Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics
Number 93, December 2024 ISSN: 2047-0622
URL: http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/

Travails of Love and Death in Gillian Rose's *Love's Work*

Nancy Gerber

> *Love's Work* is a profoundly Kierkegaardian work. . . . It deploys sensual, intellectual and literary eros, companions of pain, passion and plain curiosity, in order to pass beyond the preoccupation with endless loss to the silence of grace.
> --Gillian Rose, *Paradiso* (1999, published posthumously)
>
> Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death . . .
> --Song of Songs 8:6 (King James Version)
>
> Our unconscious then does not believe in its own death. It behaves as if it were immortal. We cannot imagine our own death and when we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still spectators, hence, no one believes in his own death.
> --Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13)

I discovered *Love's Work* (1995), a memoir by British social philosopher Gillian Rose (1947-1995), quite by accident, having found it while searching on Amazon for the next book to read. *Love's Work* is unlike any memoir I've read; the writing is bold, blistering, graphic, and defiant. Rose, diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer in her mid-40's, died two years after the diagnosis, the same year the memoir was published. She lived to see and enjoy the book's positive reception: 'Rose relished the irony that it was *Love's Work* [rather than her scholarly books] -- her most difficult and esoteric act of indirect communication – that gave her popular success' (Caygill, *Paradiso*, p. 8). The voice in *Love's Work* – confrontational at times, confessional yet elliptical -- has imprinted itself in my psyche; writing is my attempt to better understand its impact on me. While the title announces a work about love, images of death and decay disrupt and interrupt the theme of Eros, not surprising given that the book was written in the wake of a devastating diagnosis.

What does Rose mean by love's work? In his introduction to the memoir, Michael Wood writes, 'The work of love, for Rose, is what she calls her "life's affair": a matter of getting love wrong, and going on getting it wrong, but not only getting it wrong' (p. xii). The 'not only getting it wrong' refers also, in my view, to Rose's desire to live a fully engaged life through her work, including scholarship, teaching, lecturing, and writing for a general audience. Yet in her relationships, love inevitably disappoints, ending in abandonment – symbolic death -- or in the actual death of friends, lovers, family killed in the Holocaust, and the specter of her own death which shadows the second half of the book. Perhaps 'love's work' also refers to the unconscious struggle between Eros and Thanatos and the wish for immortality. On her deathbed Rose's final request was for baptism into Christianity, defying her Jewish origins. I can't help but wonder if baptism symbolized for Rose a wish to defeat Thanatos by grasping for the paradisaical haven of Christ's eternal love: 'Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise,' Christ's

promise (Luke 23:43). Rose's final book, which remained unfinished and which she worked on until death claimed her, was titled *Paradiso*.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud wrote about the tensions between the drives of love and death -- Eros and Thanatos -- that occur from the moment of birth and last the rest of our lives. Hannah Zeavin observes, ' . . . we seem to desire our death, or at least something not on the side of life.' The seductiveness of the death drive reveals itself in the repetition compulsion, in which we repeat maladaptive patterns experienced in childhood that are passed along unconsciously through the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next. Rose herself was a daughter of trauma. Her parents divorced when she was young, fragmenting her sense of self and leaving her psychically homeless. Her mother remarried, and, when Rose began her studies at Oxford, divorced Rose's beloved stepfather, leaving Rose twice fatherless. A member of 'the third generation' of Holocaust survivors, Rose was deeply affected by the annihilation of her maternal grandmother's family. The only survivor of that extended clan, a distant cousin, arrived in London from Poland after the war to share the terrible news of the family's demise. Rose must have been about two years old at the time of the cousin's visit, yet the traumatic impact of so much loss and death reverberated throughout her life.

We know little of Rose's early relationship to her mother. Of their adult relationship Rose writes: 'Nowadays, my mother denies [the decimation of her extended family]; she denies that it happened, and she denies that her mother suffered from it, so deep is her unresolved suffering. This denial and unexamined suffering certainly are two of the main reasons for her all-jovial unhappiness. . . .' (p. 19). In this passage I hear a critical jab, especially in the oxymoron 'jovial unhappiness,' which gives voice to Rose's disdain. There is a gap in the narrative about whether Rose felt loved by her mother and whether her mother's love was reciprocated by Rose; the elision seems to indicate both were missing. Yet I suspect Rose was like her mother in her unhappiness. While Rose asserts, 'I am highly qualified in unhappy love affairs,' she does not acknowledge the shared unhappiness of mother and daughter when it comes to love and affairs of the heart. The process of separating and individuating from the internal mother of early childhood seems not to have been resolved, since Rose continues to punish her mother throughout the memoir. Her mother disappears from the text, symbolically killed off, except for a passage where Rose blames her mother for the father's and stepfather's desertions: 'there lurked a rage at having been deserted by my fathers, and at their having allowed my mother to dispose of them' (p. 63). Her words paint the two paternal figures as puppets of a manipulative woman rather than as adults with agency and autonomy. Perhaps the pain of acknowledging the father's and stepfather's desertion and their failure to protect Rose was too much to bear.

Rose is also quite open about her negative feelings for her father. She describes him as a policeman, stern and devoted to the accumulation of wealth (p. 50). Court-ordered visits to her father after her parents' divorce were accompanied by episodes of vomiting. At the age of 16 mandatory visits to her father were terminated, since Rose was no longer considered a child in the legal sense. To celebrate her liberation Rose changed her surname from Stone, her father's last name, to Rose, her stepfather's surname. This rejection of her father, which Rose calls "a violent act of self-assertion,' resulted in her father retaliating by disowning her, which was followed by a five-year estrangement (p. 41). In changing her name Rose sees herself rebelling against patriarchal law, a 'disastrous Judaism of fathers and family,' a symbolic killing of the

father. Murder takes many forms in the symbolic realm, but the consequences do not seem to offer the desired liberation. Rose writes of her internal dilemma, 'This long and perilous upbringing spoilt . . . my ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, to be able to feel murderous in the confidence that I would not commit the foul act' (p. 46). Yet Rose commits various symbolic murders, killing off parents she cannot love. She continues to punish herself for her murderous rage through her inability to find lasting love, an unconscious identification with her unhappy mother.

Susan Schwartz (2022), a Jungian analyst, describes the father's potential as an internalized good object who can help the daughter attain growth and independence. But if the father is not a good object, Schwartz writes, '[his] absence and emotional deadness can fuel a child's compensatory drivenness' (p. 3). To compensate for her father's coldness, Rose worked hard for acceptance in the world of men, not just in the choice of philosophy as her field of study -- historically a male-dominated arena – but in her ambition to succeed; she wrote six scholarly books in addition to *Love's Work* and *Paradiso*. Rose describes coming of age at a time and place when women were seen as intellectually inferior to men. At Oxford she is taught by a woman, the widow of philosopher J. L. Austin, who reminds her female students, 'Remember, girls, all the philosophers you will read are much more intelligent than you are' (p. 129). By studying and succeeding in a man's world, was Rose vying for male approval and attention, the positive regard she sought but did not receive from her emotionally unavailable, authoritarian father?

Love's Work is a lonely book, though it is not manifestly about loneliness. There are no descriptions of friendships with colleagues or with women her own age. Jacqueline Rose, a psychoanalytic critic and one of Rose's two sisters, is barely discussed; Rose's other sister remains unnamed. One of the themes in the memoir is Rose's search for a surrogate mother who will provide the love and stability Rose felt were lacking when she was young. Her relationships with these two substitute mothers end in death, a repetition from a traumatic childhood and the death of her mother's two marriages. Edna, an older woman, insists she is Rose's 'home from home,' a safe harbor from pain and rejection. Yet Rose's love for Edna cannot survive for long – she meets Edna when the older woman is 93 years old and recovering from cancer of the face; Edna dies three years after their first encounter. Yvette, another loving and loved older maternal figure, dies of cancer before the two women can travel to Israel, Yvette's birthplace, and, for Rose, perhaps a pilgrimage to find a symbolic home as a Jew. The chapter that separates the stories of Edna and Yvette describes a trip Rose took to Auschwitz, 'a borderless cemetery in the air' (p. 36). Thus, the first three chapters in a book about Eros are about Thanatos. Too, one cannot help but consider that these two maternal figures, like Rose, struggled with cancer, a malfunction of the immune system possibly linked, as with autoimmune diseases, to childhood trauma (Dube et al.).

Rose does not interrogate her motivations for her passionate entanglement with a Catholic priest. Was the unconscious motive for the affair a wish to seduce her lover away from the Church, to bring him to her with powerful seductiveness as she may have fantasied about seducing her father so he would return to her? These are questions for psychoanalysis, and Rose, while versed in the language of analysis, does not mention turning to a psychoanalyst for relief from her pain. The relationship with the priest, as with Rose's rapturous friendships with Edna

and Yvette, comes to an end; the priest realizes he must choose between his religious vows and his romantic liaison. In choosing the Church, he abandons Rose in a repetition that must have become painfully familiar – rejection by a powerful man, a man like her father who was also torn between two loves and who ultimately chose the other, rejecting Rose and symbolically killing her off.

Throughout the brutal course of Rose's illness – multiple operations, the spreading of the cancer, failed chemotherapies, a colostomy that cannot be reversed – Rose's mother, father, and stepfather are never mentioned. Rose represents herself as doing battle alone, implying she was forsaken or forgotten by her parents, or perhaps rejecting of their help. Since there is no mention of them, we do not know whether they were supportive or not. We do know that Rose kills them off in the narrative, perhaps out of rage, disappointment, or both. There is only love lost, or perhaps never experienced. The symbolic deaths of the parents and two stepparents (both parents remarried) may be related to Rose's wish to emerge as the heroic avenger of wrongs against her, a Joan of Arc with a pen instead of a sword (both phallic symbols). I wonder if Joan of Arc's transgressiveness -- dressing as a man, wielding a sword – were appealing to Rose, who, as a child, wished to be Roy Rogers. She enjoyed dressing as a cowboy and tried to urinate from a standing position until her mother, acting as aide-de-camp to her father, put an end to these transgressive explorations (p. 62).

In a book that seems more about death than love, writing is Rose's most libidinal act, her most successful attempt to thumb her nose at Death, putting me in mind of Donne's famous sonnet (1633): 'Death, be not proud, though some have called thee so.' Rose insists that writing, while satisfying, 'is a very poor substitute indeed for the joy and agony of loving. Of there being someone who loves and desires you. . . .' (p. 59-60). Yet writing becomes her most reliable companion, what she turns to in the face of death to maintain her connection to life. Interesting too that Rose envisions herself as the object of love, the beloved, rather than the lover. Did Rose unconsciously introject Freud's view of femininity (and adult women) as passive? Is this a repetition of Rose's powerlessness as a child who was abandoned and rejected as the loved object? In memoir, writer and story, self and object, are merged, creating a return to the early merger with the preoedipal mother and giving the writer a sense of magical omnipotence. Whether or not the writing is successful, reaches thousands of people, and wins prizes is not really the point (though such success is, I imagine, very nice). Instead, writing memoir, like sexual climax, provides a deep connection to the self. 'We die,' says Toni Morrison in her 1993 Nobel lecture. 'That may be the meaning of our lives. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.' For Rose, writing becomes an act of survival.

Audre Lorde (1978), a black American lesbian feminist writer and activist who died of cancer, theorized writing as an erotic act: 'the very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros,* the personification of love in all its aspects . . . personifying creative power and harmony' (p. 55). Lorde sees writing as a fusion of body and mind in ecstatic communion: 'And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love' (p. 58). In writing, we dance, using the fullest measure of our bodies and our minds, with the words we leave on the page. Helene Cixous (1976) exhorted to women, 'Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth' (p. 880).

Both Lorde and Cixous envisioned writing – specifically women's writing -- as a radical, thoughtful embodied act of rebellion and resistance. Their words were written in the 1970's, a decade in the United States that saw the legalization of abortion, the establishment of the first Women's Studies department, the publication of Toni Morrison's wrenching *The Bluest Eye,* with its portrayal of incest. But Rose did not identify as a feminist: ' . . . feminism never offered me any help. For it fails to address the power of women as well as their powerlessness. . . .' (p. 140). Would she have felt differently if she'd read Lorde and Cixous? Or perhaps she had read them and dismissed their identification with women's intellectual and creative power? Lorde and Cixous refuse the patriarchal dichotomization of men=mind, women=body. The intersection of body and psyche for women writers seems particularly important at a time when women in the United States have lost authority over their bodies, with the overturning of Roe v. Wade.

However, women are not the only ones who experience writing as an erotic act. Warren Poland (2019) writes, '. . . the passion for language marks the character of many who become ardent as readers and writers. The import of body and language overlap, with even the ideas in words early involving physical pleasure' (p. 581). I am reminded of the way very young children delight in the game of creating strings of rhyming words, their earliest poems. Clearly Rose was in love with writing – she never stopped writing, even as death stole nearer and nearer. And if writing, as Poland, Lorde, and Cixous maintain, merges mind and body, writing was a way for Rose to restore a body that was failing; we speak of a writer's body of work, a book has a spine.

In thinking about Rose, I am reminded of what my first analyst once said to me, about women who will not sit with other women. The disdain for and blame of the mother seems to include an unconscious rejection of mothers and motherhood – Rose's cancer consumed her ovaries – along with her idea that women must behave like men in order not to be seen as intellectually inferior. Looking at writing through a feminist lens gives women the opportunity to reject the internalized patriarchal critic who pontificates in Samuel Johnson's quote about women's voices: 'Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.'

In the memoir, failure of the body is written in devastating ways. Even as the body fails, Rose is writing. Her visceral description of her colostomy, which was not reversible as she'd expected because the cancer had spread, is one of the most difficult, disturbing passages of prose I've read, an unwelcome reminder of the fragility that exists between what we hide and what we reveal, whether we want to or not. The description of the colostomy brings Thanatos and its decay into full view for the reader; as I read, I could feel my resistance to thinking about what it would be like to be Rose. Perhaps the graphic description of the stoma – what it looked like, what it felt like – is a weapon Rose uses in her battle against death, putting her rage into words that live on the page.

Rose did indeed die before her time, as she predicted in a lecture quoted in the introduction to *Love's Work*. Her search for the ideal lover, someone who would love her unconditionally and never leave her, was not successful. Love remained elusive, even as death was not. Nonetheless, the memoir poses interesting questions about how we love, whom we love, whether we are consumed by the beloved or whether we consume the beloved. These questions

are addressed by Winnicott in *Playing and Reality* (1971). Grammenou (2024) writes, 'In *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott refers to the good-enough mother's attunement as also involving the capacity to survive the infant's/child's aggression/ attacks by avoiding retaliation or withdrawal. This allows the child to gradually recognize her as a subject outside of its omnipotent control. . . .' Love's destructive edge lives in all human beings. Perhaps Rose could not allow herself to relinquish her fantasy of omnipotence, of complete merger between lover and beloved, a wish destined for disappointment.

In the *Symposium,* Socrates says to Agathon, 'If you reflect for a moment, you will see that it isn't merely probable but absolutely certain that one desires what one lacks' (76). These words sound so contemporary in their understanding of lack, that love is not able to fulfill the desire for completeness, and that a mature, loving relationship requires a great deal of compromise, sacrifice and psychic work. Perhaps Rose's struggles in love were related to unintegrated feelings from her traumatic childhood. She may have swallowed her mother's inability to find love, possibly from the inherited trauma of the Holocaust. *Love's Work* is an elegy, a work of grief and mourning for a life truncated by illness and disappointments in finding love. The final words of the memoir invoke an old age that is deprived, a senescence that never comes. Yet even in her fantasy of growing old, Rose imagines herself alone, as Christie's Miss Marple who survives with the help of a sharp intellect and dedication to her life's work.

References

Cixous, H. (1976). The laugh of the Medusa. *Signs,* 1*(4),* 875-893. Print.
Donne, J. (1633). Death be not proud (Holy sonnet 10). Academy of American Poets. https://poets.org/poem/death-be-not-proud-holy-sonnet-10. Retrieved 27 Oct. 2024.
Dube, S.R., Fairweather, D., Pearson, D.S., Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Croft, J.B. (2009). Cumulative childhood stress and autoimmune diseases in adults. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 71*(2)*, 243-50. On-line.
Freud, S. (1920). Beyond the pleasure principle, In J. Strachey et al (Trans.), *Standard Edition,*18, 7-64. Hogarth. Print.
Freud, S. (1912-13). Totem and Taboo. In J. Strachey et al. (Trans.), *Standard Edition*, 13, 1-255. Hogarth. Print.
Boswell, J. (1799, 1960). *Life of Johnson*, 3rd Ed. Oxford University Press.
Grammenou, F. (2024). Donald Winnicott: 'The good enough mother' and the emerging sense of self. New York College Blog. https://www.nyc.gr/en/about-nyc/blog/psychology-. Retrieved 28 Oct. 2024.
King James Bible. https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org. Retrieved 10 July 2024.
Lorde, A. (1978, 1984). Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press. Print.
Morrison, T. (1993). In E. Danticat, *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* (2017). Graywolf. Print.
Plato (1956). *The Symposium* (370 BC). W. Hamilton (Trans.). Penguin.
Poland, W. (2019). Writing psychoanalysis. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association,* 67, 581-585. On-line.
Rose, G. (1995). *Love's Work*. Introduction by M. Wood. New York Review Books. Print.
Rose, G. (1999). *Paradiso*. Introduction by H. Caygill. Shearsman Books. Print.
Schwartz, S. (2019). The gaze of the father. Presentation. https://www.researchgate.net/search.

Retrieved 27 Oct. 2024.
Zeavin, H. (n.d). Death's work. *Parapraxis*. https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/. Retrieved 27 Oct. 2024.

About the Author:
Nancy Gerber completed a PhD in English from Rutgers University and a certificate in psychoanalysis from the Academy of Clinical and Applied Psychoanalysis in Livingston, New Jersey, where she is a member of the faculty. Her most recent book is *Language Like Water* (Finishing Line Press, 2024), a series of poems exploring a fractured mother-daughter relationship.