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Gillian Rose Love's Work



Love's Work

'Intense and beautiful . . . a laconic, lyrical autobiography. It describes a troubled childhood in a turbulent Jewish family where the trauma of divorce was loaded on to the motional weight of history; it recounts romantic loves that are sometimes desperate, sometimes euphoric, and offers vivid, tender, and occasionally shocking portraits of many of her friends . . . there is a fierceness here that defies both conventional wisdom and readers' self-reassurances' Lindesay Irvine, *Guardian*

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'It provokes, inspires, and illuminates more profoundly than many a bulky volume, and it delivers what its title promises, a new allegory about love' Marina Warner, *London Review of Books*

'Sears the page it occupies' *Philadelphia Inquirer*

'An autobiographical narrative of astonishing power which intertwines threads of philosophy and personal life' *Times Higher Education*

'Remarkable . . . Memory, confession, abstract ideas and Rose's candid accounts of her failure in love feature in a work which is both haunting and utterly matter of fact' *Irish Times*

'Magnificent . . . Makes whatever else has been written on the deepest issues of human life by the philosophers of our time seem intolerably abstract and even frivolous' Arthur Danto

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gillian Rose studied philosophy at the Universities of Oxford, Columbia and Berlin. She was Professor at the University of Warwick, where she worked in modern European philosophy, social and political thought, and theology. Her books include *Dialectic of Nihilism*, *The Broken Middle*, *Judaism and Modernity* and *Hegel*. She died in December 1995.

Madeleine Pulman-Jones was born in London. Her poems, essays, and translations have appeared in publications including *PN Review* and *Modern Poetry in Translation*.

GILLIAN ROSE

Love's Work

With an Introduction by Madeleine Pulman-Jones



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Contents

Introduction by Madeleine Pulman-Jones vii

Love's Work i

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Introduction

When Gillian Rose was diagnosed with cancer at the age of forty-six, she began learning to speak a new language. She gave it different names: she became conversant in ‘the esoteric but fatal language of clinical control’, and she learned cancer’s ‘additional declension’. Rose would ultimately reject the clinicians’ idiom. ‘Medicine and I have dismissed each other – we do not have enough command of each other’s language for the exchange to be fruitful.’ But the language of cancer was different – less a matter of acquiring new vocabulary than repurposing that which Rose already possessed: of imbuing the pain and portent of illness with the power and significance of words. This language permeates *Love’s Work*, the extraordinary philosophical memoir which shines amongst the major works of Rose’s rich and ground-breaking academic career.

Until *Love’s Work*, Rose had been dedicated to the study and composition of philosophy. Born in London in 1947 to Jewish parents of Ashkenazi descent, Rose studied Philosophy at Oxford, Columbia, and the Free University of Berlin. Later, she took up teaching positions at the Universities of Sussex and Warwick, and was employed by the Polish Commission for the Future of Auschwitz. She socialized and collaborated with thinkers such as Geoffrey Hill and Daniel Boyarin. Her thought – informed by interpretative readings of Hegel and Adorno, as well as Jewish and Christian theology – was

preoccupied with difficulty. For Rose, difficulty was not an obstacle to be hurdled. In her work, difficulty, like beauty, is a mystery to be lived with and for, rather than against or in spite of. The title of her 1992 work, *The Broken Middle*, encapsulates this crucial idea: the middle, while broken, cannot be circumvented. It is 'the intensified agon of living', as Rose puts it in *Love's Work* – it is the substance of life.

Travelling in memory from New York to London, from London to Kraków, from Kraków to Auschwitz, from London to Jerusalem, and back to New York, *Love's Work* draws together the defining themes of Rose's emotional and intellectual life. These are journeys that lead Rose from her British English to the American English of writer friend Camille Paglia, the Yiddish of her grandparents, and the Polish of an impoverished Cracovian aristocrat. Throughout, Rose finds in language – whether that of sickness or of the Ashkenazi diaspora – a profound form of hope. Just as she recognized the ability of language to illuminate the most challenging aspects of the human condition, Rose saw its capacity to express – and to enact – her never faltering love for life.

As a writer and translator, I have made a career studying the languages of Eastern Europe. Like Rose, I have family who emigrated to London from the continent's Shtetls and Jewish quarters. In fact, from what I can make of the scant documents in our possession, my great-grandfather was born in central Poland, only forty-five minutes by car from Rose's grandfather. My curiosity about my family in flux brought me first to Russian, then to Polish, and now to Yiddish. It has also brought me to the various academic institutions which have helped me to learn them – which have supported my travels to the same cities Rose visits over the course of *Love's Work*: Kraków, Jerusalem, New York. Remembering her grandfather on his deathbed, Rose recalls how he lapsed surprisingly into High German – a

language he knew primarily in its Hebraized, evolved Yiddish form. In this moment of unexpected linguistic rupture, Rose found herself using the German she had learnt by reading Adorno to decipher her dying grandfather's words. We can't predict what the proximity of death will do to us, what new discoveries it might generate; how it will colour the stories we tell, or the languages in which we will tell them.

In my penultimate year of university, I was diagnosed with Stage IV Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I was studying in Moscow at the time, where I had been frantically attempting to wrap my mouth around the clustered consonants of Russian, living my life through the filter of constant misunderstandings. The clarity of my diagnosis felt, at the time, like a full stop. The lump in my neck, which I discovered while walking past the Estonian embassy in Moscow, was itself shaped like a full stop. Running my hand over the lymph node, speechless, motionless on the pavement, I knew that the year had run out of breath. In the months that followed, I spent hours making myself just as motionless, just as speechless, under the PET-CT scanners which determined where and how my cancer had spread. To busy myself, I played linguistic games: I compared PET-CT scans to anagrams; I compared finding cancer in the lymph nodes to finding 'stone' in the word, 'Estonia.' Later, I erased this full stop in favour of learning cancer's language. I found unexpected joy in narrating my illness from within its own lexicon – making full use of its 'additional declension.'

At the age of sixteen, Rose changed her surname from 'Stone' to 'Rose.' She was not the first member of her family to change her last name. 'Stone' itself was an anglicization of her paternal Jewish name, 'Riddell,' foreshadowing the later contraction of her stepfather's 'Rosenthal' to 'Rose.' The transformation of Ashkenazi names is far from uncommon. My own surname, 'Pulman,' appears to have been altered or adopted by

my great-grandfather. In any case, the double transformation of Rose's surname is particularly pronounced. It seems only fitting that linguistic complexity would be so integral to Rose's identity. She was committed to the agon – the creativity – of writing; to working with language and its variant histories; to finding a vocabulary that could match the complex questions raised by sickness and by death. This was as much for herself as for her readers, from whom she withholds discussion of her own ill health for much of *Love's Work*. Undergoing cancer treatment twenty-five years after the book's first publication, watching my body become as incomprehensible as the new medical terms I was compelled to learn, I began to use this vocabulary, too.

I started learning Polish four years after I had begun learning Russian, and one year after I began learning the language of cancer. While preparing a piece for Pilot Press's anthology, *Responses to Love's Work*, I began to compare the three languages to one another. I was fascinated by the fact that Polish has one more grammatical case than Russian, which means that words have an additional declension, their endings changing according to the role they play in a sentence. The seventh case, which Polish has, and Russian does not, is the vocative case – the case for calling out. Not *Ania!* but *Aniu!* Not simply *my love!* but *my love in the vocative case!* Russian used to have this case, but has shed it over the years. It seems to me that the vocative case is the closest to loving – that calling out is for is calling out to, for occasioning movement towards, together, tonight. I like to think that this is what Rose meant by her 'additional declension,' that cancer had afforded her love an additional urgency. This revelation, in the middle of a book filled with revelations, feels hopeful – as though illness and love are not mutually exclusive, but can yield to, and nourish, each other.

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