

Philosophy for everyday – though not for everyone

Text reviewed

Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, xvi + 336 pp.

Abstract

The subtlety of contemporary philosophical reflection, proclaimed and magisterially displayed in Gillian Rose's *The Broken Middle*, is an effect of postmodern challenge, rather than inner tendency of modern thought; above all, this applies to the acceptance of inherent ambiguity of 'the middle' – the space where possibility is recast into actuality, and hence of the infinity of philosophy's task. 'The middle', though already structured by the Law (the ethical codification of morality), was through modern times the locale of moral solitude: what was *determined* was inescapability of *choice*. 'The middle' has been 'broken' – a site of freedom/unfreedom, uncertainty/determination – from the start, yet the recognition of its nature has been hard earned mostly through the experience of persons/categories refused or refusing 'assimilation' into the Law modernity stood for; what is called 'postmodern condition' is the universalization of that experience. Universalized, this experience is increasingly wary of the two most tried modern attempts to 'repair' 'the middle' – through the 'general will' or through the escape into privatized self.

I am writing down these thoughts, prompted by the latest addition to what has now become Gillian Rose's *trilogy*,¹ in the spirit of Richard Rorty, who recommends the 'inspired' instead of the 'methodical' reading of texts. The latter takes its clue from the Aristotelian opposition between practice and theory (between *use* and *interpretation* aimed at the truth) and Kantian separation of prudence from morality; it opts for theoretical purity, and prudence wary of moral interest. When 'methodical' readers have done their 'methodical' reading, the text they read 'had no more changed these readers' purposes than the specimen under the microscope changes the purposes of this histologist'. Instead, the readers will probably rejoice in their belief that

now, at long last, they know what the book they put on the grill was *really* about. They err, says Rorty, and the comfort they take from having arrived closer to something they call 'the truth of the text' is illusory: each successive reading 'simply gives you one more context in which you can place the text. . . . Neither piece of knowledge tells you anything about the nature of texts or the nature of reading. For neither has a nature.' The 'inspired' reading, on the contrary, does not entertain illusions about its own potency. Having dismissed Aristotle's and Kant's injunctions, the 'inspired' reader attempts nevertheless 'to salvage'

a useful distinction which is vaguely shadowed forth by these two useless distinctions. This is between knowing what you want to get out of a person or thing or text in advance and hoping that the person or thing or text will help you want something different – that he or she or it will help you change your life.²

Here (nor elsewhere, for that matter) I am not after the 'correct' reading. Instead, I am after an illuminating one. And I am mindful of Umberto Eco's sobering observation that the 'universe of semiosis' 'is structured according to a *network of interpretants*',³ and that this structure is more reminiscent of an encyclopedia, with its ostentatious and unashamed, never ending cadrille of cross-references, than of a dictionary, with its Ezra Pound-like dream of pinning down the words, like butterflies, into the boxes where they singly or severally, but always uniquely, belong. I am aware that my reading will differ from that of any other reader, much as her or his interests and commitments and biographically shaped relevances differ from mine. And I am not going to dispute their right to a different reading, hoping that, in good grace, they will grant the same right to me.

I

The 'Middle' in the title of Gillian Rose's book stands for the space that extends, the time that passes, between the 'Beginning' and the 'End'. The 'Beginning' is the *potentiality*; the 'End' – *the actuality* of the world. When contemplated from the middle, beginning is remembered as a cluster of possibilities that already begin to vanish or ossify; the end is adumbrated as the foreclosing of possibilities. But it is in the middle that the potentiality is trimmed and congealed into actuality. It is in the Middle where we, sad alchemists, convert the gold of freedom into the base metal of necessity. But one may say as well that it is the middle, the work done there and the thought that makes the work done, which diffract the contents of its own compound of freedom and boundedness onto two opposite screens and recast the beginning as the universe of the possible and the end as the realm of unfreedom. It is the silent or outspoken work done in the middle that sets the beginning apart from the end and makes both to oppose each other.

Gillian Rose justifies her present exploratory expedition to the Middle with announcement that the Owl of Minerva has spread its wings. She is not the first, and most certainly not the last, to make this announcement. Owls spread their wings with every sunset and sunsets crown every day. It is not necessarily the same owl that spreads its wings sunset after sunset, though all who do wear proudly the ensigns of Minerva. Rose's owl is spreading its wings at the end of a particular day. What day is it? The day called modernity? But Rose repeatedly, emphatically, passionately denies that modernity has reached its sunset. With such a denial, why should the reader believe the announcement? Has not the owl stolen the ensign?

It is too early, says Rose, for the post-modern celebration of discourses coming to replace knowledge, of pluralism displacing critique, of the renunciation of all conceptuality as violence, of the final defeat of 'Western metaphysics'. Too early – because modernity has not yet run its course, given its last gasp. It has not grown old either – or, rather, it is not today old *differently* than it was old yesterday, since it was old right from the start, as our life 'has always been already ancient' (p. xi). Granted; still, old age of today does not feel quite like the old age of yesterday, or what we know and grew to remember of it; and the particular twilight which must have prompted Rose to announce once more the flight of Minerva's owl and to decry past take-offs as, presumably, false starts, has more than coincidental connection with the arrival of postmodernity. If Rose says that 'we may now be prepared and readied for comprehension', that the time has arrived neither to *ex post facto* justify, nor to *a priori* rejuvenate, the opposition between potentiality and actuality, that perpetual modernity's favourite, but to *understand* it – then who but the insolent and arrogant postmodernity are we to thank for the blessing?

It has been the harassment and the threat of disgrace coming from post-modern quarters that forced our modern world (and its self-appointed philosophical spokesmen) to take a long look at itself, longer and deeper than the looks before; to pause, to reflect, to doubt what was never doubted before and to think again of matters thought to have been settled once and for all. It was the challenge of postmodernity that forced modern reflection upon itself, that cast our modern world into a self-reflective mood. What does the much abused and more still maligned name of postmodernity stand for, if not for this mood, this urge, this compulsion to self-reflect? What else is postmodernity, if not modernity thinking once more, and – hopefully – more seriously than before, about its own banes and afflictions, about its pretences sometimes false, sometimes dangerous, about the way it used to account for its own right to exist? We are not prepared, says Rose, for the 'colour on colour' of postmodernity – philosophical reflection remains monochromatic, we are in the time of philosophy's 'grey in grey'. Granted again – but for the most part of its modern history philosophy was all about black 'n' white, had little time nor room for the subtle shades of grey, thought the grey intolerably insipid and could not wait to separate the light from darkness. Whence now the sudden tolerance for the ambiguity of greyness, readiness to mix black and white and

to allow them to stay mixed? Was not it the postmodernity's joyful jumbling of colours that made the subtlety of the many shades of grey into serene beauty, and their resilience into the wisdom of Minerva?

The Middle is the seat of ambiguity, ambivalence and equivocation – of the oppositions 'which might initiate process and pain' (p. xiii) but which are not resolved in that process, however painful. The reward for pain is the 'risk of coming to know', meaning to know the presence and irresolution of contraries, the 'aporetic' fate of being. Philosophy's 'grey in grey' is meant to portray that condition, the condition that others explore through a different entrance (Agnes Heller, for instance, through that of contingency – already the fate, waiting to be made into destiny), but always goaded by feeling of urgency, itself a vivid testimony to the bankruptcy of the received philosophical wisdom. This is not the 'end of philosophy', now less than at any time in the past (ends of philosophy were proclaimed, with credibility, by those dazzled with the splendour of latest systems that 'said it all'; paradoxically, in our merry-go-round time proclamations of the end of philosophy sound hollow, while those of the end of history gain in force – after all, philosophers spawned systems to bridle unruly history). But it must be an end to a certain style of philosophizing. What we now half-know (feel – intuitively) of life in the Middle still awaits to be articulated, enclosed in concepts, understood – the task to which the received self-understanding of philosophy failed to prepare us. What is needed is philosophy freed from self-deception, delusion of grandeur, conceit and promises that cannot be held. It is such a philosophy that Rose patiently, painstakingly spins, turning the hermeneutic wheel through lives and thoughts of those who tried hard to comprehend what being in the Middle was like.

This philosophy, one hopes, stands a real chance of 'coming to know' – precisely because it wants to reflect 'on what may be ventured – without mending diremption in heaven or on earth' (p. xv).

II

'I am an end or a beginning' – noted Franz Kafka. And so could say all other heroes of Rose's venture – Sigmund Freud, Maurice Blanchot, Thomas Mann, Rahel Levin-Varnhagen, Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, Franz Rosenzweig, Emil Fackenheim; and, above all, the main character of the drama, the first among the unsung heroes of the Middle, the hero by whom all other heroes are measured, Søren Kierkegaard – whom Rose set to 'reclaim from antinomian repetition'.

Each had her/his own reason to say that, and so each had reason to be selected by Rose. What united those disparate reasons was their effect: living the Middle as a void, but one haunted by ghosts of the increasingly unclear past and visited by yet incoherent harbingers of stubbornly elusive future – and thus a *meaningful* void, a void that felt *as a problem*, that prompted a life as

actorship/authorship. Life lived in the anxious knowledge of the 'difficulty of beginning and the beginning of difficulty: the entanglement of aporia with itself' (p. 30).

'I am an end and/or a beginning' is the modality of the Middle. The end and the beginning which meet there are the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end: beginning is ending because its hold is waning, the end is but starting because its grip is still weak. This is the place of loneliness, fear, anxiety – and moral choice. This is the place of responsibility. At the start, anxiety has no anchor, it is just the premonition of the 'possibility of possibility': 'Not the choosing of good and evil but possibility . . . gives rise to anxiety, the "intermediate" psychological term for this passing of possibility over into actuality which is not logical nor ethical, but existential, "entangled freedom", where freedom is entangled in itself' (p. 95). The 'ethical' is the moral that has been already pre-empted, 'communalized' or divinized. At the time of the Middle, the ethical – the law – is always already there. It helps as little to quell anxiety as knowledge that God's verdict has been already recorded helped the pious Calvinist. One still confronts freedom that suspects it is not really free, but knows little of the nature of its bondage. In Maurice Blanchot's words, 'everyone here has his own prison, but in that prison each person is free'.⁴ Like Hermann Hesse's Knecht, so the hero of Blanchot's 'Idyll' finds the world unlivable when he is finally let out. Can one be free only inside the prison? Is not the delusion of freedom outside the true beginning of bondage? Is not the actor/author 'the ephemeral character who is born and dies each evening in order to make himself extravagantly seen, killed by the performance that makes him visible'⁵ Before the work is done/word written down, freedom is not yet. When it has been done, it is no more (and so is the actor/author, s/he who works/writes).

I read the '*broken Middle*' as the '*broken prison*' (or, more precisely perhaps, though certainly more perplexingly – breaking the boundary between the prison and the world outside). What has happened on the road to the point where modernity reaches its *post*(humous life?) is the dismantling of the prison walls, with the effect that authorship/actorship, no more 'outside' as there are no walls to demarcate the non-incarceration, finds itself doing the DIY job. The *broken Middle* is the world of private prison huts, each custom-made by its 'singular', 'unique' resident. The Middle has been broken (was there ever an unbroken one?) in the course of the *privatization of prison service*.

In the colony of one-cell prisons which is the site of the broken Middle, freedom means 'to be always all-ready for anxiety' (p. 87); there, 'anxiety defines sin, not sin anxiety', though 'law precedes desire and intelligibility' (p. 86) – there always has been a beginning *before* the Middle is reached, though in an individual prison everything seems to 'begin from the beginning', to start afresh, inside – in the Middle itself. Sin is the product of anxiety, but anxiety arises from the vague, yet poignant feeling that the sin has been *already* committed, and from the still more harrowing uncertainty as to the exact nature of that sin.

What does this 'already' stand for? More importantly, what power – actorial/authorial power – made that 'already' into a sinful one? Where from that Law comes which, if known, would make one's own actorship/authorship intelligible? Kafka's K. struggled in vain to find the answers in the court of law; the court received him when he came and dismissed him when he went. The crime, so it seemed, was to be accused of one – but no one spelled out the charge, no one sat on the prosecutor's bench. Despaired of finding the beginning of his guilt, Kafka wrote: 'My imperfection is . . . not congenital, not earned'; 'The reproaches lie around inside me.'⁶ The vagueness, haunting elusiveness of the Law guided Kierkegaard's pen, when he wrote of the 'continual commandment': 'I hear it, as it were, even when I do not hear it, in such a way that, although it is not audible itself, it muffles or embitters the voice bidding me to do other things'. Rose comments: 'the curse of continual commandment grating against the temporal demands of the opposed and embittered voice. . . . The non-intelligible inner commandment which nevertheless insists on being communicated is, in effect, imperative but not comprehensible' (pp. 73–4). A century after Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas wrote of 'obeying the order before it is formulated', the command which is binding before it has been spoken.⁷ And Knud E. Løgstrup concluded that since 'The Command' is 'unconditional, infinite, absolute', and above all 'unspoken', 'a person can never be entirely sure that he has acted in the right manner'.⁸

The 'brokenness' of the Middle is lived as uncertainty. The uncertainty which each act is an attempt to escape from (to pass from the Beginning, where everything is but the possibility, to the End, where certainty has been bought at the price of freedom), but which each act only succeeds in deepening. It is as if the Middle laboured under the curse of never ending Beginning; as if the Beginning, that 'tyranny of opportunities' (Hannah Arendt), was never to end. . . .

A sociologist would be naturally inclined to decipher the infuriating 'under-determination' of a command never spoken and order never formulated as the emergence of diffuse, de-centred, contradictory social pressures from the secure shelter of the Divine and its one and only Code of Moral Law. Having abandoned all pretence of universality (which could only be construed as supra-human), that 'liberation' left the lonely prisoner of the Middle free to build his own prison. . . .

III

Some persons, groups of persons, categories of persons experience the *ethical aporia* of the Middle more acutely, more painfully than others. Their uncertainty, to recall Althusser's once famous phrase, is 'over-determined'. Many hands around stretched to offer guidance, but none ready to guide, none willing to embrace or prop. Such persons have the advantage of seeing

through the common condition in an uncommonly perceptive way. They are, so to speak, doomed to serve as pioneers. The other residents of the Middle may recognize themselves in their confessions, thus gaining the chance of *comprehending* what otherwise they would struggle to grasp in vain. This seems to be the secret of amazingly 'prophetic' quality, belated yet continuous topicality, increasingly universal validity of particular self- (barely disguised as 'social' or 'psychological' or 'philosophical') analyses produced in the course of modernity by Jewish thinkers smarting under the contradictory pressures of inclusivism of the liberal assimilationist programme and exclusivism of modern nationalism.⁹

Rose's search of the articulation of the hellish aporia of the Middle – there where they hurt, and sober up, most – brings the richest fruit in 'Love and the State', the chapter dedicated to the unpacking of experience recorded by Rahel Varnhagen, Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt: 'As women and as Jews, they are especially qualified witnesses of the middle by virtue of their exclusion from three abstract universalities: as women, excluded from the revolutionary fraternity of man – liberal-bourgeois and socialist; as Jews, excluded from the community of Christian love; and for both reasons excluded from civil status' (p. 155). All three were suspended (free; lacking resources to exercise their freedom; cast in the perpetual beginning) between political universality, which they refused to abandon (though none entertained hope of delivery on its promise), and the 'ethical immediacy of love: "community", "nation", "race", "religion" or "gender"', into which they refused to run for shelter. Thus, they remained 'within the agon of authorship', where they cultivated 'aporetic universalism, restless affirmation and undermining of political form and political action, which never loses sight of the continuing mutual corruption of the state and civil society' (p. 155). As Agnes Heller would say – all three reformed their fate into a consciously embraced destiny – something all of us, residents of the Broken Middle, are ethically compelled to do, but most have neither perspicacity nor strength, nor a sufficient store of disenchantment to do.

The three women whose experience, and whose account of that experience, Rose so ably, so empathetically, dissected, are so interesting because they, better than so many others, avoided the many traps set in the Middle, now no more surveilled by the Divine Guardian, by the competing/collaborating powers of the state and civil society. They did not fall into the trap of the 'general will' meant to resolve the aporia involved into combining individual wills into the 'will of all' (p. 170); nor did they fall into the trap of opting for 'individual inwardness' of community, which would 'merely reinforce what is abhorred', 'treating oneself and others as means instead of coming to recognize oneself and others even in the struggle of misrecognition' (p. 165). The three women were among the first in whose condition the white never came unstained by soot, and no black was pitch-dark; they were among the first to paint grey in grey. After them, it is difficult – nay impossible – to use again the uncompromising colours of untested hope.

IV

This is the finding brought home from Rose's exploratory expedition to the Middle: 'The agon of authorship is to remain with anxiety of beginning and equivocation of the ethical. . . . Because the middle cannot be mended, because no politics or knowledge may be available or employable, it does not mean that no comprehension or representation is possible, or that it is in any case avoidable' (p. 296). No recipes for repairing the fissure are to be trusted; the more radical they are, the more they need to be suspected. Each attempt to repair (no attempt can do without violence) will but exacerbate the condition meant to be repaired. Residing in the Broken Middle is our common fate. We can live at no other place; there is no other place, nor would be.

Rose offers us serene, dignified philosophy that shuns illusions and – more than anything else – self-delusions. What it rejects is, in the end, the modern hope of the Human replacing the Divine and doing His job. In this sense, the most important of senses, Rose's philosophy, despite all protestations, is *postmodern through and through*. Like postmodernity, it still thinks it would be nice if the hopes of modernity came true, but it no more believes that they ever will.

Rose's philosophy fits well into the present mood of the 'disenchantment mark two': disenchantment of the same *human reason and will* which the first disenchantment, the modern disenchantment, the disenchantment of Nature, bestowed with magic powers (the act that reformed that disenchantment into philosophy of optimism and boisterous self-confidence). 'No more salvation by society', wrote Peter Drucker recently. No more social engineering, shout we all, with varying degrees of shrillness. As to the communal alternative to the now suspect State, more and more fingers are singed as the heat of communally boiled emotions melts the old civilized solidarities to mould new, uncivilized ones. Beware the salvation coming from those quarters – though, whatever we do, many are seeking it and many more still will join them in the search.

Rose's philosophy fits the present mood also in another respect: in the way in which *authorship* gradually yet relentlessly displaces and replaces *actorship*, ostensibly through presenting itself as the paragon for actorship as such, but surreptitiously proclaiming gratuitousness of any actorship other than authorship, by setting itself tasks and standards that can be reached only if the objects of action are *not interfered with* (interference being the hallmark of that other action, now warned against). What we end up with as the only permissible choice, is 'comprehending and representing'; something the authors do and by doing it become the authors they are. It is nice and cosy and warm here, *inside the whale* – our own, intellectual brand of the Broken Middle. . . .

The above sentence is not a charge against Gillian Rose. With a palette that contains but the shades of grey (we cannot trust lurid chromatics any more), maps of no other 'agons' can be painted. Gillian Rose shares in the

impossibility which haunts us all, and her great merit is that unlike so many others who share it she had the perspicacity and courage to face it, 'comprehend and represent'.

The book is a feat of authorship at a time which drew a thick line between the author and the actor. The merits of the book are all Rose's. For its weaknesses, its melancholy, its disenchantment – who will throw the first stone?

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Notes

1 The two preceding volumes of the trilogy were: *Hegel Contra Sociology* (Athlone Press) and *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law*. In Rose's own rendition, all three books pursue the theme of 'diremption' (forceful separation) of law and ethics, with the first book dedicated mostly to the 'ideal law which Hegel was unable to obtain', and the second to 'the post-Kantian "antinomy of Law" which resurfaces in latter-day nihilism'. The third volume reconsiders the 'antinomy of law' as 'the dual implication of law and ethics' and argues that 'post-modern antinomianism completes itself as political theology, as new ecclesiology, mending the diremption of law and ethics' (p. xiv–xv).

2 Richard Rorty, 'The pragmatist's progress', in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 106–7.

3 Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 83.

4 Maurice Blanchot, 'Idyll', in *Vicious Circles*, transl. by Paul Aster, New York: Station Hill, 1985, p. 10.

5 Maurice Blanchot, 'After the fact', in *Vicious Circles*, p. 60.

6 *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. Max Brod, Penguin, 1964, pp. 18–19.

7 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, transl. by Alphonso Lingis, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, p. 13.

8 Knud E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, transl. by Theodor I. Jensen, Philadelphia: Fortran Press, 1971, pp. 46, 48, 114.

9 Compare the chapters 'Trapped in ambivalence' and 'Revenge of ambivalence' in my *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1991. Also my 'Simmel, ou l'éclosion de l'expérience postmoderne', in *Sociétés*, N. 35, 1992.

