HOW THE WRITER AND CRITIC JACQUELINE ROSE PUTS THE WORLD ON THE COUCH

Enlisting Freud and feminism, she reveals the hidden currents in poetry and politics alike.

By Parul Sehgal

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“Psychoanalysis brings to light everything we don’t want to think about,” she said. “If you can acknowledge the complexity of your own heart, then you’re not going to look for scapegoats.” Photograph by Robbie Lawrence for The New Yorker

We were too late. For weeks, the Davidia—the ghost trees—had been shedding their loose white blooms, like translucent handkerchiefs. Jacqueline Rose pocketed them on her walks around her London neighborhood of West Hampstead—the kind of long, looping tour she had begun taking daily during the pandemic. She brought me on one such walk, late this spring, but the specimens we found were sad: squashed, yellowing smudges. "About two weeks late," she assessed, studying them. Never mind. There was a handsome lime tree to admire. There was a florist to avoid ("racist") and a florist to visit. We lingered over shaggy mums and reluctant new lilies, bound tight in their buds. Groups of shouting boys ran by in ghastly magenta school blazers. "Who designed the jackets?" I wondered.

"Who designed the boys?" she replied.

Rose, who co-directs the Institute for the Humanities at Birkbeck, University of London, is a feminist writer and critic with a psychoanalytic orientation; she is singularly influential, both within and without the academy. Since the nineteen-eighties, she has explored a range of topics—modernism, motherhood, the Middle East. But mourning has long been a keynote in her work, nowhere more emphatically than in her new book, "The Plague: Living Death in Our Times." A collection of essays incubated during the COVID lockdown and structured around readings of Albert Camus, Sigmund Freud, and Simone Weil, it is perhaps her most scarred and harrowed volume and yet one strangely energized, full of possibility.

It is also, in Rose's elliptical way, full of her sister, Gillian Rose, a philosopher who died of ovarian cancer in 1995, when she was forty-eight and Jacqueline was forty-six. Growing up in London, they were the doctor's girls, the clever girls, from a middle-class Jewish family in a working-class neighborhood. Their stepfather—their parents divorced when Jacqueline was three, and their mother remarried soon afterward—kept a surgical practice on the ground floor of their

house. Domestic life was quiet, organized around the doctor's work, the children's education, and a thicket of family secrets. Out of the silence, the sisters would produce shelves of books between them—consumed with naming the unnameable, with writing into the dark.

"We spurred each other on," Rose told me. She paused. "I hope I said 'spurred.' If I said 'spurned,' that's also quite interesting. I think both are true."

Rose's work has been full of haunting. "Haunting, or being haunted, might indeed be another word for writing," she noted in her essay collection "On Not Being Able to Sleep" (2003). She first came to broad attention with "The Haunting of Sylvia Plath" (1991), a feminist reading of the poet that refused to reduce her to a bundle of symptoms or to mine the poems for biography. Rose insisted on the violent, emancipating breadth of Plath's imagination, and turned the distorting fantasies projected on her poetry back on the reader. She went on to take this approach to studying women as varied as Marilyn Monroe and Rosa Luxemburg ("Women in Dark Times" was the title of her 2014 essay collection), tracing overlooked acts of creative defiance.

"I fell in love with these women—the links between their internal abjection and political insight," she told me. Never shying from trouble, she tussled with Plath's estate, and, many people said, put Israel itself on the analyst's couch, in her 2005 book "The Question of Zion." In Rose's view, nobody is innocent, and the work of mourning is never completed.

On our walk, she wore a buttery leather jacket and exuded a careful, coaxing charm. At times, she played the analyst, guiding the analysand toward insights but taking care not to preëmpt them. Lacan said that analysis did not take place in the present tense but in the future perfect—a way of looking back at what one will have become—and it is here that Rose seemed to dwell during our time together. "You'll want to tease this out," she would note, of a particular detail. Or, "There's a whole other story there, which I think is crucial for you." Holding up her finger, with its bright-blue polish: "Now, this is something you can use."

I became accustomed to her swift assessments, to her eerie bodily attunement:

"You're jet-lagged. You will need to sleep. Go home but don't sleep just yet, stay awake." Before parting on one occasion, she scanned me quickly: "If you'll want the ladies, it's to your right. Never a bad idea." She wore Bakelite bangles and the same necklace every time we met, a string of alternating opaque and transparent beads. It was, I learned, her pattern.

Psychoanalysis, for Rose, begins with "a mind in flight," fleeing its own pain and obscuring its meanings by projection, displacement, inversion. As we walked, the ground beneath her feet seemed thick with the detritus of memory. "All the long gone darlings," Plath called her dead. "They / Get back, though, soon, / Soon." Rose mentioned Gillian almost as soon as we met, and Gillian was swiftly joined by two other figures: her cousin and lifelong "spiritual companion," Braham Murray, who died five years ago, and her friend Edward Said, who died fifteen years before that. (Rose does an excellent impression of him: "You've got to write every day, Jacqueline.") These were, she said, choosing her words carefully, "the losses that define one."

West Hampstead is bustling, affluent; we were far from the neighborhood of Rose's childhood. Born in 1949, she grew up in the West London town of Hayes, bordered by factories filled with the migrants of the nineteen-fifties. She recalled mothers warning their children, " 'When those Pakis come at you in their bands along the street, just cross over to the other side. Dirty Pakis.' I would go home, and my stepfather would say, 'I've been in working-class houses, and I've been in Asian houses, and, believe you me, the least dirty in the town are the Asians.' He was really anti-racist, as was my mother." Still, the children didn't mix with their neighbors. "I'd walk into the grocery store and ask for 'small, firm tomatoes,' as if somehow being the doctor's daughter entitled me to the best tomato." The creeping understanding of her privilege, she said, was accompanied by a creeping awareness of unmentionable suffering in the family's past.

Every Sunday saw the dreaded trip to the maternal grandparents, the Prevezers, immigrants from Poland, and each a remnant of slaughtered families. Fifty of her grandmother's relatives had been killed in the Holocaust, Gillian once wrote. This was never discussed; all that was communicated was a hatred of Germans

and a desperate cleaving to tradition. “They were cauldrons of feeling, but none of it could be expressed,” Braham Murray, who became a celebrated theatre director, wrote in his memoir, “The Worst It Can Be Is a Disaster.” The fact that “no Prevezer could ever appear vulnerable or moved” was, he said, the family “curse.”

The grandparents had made their way in London by waiting outside stocking factories, collecting the rejects, matching up pairs, then selling them off a cart in the East End. In time, they set up their own hosiery shop. Rose’s mother had secured a place at medical school, but her parents refused to let her attend. She was married off to a doctor fourteen years her senior who had recently returned from a prisoner-of-war camp, where he had been tortured. In Rose’s delicate assessment, he “was not ready to be married.”

Two daughters were born soon afterward: Gillian in the fall of 1947, and Jacqueline twenty months later. Gillian was the serious one, Rose said: “She was reading Plato while I was sitting on a swing, listening to pop music, thinking about looking pretty, and boys.” Rose told me that the great wish of her childhood was to best her “serious, pained” sister; it was “a productive rivalry.”

Their parents’ divorce was bitter and protracted, with frequent custody challenges. Gillian, in her memoir, “Love’s Work,” recalled that she would vomit with dread before the fortnightly visit with their grim-faced father. Both parents remarried, had other children. At sixteen, Gillian formally changed her surname to that of her “kind, equanimous, humorous” stepfather, becoming a Rose in a defiant act of self-assertion that she compared to a bat mitzvah. (Jacqueline, of course, would do the same.) Then Rose’s mother left her second husband —another painful divorce. Rose was in a gap year after secondary school; Gillian, in her first term at St. Hilda’s College, Oxford. “My mother had given up too much,” Rose told me. “She needed to live some more.”

Gillian was less forgiving, and her fury at her parents still scorches in the memoir; her upbringing, she wrote, “ruined my capacity to tolerate highly charged yet contrary emotions about the same person.” Rose, for her part, tries to maintain a gentle, rotating sense of sympathy for all the players in a drama. She

says that her mother "had a case for rage" against her own parents, who had denied her an education. "But there was no empathy. And no historical understanding. And, above all, no real telling of the story."

Rose herself is not a voluble teller of such stories. Janet Malcolm, in her book about Sylvia Plath, "The Silent Woman," describes meeting Rose and offers up a grudging piece of praise: "Her manner was engaging—neither too friendly nor too distant—and on a scale of how people should conduct themselves with journalists I would give her a score of 99." Rose, Malcolm thought, had "carefully worked out for herself exactly how much she had to give." The Rose I met was equally circumspect, cordoning off large portions of her family history and of her personal life. But, even as she declined to provide certain details, she offhandedly pointed me to those people who would provide them—to family members, or their memoirs. This constitutionally guarded and private person has chosen to surround herself with provocatively candid intimates.

The question of closeness—closeness desired, permitted, negotiated, regretted—recurred in my conversations with Rose. Freud, I remembered, kept a figurine of a porcupine on his desk. He was fond of Schopenhauer's parable about a group of porcupines on a cold winter's day. Huddling, they were pricked by one another's quills, and sprang apart; chilled, they again tried to nestle together. When I asked Rose what it had felt like to be in Gillian's physical presence, she told me, "We had the most profound respect and need for each other. But, in terms of comfort and ease in being together, it was never simple or straightforward."

Rose hadn't wanted to go to the same university as her sister, but she didn't receive the offer from Cambridge that she'd hoped for. After graduating, she moved to France, escaping the family turmoil; Gillian had gone to the U.S. and to Germany, where she studied Continental philosophy. "We had to push away," Rose said. "We had to push against each other."

A slight hill, a slight turn, and we arrived at an Anglican church, cradled by a ring of tall trees. Four benches faced one another, each occupied by an elderly man and his can of beer, calling across the courtyard to the others.

"This is the church where my mother was baptized," Rose said. Gillian, too, converted to Anglicanism, on her deathbed. Rose wanted me to understand that these were different conversions. She speculated that her mother, who converted in her sixties, felt only oppressed by the religion of her childhood; she couldn't see its traditions of justice and righteousness. But Rose thinks that Gillian's conversion came, paradoxically, from her attachment to her Jewishness, that she saw in the Church of England a way of augmenting Judaism's ethical traditions. On her headstone is both a cross and a Star of David.

Down the hill, she explained, is the cemetery where Gillian is buried, and where her mother's ashes repose. "It's the street on which I live," she said, pinning map to metaphor.

Leaving family behind was a matter of survival when Rose was in her early twenties. She studied literature at the Sorbonne, discovered Freud, and took a job at an Yves Saint Laurent store—the English shopgirl adored by the clientele. Living in France, living in French, taught her about translation: "Which is to say, translation isn't about equivalence—it's about a re-rendering of the world. French was not just a liberation from the agonism of what was going on at home. It was also a way of thinking that was more flexible and nebulous and imaginative." She paused. "Let's cross over, and I'll tell you what our options are."

"*I'll tell you what our options are.*" "*We can either come back the short way or we can go the slightly longer way.*" "*Now you have to make a choice, because there's a walk down through the lime trees or . . .*" This is what it's like to walk with Jacqueline Rose. It is also what it's like to think with Jacqueline Rose—in an intellectual style that has been honed by her engagement with Freud. There are so many routes one can take, each with its own losses and gains.

What she calls "the wonder of Plath," for instance, involves the poet's taking multiple paths: "In the space of a line of poetry, she can rail against patriarchal figures—you know, fathers, husbands, doctors—and lament or even celebrate her passionate attachment for them at the same time."

When Rose writes about violence, in turn, she highlights the way it forecloses

such multiplicity, and the sense of self that sustains it. “Harassment is always a sexual demand, but it also carries a more sinister and pathetic injunction: ‘You will think about me,’ ” she wrote in her 2021 collection, “On Violence and Violence Against Women.” A lasting injury done by threats of violence is the hijacking of thought. When our interiority is suborned, she argues, we lose our ability to come to grips with the contradictions that lie within us and surround us.

“She plunges you straight into the world,” her friend the historian Sally Alexander told me, “the most uncomfortable, obscure, and difficult moments. But she also reminds you that a thinking human being is capable of action in that world. How can we think through these difficulties?” It’s here that Jacqueline and Gillian’s “thought *touches*,” Alexander added. “That comes from their parents, or their unspoken history—that sense that there was something to be uncovered and revealed and thought through.”

In the front room of Rose’s apartment hangs a Thérèse Oulton painting of startling contrasts, bright white edged with a dense brown. It is a painting of a terminal moraine, the term for the debris at the farthest edge of a glacier (also called its snout), which becomes edged by the earth scraped up and carried along under the ice sheet. It evokes a mind able to rake up and push into its own dirt. (“I would like to live in a world where you didn’t have to be ashamed of shame,” Rose once said.)

Another large Oulton hangs on a living-room wall, this one of pooling, pearlescent liquid—milk or spit or sperm, it’s hard to say. “It’s so multiple,” Rose said. The brushstrokes are a single layer deep; no brushstroke covers another, no stroke is obscured, covered up, corrected.

Rose has lived in the apartment since her early twenties, decorating it in cream and beige—soft marine colors. The feeling was of being inside a shell. A low table was heaped with books by young women writers—Joanna Biggs, Andrea Long Chu, Yasmin El-Rifae. (Rose is “a model of how you engage as a feminist with younger feminists,” the philosopher Amia Srinivasan told me. “She is so

intellectually open, something you don't see in many feminists of her generation.") On a bookshelf, a fat volume on apartheid was squeezed beside a guide to cultivating orchids.

She pointed out a photograph: "Braham. Look at that beautiful Jewish face. Look, how beautiful." Then a picture of the trio—her, Braham, and Gillian—as children: "The three of us, deeply linked. Him with the authority, here. That's his bar mitzvah."

Rose writes in a dim, carefully organized study with bookshelves dedicated to South Africa, Israel and Palestine, psychoanalysis. Above her desk is a photograph of her daughter; nearby is a framed portrait of Edward Said, looking as if he's about to disagree with you. On a bookshelf in the corner is her Freud, the standard edition, twenty-four slipcovered volumes.

When Rose bought the flat, she became intent on painting this room a particular, shimmery shade of turquoise. "My friends thought I had gone mad—'This is not your palette,' " she recalled. When she finished and hauled in her books, she realized that she had painted the room the very blue of Freud's standard edition.

"It's enough to make you believe in the unconscious—that you could actually paint the room the color of the person's books you're going to spend the rest of your life thinking about, one way or another," she said.

In her younger years, she briefly considered studying to become an analyst, but decided she was deflecting from the analysis that she needed. "Psychoanalysis brings to light everything we don't want to think about," she explained. "If you can acknowledge the complexity of your own heart, then you're not going to look for scapegoats."

In her early twenties, back in England after her Paris sojourn, Rose embarked on a dissertation on children's literature at University College London, and fell in with feminist groups. She liked to tell people that the "Y.S.L." on her scarves stood for "Young Socialist League." "One of the great legacies of the feminism of the nineteen-seventies was friendship," she told me. Laura Mulvey, Sally Alexander, and other feminists were participating in reading and discussion

groups; the friendships were fast and ardent. At a dinner party, Rose met Juliet Mitchell, a literary scholar and a psychoanalyst, and by the end of the evening they had agreed to translate Lacan together, eventually producing a volume that stayed in print for decades.

Rose's Ph.D. thesis, and the work that followed, about Peter Pan and childhood, was finding admirers, too. "It was groundbreaking," the novelist Ali Smith, then a lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, said. "Nobody was writing about literature like this." Childhood purity and innocence, Rose suggested, was an adult fabulation. Children's literature was structured by adult desires, actual childhood having been colonized by our fantasies of it. In later years, Rose seldom returned to children's literature, as such, but the interrogation of innocence became a lifelong project.

Her teaching life, meanwhile, became critical to her thinking. In 1976, she joined the School of Cultural and Community Studies at the University of Sussex (finding herself again with Gillian), which allowed her to stay near London. She was drawn, she said, to the social impact of education, and was determined to seek out and teach a multiracial student body. Talking about this, she gave me a significant look: "There's a story there about belonging and not belonging."

Starting in the late nineteen-eighties, a decisive shift occurred for both her and Gillian. The sisters, as well as Braham Murray, then an artistic director of the Royal Exchange Theatre, in Manchester, found that their work was drawing them toward the Holocaust. Gillian, a scholar of German idealism, had immersed herself in the Holocaust theology of Emil Fackenheim; Braham, at his Manchester theatre, set a production of "Macbeth" in a Nazi death camp. Rose was defending Sylvia Plath's controversial use of Holocaust metaphors. "I realize now that the three of us had been brought to this topic as a way of engaging a mostly unspoken part of our family history—on this, the lines that were running, strangely and unconsciously, between the three of us were clear," Rose told me. "But there was something more."

Murray, she said, was "blurring the ethical contours of history by forcing the prisoners to perform—through Macbeth's burgeoning and finally uncontrollable

violence—the reality of the evil to which they as Jews were subject." And then, Rose says, there was Gillian's "not unrelated plea that Auschwitz should not become sacred, its victims ideal innocents, its perpetrators unthinkable monsters. Nor should it be seen as absolute, unrepresentable—a horror which can only therefore be countered by an equivalently absolute act of redemption by the Israeli nation-state."

Rose describes herself not as an anti-Zionist but as a critic of Zionism, a reader of Zionism, focussing on the nationalist movement's insistence on its own innocence. She warns against letting victimhood—best understood as an event, something that befalls a person—become an identity. In the context of Zionism, as in the context of feminism, she has said, we "need to be endlessly vigilant in not allowing victimhood to become who we are."

Such statements have brought swift, sometimes violent censure. The novelist Howard Jacobson based a character on Rose in his 2010 Man Booker-winning novel, "The Finkler Question": Tamara Krausz, an academic and an "ashamed Jew" who "never appeared in public looking anything other than an executive of a fashion consultancy, at once businesslike and softly feminine." Finkler, the protagonist, fantasizes about slitting her throat. Recently, Rose's insistence that feminists have everything to learn from trans women alienated some former comrades. "I lost friends," she said.

Rose's suspicion of all notions of innocence ran through even her later reflections on South Africa's struggles to make itself whole after apartheid. She adopted a Freudian perspective on the impossible ideals of truth and reconciliation, on the paired sainthood of Nelson Mandela and vilification of Winnie Mandela. "Why do we expect, in situations of political injustice, that virtue will accumulate on the side of the oppressed?" she wrote in the *London Review of Books,* her regular outlet. "At the very least, Winnie Mandela does us the favour of demonstrating how misguided that belief is. Why, then, do we rush to divest the downtrodden of the ethical ambiguity that must be everyone's birthright?"

In 1992, at the age of forty-two, Rose took a position as a professor of English at Queen Mary University of London. (She moved to Birkbeck, in Bloomsbury,

eight years ago.) Her partner then was the psychoanalyst and writer Adam Phillips, and in 1995, not long after Gillian fell ill, she adopted a girl from China.

"I had always wanted to be a mother," Rose said. "I was never one of those women who put their career first and wake up and find it is too late. It was simply that it never happened. Men thought, 'Oh, she's this intellectual.' I was a nice Jewish girl who wanted a family."

In Rose's living room, there is a photograph of her in a swimming pool, joyfully holding her daughter, Mia, aloft, almost like a prize. "It was just magic, being an older mother," Rose told me. "You know, I had fulfilled so much of my life in ways I'd never dreamed of. And so I thought, I can really do this. If I had my time over, I would have taken a five-year career gap just to concentrate on that. And I would have adopted a second child. But that turned out not to be possible."

Mia, a schoolteacher, lives with her partner nearby. When I asked her if she and Rose were close, she laughed and said that she does her mother's hair. She is possessed of a cheerful, slightly scary frankness. I raised the question of what it was like to be brought up by a psychoanalyst and a psychoanalytic critic—was there heavy dream analysis at breakfast?—and Mia replied heartily, "It put me off. I felt really stupid. As I got older, I became proud, but it was daunting. How do they know all this? What are they talking about? I became literally the opposite—into sports, photography."

Phillips and Rose split up when Mia was six. Mia is so blunt about the subject of her parents' relationship—so matter-of-fact, and so devoid of rancor—as to suggest that the Prevezer curse has been decisively routed. "Men feel competitive if their partners are clever and successful," she said. "My mum was very successful. And my dad wanted something different. He found someone in a different job, fourteen years younger."

Rose, on the other hand, is never more circumspect than on the subject of her personal life. "You can say," she finally allowed, "that 'there has been—and is—

love of men in her life.' " On Phillips, she offers, diplomatically, that theirs was "a very fertile exchange." They read each other's work. "Whether there were other unconscious undercurrents, which were a bit more complex . . ." She shrugged, smiled.

"Prepare yourself," Rose told me. We were standing outside the Anna Freud room in London's Freud Museum. It had been the family house after the Freuds fled Vienna, the house where Freud died. There was something Rose wanted me to see, something she said would overwhelm me. She put her hand on my back lightly and followed me into the room. It was bright and bare: Anna Freud's desk with her typewriter, a few photographs, and display cases.

Rose looked stricken. "It's gone," she said. "Gone."

It was the loom. For years, she explained, Anna Freud kept a loom in the house; she would sit and weave between seeing patients. She sat there, too, after her companion, Dorothy Burlingham, died, weaving her grief. Many of the Freud women had worked with cloth; among the carefully curated objects in the Freud Museum is a messy box labelled "*Petites Choses*," stuffed with ribbons and swatches and lacework. They belonged to the sisters Freud left behind in Vienna, all of whom died in the Holocaust.

For Freud himself, textiles were a potent source of psychoanalytic metaphor—the strands to gather, the thread to follow out of the labyrinth. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud described how his grandson would throw out of his crib a bobbin—a piece of a loom, with a string attached to it—and then pull it back. Each time he would say, "*Fort!*" ("Gone"), and then "*Da!*" ("There"). Freud surmised that he was coming to terms with his mother's absence, a form of unconscious mourning.

Rose had last visited the museum in September, 2020, to give the annual Freud Memorial Lecture, over Zoom. She had stood alone in Freud's study, between two couches: the ornate, rug-draped divan on which his patients lay and a very plain one, on which he died. Her lecture, which appears in "The Plague," explores how Freud's notion of the death drive was influenced by the pandemic of

his own time, the so-called Spanish flu. The flu pandemic, by some estimates, wiped out more people than the two world wars combined but was itself swiftly wiped from historical memory. Freud himself seldom mentions it. And yet it took the life of his favorite daughter, Sophie, then pregnant with her third child.

Rose had been writing about Freud in her Freud-colored study throughout her career, but only during COVID did she fully appreciate how his thought emerged from pandemic and war. Losing Sophie, she believed, helped him articulate a sense that the organism possesses an awareness that it is moving toward death. The death drive was among his most controversial theories, and for good reason, she insisted: "The idea of an unconscious demonic principle driving the psyche to distraction could be said to sabotage once and for all the vision of man in control of his mind."

The museum was nearly empty when we visited. The exterior walls were webbed with white roses cultivated from cuttings of Freud's own flowers. Two women sat knitting in the garden. His office that day was warm, enclosing. A brass kettle rested on a brazier. The porcupine figurine sat on his desk, grimacing. The patient's couch looked like a great inviting lap.

"It completely overwhelms me to see how much he had in his head, that he had room for all of this," Rose whispered, peering over glass cases that held Freud's archeological keepsakes—a terra-cotta Sphinx, a bronze Athena. "Well, everything began here, right? I mean, Oedipus begins here, and Moses, who was an Egyptian. Between classical culture and Egyptology. He sort of belonged in these two places."

Then she noticed that something else was missing: Where was the deathbed? She spotted the museum's director, in conversation with a guest, and introduced herself.

The director turned. He was wearing, improbably, a shirt in the same minty blue of Freud's standard edition. Now he gasped, theatrically. "You are Jacqueline Rose. The famous Jacqueline Rose."

The director's guest, a retired academic, sensed an opening and moved in. She

was studying psychoanalysis and colonial India, the same topic as one of Rose's Ph.D. students—remarkable coincidence! They were to be in the same edition of a French publication—marvellous! They must all get in touch.

Rose turned back to the director. "Don't be shocked," she said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a photograph.

"Oh, my goodness," he said. "When was this?"

The photograph showed Edward Said sitting in Freud's green armchair, as if listening to a patient on the nearby couch. The photograph was taken, Rose said, before Said gave his "Freud and the Non-European" lecture at the museum, in 2001—a reading of "Moses and Monotheism" in which Freud's notion of Moses as an Egyptian complicates the usual promised-land narratives of identity and emancipation.

"Whoever was guiding us said, 'Hop over, go sit on the chair,' " Rose explained.

"I'm very glad that he did."

"I wasn't sure how you would react. I must be honest."

"We were more laid-back in those days," the director said. "We are stricter now." He looked at the photograph again.

Rose asked about the couch on which Freud died. What happened to it?

"It's upstairs," the director assured Rose. "It's just not something we like to display too much. We feel that it's maybe not part of the story, you know, of the creation of Freud's study, bringing everything over from Vienna. I mean, that couch was acquired in London for him to die on."

In "The Plague," Rose quotes Walter Benjamin's observation, in his 1936 essay "The Storyteller," that "there used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died." Like him, she looks askance at the effort to deny the spectacle of dying. "In a pandemic, death cannot be exiled to the outskirts of existence," Rose writes. But, even here, death was back in the attic; the couch was

gone, and no one could tell us what happened to the loom.

At the launch for the British edition of "The Plague," hosted by the London Review Bookshop, the crowd was large, young, adoring. Not one but two young women with severe bobs were holding copies of "The Bostonians." An audience member reported arriving fresh from analysis, and looked it. Another lamented, about a lover or a crush, "I need him as an unattainable object of my desire. Maybe I should re-idealize him."

When Rose started to speak, they sat raptly. The storyteller used to derive his authority from death, she explained, glossing Benjamin. But now death had become a shameful thing, to be banished from sight. That pathology, the need to hide death, she said, "is always summed up for me by the joke Freud shares in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death': Husband and wife are sitting together talking about their future. And the husband says, 'When one of us dies, I'll move to Paris.' "

When one of us dies: Braham and Gillian wrote with fierce urgency at the very ends of their lives. Braham received a finished copy of a book he had written on Shakespeare the day he died. Gillian wrote her memoir in the last two years of her life, squeezing in, as well, two philosophical treatises and at least one new love affair. (Rose had told me, with relish, "She lived fully.")

How, "The Plague" asks, do we think in a disaster? Pulsing beneath this is another, more disturbing question: How do we think without one? "So what if I die," Gillian wrote. "Let me discover what it is that I want and fear from love." The membrane between life and death feels very thin in her memoir, the time short, and thought distilled to essence. It was this urgency with which Rose spoke to the audience. Were they reading *Jewish Currents*? Had they seen that article in the new magazine *Parapraxis* about the importance of psychoanalysis in times of fascist creep?

"Of course, psychoanalysis is meant to be marginal," she said. "It's socially corrosive. If it becomes widely accepted, it can become a problem."

Rose took questions; she signed books. She performed, in her paradoxical fashion, the act of thinking in public—this tidy, tailored, precise person championing the virtues of the ambiguous, the ungovernable, the unruly.

Later, when a group of us decamped to a nearby pub, Rose seemed self-critical, and tired—tired of being looked at, I thought. She ordered a tomato juice, then, in a valiant stab at celebration, a prosecco. She made introductions, and, when she was satisfied that the conversation would go on without her, she pushed her full wine glass to the side and made a polite escape.

"This is why I love Simone Weil so much," she said, trailing a final strand, a final thought. "She had this thesis of how you make yourself most present in your absence." ♦

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