

In the shadow of Gillian Rose: Truth as Education in the Hegelian Philosophy of Rowan Williams

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Abstract: Rowan Williams, ex-Archbishop of Canterbury (2002-2012), is a polymath of remarkable breadth and depth. But there remains at least one area in which his philosophical work has gone relatively unacknowledged and that is his view of education. My aim here is to explore a philosophically nuanced notion of *truth as education* in his work by examining its indebtedness to Hegel, and the recent Hegelianism of Gillian Rose. I argue that not only does a radical re-reading of the negative by Williams shape a formidable social and political critique but that therein the question of the Absolute is renewed in and for our time as one of learning.

Keywords: Rowan Williams; Hegel; Gillian Rose; truth; education; philosophy; politics; Tubbs

Introduction

“the only honest beginning is with difficulty” (Williams, 2007: 62)

Rowan Williams; ex-Archbishop of Canterbury, distinguished academic, theologian, philosopher and poet has intervened in, and contributed to, a striking variety of social, political, religious and cultural issues and debates. He participated in arguments surrounding the question of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, to which he was opposed. He argued, somewhat controversially, that certain aspects of Sharia law be incorporated into the British legal system. He challenged the UK coalition government’s concept of the “big society” and its cuts to welfare services whilst

offering a critique of disturbingly high levels of social, political and economic deprivation. He has strongly criticized the structures and practices of the global financial system, has been bold in his justification of faith schools and was at the helm of some of the most difficult of global interfaith discussions. Most notably, he presided over a time of great division within the Anglican Communion over the question of the ordination of gay priests and women bishops. Alongside all of this Williams' interest in the Arts, literature and education has seen him contribute to a much wider cultural and intellectual landscape. But perhaps the most striking feature of Williams' work is his remarkable ability to bring a certain philosophical thinking to bear on theological, philosophical, literary and political questions and thinkers as well as on many of the most difficult and contentious issues of the moment.

But when in 2006 Giles Fraser wrote that “the Anglican Communion is currently being tortured by a dead German philosopher”¹ this thinking had a rather more public unveiling. Hegel, it appeared, was a partner in the running of the Church of England bringing a certain brand of dialectics to wreak havoc on internal disputes and debates leaving many frustrated by, what Fraser calls, the “politics of eternal negotiation”.² On Fraser's reading, Hegelian dialectics amounts to the experience of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, whereby “human culture advances through a series of oppositions”³ to a moment of resolution. The “Canterbury” take on this, he writes, looks like this: “take someone who believes that women ought to be bishops. Take someone who believes women ought not to be bishops. Put them in a room with flip charts and

¹ Fraser, G. “Face to Faith” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2006

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

shake them all about, and you come out with a synthesis. Or a structured wholeness nuanced enough to contain what appeared to be contradictories. But you don't. What really happens is that you come up with a bodge and a room full of very angry Christians".⁴

But, whilst amusing, Fraser's understanding of Williams' Hegelianism did little more than reassert the long-worn stereotype of Hegel's philosophy as advancing to a synthesis of oppositions. Symbolic of what is most obsolete about Enlightenment thought and maligned as the archetypal dogmatic and imperialist (white, male) thinker of the absolute he is the object of many a critique in both analytical and continental philosophy. Williams himself admits that his first forays into Hegel offered a somewhat summary analysis of his system as the "organizing principle" which gathers all oppositions under the cloak of its "universal dialectic".⁵ He read it to be an "evasion of the temporal"⁶ and of the contingencies and unresolved tensions of human experience. But it was his re-examination of Hegel through the friendship and work of Gillian Rose, whom he recently described as still of "magisterial influence",⁷ that was to provide the route for a radical re-thinking of Hegel's philosophy.

Rose was by all accounts a most extraordinary thinker, her work unapologetically difficult and notoriously challenging. Her most important accomplishment and contribution to the field of Hegelian studies was *Hegel Contra Sociology* in which she reassesses the "experience of negativity, the existential drama"⁸ at the heart of thinking. The book is a complex

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 161

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 6

⁸ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, preface

and often controversial engagement with what she argues to be the “perennial difficulty”⁹ of modernity and post-modernity in reproducing dualistic (Kantian and neo-Kantian) forms of thinking. It was Rose’s re-reading of Hegelian speculative experience in the book that formed the basis for a retrieval of the truth that lives in, but which is suppressed by, these dualisms. Not only does this underpin a radical social and political critique, it is the route to a thinking of, and living with, the absolute in modern social relations.

It is not surprising that someone with the reforming instincts of Williams would be drawn to this reading of Hegel. The extent to which it shapes a social and political theorizing in his thinking drives increasing interest in his work. But, for the most part, readings of Williams miss the opportunity to engage with the most important aspect of the philosophical difficulty he works with: education. This is not to say that the formative nature of the dialectic in Williams is not widely acknowledged, for, as Myers remarks in *Christ the Stranger*, “Williams’ theology of the Church is...at heart, a theology of growth”¹⁰ or, as Russell puts it, “transformative potentiality”.¹¹ It is rather to say that the idea of learning in Williams is read as merely an effect of dialectical or philosophical experience. That it might carry a much deeper truth than this in Williams, because ‘the very experience of learning can be read as something to do with God’,¹² is sidelined and thus elided into the far less difficult notions of growth or mutual recognition.

In what follows I will argue that in working with a particular idea of difficulty in Hegel and Rose - carried in such weighty terms as the negative, struggle, loss, contradiction,

⁹ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, preface

¹⁰ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 55

¹¹ Russell, *On Rowan Williams*, 33

¹² Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 60

uncertainty - Williams changes the landscape of how truth and learning are understood in relation to each other. Part I sets up the relationship between Williams, Hegel and Rose. It offers an exposition of the negative in their work as a springboard to understanding Williams' own theorizing in Part II. It is here that the work of Nigel Tubbs is also introduced; a former student of Rose. His reading of education in Hegel raises the stakes for what this idea of truth as learning might mean. The radical import of Hegel's philosophy says Tubbs, lies in the ways in which it "works in the full awareness of having education as its own essence, that is, as the very substance of what it is and does".¹³ It is the educational subtleties of this in Hegel and Rose that, I argue, Williams is drawn too. Part III illustrates three ways in which it is developed into an educational social and political theorizing, couched in the terms of "negotiation", "self-dispossession" and the "iconic". I then return to Rose in the conclusion to ask what this idea of education might mean for the wider political, theological and metaphysical enterprise.

Part I

In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel states that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance* but equally as *Subject*" (author's emphasis).¹⁴ But to equate substance with subjectivity in this way is to bring together what, since the time of Aristotle, must be incompatible. Philosophy has always, in various ways, defined truth according to the ancient logic and necessity of the in-itself, truth as unity and lack of relation. That which was for-another was mediation and thus error. This idea of truth is carried

¹³ Tubbs, *Education in Hegel*, 2

¹⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10

in Aristotle's notion of the Prime Mover which is its own condition of possibility. Necessity - that it must be itself - is the principle of non-contradiction and the idea of the absurdity of infinite regression. Metaphysics has traditionally rested on this logic of the in-itself which is free from opposition, contradiction and change.

Phenomenological consciousness in Hegel has two experiences of the in-itself. The first is the object in-itself as "the moment of truth".¹⁵ But at the same time the object is *for consciousness* or is essence. The distinction from, and relation to, the object is the determining aspect of thought or what knowing is and this relation between the two is the "dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself and which affects both its knowledge and its object".¹⁶ The second experience is the one that we, the philosophical observer, have of this natural relation to the object. But our inquiry into the truth of knowledge concerns the object "knowledge" whose essence will also be being-in-itself and being-for-another. Both experiences are ones of loss because consciousness loses the object as it appears in both cases to the insight that what is known in-itself is mediation. Philosophical consciousness is the thinking which comes to know itself not only *in* the experience of negation but *as* the activity of negation itself, that is, what it observes is its own doing.

In this way we see what natural consciousness does not see, that loss is not just an empty nothingness but "the nothingness of that *from which it results*" (author's emphasis).¹⁷ It has a content because it is "what experience has made of it".¹⁸ Hegel shows us that if we do not protect

¹⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 53

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

the negative from its own contradiction – positivity – the negative *is* something. But our knowing of this is just as abstract. The significance of philosophical experience is thus our insight into the reality of loss that natural consciousness is content to screen. Therein a different understanding of, or relation to, truth in-itself arises. What philosophical awareness teaches us is that truth is learned in and from experience.

The negative nature of this experience is described most famously in Hegel as the “pathway of doubt” or the “way of despair”.¹⁹ But the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not an account of how consciousness overcomes doubt towards some dogmatic moment of absolute knowing. It is a discovery of how natural or abstract consciousness loses itself in its experience of the object, including itself as object, and how in doing so it comes to know the nature of untruth. Loss in Hegel is recognition of the unsustainable character of the natural. This unrest of truth and knowledge may well make consciousness seek a retreat to a place of certainty. But, says Hegel, “thought troubles its own thoughtlessness”²⁰ and relating to itself in this way it discovers the discipline of a thinking which does not eschew the experience of doubt or contradiction because it knows it to be “the education of consciousness”.²¹

In *Hegel Contra Sociology* Rose shows us that modern social and political theorizing continues to be characterized by the logic of the in-itself, rooted in a Kantian and neo-Kantian transcendentalism which “necessarily presupposes the actuality or existence of its object and seeks to discover the conditions of its possibility”.²² This separation of the transcendental from

¹⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 49

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 50

²² Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 1

the object betrays the same separation of the in-itself from that which is for-another. She argues that despite Kant's critical philosophy the contradictions experienced by reason when it tries to think itself are seen as error and ultimately overcome in a transcendental account of experience and the synthetic *a priori* judgement. This ultimately serves to "justify infinite ignorance"²³ because in seeking to justify the true in-itself it is only available in the way that it appears to us, as an identity in-itself, which leaves "the social, political and historical determinants of all knowledge and all action... unknown and unknowable".²⁴

What Kant fails to do, unlike Hegel, is make the experience of contradiction, that "the examination of knowledge can only be carried out by an act of knowledge",²⁵ the content of reason's self-examination which would be rather the phenomenological investigation of its experience whereby we observe the contradictions between natural consciousness and its objects to be "the occasion for a change in that consciousness and in its definition of its object".²⁶ For Hegel, it is consciousness itself which sets up the standard by which to judge what can be known in-itself and so what is error. But in doing so, it "presupposes that the Absolute stands on one side and cognition on the other, independent and separated from it".²⁷ It is no surprise that philosophy fears falling into the errors of mediation because how can it be truth and outside of truth at the same time? But, says Hegel, what if this fear reveals itself rather to be "fear of the truth".²⁸

²³ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 44

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Hegel cited in Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 43

²⁶ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 46

²⁷ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 47

²⁸ Ibid.

It may appear absurd to natural consciousness to say that truth is substance which is subject because truth in-itself cannot be also our subjective experience of it. But it is precisely this contradiction that Rose retrieves for what she calls a “non-foundational and radical”²⁹ Hegelianism. Philosophical consciousness sees that natural consciousness is always already a shape of relation to and determination of substance and so the misapprehension of substance. But only in this way is the relation already something which will reform itself because consciousness becomes aware that experience contradicts the object in-itself. In this experience of contradiction “a notion is implied”³⁰ that makes known a different kind of truth than that which is identity.³¹ Instead, truth is *present* but only in the whole range of its history because it is the “result of the process of the contradictory experiences of consciousness”³² realized in and as philosophical consciousness. The negative in Hegel is “self-perficient”³³ skepticism. It has a content because it is “our “addition””³⁴ to the experience of thought’s relation to the object. Truth in Hegel is systematic but not dogmatic because it is “the idea of a whole which cannot be grasped in one moment or one statement for it must be experienced”.³⁵

Rose’s concept of the “broken middle” expresses something of the speculative character of this experience. It is an idea which expresses negativity, opposition and contradiction as something substantial. We can think of the broken middle as the gap between our concept of

²⁹ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, preface.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 46

³¹ The Notion in Hegel is the name given to the educational work that thinking exercises on itself as both the natural relation that thought has to its object and that relation re-cognised as one of illusion. In the *Science of Logic* the labour of the notion is the way that illusion learns of itself from itself.

³² *Ibid.*, 46

³³ *Ibid.*, 153

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 154

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 182

something (the universal, identity) and what that something actually is, between what thought intends and the reality, and so, likewise, what we think we are and what we actually are or have become. But instead of trying to overcome these gaps and the illusions thereof, speculative experience of the rhythmic movement of dualistic consciousness, of identity and lack of identity, is made content for a different understanding of who and what we are. For Rose, there is a different resonance to be discovered, or rather learned, in these gaps (historical, political, cultural, philosophical and religious) if we do not run away from or try to mask the difficulties they present to us.³⁶

Part II

We see most clearly Williams working with this reading in his four main essays on Hegel where truth is to be found in the rhythms of philosophical experience as opposed to solutions and identities which overcome them.³⁷ Thinking about thinking is a risky engagement with the negative as the genesis for this different kind of truth from within which the Absolute can be thought. This is why one of the first things we can say of Williams is that he draws attention throughout much of his work to the unsettling of that which conforms to the logic of identity or non-contradiction. It is no surprise that this shapes a certain sort of response in his contributions

³⁶ Rose's philosophical idea of the broken middle is to be found in Gillian Rose *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992)

³⁷ These are; "Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose"; "Hegel and the gods of postmodernity"; "Logic and spirit in Hegel", in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007) and Rowan Williams "The Sadness of the King": Gillian Rose, Hegel and the Pathos of Reason" in *Telos*, 173, 2015:21-36

to contemporary issues and debates. The more probing voice of the negative insists on making visible the mediated and contingent nature of dualistic consciousness and so the gaps that open up between our concept of ourselves or states of affairs and reality. We must be prepared for what these rhythms will teach us about all of the ways in which we deceive ourselves in the varied rhetorics of modern freedom; choice without loss, cost or limit; desire without responsibility; innocence without complicity. If natural consciousness is untruth, because “to think what is other is to discover its otherness as implicated in the act of thinking and the thinking implicated in the otherness”,³⁸ then the beginning that thought makes over and against the object is always a dishonest one.

To be aware of the contingent nature of beginnings, for Williams, is to be “put in question”,³⁹ to be made uncertain by the gaps constituting our involvement in a much larger landscape of mediations, perspectives and contingencies. Without the myriad of mediating social and cultural institutions and associations through which we learn of and in this uncertainty, and he is clear that this is precisely what is happening in our contemporary culture, we simply reinforce a market notion of freedom “that presupposes a blank will looking out at a bundle of options like goods on a supermarket shelf”.⁴⁰ The problem with this is that it suggests that “gain may be had with the minimum of loss”,⁴¹ a rhetoric which masks the difficult but educative rhythms of modern freedom. Williams drives this home in his analysis of the rhetoric of choice in education and in debates concerning abortion and euthanasia. “We end up assuming that

³⁸ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 36

³⁹ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 62

⁴⁰ Williams, *Lost Icons*, 32

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23

human beings do not have to learn to choose; will triumphs over the messy and time-consuming business of reflection, the thinking through of our relationships and dependencies”.⁴² Our protection of childhood as a space in which to learn and nurture this experience of freedom is thus vital to Williams. Through play and fantasy we get to try on the clothes of a mature adult freedom. We get to test its boundaries and its costs in a safe environment. In the landscape of the imagination we are given “a space for seeing the self and its world afresh”.⁴³ Williams thus defends the motility of the relation between thought and truth and so truth and experience as the negative force of a learning self and a learning culture. But there is deeper significance to this loss in Hegel and Rose and Williams. To understand the nature of the education in question we must turn to one of the most contested terms in Hegelian philosophy, that of the *Aufhebung*.

Aufhebung tends to get translated as sublation. In the *Science of Logic* Hegel writes that it has two meanings. The first is “‘to preserve, to maintain’ but it is just as much ‘to cause, to cease, to put an end to’”.⁴⁴ In a recent book on Hegel’s preface, Yirmiyahu Yovel describes the *Aufhebung* as the principle of the Hegelian system whereby every moment of the dialectic in “transcending its limits”⁴⁵ reconstitutes or rebuilds itself. “The new form negates its predecessor’s inadequate form but incorporates its essence within itself”⁴⁶ and so is a new shape of relation to self and object. Most common readings of the term tend to describe it as the higher element of the dialectical process. But, as Rose notes, it is also the term which expresses

⁴² Ibid., 38

⁴³ Ibid., 19

⁴⁴ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 107

⁴⁵ Yovel, *Hegel’s Preface*, 67

⁴⁶ Ibid., 95

speculative experience which carries a much more difficult idea of where we actually end up in the process.

To raise the stakes for what this might mean I want to turn again to the work of Nigel Tubbs whose reading of Rose takes up the challenge of interpreting her Hegelianism as a philosophy of education, and again, as the education of philosophy.⁴⁷ He argues that the term sublation does not quite do justice to the educational nature of the *Aufhebung* in Hegel making it a mostly misunderstood term. If it is read according to the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad then we might well recognize the formative nature of the movement but not the most important feature of that education; the fact that the consciousness experiencing the movement of negation and the negation of negation is changed. To remain a voyeur of the movement is to see the result or synthesis as merely identity, which is another one-sided view of the dialectic. It is easy, on this reading, to criticize the dialectic as overcoming and so as the domination of reason over difference, diversity, openness and critique. But, he argues, the *Aufhebung* is the experience in and by which consciousness can “realize a determinate self-(re)formation”.⁴⁸ What is most suppressed about philosophical experience in Hegel is that it is always this relation to the object (natural consciousness) and the relation to that relation (philosophical consciousness). The *Aufhebung* is the *sustainability* of the relation between them in the mind learning about itself as

⁴⁷ Tubbs’ theory of education in Hegel has its roots in Rose’s retrieval of Hegelian speculative experience. It is developed and expanded in a series of books, most notably, Nigel Tubbs, *Philosophy’s Higher Education*, (Netherlands, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004); Nigel Tubbs, *Education in Hegel* (London: Continuum, 2008); Nigel Tubbs, *History of Western Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Nigel Tubbs, *Philosophy and Modern Liberal Arts Education* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). It is also to be found in a trajectory of Hegelian educational theory and practice in two undergraduate programmes in Education Studies and Modern Liberal Arts at the University of Winchester.

⁴⁸ Tubbs, *Education in Hegel*, 48

the truth of them both. This is why Williams is keen to point out that “Hegel does not offer to dissolve natural consciousness, with its specific objects of knowledge; how could he? For it is in the continual renewal of the ‘natural’ errors of pre-speculative thinking that speculation... is itself renewed”.⁴⁹

Read in this way, the *Aufhebung* is the condition of the possibility of all thinking because it is always already the form and content of the experience of immediacy and mediation. For Yovel, it is the principle by which immediacy is lost and then “interiorized”⁵⁰ in memory so that consciousness “remembers itself”.⁵¹ But Tubbs warns us that to know how it is really educational we must be mindful that its positivity is more than mere remembering. To do this we must be asking a particular question. How is it possible to “know the truth of something in what it is not”⁵² without suppressing its negativity in its being known? Tubbs argues that remembering is the overcoming of forgetfulness by memory and that, as such, it is identity. But this fails to sustain the negativity of that which *is* what it *is not*. Read speculatively, remembering is recollection. It is the thinking which knows it gets caught in the contradictions of recollecting itself as something in-itself. That is, it loses itself in a way that merely remembering does not. But it makes that contradiction its content. It remembers what is lost but loses what it remembers to its mediation. What is known as recollection is not overcome as mere identity. It is rather “the groundlessness” of that which is retrieved or preserved. This double movement, negation and negation of negation, is what Hegel means by subjective substance. Recollection has its truth in

⁴⁹ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 61

⁵⁰ Yovel, *Hegel's Preface*, 67

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 153

⁵² Tubbs, *Education in Hegel*, 51

and as the lived life of learning. Whilst this is a rather difficult formulation by Tubbs it does offer a much more open Hegel in the way of Rose and Williams that retrieves the positive moment of the negative, not as another unmediated mastery, but as a learning mind.

What does this idea of learning amount to for Williams? First of all, it teaches us that “actuality” must be read as “difficult”.⁵³ Difficulty in Williams is the substance of a freedom which lives and learns in the ambiguous middle of a “universality of perspective”⁵⁴ and its mediation in the particular and singular realities of that freedom. Moreover, this nexus between difficulty and freedom is interpreted by Williams as having to do with the fundamental question of recognition and so the educational relation of self and other.

In *Hegel Contra Sociology* Rose argues that recognition in Hegel is formal recognition, the rhythms of which remind us of “the philosophical importance of error and the recognisability of error”.⁵⁵ The prefix “re” of recognition tells us that there is an inescapable “misseeing” in the experience which implies that something has been re-experienced in order that it is “well-known”.⁵⁶ Recognition presupposes the gaps represented by the relation between concept and object/intuition, that is, that the concept is never united with intuition. Failure to acknowledge this gap is failure to see how difficulty actually arises in the experience of the concept. It means that recognition has, in fact, a triune structure, argues Rose. It implies unity (immediacy), lack of unity (mediation, contingency) and so, crucially, the *third* partner of the relation or the *work* that

⁵³ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 53

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 65

⁵⁵ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 59

⁵⁶ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 71

consciousness performs on itself in the process. Recognition is a triune relation in and by which, for Williams, self and other “reconceive their goal and interest in what is other”.⁵⁷

This reading of recognition by Rose, however, warns us against a theory of mutual recognition in Hegel. The truth of the immediate and independent self-consciousness “who only exists in being acknowledged”⁵⁸ presupposes reflective consciousness which is shown to be already “the reflection of individual domination”.⁵⁹ Mutual recognition in Hegel is miscognition or the failure “on the part of two self-consciousnesses who encounter each other and refuse to recognize the other as itself a self-relation”.⁶⁰ It is this reading of recognition in Rose and the educational subtleties of the *Aufhebung* therein that, I argue, underpins Williams’ own theorizing of self and other. Because thinking in Hegel “outlives and “defeats” itself “by the penetration of its own logic and process”⁶¹ the difficulty of recognition is formative for the mind that “realizes itself in “emptying itself” and so whose “continuity” (positivity?) “is secured in and by its challenging or denying of itself”.⁶² This can, on the one hand, be read as mutual recognition and Williams does, at times, lean this way. But, at his most difficult, he insists that this is no mutuality. The *agonistic* middle of recognition is the awareness that “the act of interpreting, expressing “learning” is itself historical, strategic and without guarantee”.⁶³ Theories of mutual recognition hide the truth that we are each “equally enraged and invested”.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 59

⁵⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111

⁵⁹ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 71

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 74

⁶¹ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 37

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 67

⁶⁴ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 74-75

This is why Williams does not read Hegel's philosophy as a "story of *return* to the same" (author's emphasis).⁶⁵ To do this would be to remain at the level of the abstract opposition "of positive and negative (presence and absence)"⁶⁶ that has no way of recreating the conditions for thought's renewal and so the critical activity in and by which "self-consciousness learns of its investment in denying the actuality of itself and other as always already engaged in some structure of recognition or misrecognition".⁶⁷

The challenge this poses to a certain post-modern absolutizing of the other are important. As Williams sees it, the work of consciousness yields the speculative recognition that identity and difference are returning identities i.e. they are the *time* of thinking and so the "processes of concept formation as they show themselves in language".⁶⁸ The dialectic is not the tyranny of identity. It is the *difficulty of actuality*, known in and to itself as learning. Liberation from this difficulty is what we should be worried about because it is recourse to a "depoliticized"⁶⁹ reality and so the emptiness of absolute difference without work, without accountability, without social meaning and so, crucially, without learning.

Part III

Negotiation

⁶⁵ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 29

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 75

⁶⁸ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 30

⁶⁹ Ibid., 31

Williams is indebted to Rose for his own development of an educational theory of recognition. Concerning the question of “the other” in post-modernity he quotes her as follows.

“‘The Other’ is misrepresented as sheer alterity, for the ‘Other’ is equally the distraught subject searching for its substance, its ethical life... New Ethics would transcend the autonomy of the subject by commanding that I substitute myself for ‘the Other’ (heteronomy) or by commanding attention to ‘the Other’. Yet it is the inveterate but occluded immanence of one subject to itself and to other subjects that needs further exposition. Simply to command me to sacrifice myself, or to commend that I pay attention to others makes me intolerant, naïve and miserable...[T]he immanence on the self-relation of ‘the other’ to my own self-relation will always be disowned”.⁷⁰

What is at stake here is the difficulty of self and other as an educational experience. Only in the errors and failures of recognition do we see the other as not absolutely other but “a determination within constraints of how my and our life is to be shaped”.⁷¹ Difference is “an occasion of work” because each of us is “enacting concrete intentions”⁷² within a cultural and institutional environment shaped in and by this constraining actuality. Recognition is a relation to actuality and so crucially our investment in what Williams calls the experience of negotiation and thus self-critique.

“another material speaker is someone whose deployment of conceptual and rhetorical strategies will be in some ways parallel and in some ways divergent in relation to mine: I

⁷⁰ Rose cited in Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 59

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 54

⁷² *Ibid.*, 59

recognize a strategy that is faced with what I am faced, yet one that operates out of a distinct accumulation of past negotiation and from a different material location, whose perspectives are accessible to me only in the exchanges of language. But the material of my own negotiation in and with my environment is nothing other than these other perspectives and histories”.⁷³

For this reason, Williams is not prepared to cede the other to the post-foundational view. Discarding the metaphysical baggage of a tradition and an ethics which is seen to have subsumed the other under its universalizing tendencies is a dangerously “anti-political”⁷⁴ move for it makes otherness unthinkable, which would “leave us incapable of thinking ourselves, and so of thinking about thinking – and so of thinking itself”.⁷⁵ Moreover, a post-modern rhetoric of otherness avoids the historical and propertied relations which determine the presuppositions of such a reality freed of the “the tensions and aporiai of power”.⁷⁶ In sidestepping an ethics that works with the reality of negotiation post-foundational discourses envisage an environment of “unconditioned access to goods”⁷⁷ which fails to recognize how power actually arises in conditions which must necessarily be scarce because “desire can be and is frustrated by the access of others to goods”.⁷⁸ For Williams, the shared environment must be an object of thought if it is to do justice to negotiation and, in turn, the continued search for justice in the world which

⁷³ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 54

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 31

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 36

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 55

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 55

arises when all labour at their shared conditions. The learning self undermines a reality seen “in terms of individuals “owning” selves, ideas, property in a fixed and uncontended way”.⁷⁹

Self-dispossession

From this perspective Williams’ theory of negotiation is also a theory of self-dispossession. He remarks that the modern reflective subject knows the pathway of doubt only too well, dispossessing itself of itself time and again. He roots this partly in the “crucible of western self-doubt”⁸⁰ as it emerged in the European Enlightenment when the skeptical revolt against the conventions of society was translated into a skepticism about God. The loss of both, he writes, left “the human spirit homeless”⁸¹ and turning inward toward the depths of the self. But consciousness, “if it does not run away from the contradictions and difficulties”⁸² that will come its way in attempts to overcome or suppress them, learns that loss is where we are most human and most aware of having changed and so of having learned. Self-dispossession is “a renunciation of the self-possession that is content with never failing”.⁸³ Thinking about ourselves and our experience teaches us this much, that the power we possess in speech and action is contingent, that the source of our power is loss, limit, failure and powerlessness. Power is ethical when it is able to understand the deep connection between loss and truthful self-relation.

The ‘iconic’ life

⁷⁹ Ibid., 68

⁸⁰ Williams, *Dostoevsky, Language, Faith and Fiction*, 205

⁸¹ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 68

⁸² Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 68

⁸³ Ibid., 64

In addition, negotiation and dispossession converge in one further spiritual concept of the “iconic”. Williams writes about icons in a number of works both as a “cultic object” of convention, devotion and prayer and as a concept for thinking through the sort of educational experience discussed above.⁸⁴ This is because “an icon comes with a narrative”.⁸⁵ As a holy image the narrative takes shape as a depiction of the activity of God, who in the life and death of Jesus transfigures the human life. The narrative has loss as the principle of divine action. But icons are also the divine life at work in the discipline of the process of making them and in the devotional life that responds to them. We do not just look at them. The icon invites us also to be looked at and in this way they reflect back to us the work that we must do to understand ourselves in the light of divine action. The self-awareness they engender is what Williams has elsewhere called a “borderland”⁸⁶ experience, one which draws us to the familiar – places, pictures, persons – now grown strange. It therefore reveals to us the “potentially tragic”⁸⁷ in human affairs but therein the depth and wider horizon within which our struggles have meaning and through which we are changed.

He can translate the liturgical, artistic meaning of icons into political, spiritual and educational critique because, he says, there have always been “verbal and moral icons”⁸⁸ within which cultural forms of recognition are sustained. In the way that religious icons “give us a

⁸⁴ See Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (London: Morehouse Publishing, 2000); Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2003); Rowan Williams, *Ponder these Things* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2002); Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky, Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008)

⁸⁵ Williams, *Dostoevsky, Language, Faith and Fiction*, 125

⁸⁶ Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light*, xiv

⁸⁷ Williams, *Dostoevsky, Language, Faith and Fiction*, 200

⁸⁸ Williams, *Lost Icons*, 2

window into an alien frame of reference”,⁸⁹ so to do those structures and practices which shape social relation and human behavior. In various ways, Williams demonstrates that there is to be had an iconic life capable of learning in the light of loss and difficulty. Icons and the iconic life are mirrors of the implicated nature of human and divine loss. If we probe this a little more we can see that the iconic as a mirror to the self has something of the speculative about it. Icons structure and show in what they reflect the narrative of the self “as something realized *in time*” (author’s emphasis).⁹⁰ They yield the experience of re-cognition; of immediacy, loss and disruption brought into relation with what is already the larger context of its experience. At the same time, they return us to ourselves in the empowering of individual political life. This “eye” of the icon is the work of the “I”, the third partner of the relation between image and observer. Icons are mirrors of and for the broken middle of divine and human education in the learning individual. It is analogous to “gift” because it is the gift of a “different kind of self-hood”.⁹¹

“The icon as a cultic object shows brokenness healed and plurality reconciled, but translated into the terms of a human biography, the icon must be a story, a process, that shows the reality of a life that is disrupted by loss or sin and still faithful to the world that the icon manifests, faithful enough to become answerable for that world’s reality and power”.⁹²

What the themes of negotiation, self-dispossession and the iconic show is the extent to which Williams’ thinking works not only with the difficulty of truth but with the truth of

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Williams, *Lost Icons*, 5

⁹¹ Williams, *Dostoevsky, Language, Faith and Fiction*, 160

⁹² Ibid., 201

difficulty as it is lived educationally in all areas of our lives. For Williams its implications are far reaching. It means no programme for the achievement of a social and political ideal because it insists on a “sociality never “mended” in any final way”.⁹³ It unsettles all that is most natural to us and it asks us – as individuals and as a culture or society – to risk our own vulnerability in and for the *agon* of truth which is made known therein. But it is an educational truth not necessarily discernible or tangible in the ordinary way of things. Hence, for Williams, “how we learn about learning is a condition for politics (including ethics), theology and metaphysics alike”.⁹⁴

Conclusion

What then can we say about the absolute significance of this educational truth? Rose argues that to think the absolute is to “acknowledge[] the subjective element, the limits on our thinking the absolute”.⁹⁵ It is what thinking about thinking in Hegel has taught us. In the *Logic* it is a “category of essence”⁹⁶ which is precisely this limitation, abstraction or subjectivity. It means that the ancient logic of the absolute in-itself is re-cognized as relative, i.e it is a presupposition and so “has its starting point in the contingent”.⁹⁷

It means that thinking the absolute acknowledges the “*relation* to actuality, which, by definition, excludes part of it” (author’s emphasis).⁹⁸ This relation is the negative which determines our subjective experience of the absolute as also “the relation to self and relation to

⁹³ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 60

⁹⁴ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 74

⁹⁵ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 204

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 205

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 206

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 204

other”.⁹⁹ This is why Rose draws attention to the difficult suggestion in Hegel that ‘the idea which a man has of God corresponds with that which he has of himself, of his freedom’.¹⁰⁰ And so, she argues, “if actuality is not thought...thinking has no social import”.¹⁰¹ The contradictions experienced in and by the dichotomous landscape of modern consciousness are suppressed by abstract philosophical thought so that there is “no means of knowing or recognizing the real relations which determine “¹⁰² them. Thinking the absolute, for Rose and for Williams, is fundamental for a critique of social and political relations because to acknowledge the difficulty of actuality is not closure but “real possibility”.¹⁰³ The experience of dualistic consciousness is formative for both natural and abstract philosophical consciousness because philosophical consciousness is the “recognition of “the totality of conditions...” which more or less reappears in our subjective acts or productions”.¹⁰⁴ Williams seeks to retrieve the aporias of our thinking the absolute in the rhythms of self and other, faith and politics, God and freedom, politics and metaphysics, as a learning experience.

We saw at the beginning that metaphysics, the study of and “overall proposal concerning the character of reality as known”,¹⁰⁵ has traditionally rested on the logic and necessity of the in-itself. The ancient mind searching for the truth of knowledge; in nature, the cosmos and in political life, sought the transcendental or universal ground to political discussion and to the question of justice. Philosophy was the interweaving of metaphysics and politics concerned to

⁹⁹ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 204

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 92

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 214

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 214

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 206

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 205

¹⁰⁵ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 58

discover the nature and truth of the common life. And so, as Williams asserts, thinking about thinking, “working at and testing the bonds that language requires and presupposes so as to rule out the arbitrary and the partial”¹⁰⁶ has always opened out onto thinking what is non-negotiable in the interaction between human beings. The importance of Hegel and Rose for this endeavor lies in what they have to say about the difficulty of this non-negotiable element as both historical and metaphysical actuality, that is, it constitutes “the element of “seeing” that is contained in any idea of intelligible action in a world of diverse agents”.¹⁰⁷ How we learn to see and so how we learn about that learning is freedom’s “labour of the negative”. It is to retrieve history as “the record or deposit of speech” and so as a “coming to learn”.¹⁰⁸

Once again it is education that Williams is drawn to when describing what is actually going on here. Moreover, it is not some totalizing or reconciling end of history because education is always the self-opposition – master and slave – of thought working on itself. Its integrity lies in not giving us “falsely reconciling”¹⁰⁹ solutions to the world problems. Neither does it seek to justify the past. It is the historical life of thought struggling to find meaning and truth in the losses which it knows to be its own. “History is how we do our metaphysics”,¹¹⁰ writes Williams, which makes the absolute in Hegel not a tyranny of identity or end game. It is the comprehensive thinking which reveals to itself its own misrecognitions, weaknesses, failures

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 56

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 57

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 67

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 67

and vulnerabilities which is the meaning of Hegel's "spiritual and philosophical notion of truth".¹¹¹

The language of the negative; difficulty, loss, uncertainty, vulnerability, contradiction, litter the terrain of Williams' interventions, writings and speeches. If we mask the experience of difficulty, e.g. in a consumer rhetoric of choice or in the fantasies of a mended world, we are on dangerous ground. Difficulty is the very substance of our making sense of ourselves as subjects in continually risky and unsettling negotiations. His philosophy of education is to be found in this idea of difficulty. But, if one suppresses its significance as the truth of philosophical experience then not only does one suppress the most important aspect of one's education and learning, one also fails to grasp the absolute substance and subject of social and political life in and as this learning.

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¹¹¹ Tubbs, *Education in Hegel*, 4

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