Out of the ivory tower

If an academic wants to roll up her sleeves and play a part in world affairs, can an intellectual approach and psychoanalytical insight make a difference? Jacqueline Rose, professor and writer, hopes they can. Is that enough?

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What use is an intellectual? Or, to put it another way. Why does an academic, as fervently private as Jacqueline Rose, professor of English Literature at Queen Mary's College London, risk venturing out of the ivory tower of academia and into the murky world of public political debate, out of the security of the classroom and into the battle on the street? It's a risky place to put yourself if you don't have to, if something isn't propelling you there. Yet in the past year this is precisely what she has done - taking part in the London Review of Books forum, The War On Terror, making a film for Channel 4, Dangerous Liaison, about America's relationship with Israel; and next year she will give the Christian Gauss seminar at Princeton University, its title The Question Of Zion.

Prior to this, her work was concerned with the relation of literature to psychoanalytic theory - "I owe Freud a great deal" - in teaching, obviously, and writings, in particular The Haunting Of Sylvia Plath. This is a book which analyses the poet's work, in part by looking at the passionate public response that it arouses - in other words, it takes the pathology often assumed to be at the heart of Plath and projects it back on to the reader. In simple terms: if Plath is mad, who are we who love her so passionately? What do we have invested in our understanding of Plath's work? As Professor Rose says: "Psychoanalysis is there to help you look at sides of yourself which you feel are driving you, but which are too painful to look at on your own." It is a kind of sleuthing around in the psyche. You could ask what drives someone to choose analysis rather than say, poetry, or talking to mates, and she would accept this. Psychoanalysis is not for everyone. "It is for people who feel compelled to do it, to go on finding out." A serious person then, and one who has chosen to take on herself some of the consequences of being a social being.

Psychoanalysis is an institution that rests on theory, on an authority, to produce a map of the internal world. The intellectual academy is, of course, also an institution, with its own language, its own way of negotiating its authority, in this case texts. So we have here two authorities (you don't have to be Freud to wonder why two and who, in any case, this authority is substituting for): two systems, you could say, now brought to bear on politics, the outside world, or what we commonly call the real world, and its chaos. And the question has to be - how can theory, of any kind, provide us with a practical solution to the world's problems? Isn't one critique of academia that it so often seems to dress up common sense in theory that most people find incomprehensible?

What does the intellectual have to offer that isn't already out there? "Dissent," Rose says. "It is the task of the intellectual to think thoughts, to say things, that can't be said anywhere else. What I think goes most frighteningly and disturbingly wrong in politics is that people hold intransigently to their ideals. They admit no flaw, no break in (their own) system." You can't argue with this, it's what any good liberal intellectual would say. But is there something specific that she has to bring? "I would like to live in a world where you didn't have to be ashamed of shame, where we could admit the failings, ambiguities, politically and psychically, that operate in the world - instead of putting people up and shooting them down." And, "A lot of modern political identity is an attempt to get away from the idea that shame is not only something we do (as in to shame) but also something we should be allowed to feel."

Shame is the refrain that runs through her new book, On Not Being Able To Sleep, a collection of essays, literary, psychoanalytical and political, written over the past decade. I don't think that another person would have identified shame as the common theme; it is Rose who points to this in her introduction. "I was surprised to find shame as the constant running through. I was astounded."

Shame, she says, is what we feel when we haven't lived up to some ideal of ourselves; it has a public dimension as opposed to guilt which is private, the internalising of weakness. In one essay, The Cult Of Celebrity, she, a self-confessed Hello! reader, analyses the mechanics of shame. You have to risk shame to be a celebrity. You are a model, of some kind of perfection, and that involves exposure and with it the risk of failure. Those of us observing celebrity have "a very special form of curiosity": we watch the celebrity walk the perfection tightrope and hope they will fall. So while we know they are confronting the continuous prospect of their own failure, they know we are willing them to fall. In this sadistic desire there will be also, as she points out, shame.

I asked her if she thought she was risking herself in this way. From the seminar room to the lecture hall to television, creating an ever bigger audience for herself, more exposure, more risk. To my mind, she ducked the question. "I don't believe that I am risking celebrity. I am doing it as an
Jacqueline Rose was born in London in 1949 into a middle-class Jewish liberal family. Her parents divorced when she was five. Both her father, whom she refers to as "my first father", and her stepfather, whom she calls "my father" were doctors. From her mother and "father", "incredibly loving and warm", she derives her social conscience. "We lived in Hayes, Middlesex and I remember driving to school through Southall, which had the highest density of immigrants of anywhere in London at that time, and we would see all these people going to work in the factories, taking jobs that white people wouldn't take. And at our grammar school all the racist comments. And my parents saying, 'These are the nicest, cleanest people.' They were adamant in that respect."

But it was from her mother that she derived her passion for reading. "My mother was an uneducated woman, but she loved to read more than anything else and she really encouraged both my sister and me academically." Her mother had been prevented by her own parents from taking up the place she had secured at medical school. "They wanted her to get married." At the age of 20, instead of becoming a doctor, she married a doctor, and had two daughters in quick succession, Gillian and Jacqueline - "We were 20 months apart." Seven years later, after her mother's remarriage, a third daughter, Diana, was born. There was little jealousy, little sibling rivalry, she says. "Seven years is a long way apart."

But 20 months is not. So, two intensely scholarly sisters, both high achievers. After Gillian gained a scholarship to St Hilda's, Oxford, to read PPE, the sisters decided that Jacqueline would have to apply to Cambridge. "We tried very hard to go to different universities but Cambridge rejected me; it was quite amusing. Newnham and New Hall both turned me down." But Oxford did not. She gained an exhibition, also to St Hilda's, to read English. Two of their three years at Oxford they overlapped. What is one to infer from this? Certainly their trajectories diverged later - after Oxford Gillian went to Berlin, Jacqueline to Paris, to continue their studies. So, you see, she says, "very different paths". Not so very different, I point out. And their academic paths converged some years later when Jacqueline followed her sister to Sussex University, also to become a don. It's the same story - she applied for a job at London, they turned her down, at Essex ditto. "Then the story gets even funnier. Five jobs came up at Sussex. I didn't want to apply. But Gillian said, 'You should, you probably won't get it, anyway.' But of course she did.

At one point, I asked her if she would talk to me about guilt she may have felt after her sister's death. Guilt, surely, always accompanies survival. Gillian was 48 when she died, five years younger than Jacqueline is now. She says that she will not, by which I understand cannot, talk to me on this subject and points me instead in the direction of a piece that she wrote soon after Gillian's death, about Virginia Woolf, Freud and modernism. Talking to her, you find yourself constantly making the detour into theory, back to an outside authority. And sure enough the essay turns out to be about Freud's own detour, in his paper Mourning And Melancholia, where he mentions, as she says, "almost in passing", that mourning can be sparked not only by the loss of a loved one but equally by some abstraction - "such as one's country, liberty, an idea". What on earth does it mean, Rose asks indignantly. "Something strange is going on here." And I would echo her question. What on earth does it mean to take flight into abstraction? Except that abstraction is as good a place to hide as any.
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concerned with the private concerns of the individual and not with political and social

consequences. But the intellectual climate in Paris in the 1970s was dominated by psychoanalysis,

feminist literary theory, "the personal is political" and the link between individual and collective repress;

it was here, she says, not at Oxford, "reading six male writers a year", that her real

intellectual development began. "I came from that very politicised generation that took seriously the basic Marxist idea of literature, film as being an instrument for social change, that believed culture has to be analysed because it influences people's beliefs and often in ways of which they are not aware." Feminism was a crucial part of this early political awareness, "because feminism was at the forefront of that dialogue between psychoanalysis and politics. Feminism added to politics that psychosexual complexity of who people are, of what happens between men and women."

More recently, she says, she has taken issue with some aspects of feminism. "I am still a feminist but there is a feminism which sees women as perpetual victims of male power. Sure, there are political situations where it is clear who is the oppressor and who the victim - apartheid would be one. But to turn the relations between men and women into a gothic horror story, as Greer has done, is not so helpful." Theory, here, but also the personal. Just after Gillian Rose died, Greer published an article remarking on the absence of obituaries of women. Jacqueline wrote to the paper remonstrating - Greer had complained that women were only recalled for their youth and beauty, apparently not noticing that the papers had been full of obituaries of Gillian Rose. Jacqueline Rose says now,

"Charting the invisibility of women was historically crucial, but I don't think that's the only thing feminism should be doing, and it certainly shouldn't be doing it if it means passing over the vibrant, brilliant presence of a woman philosopher."

I don't know if she really believes that the problems of the world can be mastered; the world,

unfortunately, is not governed by the authority of reason. But in a culture where people, as she says, will do anything to get attention, it doesn't seem just to criticise her for seeking attention/bringing attention to issues that concern us all. Her work on Israel/ Palestine engages her and exposes her in the major political crisis of our time, war in the Middle East. As a Jew - "I feel completely Jewish, but I hope in an open-ended way" - she passionately supports Palestinian self-determination, but argues against what she calls "the use of Zionism as a dirty word". "There is a kind of cliché position on the left where, if you support Palestine, then you can use Zionism as an insult - which I think is wrong and naive, because Zionism is one of the most powerful collective identities of modern times and if you don't understand that then you are in serious trouble." US guilt, post-second world war, towards Israel and Israeli perception of itself as victim are two of the problems she identifies as "fanning hostilities". "There is a real fear in the Jewish psyche which allows it to go seeing itself as victim. The holocaust is used to legitimise Israeli aggression, I have no doubt about that. There is a feeling that it is not safe to be a Jew in the world, and it is legitimate - Bin Laden has been unequivocal about this." This feeling, too, she says, is used to legitimise Israeli aggression, which in turn provokes anti-semitism, "and leads to Israel being unable to acknowledge the dangers of its own aggression towards Palestine". So we go round and round. Victim becomes oppressor. Oppression produces shame. Ashamed of our shame we repress it. Hide behind authority, ideology. "Ideals," she says, "are a licence to kill."

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is there for us, I asked her if, two thoughtful intelligent people, committed parents, cannot resolve their own differences. "I don't think separation means lack of insight," she said. And, for once, I don't think she is ducking the question. Separation is what we have. Insight is what we work towards.