

'The personal is the philosophical'

Gillian Howie, 1965–2013

Gillian Howie, the first female professor of philosophy at the University of Liverpool and head of the philosophy department, has died at the age of 47 after living with cancer since 2006. As colleague Simon Hailwood said at her funeral, Gill was a extraordinary person: 'she was brilliant, sensitive, humorous, kind and a source of immense support and inspiration.' She has left an important philosophical legacy in a range of fields, spanning feminist philosophy, Deleuze studies, Marxism, and the intersection of critical theory with phenomenological existentialism.

Born in Kingston upon Thames, Gill completed her undergraduate studies at Exeter University and undertook a doctorate at Jesus College, Cambridge. She joined Liverpool University in 1995, where she met and subsequently married Simon Hughes, with whom she had two children, Alfie and Henry.

Throughout her life, Gill was committed to social and political activism. This commitment is at the centre of her philosophical work. Even in the most theoretical of her writings, her underlying concern lay with praxis-related questions revolving around the politics of justice. In Cambridge, she served on the executive committees of the Cambridge Labour Students and Cambridge University Students' Union. Subsequently, she served on the national executive committees of the AUT (Association of University Teachers), the British Philosophical Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy. She was also director of the Institute for Feminist Theory and Research at the University of Liverpool. In keeping with her political interests, Gill made a significant contribution to the philosophy of education, including *Gender, Teaching and Research in Higher Education* (co-edited with Ashley Tauchert, Ashgate, 2002) and a special edition of the journal *Critical Quarterly*, 'Universities in the UK: Drowning by Numbers' (Spring/Summer, 2005). She was also on the editorial board of *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (2005–08).

Pinned above Gill's office chair was a quotation from T.S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding' from *Four Quartets*: 'We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.' Exploring endlessly was just what Gill did: she continued to engage in debate and critical dialogue from her hospice bed.

Gill's first major published work was *Deleuze and Spinoza: Aura of Expressionism* (Palgrave, 2002). Arguing that Deleuze's philosophical commentary on Spinoza provides the foundations for his own later metaphysical speculations regarding the body, power, singularities and difference, it goes on to make the provocative claim that Deleuze's arguments lead to eliminativism, a Hobbesian politics and mystification. In later papers, Gill suggested that feminists should view his philosophical model 'becoming-woman' with suspicion. For all it seems a radical attempt to transform embodied nature, it is aligned with schizo-processes and the philosophical loss of things as mind-independent. Sexual difference remains hidden.¹

Sexual difference and its associated politics were pivotal in all of Gill's work: she regularly contributed to the organization of conferences in the field. There are too many to detail, but one stands out for me as I was co-organizer: the 'Women and the Divine' conference held in Liverpool in 2005, with Luce Irigaray as the keynote speaker. It spanned five days, and over a hundred papers were presented from all over the world. In a move typical of Gill's integrative view of academic pursuit, she suggested that the programme extend beyond the presentation of papers: ultimately it included a local, grassroots interfaith forum, yoga, shiatsu, jazz and poetry recital. The volume *Touching Transcendence* was based upon this conference.² It was a pleasure to collaborate with Gill, who was the very model of grace under pressure – except when the rising bollard in the conference car park rose into the undercarriage of her car on the last day.

Among Gill's edited collections was also the highly regarded *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*. In this, she and her co-author Ashley Tauchert argue that 'the presentation of recent shifts in feminist self-consciousness and practice as a third wave presents historical and theoretical problems in a way that risks a new mode of "false consciousness" for women.' Concern is expressed over apparent tension between an indirect epistemological anti-realism in some third-wave feminism, and second-wave materialist analysis of socio-economic conditions. Instead, it is argued, the cultural insights of third-wave feminism into the 'aesthetic and affective manifestations of subject identity' can be woven into a model of constituted identity: the politics of representation can be criticized without relegating feminism to the 'acting out of parodic surface manifestations'.³ A return to materialist feminism, duly revised and updated to take account of global capital, is proposed. The philosophical positions espoused here are carried over into Palgrave's 'Breaking Feminist Waves' series, co-edited by Gill with Linda Martín Alcoff. This project was dear to Gill's heart.



This renewed commitment to a materialist feminism culminated in the publication of her final monograph: *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method* (Palgrave, 2010; reviewed in *RP* 174). Giving due recognition to the multiplicity of speaking locations, the polyvalent causes of oppression and the dangers of universalization, she asks how collective goal-oriented action is possible. How do we answer the question, 'what systematic changes would be required to create a just society?' And how can feminist theory in the academy connect with the women's movement? The solution, argued Gill, is a recuperation of critical social theory. Theory needs to reconnect with praxis. The objectivist tendencies found in social science need to be synthesized with the subjectivist tendencies of phenomenology and hermeneutics. To achieve this, Gill called for a regrouping around dialectical materialism; retaining the poles of subject and object, dialectics can 'probe the force field between

consciousness and being'. Through a dialogue structured around philosophical problems of universals and reason, nature and essentialism, identity and nonidentity, Gill sought to uncover the basis for relations of similarity across a dynamic topography, thereby uncovering a basis for alliance across disparate groups. This 'problem-based, micro-political and coalitional feminism' needs to be 'attuned to and learn from struggles across localities'; it needs to be politically alert, flexible, agile and responsive.

Another important strand of Gill's work emerged from her own experiences with life-limiting illness. She became interested in the medical humanities, establishing and acting as director of the Centre for Health, Arts and Sciences at Liverpool University. This is based on the therapeutic contribution that arts, humanities and creativity can make both to medical and scientific practice and to a differentiated understanding of health and well-being. Connected to this was New Thinking on Living with Dying, an AHRC-funded network of academics and practitioners intended to make a distinctive and interdisciplinary contribution to the study of 'living with dying'. In a blog post entitled 'Death; you can't live with it, you can't live without it', Gill reflects on whether the knowledge of impending death 'clogs the mind with terror and evacuates meaning from the world, from "my" world', to which she responded:

If philosophy has a role to play in our lives at all it must be that it can help alleviate our suffering during times of crisis and fear.... [P]hilosophical reflection – if nothing else – ought to be able to relieve anxiety, to provide the conceptual clarification that could be placed as a series of stepping-stones through any dark night.... For Epicurus there is no point to philosophy if it does not expel the suffering of the soul. Perhaps if the question were rightly asked, philosophy could settle this question: how can I suffer with this? Our question, simply put, is: how can we live right up to dying?⁴

I don't think Gill ever considered she had found the answer to that question, but it is one she continued to ask until her illness wholly overcame her. Perhaps that very process, that very asking of the questions in her 'endless exploration', was for her the series of stepping-stones that helped her traverse the dark nights.

Gill's career was also, importantly, driven by a commitment to students and the genuine pleasure she took in teaching. It is with a student comment that I close, from the inscription in a handmade card: 'To Gill Howie, generally fantastic'.

J'annine Jobling

Notes

1. 'Becoming-Woman: A Flight into Abstraction', *Deleuze Studies* 2, 2009, pp. 83–106.
2. Gillian Howie and J'annine Jobling, eds, *Touching Transcendence*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009.
3. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford, eds, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, expanded 2nd edn, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007, p. 47.
4. <http://newthinkingaboutlivingwithdying.wordpress.com/2012/06/28/death-you-cant-live-with-it-you-cant-live-without-it> (28 June 2012).