

Victoria Browne and Daniel Whistler, editors  
*On the Feminist Philosophy of Gillian Howie: Materialism and Mortality*  
 London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016 (ISBN: 978-1-474-25412-0)

*Reviewed by Aaron Aquilina, 2017*

**Aaron Aquilina** is a FASS-funded PhD student at Lancaster University. His research looks at how certain literary works propose challenging existential, phenomenological, and ontological questions about death, pointing to the unthinkable beyond of Heideggerian *Jemeinigkeit*. He is also interested in Modern and contemporary Anglo-American literature, theories of sexuality and posthumanism, and the intersections of the humanities and the sciences. His work has been published in *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics*, and he is the founder and general editor of the interdisciplinary journal *antae* ([www.antaejournal.com](http://www.antaejournal.com)).

[a.aquilina@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.aquilina@lancaster.ac.uk)

\*\*\*\*\*

It is easy to write about death. You sit, very much alive, and write. It is a different matter to think about death when you are dying--physically, very truly, dying. And so I can only imagine the courage with which Professor Gillian Howie, from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Liverpool, talked and wrote on the topic of mortality. "How can you *live*, right up to death, when you have a life-limiting illness?," she asks in March 2012, during a lecture delivered as part of the Engage@Liverpool Initiative (Howie 2012). As glaringly troublesome as it is, this conundrum (to use a word Howie liked) has only relatively recently been given its due attention in philosophical circles. The idea of this *in memoriam* collection started to take shape after Howie's passing in March 2013. The people who helped shape this edition include her friends and colleagues at the university, the members of the New Thinking on Living with Dying research network, and the attendees at the "Feminism, Materialism, Critical Theory" symposium in December 2013. It is an essential volume for those who want to read further, and in considerable depth, about issues of feminism, materialism, and mortality, and, at their tripartite base, the philosophy of Gillian Howie.

Browne and Whistler's introduction immediately demonstrates the concordance of Howie's life and engagements, both through and outside of academia, with the philosophy she expounds. Her writings are understood as "provocations to thought, enabling an enrichment of current and emerging debates around the intersections of feminism, critical theories and philosophies of illness and death" (3). The editors group Howie's work into four broad categories: (i) *feminist theory* and its relation to Marxist thought with the aim of rejuvenating a dialectical method (and this includes the influence of Horkheimer, Jameson, and, in particular, Adorno); (ii) *affirmation and negation*, that is, the turn away from psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories of identity (especially, those of Deleuze) in order "to provide an account of non-identity that is intended to do justice to lived experience" (7); (iii) *the state of education*, whereby she scrutinizes, for instance, the Bologna accord and its effects on knowledge-production; and (iv) *living with dying*, where Howie tests the limits of philosophical thought and sets out "to recover an alignment between philosophy and *therapeia*" (11).

Following this introduction, the book is split into two parts. The first section, "Feminism, Materialism, Critical Theory," deals with the first three categories as outlined above, while the "Living with Dying" section deals with the last. Due to space constraints, more attention shall be given here to the second half, but it is important to note that the first section contains important contributions on Howie's ideas about the relation between feminism and what is termed *dialectical materialism* (Stella Sandford); her definitions of "late" feminism as that which has simultaneously retreated from the political and celebrated contemporary neoliberal, consumerist logic (Kimberly Hutching); and her unlikely combination of Adorno's negative dialectics, coupled with Irigaray's thought, with a radical feminism of resistance (Joanna Hodge). The fourth and fifth chapters are contributions by the editors themselves, and both deal in turn with Howie's ideas on the state of education: the problematized transfer of knowledge in an academic culture that is both market-based and gender-discriminatory (Browne), as well as Howie's thoughts on liberal education in the modern university where, in Howie's words, there is "the transformation of learning from a process into a product" (Howie 2009, 7), and where the required neutrality of the university and its inhabitants is a neutrality already colonized by the male figure (Whistler).

The second half of the volume, which homes in on the problems of living with dying, opens with a transcript of the previously mentioned lecture that Howie delivered in 2012 (Howie 2012). The eight essays that follow all pick up, in one way or another, Howie's intriguing lecture and extend it in several different directions, evidencing the richness of thought around the problem of living right up to death. What follows here is a review of those essays that explicitly engage the provocations of Howie's thought. As such, Deryn Rees-Jones's essay "What the Living Do': Poetry's Death and Dying"--which looks at how the lyric genre occupies the space between our knowledge of our own death and our inability to imagine it--as well as the investigation of photography as that which exposes the problems with the glamorization (and feminization) of breast cancer, carried out by Nedim Hassan's "*Cancer Sucks: Photography and the Representation of Chronic Illness*," shall here be left undiscussed.

The first essay of this second section is Christine Battersby's "Gillian Howie's Situated Philosophy: Theorizing Living and Dying 'In Situation'," which proffers an *apologia* for philosophy's role in discussions of loss and suffering. She starts by turning to a posthumous publication of Howie's that avows the possibilities of philosophy as *therapeia*, where Battersby contextualizes, without over-complication, Howie's idea of living-toward-death through Heidegger's and Sartre's understanding of "death" and "situation" (and, briefly, also through Beauvoir's and Merleau-Ponty's definitions) (Howie 2014). Looking then to *Between Feminism and Materialism*, Battersby observes Howie's extension of previous Sartrean conceptualizations of situatedness to include subjective embodiment and the situation of "woman," although she goes on to discuss Howie's perhaps unnecessary taking-issue with Sartre. In conclusion, the author turns to Howie's lecture--which seems to her "both the strongest and also the most personal philosophy developed by Howie"--and describes Howie's positioning (or situating) of the meaning of "my death" as one that departs from Heideggerian thought, falling in line, rather, with the trajectory of Sartre's conception of the absurd (159). Consequently, this leads Howie to privilege hopefulness, rather than existential dread, in the face of one's imminent death. Overall, the essay clearly argues for a conception of philosophy that is not removed from our everyday existence, even when such existence is fraught with terminal illness.

The eighth chapter, Alison Stone's "The Relationality of Death," also looks at Howie's position vis-à-vis Heidegger's in terms of one's relation to one's own death, as well as vis-à-vis Stone's own, with which Howie had grappled in her 2012 lecture. Stone thinks of death as one that is "shared," and not only one's own, "insofar as each person is constituted of a web of relationships unfolding over time"--as such, when a person dies, a part of me literally dies with him or her (166). This is something, however, that Howie finds asymmetrical: although the death of others occurs in my life, my death does not, and cannot, take place in mine. This contribution, then, takes on a measured anti-Heideggerian investigation into the possible relationality of death as Stone sees it, including an insightful analysis of Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal*--and although she does not hold explicit conversation with Howie's body of work, there is an implicitly shared concern about materialism and the situatedness of embodiment as Howie understands it, where thinking about death "needs supplementation by an ethic of gratitude and receptivity for the relational histories in which we already find ourselves" (178).

Morny Joy's "Reflections on Living up to Death" looks to Howie's lecture for the overlaps between her concerns and Paul Ricoeur's. Largely looking at the conceptual history of Ricoeur's work as that which led him to the posthumously published monograph *Living up to Death*, Joy's essays puts forward a particularly engaged commentary on his thoughts about birth, the voluntary, hope, and Stoicism and Orphism. What emerges throughout is how Ricoeur continuously sought an affirmation of life in death, rejected thoughts of immortality as are often implicit in thinking about death, and strove toward finding joy in the attitude of detachment that does not imply distance. The essay ends with some reflections on Ricoeur's attitude to his own prolonged death, entailing "a relinquishment of . . . emotional attachments," a conclusion Howie may or may not have taken up herself had she had the time (193).

The tenth chapter, Claire Colebrook's "Learning to Die, Finally," aims to explore the paradox of the narrative of death: "The end of one's life," she writes, "is at once that which gives form and closure, and that which destroys all form and sense" (199). Taking Howie's questions over ground she had herself expressly refused to traverse when thinking about death--such as Derrida, Deleuze, or Nietzsche--Colebrook traces this conflicting view of death as one that is bound over the issue of meaningfulness and personhood, and maps this view over the idea of closure within the traditional narrative genre. Colebrook then ties in with Howie's 2012 lecture, arguing that "this seemingly non-natural death [early-onset terminal illness] should be the way we think about all death," as a way to reveal the necessary fiction of us somehow having control over meaning and time (207). Looking also at the bigger picture, where it is no longer just the person who is at risk but rather the species, she thus responds, almost ecocritically, to Howie's lecture with a prioritization of the value of rethinking the nature of meaningfulness (and the meaningfulness of nature) rather than shoring up hope against time.

Continuing to evidence the breadth of Howie's thought is Amy Hardie's "Movie-making as Palliative Care"; she looks here at how artists deal with the idea of uncertainty within the palliative care environment, namely from the examples of three documentary films: *The Edge of Dreaming*, *Tuesdays*, and *Seven Songs for a Long Life* (all Hardie's own work), and states that the meaning-making of human beings "becomes even more urgent when one is close to death" (247). In finding ways to talk about mortality, Hardie asserts, documentary films are an invaluable response from the people who live their lives under terminal diagnosis. It is a mode that can explore loss over time: of bodily abilities, of will, of time itself. Having herself

gone through serious illness, Hardie asks questions throughout the essay that echo Howie's own, and her films confront the topic of death with the honest frankness of the camera lens.

The last chapter, "Experience and Performance whilst Living with Disability and Dying: Disability Art as a Pathway to Flourishing," co-written by Janet Price and Ruth Gould, is notable for being the sole contributed chapter from non-university-affiliated thinkers, in line with Howie's own life and work, which drew from and engaged with academics and non-academics alike. In fact, leading from Howie's co-hosting of an event with Liverpool-based DaDaFest (Deaf and Disability Arts Festival), Price and Gould explore the power of art in fighting the stigma of illness and disability.<sup><1></sup> Their essay, then, explores the social negotiations of identity in face of illness and disability through creative production, exploring the idea that "[d]isability arts would not have been possible without disability politics coming along first" (271). The authors demonstrate the recognition needed by disabled or ill bodies who are all too often characterized under a certain "sameness," and thus think about issues such as prostheses, pain, normativity, and living-with-death through the lenses of feminist and critical disability theories. At the heart of their essay is society's engagement with disability art; they conclude this collection by moving it from the past of Gillian Howie to the future she envisaged:

Can [diversely expressing disability and terminal illness] open society up to change, such that our ways of being, our supposedly disruptive bodies and minds, are not out of place . . . but are seen instead as something to be welcomed, valued and recognized as enriching the world we share, as offering routes to follow, maps that lead both to new and exciting possibilities, and to peaceful places of gentle flourishing for those living and living with dying? (282)

Overall, this collection serves as both a good introduction to those seeking to become familiar with Howie's philosophy as well as an invaluable read for those already well-aware of the ground covered above. The essays are in constant dialogue with one another, if sometimes only implicitly, and they exhibit a rigorous clarity often lacking in academic writing. If pressed, however, I would identify two shortcomings: (i) occasionally, the contributors lose their voices in seeking to expound Howie's, and (ii) there are, at times, unsettling variations in the pitch of the essays. Some chapters, such as Stone's and Colebrook's contributions, offer rigorous challenges to and extensions of Howie's philosophical thought; others, such as Joy's, are little more than case studies with no real argument; and yet others, like Hardie's as well as Price and Gould's, deal with tangible art projects that manifest Howie's thought in different modes. Of course, these variations are understandable: this is, after all, a book about Howie's philosophy, and this second limitation could not be avoided when one has as diverse an audience as the one Howie attracts.

Since the vast majority of Howie's readers are feminists, it might also seem rather odd that Howie draws upon male philosophers who are not typically considered feminists themselves (with the notable exception of Irigaray). This might suggest that Howie views death as a universal existential "experience" that men and women "live toward" in similar ways. However, this collection reveals that women not only live, but also die, in othered spaces, and yet are frequently excluded from existential discourses on death. Howie's work on death foregrounds such issues of portrayal and representation, and destabilizes conventional narratives of death and dying. In doing so, it arguably amounts to a feminist approach to the self's relation to dying.

Ultimately, perhaps the volume's strongest point is its trajectory: earlier essays engage deeply with Howie's published and unpublished work, and later chapters move beyond her work into discussions inspired by her thoughts. This is a great honor: Browne and Whistler's volume takes Howie's philosophy into the future, where those who live on can see the world through the gaze Gillian Howie has so graciously allowed us to inherit.

### *Note*

1. For further detail, see Dadafest. <http://www.dadafest.co.uk> (accessed December 1, 2016).

### *References*

Howie, Gillian. 2009. Teaching philosophy in context: Or knowledge does not keep any better than fish. In *Teaching philosophy*, ed. Andrea Kenkmann. London: Continuum.

-----, 2010. *Between feminism and materialism: A question of method*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

-----, 2012. How to think about death: Living with dying.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czaaTDr09bc> (accessed December 1, 2016).

-----, 2014. Alienation and therapy in existentialism: A dual model of recognition. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17 (1): 55-69.