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Michael Patrick Gillespie
Florida International University

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Remembrances of Phillip Herring

Michael Patrick Gillespie



Phil Herring was a dreadful volleyball player, but that did not deter him in the slightest from energetic participation in the sport. He was a fixture in matches held nearly every Saturday morning from the late spring to the early fall of 1978, organized by a group of graduate students from the English Department at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Phil was the only faculty member who showed up on a regular basis, and he had a near obsessive devotion to these matches. He careened around the court with reckless abandon and a pure joy for the game, showing not a trace of self-consciousness regarding his style of play, which he considered unconventional and the rest of us thought of as simply terrible. (He once even brought Murray Beja, who was visiting him in Madison, to one of the sessions. It was clearly not Murray’s ideal way to spend a Saturday morning, but he was a good sport about it and played very well.)

Though drawing a parallel between volleyball and academics sounds like the beginning of a bad *PMLA* article (forgive the redundancy), a lot of what Phil showed on the volleyball court typified his scholarly life. Phil had a single-minded approach to whatever task he set for himself. He proceeded with great care and made an unconditional commitment, and he would never let those who endeavored to discourage or deflect his efforts shape his course of action. He was as sensitive to criticism as any of us, but he retained a stoic determination to complete the work before him.

Discipline was at the center of whatever he chose to do. Many who knew him as an academic would be surprised to learn that he was born in Fort Worth, Texas, grew up in Austin, and took his undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Texas. Phil spoke without a trace of a Southwestern accent. His fluency in German and the time he spent there while he was in the service certainly may have blunted any Texas drawl that he acquired growing up, but it seems more likely that he had a determination to speak clearly in a voice without a pronounced regional accent in order to make his words more accessible to whomever he spoke.

Phil was a meticulous man in the best sense of the phrase. He worked on his PhD under the direction of David Hayman, a scholar who has built his reputation on close readings of Joyce's writings. Phil's studies certainly drew inspiration from Hayman's critical skills, but they forged an independent path that provided tremendously useful scholarly material for students of *Ulysses*. His transcription and elucidation of the Joyce Notesheets held by the British Museum and his follow-up work on pre-publication *Ulysses* material held by the University at Buffalo gave scholars an intimate and detailed representation of the early stages of the process of composition of Joyce's great novel. The Notesheets book appeared in 1972 and the Buffalo study in 1977 several years before the massive Garland publication of the James Joyce archival material and decades before digitalization of a great deal of Joyce's compositional work.

Two details relating to these projects neatly reflect his approach to scholarship and his dedication to shared learning. Once, putting on a pair of reading glasses, he laughed and noted that he had "ruined my damn eyes" in the hours spent poring over Joyce's smudged, crabbed writing, often obscured by colored pencil lines through it. (In truth, I may be misremembering exactly what he said, for in the forty-five years I knew him, I don't recall any other instance of his using such a strong expletive.) The other incident was an off-hand comment he made regarding the Garland project. Someone had urged him to oppose Buffalo and the British Museum giving permissions for reproducing the material on which he had worked, saying that the publication of the archives would infringe on the popularity of his studies. He dismissed the argument with a measure of contempt (everything Phil did was measured), replying that the more outlets for Joyce's material that there were, the better.

After spending so much time on Joyce's pre-publication material, Phil offered his own assessment of the canon in *Joyce's Uncertainty Principle* (1987), a book that offered nonlinear insights into Joyce's writing a decade before others would follow his lead. By the mid-1990s, he was working on a biography of Djuna Barnes, which appeared in 1995. There was a strong,

positive response to it as well as howls of indignation from the “how dare he write about her” crowd, as some scholars unabashedly resented a man offering biography on Barnes. Through it all, Phil maintained a balanced view to all these responses: mildly surprised by both reactions but never unduly influenced by either.

During this time he was also teaching a great many future Joyceans. Patrick McCarthy took several courses from Phil at the University of Virginia in the late 1960s and still feels that experience is what led him to his own career in Joyce studies. Phil went from Virginia to the University of Wisconsin in 1970. From then until he retired in 1996, scores of scholars benefitted from his erudition, insight, and experience to launch their own careers in Joyce studies.

For decades Phil was a fixture at Joyce conferences and symposia. Though he seemed reserved, he showed a great interest in the work of others and was genuinely delighted whenever he encountered other Joyceans. For a number of summers, he and his wife Lydia would make the trip from Madison to Big Cedar Lake, about 30 miles north of Milwaukee, where Mary Reynolds and her husband Lloyd, who had a summer home there, would invite friends to spend a day on the water, have a marvelous meal, and recollect all the people in Joyce studies whom they knew.

After leaving Madison, Phil returned to Austin, Texas, where he joined the staff of the Harry Ransom Center. Headed by the doyen of Joyce studies, Tom Staley, and boasting a superb collection of Joycean material, the Ransom Center was the perfect final academic stage for Phil’s career. Though perhaps not as ebullient as some or as skilled at networking as others, Phil was a steady, supportive presence in Joyce studies, and his passing leaves us all saddened by the loss.

—*Florida International University*