Forum: Responses to Carolyn G. Heilbrun's Guest Column

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[T]hat was the strange free thing. . . .
—Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (76)

One of my loving quibbles with Carolyn, with whom I walked in the park every week for something like twenty-six years, concerned her almost constant reference, from what seemed to me an early date, to her "old age." I know, of course, how she was ready for it, and wanted us to be so: the readiness in *Hamlet* and the ripeness in *Lear* were important to her. She had changed her reading, yes. For the last few years, on our weekly walks, she would talk—as enthusiastically as she always had about poetry—about science, scientists, and their lives. I would listen: what do I know about science? But her enthusiasm was continual, pressing, and, I hoped, catching. Only it wasn't. What I loved was her love of it all. Perhaps she wasn't writing, or at least lately she said she wasn't, but she was reading and talking about what she read.

Science and philosophy held the greatest interest for her, these last times we walked.We had gone through a period of discussing mostly art. Some paintings she found endlessly mystifying, like Édouard Manet's painting *Gare Saint-Lazare*, with the little girl gazing out through the bars onto the tracks, her face turned away from us. What was the story? she would ask. We had half planned to do together a compilation of essays about radically different ways of reading art and its stories.

She liked walking with me, she said, because my mind was so different from hers, my readings different, my attitudes different. You like the complex, she would say; I like the straightforward. But reading her straightforwardness was never an easy affair, as we have so recently learned, to our deepest sorrow. If her schedules did not change or the things she liked to look at in the park—those tall buildings across the green or brown expanse, every dog she saw (my friend, she would say of me to whomever passed, only likes fuzzy-haired dogs), the ducks on the boat pond—her readings did.

We often got on the topic of Henry James, whose *Ambassadors* she loved as much as I do *The Golden Bowl.* Perhaps not needless to say, *The Wings of the*

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Dove never fluttered into our conversation. Densher, colorless; Millie, tragic and giving; Kate, plotting. No way was this a matter of passion for us. But what was a passion for her that could have sustained her? Had her writing-rereading desire so changed for her, in what she persisted in calling her old age? So that the empty-handedness of Strether was itself all that could be wished, with no tying down, no debts on either side? Emptiness resonates throughout her piece.

Now I like to think that we served as ambassadors each to the other's concerns and as caring enliveners of each other's passions. She had brought me back, so long ago, when there was a where to be brought back from. I came back, and we walked as we always had. And every week she would ask if I would be there the next; and now she is the one who won't be.

Carolyn had so far outdistanced the "academy"—whatever that means—that it was of little interest. Instead, we talked about poetry and philosophy and choices, about the simple and the more complicated. She read my forthcoming memoir, *To the Boathouse*, insisting I keep the many passages about food, and hoped there would be a picture of us together in it: there will be. I would take her something by or about some philosopher or some book of poetry, and the next week she would return the book to my backpack; we had done this for years. She had especially liked Marilyn Hacker's *Desesperanto*, which I had taken her late last September.

Yet she herself was always a traveler with no baggage, no backpack, just some memories. Perhaps it was something about lightness that most mattered to her: not burdening, not accepting, not owing, not weakening. Not getting anything for oneself was indeed the point. Strether, she said, will write, if he writes, "as he will live, not for recognition, not to get anything for himself, but to render his observations. . . ." As she does in her essay.

Finally, the famous *Ambassadors* scene in Gloriani's garden, to which Carolyn refers, reads, "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life" (140). As I continue to wish Carolyn were living now and here, to walk on Tuesdays or any other day with me or anyone else, I too believe that it matters less what we do in particular or have done in general than how intensely we have done it, cared about it, and seen what we were doing with our living. And I think *The Ambassadors* is about seeing—as in Holbein's *Ambassadors*, where the skull is only visible in anamorphic perspective. In James, it is often seeing what you have and haven't, as at the end of *The Golden Bowl* ("See," says the Prince to Maggie, "I see nothing but you" [547]). My own focus in *The Ambassadors*, like that of many readers of James, remains most closely centered on the scene where Strether comes to his understanding, precisely through seeing Chad and Madame de Vionnet coming down the river like figures in some impressionist painting and fixing through them his own impression: "What he saw was exactly the right thing . . ." (348). And at the end, about Mrs. Newsome: "But I do what I didn't before—I see her" (391). Someday we may see the right thing about Carolyn: perhaps it is too soon.

In any case, what exactly mattered for James was seeing, as well as living. I think Carolyn saw how fully she had had and had lived her life and knew—no mistake about this either—how she helped many of us to see, a lot about life and living and much else.

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READING (AND REREADING) CAROLYN HEILBRUN'S essay leads me to reflect that the experience of retirement—the opportunity we get to reread our lives—is inevitably a gendered experience, given that we experience our professional lives in gendered ways. It's easy to understand why "achievement" would be important to the generation of feminist women scholars who put feminism and gender studies on the academic map. Not only was that an achievement to be proud of, but it came about under circumstances that made visible and incontrovertible achievement, individual and collective, the

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sine qua non of the feminist revolution's academic success. Other academic and intellectual revolutions have followed suit; but one tends to forget the extent to which "back then" humanities scholarship was still a male-dominated profession, regulated through a sort of men's club, one that tended to produce authority and power for its members as much through its own operation as in response to intellectual achievement. Feminists, though, had to make it through achievement alone, and they did.

If that's a reason why achievement should bulk large in feminist sensibilities, it also unfortunately offers a possible explanation of why retirement might generate a certain let-down feeling, that mood of "[s]o much living with so little life." Past achievements may not prove much help when one is "coping with retirement and old age." When you're doing battle with social security or exposed to the attention of the medical profession, no one much cares what your academic identity may once have been. So it's perhaps significant that I, for example, have made the transition to retired nonentity, and to "coping," with relatively little angst. As a man, I had the luxury all along, and especially back in the old days when I began in the profession, of being able to coast along, with more of a sense of meeting obligations and responsibilities as best I could than the feeling that I had better achieve something. That was surely an effect of club membership. And as a consequence, coping in retirement with an environment in which grades are irrelevant doesn't feel particularly discontinuous with academic life: it's OK for me now, as it was then, to feel I'm doing reasonably well just by getting by.

Still, a sex change at age sixty-five or so does sound attractive. If Rebecca West is correct, however, in her opinion that women become men at a certain age, the sex change for men who are getting on a bit is going to be a self-defeating project. Maybe, given that as everyone knows, men never really grow up and remain adolescents all their lives, we can hope to be changed into girls? Carolyn Heilbrun, in any case, was getting her sex change, if I read her right, by reading up on science in lieu of rereading *War and Peace*. I see her point: these days the humanities are certainly gendered, if not sexed, feminine (in part owing to the prominence of feminism), while the sciences have never ceased to be a masculine and male domain. But this is the idea that Michèle Le Doeuff, calling it *le sexe du savoir*, contests. Knowledge is epicene, says Le Doeuff; it's the institutions of knowledge that have a "sex." (French speakers learn at school about epicene nouns, which refer to animals of both sexes by a word that is grammatically gendered either feminine [e.g., "une souris"] or masculine [e.g., "un rat"—or "le savoir"].)

If knowledge is inclusively sexed, then, while its institutions are gendered, what Heilbrun is doing when she reads science is not unlike what disciplines do when they get together. It's striking how humanistic her interest in science is. Science is not a collective enterprise but the achievements of great men, whose work she learns of through biographies and science journalism. That obviously doesn't equip her for doing science any more than reading Jane Austen would equip me to live in early-nineteenth-century England. And it doesn't make her a man. But it does demonstrate her need "not . . . to continue along the same path"—the *desire* for a "sex change," if you will, that motivates reading and rereading. It used to be called self-improvement, in an age when moral judgments came easily and applied to just about everything.

Barthesians (I am one) like to say that in a first reading one finds in a text what one already knows; it takes a rereading for it to begin to teach us what we didn't know. An excellent point. For a committed reader, though, the idea must surely be to invent an art of reading that cuts across this hard-and-fast distinction. We professionals try to develop an ability to read as if we were already rereading, while reserving the right to reread as well. And we also learn to read and reread in a way that, in addition to teaching us what we didn't already know, actually impinges on what we *thought* we knew, and changes it. Self-improvement as intellectual growth—the difference being that such growth is something one can share with others while others share theirs with you. (In the trade, that's a large part of what we call research.) Self-improvement, in sex change terms, is like a man becoming a woman only to remain a man: a closed circuit. Of course, man number 2 might just have learned something from the transition through womanhood. But as a teacher and a reader-researcher I've found the practice of reading, and the kind of intellectual growth permitted by involvement in the humanities, to be something considerably more exhilarating. That's in part because it's collectively pursued and in part because there's no end to it.

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In retirement, the collective part gets to be less automatic than it was in one's active days. But as in the case of the coping/achievement issue, I can't say I've experienced any real discontinuity, so far, in respect to reading. The collective practice of reading and rereading—something the profession sustains but doesn't monopolize—remains and continues, along with letters of recommendation and academic gossip, those other mainstays. In that way the late Carolyn Heilbrun was part of the intellectual growth of many of us. It is good to pay her tribute for that.

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Carolyn's piece does not lend itself to a simple response. It moves in many different directions—interpretation of *The Ambassadors*, commentary on writers in retirement, meditations on science and the humanities—and it is perplexing in many respects. Why should retirement mean "'living' less and seeking more of life" or "languishing, in the absence of event, into a vain wish for something to happen"? Is Strether "urging little Bilham to a future of rereading"? Are words all that matter for literary scholars? I find myself responding to all these issues with a variety of emotions from admiration to distress.

After all she did to enrich the discipline and to move it in a new direction, I admire Carol's ability to suggest (rightly or wrongly) that she is no longer making a contribution to the discipline, that her approach is not relevant to its current direction. This is a stunning contrast to so many of her colleagues, who indulge themselves by continuing well past their intellectual prime, unaware or unconcerned with how much they have declined and how irrelevant they have become. Even if she exaggerates her position, she is pressing us to face truths most of us do not want to acknowledge.

At the same time, she seems to be doing something she and I argued about frequently in the early decades of our forty-year friendship: treating literature as if it were life. Not only did she want to write and rewrite her own life as a literary work, she also expected the literature she cared about to reflect her life as well as to teach her how to live. So she turns to Strether to explain her current feelings that her life is essentially over, that she is simply waiting for something to happen. But there are significant differences between them: Strether has come to a recognition of how much he missed by not living; Carol is facing an "aging despair" that she is no longer living the rich and productive life she had lived so long. And Strether begins to observe and respond to what is going on around him, while Carol seems to be waiting now for life to come to her.

Having summoned him to guide her, does Carol reject Strether's lesson? When he tells Bilham, "[L]ive all you can," is he urging the younger man to a future of rereading or to a future of active participation in life? Carol calls Strether's not striving to get anything for himself "the ambition of the not yet old," as though the old wanted more for themselves than do the young, and that might well be true of some, but why could it not as well be just the opposite? Why can altruism not be easier for the old because they have nothing to lose, because they can offer themselves, take chances, even risks? Carol started a foundation to bring practical help to women who needed it, others become tutors or surrogate grandparents, still others put themselves at risk to bear witness to human rights abuses. Life is still there to be lived by the old if they choose it. If, as Dante suggests in the *Convivio*, those who led active lives should offer the fruits of their experience and then move to contemplation in very old age, perhaps those who lived mainly contemplative lives of reading, thinking, and writing should move to lives of action before they die.

As literary types, "we . . . may want to go on writing," but if nothing suggests itself, even after a "radical shift" like reading about science, does that mean life is over? Are we cut off even from literature because it no longer determines our lives? It is perhaps an odd suggestion to make to professional readers, but there should be room before and after retirement to read for sheer pleasure or escape, to follow the adventures of Aubrey and Maturin or of Harry Potter and Hermione and Ron. Even for rereading, such a crucial activity for teachers because what we read changes as we and the world around us change, because familiar texts can speak to us in new ways. I cannot speak of reading and rereading for pleasure without thinking of my mother, who,

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after she retired and my father died, returned to the greatest joy of her youth, reading. She began with Anthony Trollope, reading and sometimes rereading every book he published and then, as long as her eyes lasted, reading every novel, new and old, that family and friends could provide, not always with the same pleasure but always with curiosity and interest. Literature played only a minimal role during her active life, but in youth and old age it was her life. Literature was always Carol's life; even when she turned to science, "words were still what mattered," but in the end words failed her.

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AT THE END OF "FROM REREADING TO READING," I turn immediately back to page 1 and begin again. It's what we do as textual critics, isn't it? Apply the pressure of rereading once, twice—as many times as it takes to rile the surface of a text so that meanings swarm into view? The essay's real topic, I decide after several passes, and the reason for its dark tone, is not reading but retirement—the burden of living without work whose value is acknowledged by others. Rereading and reading are strategies tested by turns for their ability to counter the despair of the retired. Carolyn starts with *The Ambassadors*, intrigued by Strether's retreat from action—his willingness to take life in without lifting a finger to shape it, his disinclination any longer to lay claim or get credit. A novel that may once have been read for its slow, obscure dramas of gender and sexuality, pleasure and postponement, Europe and America, is now reread as an antidrama of age and inactivity. Looking to *The Ambassadors* for a model of relinquished ambition, Carolyn claims to find therapy if not cure. Yet the lives of aging writers to which she turns next tell a different and less consoling story: the urgent desire to continue working as before; desperation and even madness should work prove impossible; great joy at producing late work on par with one's best. Strether's lesson in detachment notwithstanding, here Carolyn admits along with Roland Barthes that "[w]e are none of us through desiring." "[B]ut for what?" she asks.

Shifting at this point to the second of her eponymous terms, she goes on to recount her reading in the unencountered sciences. The culture into which she ventures is not only unfamiliar but also frankly scornful of the scholarship that has been her lifework. Yet Carolyn is charmed rather than put off by this altered perspective, and shares with us her dismay that we in the humanities return the favor by willfully ignoring breakthrough scientific research occurring sometimes literally next door. Ah, the breakthrough! It is partly this—starting on one side of a wall and pushing through to the other—that so appeals to Carolyn. Though noting that Darwin, her favorite, had to rely on words for lack of numbers, on persuasion rather than proof, Carolyn tells us she is drawn to the seeming irrefutability of science, to "problems that, once solved, do not return again." As a result, one's achievements in the sciences speak for themselves—no need to seek the approval of others. In this culture of the self-explanatory, above the scramble for popularity, generational differences, so salient in English departments, seem almost to drop away. One is never too young for mathematical genius, nor ever too old. . . .

Arriving once again at the end of Carolyn's piece, I find myself wishing to defend the rereading of novels it finally eschews. I would do so on the grounds, precisely, of their pleasurable inefficiency and poignant inconclusiveness, because I like the murkiness of their problems, their refutable solutions. There are breakthroughs here too, but the other side of the wall is not necessarily better or tenable. There are also, as Carolyn puts it, "those lovely double negatives"—lovely because they are, so very unscientifically, irreducible to simple positives. Numbers themselves are rarely absolute in the literary world of infinitely rereadable texts. Despite several nods to "statistics," what Carolyn shows is that age, for example, may be contingent on culture—on such things as Victorian life spans and MLA membership rules. Indeed, however explicitly it argues for marching off to read afresh in the sciences, Carolyn's own writing threatens—with its Woolfian elegance and parenthetical dalliances—to lure us back into the languors and rigors of critical rereading.

Still, I want to take Carolyn at her word and consider what might be, for her in her seventies, a compelling reason to leave literature for science. Is it perhaps that science, seemingly indifferent to anything but its own truth, offers a way to that Stretherian zone beyond ambition? Echoing James's

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character, Carolyn explains in her closing paragraph, "I sought in reading about science nothing practical for myself." Of course, one wonders if science is really so free of wanting as Carolyn avers. We have learned, on the contrary, to stress its discursive status, its covert assumptions, not to mention its shady corporate ties. But perhaps the freedom Carolyn finds in science springs less from its protocols than from her own relation to it—that is, her training as a nonscientist. Perhaps the attraction is not that for scientists "a proof is a proof" but that English professors crossing over into science have nothing, professionally, to prove. What woman especially can fail to appreciate the wonderful, unaccustomed relief of feeling no need, no need at all, to justify her presence among learned men?

And here we come to another element of Carolyn's calculated straying, so late in life, from the old world of stories and poems to a new one of cosmology and quantum mechanics. For even while declining the fantasy of actually becoming a scientist (as I say, a liberating disavowal), she nevertheless regards the arcing trajectories of the lives of men in science—Newton, Einstein, Turing, and others—with palpable envy. Reading about men whose genius was nurtured from early childhood, Carolyn is neither outraged nor impressed but *taken over*. "I allowed the felicity of their lives to overpower me," she says almost voluptuously. Noting that similarly gifted women are not, even today, thus supported, she chooses to be subsumed by the happier narrative of spectacular masculine success. Carolyn introduces her conversion to science with the elderly Rebecca West's bold wish to become a man. Carolyn's disciplinary reorientation resembles West's desired metamorphosis but is, Carolyn jokes, more "probable and possible." Yet how different actually is it? For Carolyn, too, leaving Forster for Feynman, realigning herself with the "hard," may effectively perform a sex change.

To see science as operating thus for and on Carolyn is simply to underline the impatience with gender inequities and rigidities that drives all her work, including this ultimate essay. Anticipating by several decades our current interest in transgender and female masculinity, Carolyn's 1973 book, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, was already plotting an escape from "the prison of gender," liberation from "the confines of the appropriate" (ix, x). Claiming such gender outlaws as Dionysus, "woman-in-man, or man-in-woman" (xi), this early text bespeaks a feminist who not only petitioned for women's rights and celebrated women's stories but also radically troubled and trampled on binary notions of feminine and masculine. Thirty years later, I see the same trashing of gender lightly coded as transgression of disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, her late defection to science may simply be another staging of long-standing convictions and yearnings.

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Do not go gentle into that good night.

I hear the atonal whine of Stravinsky's dirge setting Dylan Thomas's poem to song that denies song. Carolyn went, not gently, still making waves, troubling the waters of the profession as she did when she abruptly retired from Columbia, angry at the intransigence of the old boys' club. Déjà vu all over again.

I find Carolyn's parting column to the MLA heartbreaking—and alarming. Does she, Cassandra-like, utter the future toward which we academics must head if we don't die before we quit? Her essay is not so much about (re)reading as it is a howl about age, about retirement, her tiredness. And—about the futility of the humanities, especially the study of literature. For all its perpetual reinvention of itself as new ways of observing and reading, she says about our profession, the end game is repetition. Rereading isn't new reading; it's just more of the same, an echo of before. At least, she says, that's what it becomes for the individual academic who moves out of the classroom into the ennui of retirement, into a period of desiring even more intensely to live more while being able to live less. Retirement is a passive verb. And intransitive—being, not doing.

For a moment, just a moment, she finds pleasure in rereading James. His distinction between living and life resonates, excites, reconciles her to aging. Living is nothing. It's the plethora of plot, the proliferation of events. Life is rereading living, a savoring of "the residue of experience." Life is depth; living is

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surface. Life means the deepenings of happenings through reflection after the fact of doing. Age and retirement, she had hoped, would bring a different sense of time that would allow for life. The frenetic pace of writing and teaching in the profession, she implies, is "[s]o much living with so little life." The rereading of literature in retirement should allow for a rereading of one's living as a professor, as a person.

But it didn't. It brought more of the same. She hears Barthes's "agonizing question" as an address to "the burdens of retirement": "And afterward? —What to write now? Can you still write anything?" For her, Barthes's answer begs the question. "One writes with one's desire, and I am not through desiring," he says. She's got the desire, but not the goods to sate the hunger for life. "We are none of us through desiring," she says, "but for what, and how do we incarnate that desire in work that is not a repetition of all that we have done before, have even, perhaps, come to find wearisome?" *For what* do we write what we write? The lesson of her rereading is that what we rewrite is the same old same old. Déjà vu all over again. Thus the weariness, the ennui, the despair of aging. Perhaps also the sense that writing—academic writing—is navel-gazing, solipsistic, masturbatory self-play. *What*, after all, are the pleasures of the text *for*?

Deadened by rereading, Carolyn is beguiled at the "thought of encountering the formerly unread" and seems to find in science the freshness living had lost. What she wants is the stunning shift, the shock of the new, the foreign, the not known or understood. Reading science is not rereading. This is beginning again. "I stepped into an unknown land," she says of her dinner with scientists, her recent reading in the biographies of scientists enabling her "to understand a bit of this strange language." She likes being the foreigner, the outsider, the one who half understands when immersed in the pleasure of strange tongues. It's the familiarity of rereading, of aging, of our profession that she doesn't like. And what's foreign in the new ways of reading that the young are inventing is only alienating. She hasn't passed the torch. She extinguishes it.

Rereading her account of the beckoning excitements of reading science, I sense an uncanny return to her intellectual beginnings in the polarized world of the 1950s, when she is the outsider, the woman in the old boys' club, the pariah Jew in a world of Brahmins. She is titillated by science's rejection of literature. Here she finds confirmation for her own boredom with reading. Feynman says that his English classes offered "supremely useless knowledge, a parody of what knowledge ought to be." Darwin—her favorite—admits, "I cannot endure to read a line of poetry." Trying to read Shakespeare leaves him "nauseated." She remembers the famous debate between C. P. Snow, the physicist, and F. R. Leavis, the intellectual giant of the 1950s, in which Snow "satirized the traditional culture of 'intellectual persons.'" "I found [it] strangely comforting," she writes, "[w]atching the field of humanities, to which I had devoted my life, dismissed in this outright fashion. . . ."

Comforting? What does this say about how she reread her life and the field of the humanities, to which she had been devoted? This is the comfort of masochistic despair, the passive voice, the intransitive verb. Let me be beaten, oh lord.

I am reminded of why the Amanda Cross mysteries always left me faintly embarrassed, sick at heart to have the self-disdain of a woman who wasn't "pretty," wasn't rich, and wasn't WASP so disclosed in her creation of the detective she called her alter ego—beautiful, upper-class, Brahmin. What's not to love about Kate's feistiness and brilliance? But who she is was as important to her creator as what she did. As the written body of Carolyn's desire, Kate Fansler encodes the outsider status of the writer and enables her survival in a hostile world. But Kate also reveals the psychic wound of that existence for the generation of women who initiated the winds of change, making new identities in my generation possible.

Carolyn's column relives the chasm between cultures and worlds—men versus women, science versus literature—that had in the first place called her to the utopian dream of androgyny. In her farewell to the profession, she opts for science over literature as "a hell / of a good universe next door." This gesture reads to me every bit as ironic as Bernard's Byronic words to the nameless stranger that close Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*—"'Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!' *The waves broke on the shore.*"

In so doing, Carolyn seems to forget or perhaps not even to know the woman in the flesh she was to so many others—the living doer, a transitive verb, a writer who was always writing. Electrifying before an audience. Intimately warm and humorous tête-à-tête.

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The drive of elegy is to find consolation in meaning. Rereading Carolyn Heilbrun becomes a contest of wills—mine to reassert the meaning of her life of (re)reading and doing, her resistance to it.

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FOR ANYONE WHO LOVED AND ADMIRED Carolyn Heilbrun, as I did, this essay—perhaps her last piece of professional writing—makes for distressing reading. And for anyone contemplating retirement, as I am, the piece makes for disquieting *re*reading. Inviting comments, Marianne Hirsch suggested that as a tribute to the author we might respond with "our most sophisticated critical tools" to the questions "From Rereading to Reading" raises. But in the aftermath of the self-inflicted death whose imminence may have been a subtext here, it's hard to maintain critical sophistication, and harder still to distance grief.

To be sure, Heilbrun's repudiation of rereading (literature) in favor of reading (science) is marked by her usual brio. For those who knew the writer, whether in person or on the page, the voice that emerges—sometimes gravely and sometimes jovially confessional but always authoritative—is painfully familiar. Yet the language of the essay is infused throughout by a tincture of despair notably uncharacteristic of the woman who proposed *Reinventing Womanhood*, defined age as *The Last Gift of Time*, and created that feisty feminist Kate Fansler. This different, frankly despondent Heilbrun writes of "*coping* with retirement and old age" (emphasis added), of rereading as "disquieting" because "our . . . thoughts about literature [can no longer] be put to practical use," and of old age as "a foreign country to . . . us all." "There are no cures for aging despair," she declares, noting that "despair at the age of seventy is almost as common among literary giants as among those who retire from academia. . . ." Retired professors, she claims, "share the despair of the great ones, but lack . . . the impetus to continue in the same vein as before."

In fact, although "From Rereading to Reading" is ostensibly about rereading *The Ambassadors*, James's novel ultimately becomes a backdrop against which Heilbrun stages a Yeatsian "Dialogue of Self and Soul" that hinges on the question of how (and whether) to live in the "foreign country" of old age. Her allusions to the hopelessness experienced by aging "literary giants," therefore, alternate with references to writers who maintained their energy or even found new inspiration in their later years. We're told that E. M. Forster "fell into depression . . . on the threshold of old age," while Henry James considered that at seventy-one he was experiencing "golden days." We're reminded that Charles Lamb found retirement "wearisome" but Forster eventually recovered his creative strength, that Shaw "would sometimes wonder whether he had finally shot his bolt" whereas Rebecca West had lively late-life times. As my accumulation of *while*s, *but*s, and *whereas*es suggests, Heilbrun's oscillation between opposing visions of aging is so marked that we might almost be witnessing not just a redaction of Yeats's "Dialogue" but a soliloquy subtly paralleling Hamlet's "To be or not to be."

And what of the writer's turn, mid-essay, from the rereading of James to a new reading of science? Here, at least at first, Heilbrun's tone takes on the exuberance to which we're accustomed. "I allowed the felicity of [scientists'] lives to overpower me," she confesses, and relaxes into a celebration of the "novel-relishing" Darwin. Yet this affirmative gesture, too, soon becomes problematic. The felicity of scientists' lives, we understand, is that those lives—and works—are *consequential*: scientists have a chance "profoundly to affect human knowledge. . . ." Unlike professors of literature, who are uncertain "whether indeed there are any facts at all," scientists "solve problems that, once solved, do not return again."

If, compared with the life of a scientist, the life of a humanist is inconsequential—doesn't, that is, definitively "solve problems"—why live it? Musing on this question, Heilbrun would appear to have found a rationale for her renunciation of rereading (literature) in favor of reading (science). Yet despite her discovery of the pleasures offered by browsings in biology, she clearly sees her interest in science as a belated conversion. Forcing her brain to exert itself, "like a believer in muscular Christianity and cold baths," she seems to be taking desperate measures to ward off the nihilistic impulse that has invaded her professional commitment. And even the fabled second law of thermodynamics, of which C. P. Snow considered "literary persons . . . ignorant," might

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seem to her to have been sapping her strength in this struggle, for after all that principle is the law of entropy, the one that tells us how warm things cool, how energy dissipates. Isn't the second law, therefore, the law that governs aging? Perhaps (so Heilbrun's essay implies) not just in public history but in private life "[t]hings fall apart; the center cannot hold."

Because this year I've been leading a graduate seminar in Yeats's poetry, his visions of late life come to mind as I confront Carolyn Heilbrun's chilling view of the foreign country of old age, a space whose displacements obsessed the author of "Sailing to Byzantium." For if the country of the young, of "dying generations at their song," is "no country for old men," as Yeats famously opined in that poem, what *human* (not to mention *humanistic*) place is there for the aging? I think Heilbrun was brooding on this question as she drafted her essay, taking now one position, now another. And when I *re*reread some of her earlier thoughts on the matter, I realize that she had long dwelled among the uncertainties she depicts here.

Notes the medical anthropologist Sharon Kaufman, "Identity in old age—the ageless self—is founded on . . . the current rendering of meaningful symbols and events of a life" (26). Heilbrun's reiterations support this point: in her preface to *The Last Gift of Time* (1997), she affirmed that she had "chosen" life while indicating that a retirement into death might be a viable choice too (10). And in "Virginia Woolf in Her Fifties" (1981), she observed that Woolf "must have thought with great logic about suicide" since "she did not find within herself great powers of renewal": "'Why,' Woolf asks, 'drag on, always measuring and testing one's little bit of strength[?]' "(107).

Why drag on? So Yeats too seems to have thought as he planned his journey toward the artifice of eternity that he sought in Byzantium. Yet ultimately something stopped him from leaving the living land ruled by dying generations. In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," "soul" found that when it clambered toward "that quarter where all thought is done," its tongue was "a stone." Thus, the fleshly, fallible human "self" triumphed in the end, as the poet declared "I am content to live it all again," no matter how demeaning "it" might be.

That an "ageless self" might arrive at such a conclusion would seem to be a key lesson the humanities proffer—a lesson as crucial as the "facts" that scientists propound. In any case, whether or not I'm "right" in rereading Yeats this way, I wish Carolyn Heilbrun, a friend I revered, had imagined a similar passion for survival (even in the face of the second law of thermodynamics) instead of surrendering to the indifferent beak that let her drop.

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REREADING CAROLYN HEILBRUN'S ESSAY SADdens me: so much liveliness of mind with no more life to live. Like the double negatives in which she always delighted, Carolyn's nuanced words about "coping with retirement and old age" need to be disentangled if we are to arrive at their meaning, or so it seems to me. For while her meditation sets out to chart the pleasures of escaping from stale rereadings of literary and critical texts into fresh appreciations of newly discovered science books, an undercurrent of despair can be sensed, perhaps especially by those of us who now grieve that we did not manage to nurture the woman who so generously took up the task of mentoring us. When she sent her essay to Marianne Hirsch, Carolyn's suicide was in her future, but now it is in our past. So, keeping in mind the feminist detective she created, I study her last sentence, upset that she was determined to move to "a good universe next door" and attuned to other clues here of her desolation.

With time "flapping" and scholarly instincts "atrophied," Carolyn dismisses Strether's seemingly affirmative dictum, "Live all you can," as an indulgence in "nostalgia and regret, the cardinal sins of old age." For her, the monotonous pace of some novels and of retirement evokes thoughts of self-strangulation: "There are no cures for aging despair. . . ." Although in their later years Henry James, E. M. Forster, and Rebecca West enjoyed their literal

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and literary sojourns, she cannot find "work that is not a repetition." Her phrases recall a sentence Charles Lamb composed about his superannuated condition that she did not quote but that shadows the weary ones she does: "I walk about; not to and from" (198). We humanists, Carolyn's essay claims, do not find "developments in our field" beckoning because professors of English have no certainty about the facts that need to be discovered. If there are happy worlds within which to dally, they have nothing to do with the imaginative literature or literary analyses that have taken up the years spent in our professional homes and thus require mental exile.

Yet the very elegance of Carolyn's prose—as she progresses from *The Ambassadors* to the biographies of aging artists, from the history of the divide between the humanities and the sciences to the benefits of changing one's intellectual course in later life—bespeaks the acuity of an astonishingly inventive literary-critical intelligence. Short of a host of platitudes about how our profession should harness the talents of the retired in our midst, not for their benefit but for ours, what is one to make of the waste, the wretchedness, of Carolyn's loss of faith in her calling, the loss of Carolyn herself?

Is it significant that in this late piece, her conversation includes James and Forster, Darwin and Feynman, C. P. Snow and Lawrence Summers, while Rebecca West is quoted as wanting to turn into a man at midlife? Or that Carolyn recounts the oddity of her being the only participant at a Virginia Woolf conference who knew about the annual meetings on the same campus of medical researchers studying DNA? As an intellectual, did Carolyn always feel herself to be lonely, stepping between contrary cultures? During what she once described as "the dreariest decades for women of the twentieth century," she was certainly a singular anomaly as she entered a profession composed almost entirely of male professors, though eventually she depicted herself as "rescued, by feminism, from . . . rejection and heartbreak" (*When Men* 146, 142). But in the "passionate, erotic, invigorating" love affair with feminism and also during subsequent years, when "battles, betrayals, and failures" arose, those who came to her rescue were often younger colleagues, students, or acolytes (143). At the City University of New York conference honoring her retirement in 1992, and at the memorial service last month, her peers and predecessors were conspicuously outnumbered by younger colleagues, students, and acolytes whose work she had made possible. With her self-deprecating sense of irony, she may not have wanted to be called "the progenitor of feminist criticism," but in the academy she was certainly its doula.

Whereas Carolyn learned how to be an intellectual from male models whom she "was never able to call mentors" (*When Men* 102), she was model and mentor to many women entering the profession with her blessing, which she bestowed through material gifts: reviews, citations, letters of recommendation, editorial suggestions, blurbs, brainstorming sessions, encouraging e-mails, and innumerable acts of kindness. In return, she asked only that those she fostered try to keep alive the significance of the questions that continued to haunt her: is this or that good for women? does it help measure and enrich the quality of women's ambitions or possibilities? These are inquiries we must now pursue and invigorate without her, and during a period when some of our other cherished feminist friends are dead, dying, or ill.

Inside and outside the academy, Carolyn dared to make use of her seniority "to take risks, to make noise, to be courageous, to become unpopular" (*Writing* 131), especially on behalf of those women whose paths she sought to make smoother than the one she had had to travel. That she did this for me may explain why I feel angry about her not staying on with us: retired she may have been, but retiring she never seemed. Although, at a down-home restaurant we frequented two or three times a year, she and I often disagreed about whether suicide could be justified as a right to author the ending of one's own existence, I recognized how closely freedom and courage were identified in her mind with "greater risk and a more fearless affronting of destiny" (*Writing* 120). Given her recent work in philanthropy, she knew what she had to bequeath and to whom, though I might not always understand.

Several years ago, after discovering that I had begun to sew quilts, Carolyn packed up the hoods she received with her honorary degrees and mailed them to me, for whatever use to which they might be put—perhaps something commemorative for her apartment. There they are now, heaped on my study floor: orange satin and blue velvet blazing against their black backings; burgundy and bright green and burnished gold set off with stark white piping. Incon-

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ceivable to cut up these well-deserved honors, twelve of them: enough for a procession of apostles. But like Virginia Woolf, Carolyn didn't believe in processions or apostles. So what if I quarreled (didn't she know quilters use only cottons? mightn't her beloved Margaret, Robert, or Emily cherish them?)—she knew her own mind and gave of it generously; and now, as I walk about, not to and from, in the void of her absence, I think of how much I love her and of the many who will miss her help in deciding what to make of Carolyn's plush and brilliant mantles.

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HEARING CAROLYN HEILBRUN'S VOICE sounding through her essay "From Rereading to Reading" reminds me how much I shall miss our biannual dinners in comfortable Upper West Side restaurants during the years following her retirement, when, no longer oft-embattled allies in Columbia's English department, we could just be friends. The textual voice is witty, liberally sprinkled with expressions of self-directed irony, and indulgent of digressions though never errant from relevance and good sense. In my experience as her reader, I have always found, and enjoyed, Carolyn's voice in her writings—inflected, to be sure, in that dignified, post-Victorian prose that wedded insight to clarity and (as she tells us in *When Men Were the Only Models We Had*) announced her debt, at least in that respect, to Clifton Fadiman and Lionel Trilling. The presence of the voice constitutes for me a guarantee of that sincerity that, along with plain-spokenness, was always her strong suit.

Carolyn's fulfillment of what I take to have been her assigned task for *PMLA*—to report on her rereading of a text professionally important to her—reveals a good deal of ambivalence about, even resistance to, that task. The value of this, her last(?) essay, lies, at least for me, in its unwillingness to be confined to a report on a rereading of Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. Instead, "From Rereading to Reading"—the title describes both the sequence of topics in the essay and, metonymically, its author's postretirement progress or regress from teacher to (unofficial) student—ponders the larger issue of reading's potential contribution to "those of us coping with retirement and old age . . . 'living' less and seeking more of life." Read in this way, the essay speaks directly and forcefully to me, who, having invested decades of energy and love into teaching—and thus into the reading and rereading of requisite primary and secondary texts—now, on the brink of retirement, experience excitement, but also doubts and fears, about what lies ahead. (I should add that the title, in its reversal of an expected ordering of activities—first read, then reread—subtly communicates the unsettling of categories—active/passive; inside/outside—and resultant disorientation that inevitably, I suspect, accompany at least the onset of retirement.)

Accordingly, I will respond to Carolyn's essay in a self-interested manner, focusing on, and respectfully dissenting from, her judgment on the worthwhileness of rereading and (by implication) the role of criticism in that activity.

The essay suggests that retirement rereading, when and if it happens, tends to respond more to psychic demand than to intellectual resolve. Promises to revisit favorite texts are, she opines, rarely kept, which is a good thing since "on the whole rereading is a disquieting occupation, reminding us of earlier times when our words and thoughts about literature could be put to practical use, either in teaching or in publication. . . ." But "the discovery that a book read long ago suddenly appears apposite to one's condition" can lure one to reread it; in Carolyn's case, "as I considered the conditions of my life, Strether [the protagonist of Henry James's *The Ambassadors*] asserted himself into my consciousness."

The agency at once synecdochic and metonymic assigned to Strether—he stands for the novel, which represents the memorative and ruminatory powers of the mind—seems in some respects quite benevolent: "James has given us, not only a novel of age and retirement, but the illuminating experience of that condition as it is best undertaken. . . . By the book's end, Strether knows that he has, at last, lived. . . ." Yet at

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the pivotal midpoint of the essay, embracing "a radical shift in one's area of intellectual involvement" as "the best recipe I know of for confronting the dangers of retirement and old age," Carolyn in effect renounces rereading—"to return to what we have taught and pondered . . . seems not to beckon"—in favor of "the thought of encountering the formerly unread": for her, "science, particularly the lives of scientists."

I believe more can be said in favor of rereading than Carolyn proposes. A now outdated piety stated that the mark of a great work is the new insights it yields each time it is reread. A poem or novel stores infinite riches in a little room (in James's case, a spacious salon), which successive readings, or generations of readers, can only gradually unwrap, bring to light, admire. Subsequent critical trends stripped much of the agency from the reread text. Reader-response theory places preponderant wealth in the eye of the beholder; historicizing criticism argues that if we would understand a text—any text—more comprehensively we must understand the social and political force fields, and the power relations, shaping it, as well as the discursive systems that it allows to speak through it or alternatively appropriates and manipulates for purposes of resistance. With respect to my own professional experience of rereading, I find that texts I thought I knew well have taken on whole new resonances, even required major reinterpretation, when seen anew through the lens of gender, queer, postcolonial, or performance theorizing. (I confess that I can only profit in this respect from criticism that does not founder in its own jargon; like Carolyn—and here I paraphrase what she often declared over our dinners in her postretirement years—I believe that anything worth saying is worth saying clearly.)

So I'm drawn to conclude that, on the brink of retirement, I'm not yet ready to follow Carolyn in abandoning scholarship and criticism—a theme she sounds frequently and justifies in several ways, perhaps protesting too much—or the rereading they can, I still think, illuminate. (Which is not to say that the pleasure of [re]reading novels—or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*—one on one, as it were, lacks attraction for me.) Book 2 of Cicero's *De officiis*, a magisterial consideration of the duties that people (he would say men) owe themselves and each other, offers a catalog of examples proving the benefits of human cooperation. To these could be added rereading, mediated by a critic's smart, lucid mind, as an exercise—admittedly, not to everyone's taste—of such cooperation, beneficial in the never-ending task of understanding oneself and the world, and thus of possibly improving both.

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WHEN I FIRST MET CAROLYN HEILBRUN, AT A meeting of the English Institute, I was a tenured professor, the mother of a one-year-old, and a first-year law student at Harvard University. As we collaborated then on editing a collection of institute essays devoted to the representation of women in fiction, we chatted not only about the feminist revision of critical categories but also about her daughter Margaret's study of the law, her own involvement in a law case on intellectual property, and a project I was exploring with my historian husband, Patrice Higonnet—a study of eighteenth-century French attitudes toward suicide. Carolyn ranged easily and enthusiastically over these different topics with a warmth of curiosity that demonstrated her ability to enter other people's lives and deaths—as she did in her beautifully written biographies. She "lent" herself to the adventures of authors, characters, and friends. This ability made her a welcome mentor to me—restless, at a crossroads, and pondering like Jenny in Maurice Sendak's *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* that "there must be more to life than having everything!" (5). In turn, she absorbed and transmuted parts of us into her own creative world: Patrice, like Orlando, changing sex and becoming the Patrice of *Sweet Death, Kind Death.*

Carolyn contributed to our volume a witty reflection on the history of the English Institute in which she cited a nostalgic account by Cleanth Brooks of the day a "tenacious little lady" had challenged "a brilliant lecture" by Lionel Trilling for its use of the universalizing "we" (Introduction xi). Like Virginia Woolf, Carolyn excelled at the creative art of theorizing by telling stories in which she cited key actors—in this case, critics. Her stories deftly deployed the technique Nancy Miller calls "italics" to expose "what passes for the neutral or standard face" (29). Deadpan, these quotations could slip from admiration to parody. In Carolyn's

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rereading of the account by Brooks, the woman who spoke up in Trilling's audience years before became prophetic of the recent feminist panel that provided the core of our volume.

Given her interest in gender, it is not surprising that Carolyn recently was drawn to reading about genetics. Her wide-ranging intellectual curiosity reflects the interdisciplinary strategy of much feminist criticism, a crossing of boundaries that may have been reinforced during Carolyn's year at the Radcliffe Institute. Her synthesizing approach to gender is manifest in the essay "Virginia Woolf in Her Fifties." There she builds her painting of Woolf out of brushstrokes drawn from Woolf's diary, letters, essays, and novels, set against the views of critics and members of her family. At the same time she draws on theories of biological and psychological gender differences to construct her hypothesis that social attitudes shift with one's age, making possible artistic innovation. She postulates that, unlike men, women are more likely to revolt in their fifties than in their youth: "To allow oneself at fifty the expression of one's feminism . . . is an experience for which there is no male counterpart" ("Virginia Woolf" 19). Although Brooks did not tell us the age of the "tenacious little lady" who challenged Trilling's cultural landscape, I imagine her to have been in her fifties, the age when Woolf released her anger in *Three Guineas* and *The Years*, finding the freedom "to assume a tone that is far from ladylike"—as Carolyn wrote when fifty-five years old herself (21).

Carolyn persistently moved from rereading to fresh readings of books, people, science, life. If she sometimes felt time "flapping around one," it perhaps reflected her sense that teaching and writing were vitally creative acts. "Work is the essence of life," she wrote (*Last Gift* 10). At work, when we are drafting a committee report, one of my wisest colleagues often recalls the adage "Less is more." Carolyn's ecumenism and energies instead seemed to offer us faith that more is more. Like Woolf, she arranged to take on ever-new projects, appearing to live in intensity. As the mother of a small child, I listened with astonishment to her explanation that she had started writing her Amanda Cross mysteries because she was already awake at night taking care of her twins. With her characteristically light touch, Carolyn could write, "[T]here are more awakenings than births in a life" ("Virginia Woolf" 16).

Reading in a fresh field, like reading in a new way, could open the door to a foreign country. How then do we reconcile her capacity to enjoy, to produce, and to give with her final choice of death? Many of us are rereading her work and the moments we spent together in order to try to understand. Surely, Carolyn did not want to become what scientists today fondly call a Methuselah mouse. If she weighed the costs of old age and dipped into her shelf of biographies to weigh the remedies to "despair at the age of seventy," she nonetheless did not choose death at seventy, as she reminds us in *The Last Gift of Time* (10). Day by day, she chose to live. For me the red thread that holds some of her pieces together is a certain love of freedom. *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, she explained, was about freedom from "the prison of gender" (*Last Gift* 135). Kate Fansler incarnated freedom from domestic chores. Rewriting the master plot was "not unintentional"—one of her elegant double negatives (*Women's Lives* 34). "Death for women in literature is the ultimate room of one's own" (*Reinventing* 183). "Woolf's suicide was a free act, a choice" ("Virginia Woolf" 29). In a piece that came out of conversations with Carolyn, I speculated, "To embrace death is at the same time to read one's own life" ("Speaking Silences" 69). For Carolyn, reading and living were both arts.

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Carolyn Heilbrun's last essay is full of ambivalence. Tasked with writing about rereading, she does, revisiting Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, finding in Strether a model for an old age of carefully cultivated inner experience; yet the momentum of the essay turns from rereading to reading something new, the life stories of scientists, men of action. Darwin shoulders out James. Similarly, Heilbrun dwells repeatedly on the despair that for her seems ever to shadow old age, waiting to engulf it entirely; and yet many of the examples she cites are of writers like E. M. Forster who overcame despair to continue until nearly eighty a life of writing and literary activity. And Heilbrun offers her own alternative to the ennui of life beyond retirement—"a radical shift in one's area of intellectual involvement." Hence her engagement with the lives of scientists. Quoting E. E. Cummings, she bravely ends with a call to embrace new intellectual challenges: "there's a hell / of a good universe next door;let's go."

But to my ear this ending sounds forced—a case of trying too hard. Of wanting to find in the culture and company of scientists a meaningful extension of intellectual life, a reason to live.

It is impossible, of course, for me to read this essay without Heilbrun's subsequent suicide forming a horizon against which her words take on a deadly freight of meaning, inviting me to be a Kate Fansler of the psyche, tracking clues that point to what—in retrospect—can seem like despair's inexorable end. Her death is a knowledge that can't be erased.

But with some effort I remind myself that there are other horizons against which to read this essay, and one of them is Heilbrun's prior body of work. Her final essay—not, I think, one of her best (let's, with Carolyn, call a spade a spade)—sent me back to those earlier writings on my own self-appointed task of rereading. What immediately struck me was the quite different tonality of my favorite of her recent works, *The Last Gift of Time: Life beyond Sixty*. That book begins with a meditation on the proper age for suicide. Heilbrun had long imagined suicide to be her destiny and its proper age seventy, yet seventy came and went, her pleasure in living pulling her to postpone a decision made in the past, leading her to wait, to "see how it goes" (9). Her retrospective account of the richness of her seventh decade forms a narrative of pleasure and purpose. She tried new things: bought a country house, just for herself; mastered e-mail; found in female friendships new and sustaining human engagements; let herself embrace an androgynous uniform of pants and tunics and banished nylons and high heels forever.

The homeliness of many of these choices puts them well outside the conventional boundaries of the heroic. They were ordinary choices made extraordinary only by the self-consciousness with which they were undertaken, and they satisfied Heilbrun's own criteria for living well in old age. As she wrote, "The major danger in one's sixties—so I came to feel—is to be trapped in one's body and one's habits, not to recognize those supposedly sedate years as the time to discover new choices and to act upon them. To continue doing what one had been doing—which was Dante's idea of hell—is, I came to see, and the vision frightened me, easy in one's sixties" (35). That danger she escaped, though not without cost. Some choices were missteps, and she confesses to them. Nor were all her decisions really about the pursuit of the new. Her happy embrace of her long marriage and her pleasure in her children formed threads of continuity amid a series of new undertakings and fresh beginnings. Ambivalence was, however, the abiding condition of her happiness. To go on or to stop; to keep hold of what had meaning from the past or to jettison familiar habits in the hope of something more sustaining. Only in that context of competing possibilities did choice have meaning.

Following further back the thread of my rereading, I found myself perusing again the overtly feminist books—*Reinventing Womanhood, Writing a Woman's Life*—that made Carolyn Heilbrun famous, made her a pioneer in the intellectual arena where much of her public life was lived. These were bold books when written, and they retain much of their power now, even though the conversations she started have had endings and afterlives she could not have foreseen. But her major themes and preoccupations have not been rendered obsolete: how to overcome sexual stereotypes; how to allow women access to masculine domains without demanding they become honorary men; how to rewrite and multiply the scripts by which men's and women's lives are lived; how to deprivilege the heterosexual plot.

Rereading these books now, many years after a first encounter with them, I realize the unusual nature of the demands they placed on their author. As a criti-

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cism that exposes the politics of the personal, feminism has insisted on the real if complicated dialectic between art and life, cultural narratives and the people whose lives are affected by them. In writing about women's lives, Heilbrun made her own life a frequent object of analysis and reflection, and she was supremely aware of the excitement and the difficulties of reinventing institutions and paradigms. She felt that for a woman, life after fifty was a time of special possibility, a time when, freed somewhat from family duties and from sexual expectations and stereotypes, one could, in her words, "create another story" (*Writing* 109). Heilbrun's last writings chart her struggle to seize this opportunity, to rewrite the scripts handed her by culture. Such rewriting has limits. There is no perfect freedom, only choices between this path and that one, each as likely to exact a toll as to yield certain pleasure. Rereading Carolyn Heilbrun, one feels now the effort that struggle to reinvent a female life entailed. However imperfectly, she attempted to "discover new choices and to act upon them," to avoid a life of ritualized repetition well into her seventh decade. Her many achievements are the legacy of that effort, and I honor her for them. *Sit tibi terra levis.*

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I WROTE A BOOK ABOUT CAROLYN HEILBRUN in 1997; after it was published, we became, unexpectedly, friends. She had spoken from time to time of showing me work in progress, but never did until last September, when she sent me the essay she was writing for *PMLA*. On 10 September, after I had read the essay, we had a long telephone conversation; later that day, she e-mailed, "I'm going to make all the changes tomorrow." But a week later, she wrote, "I'm still pondering the two that take a little more thought and language—the turning point and the end, if you remember," a puzzling delay from one who worked so speedily. I did not see the revised essay until 2 November.

I struggle now to recapture my reaction to the essay in September, just a month before Carolyn decided to take her life. I knew she had been excited by the invitation to write "a different kind of essay" (in July, she wrote, "I'm actually thinking of doing something non-lit-crit for *PMLA*. Imagine that!"). I heard the essay's melancholy refrain of despair—but the intellectual vigor, the richness of an ongoing reading life, the nimble dance from Fats Waller to Feynman, the trajectory from retrospective (rereading) to prospective (reading) suggested an emotional key different from the icy despondency of Carolyn's essay on aging published in the July 2003 *Women's Review of Books*.

What changes did Carolyn make in the September version? Most were minor, some a little more substantial. I realize now that I had optimistically focused on the notion of a new phase of her life, a movement toward new reading, and I commented accordingly. To clarify the shift from rereading to reading (the turning point), she added two sentences, beginning, "To reread, to return . . . ," before launching into the science section. She added three sentences at the beginning of the penultimate paragraph, sentences that were to make connections among (resolve?) the dueling dualities throughout the essay (arts and sciences, interior and exterior experience, reading and writing, rereading and reading, reading to write and reading as interior experience).

We talked also about developing some sections. Editors always want more elaboration from me, she said, but I work in "layers." Layers? She slipped out from under the question. Later, the word haunted me. If there are layers, what is the inner drama being played out? If there are layers, was she writing the last chapter of her intellectual journey?

I raised a question about the line "Myself when young did eagerly frequent," given without quotation marks. It sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. You mean you don't know the *Rubáiyát*? she chided. Only dimly, I said, muttering sheepishly about the moving finger and a jug of wine. Nevertheless, I recommended cutting on the grounds of obscurity and awkwardness. In the e-mail of 10 September, she added a footnote, "Maybe I should send you the *Rubáiyát*; maybe I will one day soon." In the revised essay, she not only kept the quotation but enclosed it with quotation marks; she had, in effect, underlined and starred the words, committed to them all the more vehemently.

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It makes sense to Kate Fansler readers that the text would reveal its layers through the skein of connections to other texts. Edward FitzGerald's translation of Omar Khayyám's *Rubáiyát* ("Myself when young did eagerly frequent / Doctor and Saint . . . And many Knots unravel'd by the Road; / But not the Knot of Human Death and Fate" [1st vers., stanzas 27–31]) now becomes a text shadowing Carolyn's. We can all surmise about what the astronomer-poet's quest for meaning signified for Carolyn at this moment. Provisionally, I'll offer this: the poet urges that life must be lived at full attention because death is the end; death's omnipresence gives life its edge—its preciousness but also its emptiness.

When I reread Carolyn's essay in this light, it becomes not a pioneer's beckon to other retirees (her announced intention) but a quest for healers, new saints and doctors. She goes to Henry James, the poet of consciousness, with urgent questions: We all pass our days, kill time, but what does it mean to live? Is it possible to live life intensely as an interior experience? "[C]an I, can anyone . . . find encouragement in Strether?" She contemplates writers who, like her, beyond seventy, lost hope because they could not find new work, work that would connect the interior experience to a larger world. Where will she find new subjects? Can the answer lie in the world of science? It looks promising: the work of scientists cannot be rolled back, she claims, does not depend on the whimsical "regard" of others. But science also threatens solitude, a world empty of human contact, and so she is most drawn to Darwin, the man who wrote the story of our humanity, the scientist whose work in words connects the two cultures. Seeking intensity in a new culture, she finds her interior world further contracted: she will read science but does not think she has the authority to write about this new experience, cannot connect to a life beyond the interior, cannot progress. Out of words, she comes to a dead end. The sentences she added to the final version suggest not resolution but intellectual exhaustion (she has "quit" one world but cannot live in the next). What therefore is the "universe next door"? Indeed, that last quotation, chopped from its context, seems eerily cheerful, but reconnected to the rest of the poem it becomes a somber commentary on the very idea of progress: "We doctors know // a hopeless case if—listen:there's a hell / of a good universe next door;let's go." And so Carolyn, following some of her fictional characters, slips out of life without a word of warning.

Was she struggling to write herself out of despair, or was she dramatizing the last losing battle of the quest narrative? From *The Last Gift of Time*, we learn the struggle was a daily one—intensifying life, saturating it with sadness.

On 14 August, she wrote to me, "All my good friends are social people, devoted to their extended families. The friends I have like me seem to vanish into utter solitude." Then she added, "I hope I don't. Right now I'm feeling a bit on top of things."

I fear that now this death will overpower the life; that we will reread Carolyn's work in the light of her suicide as if this were the magnet to which she was always and inevitably drawn. Everywhere in her books, her letters, her casual conversation, we will seize on the signs, the symbols, the rhetoric of death. Everything, after all, looks different in retrospect. But I hope we won't forget what it was like to read rather than to reread her work. I already feel this loss, acutely, in the shadow of the greater one.

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Her Suicide Note, the Very Last Words

Carolyn Heilbrun wrote, read, "The journey is over." It was signed, "Love to all, Carolyn." The note embodied the writer's passion for succinctness and summarized the views on suicide already expressed in *The Last Gift of Time*. But Heilbrun's meditation on rereading *The Ambassadors* (her penultimate piece of writing) offers a frame for interpreting the note through the intricate weave of quotation that characterizes many of her essays and books. Although Carolyn couldn't have known that as editor of *PMLA* Marianne Hirsch would create this forum of response, she had to have known that her readers

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would ponder her text—after her death, and in the light it casts on her life.

"What to write now? Can you still write anything? —One writes with one's desire, and I am not through desiring," Barthes sighed at the end of his self-portrait in *Roland Barthes*. "We are none of us through desiring," Heilbrun observes sympathetically, "but . . . how do we incarnate that desire in work that is not a repetition of all that we have done before, have even, perhaps, come to find wearisome?" She could read, even feel thrilled by what she read—but she did not find a way to bring her new readings about science to words that she would publish.

The despair about what to write that wouldn't feel like repetition was doubled, I think, by a changing relation to audience. Heilbrun expresses this indirectly through Darwin's reflections on the pleasures of reading: "A novel," she quotes her favorite scientist as saying, "does not come into the first class unless it contains some person whom one can thoroughly love." When she adds her thoughts to Darwin's—"like a detective, perhaps? I asked myself"—Carolyn Heilbrun sounds a little like Simone de Beauvoir explaining why she wrote fiction. "I passionately wanted the public to like my work," Beauvoir confesses in *The Prime of Life*: "Therefore like George Eliot, who had become identified in my mind with Maggie Tulliver, I would myself become an imaginary character, endowed with beauty, desirability, and a sort of shimmering transparent loveliness. It was this metamorphosis that my ambition sought. . . . I dreamed of splitting into two selves, and of having a shadowy alter ego that would pierce and haunt people's hearts" (291). What happens to a writer when that dream has been fulfilled?

Heilbrun quotes E. M. Forster's biographer about what the novelist experienced as yet a "worse fear" than the fear of not writing: "that he should lose the power to feel about people or take interest in them." Not feeling *for* others and not feeling what others feel for you. This fear of not feeling that is tied to the inability to write makes me wonder whether Carolyn sensed that the inability to write was going to lead, indeed had already begun to lead, to a diminution of feeling—for others, for those who loved her and whom she loved. Heilbrun's poignant reading of the plight of fellow writers faced with aging helps us understand her rereading of James's novel.

"If he writes," Heilbrun says hopefully of Strether's elderly future, "he will write, as he will live, not for recognition, not to get anything for himself, but to render his observations, and the skill for observing he has now acquired, into new words in a new pattern." But if you are a lifelong, well-known, and influential writer, and not the editor of the Woollett Review (or whatever it was called), could that really be enough? For Carolyn, the answer was no. In his seventies, she reports, Henry James felt fortunate to be able to work two to three hours a day, able still "to push a work of fiction of sorts uphill at the rate of about an inch a day." Without the time spent writing, Carolyn often remarked, there were all too many hours in the day. She would marvel that just those three hours that James describes—for her more like midday, from after breakfast until the early afternoon—could give every day a shape and life its savor. Her view about the meaning of a writer's life—which is above all what hers was—came closer to the expression of anguish she finds in Forster's diary: "Unless I can settle down to some work this year, I may go wrong in my head."

Does Strether go astray at the end of the novel in cutting himself off from Maria Gostrey? Heilbrun argues that James's ambassador did the right thing by leaving because it shows that he didn't want anything for himself. She identifies with him in this and in believing that the journey he had undertaken—like hers—was over. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, who was my friend for twenty-six years, was in most ways not much like Lewis Lambert Strether, though; unless we conclude that like him she was determined to be "dreadfully right," as Maria Gostrey comes to believe of *her* friend, which is also to say, for those who remain on the other shore, quite sadly wrong.

There is, then, less advice for the retired here than a warning: for a writer, the death of the author is no metaphor.

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I WAS A STUDENT IN CAROLYN HEILBRUN'S graduate seminar in the spring of 1992, my first year at Columbia and her last. In our opening class Heilbrun offered a remark that I jotted in my notes and remembered later: "If we read texts too carefully, after a while we rewrite them." It was a good insight. But I have to risk reading "From Rereading to Reading" too carefully because I need so much from this text. I need it to give me an account of why Heilbrun took her own life. I need it to tell me how to make sense of her absence. Reading and responding to her last piece of criticism is the closest I can come to telling her good-bye. So while I suspect that Heilbrun would tell me to leave it alone, I've read "From Rereading to Reading" to pieces. In addition to the two categories Heilbrun offers in her title, I've discerned in the essay a third category—and maybe even a fourth. Perhaps I've toppled over into rewriting, but I feel even that remains preferable to what I see as Heilbrun's shadow categories: not reading and not writing.

Not reading. What is it that Heilbrun tells us she has ceased to read? Literary criticism, a genre to which she seems to have developed an entrenched aversion. Heilbrun commits to not reading criticism seven times in the fourteen-page typescript of "From Rereading to Reading." "I do not reread critics," she stipulates early on, ascribing her decision at various points to an atrophy of her scholarly instincts, to bad memory, to deliberate ignorance, and to the failure of new critical trends to appeal to her. She is even "strangely comfort[ed]," on one occasion while reading science, to find literary criticism derided as "supremely useless knowledge." While I knew Heilbrun to be an individual of ingrained scholarly habits with an excellent memory and an abiding curiosity about the world, it is her embrace of the characterization "useless knowledge" that impresses me as most egregiously inapt, particularly in the light of Heilbrun's own critical work. Along with *A Room of One's Own*, *Writing a Woman's Life* is perhaps the most useful book I have ever read. Indeed, many of Heilbrun's works position themselves as manuals for users, guides for understanding and action. So if her very own work offers a clear rebuttal to literary criticism's critics, why is it that she decided not to read?

It would be easy enough to ascribe Heilbrun's turn away from criticism to her retirement from teaching. One might also chalk it up to the bitterness of a scholar who had seen some of her critical commitments and positions attacked. Or one might follow Heilbrun's own line and say that in her seventies she felt it was time to move on to something new. But these explanations can't satisfactorily account for Heilbrun's estrangement from criticism. After all, though she was retired, she was still very much engaged in the work of reading and writing about literature, having published two books on literary topics in the past four years (*When Men* and *Women's Lives*). And she wasn't one to be daunted by scholarly critiques of her work; further, she told me she rarely read her reviews. Most unconvincing is Heilbrun's argument that she was due for a change of focus, her justification for reading science.

Though Heilbrun may have found pleasure in science, her encounter with it seems distorted by a desire to highlight the inadequacies of the criticism she no longer reads. Science appears to afford her glimpses of a desirable world where "problems . . . , once solved, do not return again" and where professional success does not rest solely on the regard of one's peers. Both of these seem like flawed characterizations of her new field of interest: questions answered in science merely yield to other questions, and scientists depend heavily on the approval of their peers to receive the support that makes their work possible. But these do seem like fair reproaches to direct at literary criticism. Major questions in criticism are answered in new ways by every generation of scholars, and many critics would dismiss the possibility of a universal standard for assessing their work. Yet if Heilbrun likes science for the ways in which it seems to improve on literary criticism, her favorite scientist is the one whose work most resembles that of critics. Darwin was unable to set up experiments that would conclusively demonstrate his hypotheses; he could use language alone to generate the inductive leap away from his observations that would establish the validity of evolution. Without conclusive proof, he had to find the words to convince his colleagues to accept his theoretical model. And yet he created something that, as Heilbrun might say, bestowing high praise, was useful. Presenting Darwin as

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her anointed favorite, Heilbrun seems to be proffering a model for literary critics to follow.

"Useful" is a commonplace standard for science but a more obscure one for literary criticism. Yet, as I've suggested, it's one that Heilbrun's work embraced. For me the defining feature of Heilbrun's critical vision is her clarity, a clarity so acute it has the force of morality. Her work has a simplicity that comes not from a refusal of complexity but from having assimilated complexity and emerged on the other side. This is a standard very few critics can meet; Heilbrun might have said that it is a standard very few attempt to meet. In recent years, when she and I would meet for walks in Central Park, she would express disappointment in the willful obscurity of so much of criticism, a trend that I think contributed to her increasing alienation from the genre.

Science is the only subject I knew Carolyn to read in a sustained way without the intent to embark on a responsive piece of writing. If science became the basis for Carolyn's not reading of criticism, it was also the occasion for her turn to not writing. And I believe it was the not writing, even more than the not reading, that made Carolyn vulnerable to what she quietly alludes to as "aging despair." She was not able to turn science into a subject for critical writing because what she sought and found in science was evidence of the inadequacy of criticism as a genre, and perhaps this is why she went from not reading to not writing. Yet on the evidence of Carolyn's work I still believe that some criticism is worth reading or rereading. When next I put my fingers on the keyboard, I'd like to try to write something she would say was useful.

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TOWARD THE END OF HER LIFE, CAROLYN wrote two essays in which she spoke with precision and candor about "aging despair" ("Taking" and "From Rereading"). In each essay she also described a "radical shift" in perspective and attachment as she "turned with pleasure from literature to science." For Carolyn, conversion and despair were intertwined. I retell the story of conversion, leaving its connections to aging despair just beneath my lines.[1]

Carolyn's radical shift, as I imagine it, began quietly. Old projects were wearisome, the "formerly unread" beguiled her. She began to explore "science." She "treasure[d]" the reading for its difficulty, treasured the feeling of her "brain exerting itself to understand." Her efforts stimulated a new "mindfulness" and a capacity for attention.

Carolyn seems thrilled by the ways scientists work. They "see a problem and set out to solve . . . it." Any solution must "face and survive [a] test for falsification." Guesses, inefficiencies are part of the process of discovery. But "problems . . . once solved do not return again," "laws . . . once discovered and defended, are established."[2]

Clarity, verification, progress, and permanence: the contrast with the work to which Carolyn has devoted her life is stark. In literary studies "no lasting answer is ever to be found"; in feminist studies there are no "right" answers at all. These epistemological *failures*—for that is what they seem—blend into failures of women: the defeat of the best qualified, the readiness even of feminists to disparage the successful.

Then the conversion:

> I have turned to science, turned to reading of men, with their feasible destinies, their ready-made support groups of men like themselves, and their chance profoundly to affect human knowledge and action. I allow the felicity of their lives to overpower me. . . . I fell, with astonishing relief, into the bounty of male lives and male stories.

In her later essay Carolyn describes her turn to science in nearly the same words. But instead of contrasting female fates and male lives, she explores a division between two cultures: the result-laden, work-centered world of science and the resultless, unfocused world of literature, shamelessly ignorant of the laws of science. Carolyn recognizes this distinction from long ago but just last summer saw it enacted at Smith College and heard it stated strongly by the president of Harvard.

In June, Smith College hosted simultaneously the annual Virginia Woolf conference and a working

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group of scientists that meets annually to discuss DNA. The workshop, a "boot camp," ran on a strict schedule; participants continued to speak their "strange language" through the hour allotted for dinner. The Woolf conference was "rather loose." Its organizers deliberately mixed literary with social and political aims such as "making the common reader feel welcome" and expressing Woolf's "party consciousness" (Hussey). Scientists, though polite at Smith, often cast aspersions on philosophic and literary studies. Carolyn finds Feynman's remark about English studies typical: "supremely useless knowledge, a parody of what knowledge ought to be." Carolyn could find no one at Smith who had even heard of the scientists who meet there annually. A scientist asked Carolyn who asked a historian what Virginia Woolf knew of science. "[I]ntrigued by astronomy, he said, and eclipses, nothing more."

Carolyn takes pleasure in seeing the two cultures at work. But she is right, I believe, to describe herself as having "stepped between" them. She dines with the scientists, speaks at the conference, yet belongs to neither. "Betwixt and between," "poised on uncertain ground," she has left one self, one set of intellectual attachments, without yet finding another (Heilbrun, *Women's Lives* 3, 36).

Abruptly, Carolyn reminds herself that "words were still what mattered," then talks at length of Darwin. According to his biographer, Darwin "had no crucial experiment . . . no equations to establish his case. Everything in his books was to be in words. . . ." Darwin reads novels, might enjoy a detective story, is "the man above all others [she] would like to have been." But he cannot be a "model" for work of her own (cf. Heilbrun, *When Men*).

As if she had played to its end the idea of a distinct culture of science, Carolyn speaks again directly about age and retirement, then returns to her conversion. I like to imagine her returning instead to her rereading, taking the phrases she made up to praise Henry James, using them to appreciate what she has done and can now do.

She has written with *the understanding that comes with thought and reassessment. . . . She will write, as she will live, not for recognition . . . but to render her observations, and the skill for observing she has now acquired, into new words, in a new pattern.*

Whatever she might have done, Carolyn's late intellectual affair challenges us to understand the attractions of science without resorting to dismissive divisions. Virginia Woolf, to whom Carolyn often turned, offers a model (Beer, *Virginia Woolf* and *Wave*; Henry). Woolf's interest in sciences ranged from the study of insects to Einstein's physics and included the terrifying "science" of eugenics whose appeal she unsteadily resisted (Henry, ch. 6; see also Garrity). Woolf was as thrilled with science as Carolyn but for different reasons. "Woolf is exhilarated by *outlandish facts"* more than by argument. She "responds with a kind of rapture to improbability" (Beer, *Wave* 7). The physics of her era offers her "multiple scales of time and space" and also "the contingency of sense and nonsense, a baffled recognition of that which buckles to human reason and that which remains enigmatic" (10).

For Carolyn exploring science meant daring "to look . . . at a different world, in an unaccustomed way." Woolf too looked with unaccustomed "global aesthetic vision" and saw a vast and fragile earth, for her a hauntingly pacifist image (Henry, ch. 6). Woolf, however, did not set "scientific material apart from all the other resources of her imagination . . . but increasingly meld[ed it] with all the other sources of her mind, not privileging scientific thought but subjecting it to humour and making it part of poignant human experience too" (Beer, *Wave* 15).

Carolyn did not err in setting science apart. That is how her love of science came to her, leaving us a rich and complicated story of identity and change in old age. But I believe that the separation of science from the "rest" of knowledge makes it difficult to appreciate the variety of methods and styles that enable us to look at different worlds in unaccustomed ways.

At Carolyn's memorial service Tom Driver said that he would continue to converse with Carolyn. I share his desire. Carolyn and I saw the world very differently; we often disagreed. But I could say anything to Carolyn about anything she wrote. We each spoke directly; she heard me out. Now I want to talk to *Carolyn* about Carolyn's thinking. No one else will do. While I write, I see her vividly, even catch a cadence, her warmth of voice. But I cannot hear, and never could predict, what she will say. The city is filled with her absence.

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Notes

[1] I have taken phrases from both the earlier and the later essays, sometimes out of context, sometimes paraphrasing. Any words or phrases in quotation marks, unless otherwise specified, are from one of these essays. I have let stand Carolyn's references—for example, to Darwin's biographer—quoting her quotations. Both essays are so short that readers can easily see what is going on. "Conversion" is my word, not Carolyn's. In philosophical terms Carolyn was struggling with a shift in "practical identity" (Korsgaard 101; see also Nelson, ch. 3). When I wrote about my own "conversion," Carolyn wrote a short preface ("Ten Years Later") for the second edition of the book in which I published it (Ascher, DeSalvo, and Ruddick). This preface is interesting on its own.

[2] In an earlier draft I noted that feminists and other critical theorists have complicated our understanding of the ways scientists work, questioning the division between discovery and justification, situating the voices of science in social and political circumstances, making connections between ideals of objectivity and gender as an ordering system of meaning. Carolyn knew some of this work and was eager to know more. But science *thrilled* her, and that seemed worth understanding.

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THE FIRST THING I TAKE FROM THIS TEXT about reading is a kind of Heraclitean message: that the same reader never dips into the same book. Rereading is not exactly what it claims to be. As the reader changes, the book changes, weakening the force of that first "re." Having read a book professionally, to teach it or write about it, how can we read the same book as an amateur, a reader like the others, with no professional axes to sharpen? It is a not uninteresting question, as Carolyn Heilbrun might have said. "Oh, those lovely double negatives," as she did say. And why? Why are double negatives so alluring to her as a reader and as a writer charmed to be charmed by the prose of Henry James? This gives me two questions, which I shall try to consider as related. What is rereading, according to Heilbrun, and what is it about double negatives that makes them "lovely" for her?

Let me start with the second question. As opposed to a simple positive statement, a double negative opens up a space, it makes us hesitate, reflect, and, in a sense, reread, on the spot, changed only by what we have read up to this point. Let us consider the following Jamesian sentence, for example:

> It was with the sense of a, for him, very memorable something that he peered now into the immediate future, and tried, not without compunction, to take up that period where he had, prospectively, left it.

Jamesian, to be sure, though not, alas, by Henry James himself (making it, perhaps, a not un-Jamesian sentence), this one was written by Max Beerbohm. Perhaps you will wish to reread it with that in mind, unless you are one of the elect who knew it was the incomparable Max all along. This is, in fact, the opening sentence of his parody, "The Mote in the Middle Distance," which must be loved by all lovers of James, since it is a parody written not without love itself.

What the double negative does, then, is make explicit the rhetorical gaps that haunt all language (as the deconstructionists used to tell us in their heyday), allowing us to revel in that aporiatic space of the sign, between the signifiers and their signifieds. I fear that my jargon here would appall Carolyn Heilbrun, even as I hope that it might have amused her. The point, however, is not made unseriously. I think the double negative does make explicit

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a duplicity of language that condemns us to rereading all the time. And this is not unrelated to that other kind of rereading discussed so eloquently in Heilbrun's message—reading a familiar text after a serious lapse of time and an important change in the situation of the reader. Like Heilbrun, I write as a life member of the MLA and an emeritus member of the faculties to which I still, in some sense, belong. I think "not unattached" is the phrase I am looking for, here. And I am aware of how different this condition is from just plain "attached." I read Heilbrun, that is, as one who shares the position—or is it the condition?—from which she wrote. I am seventy-four years old and find it quite possible that I might emulate the preposterous figure presented in Beerbohm's parody of James, who seems to have mislaid the future while trying to peer into it.

Carolyn Heilbrun seems to have considered that possibility. I cannot but think of her words as addressed directly to me and people like me, though others may overhear them with profit. She mentions the pleasures of writing, for those who are retired, but these are tempered by the fear of repeating what one has done. She therefore suggests looking at texts from another field of thought, and she recounts her experiences reading the lives of scientists—reading instead of rereading. I can understand this impulse and sympathize with it, but I find myself most charmed when her reading of a scientist brings her back to our field and her own efforts in it, as in this passage in which she is quoting from Darwin: "'A novel, according to my taste, does not come into the first class unless it contains some person whom one can thoroughly love'—like a detective, perhaps? I asked myself." I love that self-reflective moment in this text, and I note that Heilbrun went looking for science but came back to her own field, and even her own work, after all.

Finally, however, I feel that I must not only read what Carolyn Heilbrun has offered us but must respond to it as well. Much as I might wish to, I cannot speak directly to her, but I can speak to those whom she has addressed. She looks clearly at the problem of despair, for which there may be no remedy, and her death has given her words an authority no one would wish to challenge. In responding, then, I speak for no one but myself. What keeps me going is an acute sense of my own ignorance. The wish to learn what I do not know—as long as I have that I will be motivated to continue. And I count on my ignorance, that old friend, never to desert me, no matter how much I learn.

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WAS CAROLYN HEILBRUN'S MIND MADE UP about date and time of departure when she wrote "From Rereading to Reading"? Surely the decision was brewing in her. Such a "wished-for death" is rare, and the tendency will be to read everything in its hindlight. I will read this last piece as a reluctant testimony to the usefulness of literature.

In 1997 I asked my dearest friend, just days from her death, what still lasted. The fact that I seem to have made a change for a few students, she said. It seemed a gift, a consolation for survival.

At least, that's what the survivor thinks. To carry on some willed course of action—in this case teaching—with the approval of someone who knew that her race was run seems an unquestionable good. This is a classical image of the necessary detachment of the nearly dead, endowed with a peculiar wisdom. It is the image of the desire of the survivor, shared, in some way, by the dying—as much a survivor until a something (no word can be used) called "death" does not happen.

In that last space, as in all life as "last" space, we are only survivors thinking death as about to happen. The degree of this thinking (or not) varies. And, even resisting death, we want to have it happen—at least, want it to be my death and no other. Since living can also be seen as wanting to make death, even if by resisting it as happening.

For twenty years now, I have been interested in suicide as the use of the body as space of inscription. I have moved from Bhubaneswari Bhaduri to the suicide bomber. I have read them as bodying forth messages when no message will go across.

Carolyn Heilbrun published her intention to end her life more than once, we are told. I am not a scholar of Heilbrun, so I have read of these passages, heard them read. There is the inevitable association with Virginia Woolf, which makes of Heilbrun's suicide not only a declaration but a cita-

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tion. Can we think of this as a message where no message will pass? She was a feminist individualist, under control. Perhaps she did after all control her own death?

Alas, that particular project cannot not stop short as the nonhappening does not intervene and the survivors call it "death." We will have to ask the question another way. What happens when the staging of the act seems to be the proof of published intention? That question is as mysterious as all questions about the relation between act and intention. The use of the body as semiotic instrument is not the issue here. The suicide is not a message. And, for the question of intention and act, "From Rereading to Reading" gives us a text to ponder. Heilbrun's words are less like Bhaduri's mute testament and more like my friend's wise words: not a message in extremis but an image of the survivor's desire, the word "survivor" a figure that Heilbrun knew no new example of—a catachresis—for it must accommodate the one who is on her way to what we are obliged to call death as well as the one who seems not to have died.

We can read "From Rereading to Reading" in this way. In it Heilbrun repeats a gesture that has put her in the company of a much broader spectrum of feminists, indeed thinkers, than her too easily diagnosed mainstream niche would warrant. *Try opposites*—as, for example, the Maori feminist Patricia Grace's young male protagonist (how far can we get from the corner where we put Heilbrun!) learns at the end of her novel *Baby No-Eyes*. Remember, I am not a scholar of Heilbrun, just someone who wanted to earn her good opinion, without compromising my position, when I became Heilbrun's unwelcome colleague. And I go on record now, disclosing that what I saw as a pull toward the opposite is what has always drawn me to Carolyn.

The elaborate staging of the stages of one's life as representative of stages in women's lives in general was a site of conflict, I felt, between an identitarianism, individualism, personalism typical of her historical moment and a wish to understand others unlike oneself in life's details. But it was androgyny where this conflict elaborated itself most fruitfully. Androgyny is never only a balance (although it is that too). Androgyny contains a vectored stance toward itself in itself—woman toward man and vice versa. The opening pages of *Reinventing Womanhood* play out this vectoring as a historical fable. This is why I chose to read from them at her memorial.

And that is what she gives us in this last piece of writing, more starkly. Planning for the waning of the senses, she turns from the singular and the unverifiable to the generalizable and verifiable as such—hard science, mostly of the nineteenth century. As in the other cases, nothing is cut and dried here. It remains a story of a pull against the grain. Darwin continues to be her favorite, because he is a writer rather than a reckoner.

It is the frame of this move to science that gives us the best spin. Rereading *The Ambassadors*—Henry James "has been the strongest literary influence upon me," she writes—repetition (or nostalgia) turns toward its opposite: reading the first time. She was turned off by Strether's indirection the first time around, casting him away—"I remember contemplating it as an adolescent and tossing the book, in anger, across the room." Now she reads him at last, as her opposite. For he counsels rereading (nostalgia), not reading (living). I read you to cast you off and move to something discontinuous with your advice for nostalgia. My advice, in old age . . . and so it spins.

In my copy, the endnotes—an unforgiving pun there—carry a handwritten note: "Endnotes (not in acceptable form)." The tug of the opposite is never in acceptable form. It is the mark of survivorship as such, and in the end that is the image of my desire—her bequest. The "suicide" is private, in some other place.

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But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.
—Jane Kenyon

IN "FROM REREADING TO READING," CAROLYN Heilbrun addresses the daunting question of how to live in old age through an inquiry into how to read in old age. Whereas rereading represents a mode of life confined to familiar patterns and plots, reading names the experience of the new, the experience of freedom. Heilbrun's previous work proves the political and ethical necessity of conceiving new,

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previously unavailable plots of womanhood: only the invention of new narratives makes personal and political recognition possible. Whether such recognition is possible for a new plot of aging is less certain, for the experience described in this essay, which seems to be her last essay intended for publication, resists rather than enables recognition. "I had moved from rereading to reading, from the world I had quit to another world, whose meaning would resonate for me only in an interior way."

Heilbrun's suicide, in this light, might be interpreted as the culmination of the plot of aging. There is little doubt that she imagined suicide as a fundamental human right, an act of autonomy and self-authorship. *The Last Gift of Time* discusses an unrealized decision to end her life at seventy, and her suicide at seventy-seven followed a method endorsed by the Hemlock Society. "I have always believed that, over 70, one should be free to choose one's death," she writes in an essay published four months before her death. Yet there she also writes, "What it comes down to, finally, is that I think life beyond 70 . . . is an adventure so far largely unrecorded, unanticipated, unacknowledged" ("Taking" 18). Does her suicide write a new plot for the end of life, or does it testify to an inhospitable world that has failed to foster viable alternative narratives?

The frameworks that govern modern interpretations of suicide favor the latter view. Sociology, psychology, and medicine attribute suicide to causes beyond the control of the individual, of which the individual becomes the agent and victim. These diagnostic discourses might be accused, not without reason, of producing explanatory regimes that erase the specificity of any given suicide and render it a passive, symptomatic gesture. Any countervailing effort to give voice to a particular suicide, however, equally risks generating false identifications and vicarious appropriations. For, in truth, even to call a death a suicide is to produce a belated and unverifiable narrative. What, for instance, guarantees that a course of action pursued before death was not in the final instant suspended or reversed? What guarantees that what appears as suicide is not a cry for help? In attempting to respond to another's death, we rely on our own preconceptions of how suicide looks, of what it means. We do not read, but only reread, the other's death.

This interpretive stalemate is dramatized in *Death in a Tenured Position*, one of the Kate Fansler mysteries Heilbrun wrote under the pseudonym Amanda Cross. When Janet Mandelbaum, the first tenured woman in Harvard's English department, is found dead of cyanide poisoning, various theories are proposed. Was she murdered by her ex-husband, Moon, known to possess a stash of cyanide capsules? Or was she the victim of a crime against women, "murdered," Moon claims, "because of what she was and where she was and what she represented" (175)? Clues others overlook—a biography of Eleanor Marx on Janet's desk, a reported conversation between Janet and a student about Simone Weil—allow Kate to solve the mystery. "Janet was always a woman of determination. Once she made up her mind, she was not to be deterred by anyone. No more than Eleanor Marx [who poisoned herself with cyanide], or Emma Bovary [whose story Marx translated] or Simone Weil did she mean to be rescued" (184–85). Kate's solution overturns the conventions of detective fiction. Whereas the traditional sleuth sees suicide as the mask of murder, she sees suicide hidden beneath murder scenarios. But the irony of Kate's subversive insight into Janet's "determination" is that, as the latest in a series of women's suicides, Janet's death is all too easily read—or, rather, reread—according to other plots of victimization. "Janet was murdered all the same," Kate's friend argues. "We all conspired in it. We isolated her, we gave her no community. Only death welcomed her" (187). Otherwise-irrelevant details—recurring appearances of a dog named Jocasta, a passing comparison of Janet to Hedda Gabler, a name (Mandelbaum, "almond tree") that foretells the "characteristic smell of burnt almonds" associated with cyanide poisoning (102)—become omens framing Janet as the doomed heroine of tragedy or melodrama.

As a detective, Kate, too, relies on patterns of repetition, in this case, as in many, drawing on her knowledge of literature to perceive such patterns. Literature, however, serves Kate not simply as a reservoir of facts and images but as a mode of remembering and mourning. Thus, after paying a visit to the grave of Henry James earlier in the novel, Kate, at two other moments, compares her situation to *The Ambassadors*. It seems particularly pertinent

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that Moon reminds Kate of Strether, for he had been the source of the cyanide capsules: "it had occurred to him that [Janet] might take one or two, but he decided then that anyone had the right to die, and that anyway, Janet was the least likely person to commit suicide" (184). If Moon embodies the interpretive stalemate of the right to die, in that he seems to recognize that right as long as it does not disrupt established patterns, Kate adopts a different mode of response. Rather than claim responsibility or assimilate Janet's death to a predetermined fate, rather than seek to complete Janet's story, she dedicates to Janet a lecture on "the new forms possible to women in making fictions of female destiny" (186). While Janet may occasion this lecture, it clearly does not and perhaps cannot include her in its scope. Mobilizing memory and mourning, Kate moves, we might say, from rereading to reading.

What does it mean that in her final essay Heilbrun returns to Strether, now imagining him, beyond the ending of *The Ambassadors*, "render[ing] his observations, and the skill for observing he has now acquired, into new words in a new pattern"? Can we speculate that this revolutionized Strether might break Moon's stalemate and produce a new way of recognizing the right to die, of *reading* suicide? In *Death in a Tenured Position*, new narratives depend on loss—on an act of dedication but also on an act of imagination that cannot account for what is lost. Detection and interpretation find their limits in, or are exposed to their limits by, suicide. The only narrative that could do justice to such an event, it seems, would be one that abandons explanation without abandoning responsibility, that responds to an act of freedom by recognizing a freedom of its own. Even if this is nothing but the freedom to mourn, to reread.

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> *"Do what you like so long as you don't make* my *mistake. For it was a mistake. Live . . . !" . . .*
>
> *"Oh, but I don't know that I want to be, at your age, too different from you!"*
>
> *"Ah, prepare while you're about it," said Strether, "to be more amusing."*
>
> *Little Bilham continued to think, but at last had a smile. "Well, you are amusing—to me."*
>
> "Impayable*, as you say, no doubt. But what am I to myself?"*
>
> —Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (216)

Rereading *The Ambassadors* in honor of and in mourning for Carolyn Heilbrun, I found myself solicited, as Henry James would have put it, by an episode early in Lambert Strether's Paris sojourn that establishes the terms in which I want to reread his injunction to "live": Strether sits in the Jardin de Luxembourg and reviews the "crowded past" that has culminated in his "empty present" (112). He remembers the "pilgrimage" to Paris that was his honeymoon, his young wife's death, his guilty self-implication in that of his child, and finally, a procession of melancholy years in whose mirror he confronts "the fact that he had failed . . . in everything, in each relation and in half a dozen trades" (114).

In all my years of teaching *The Ambassadors*, this episode had never demanded my attention. My underlinings, in pencil and three different pens, and a faded Post-it testified that I had studied and even taught these pages. Yet they had not, I felt, been *read* before: now the lens of my grief, bafflement, and anger focused and magnified this account of what I had never recognized as depression, and allowed me to reread *The Ambassadors* as the account of Strether's emergence out of melancholia into what he calls alternately "freedom" and "life."

Why did rereading lead me to this passage? Perhaps, probably, only now, on the threshold of Strether's decade and in the shadow of loss, did I bring to the text a sensitivity open to the substance of this middle-aged man's rereading of his life. Or perhaps, too, it was the unmediatedly personal, nonacademic occasion and context of this particular rereading that enabled my emotions to meet those of the text. Free from the pedagogical mandate to police the boundaries between life and art, I "lent myself," as Carolyn put it, to the text's appeal, and borrowed from this

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encounter with *The Ambassadors* something of a response to the conundrum of her rereading.

In the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James pays tribute to the adventure of rereading his lifework: "No march . . . could possibly be more confident and free than this infinitely interesting and amusing *act* of reappropriation" (*Art* 336). He rejoices in the "inordinate intellectual 'sport' of it: the how and the whence and the why these intenser lights of experience come into being and insist on shining" (339). For James, "rereading" is always active and thus sublates any distinction between (passive) "life" and (active) "living." It is, by definition, "reading in a new way": "The 'old' matter is there, reaccepted, re-tasted, exquisitely re-assimilated and re-enjoyed—believed in . . . with the same 'old' grateful faith." This process is a supremely critical retracing of "the whole growth of one's taste . . . a blessed comprehensive name for many of the things deepest in us" (340).

Sitting in the Jardin de Luxembourg, Strether rereads the text of his life and begins to release himself from the bondage of both his youthful expectations and the paralytic remorse that has accompanied their nonfulfilment. The revival for Strether of the "general stirred life of connexions long since individually dropped" (*Ambassadors* 116) invests the formerly passive business of "seeing" with the desire and risk that make it come alive. Instead, for instance, of "winc[ing] with the thought of an opportunity lost . . . at the sight now and then of some fair young man just growing up" who reminds him too painfully of his son (115), in the scene directly following the meditation on his failures, Strether savors and then accedes to the appeal of the "very young" man standing on Chad Newsome's balcony—the young man whom he will later admonish to "live." And whereas Strether may consider himself "too old" for the active pursuit of life that he seems to be recommending to Bilham, he is no longer too old for the active pursuit of connection that leads, paradoxically, to the "freedom" to choose to go back to Woollett. Little Bilham recognizes that Strether's admonition to "live" belies his own assertions about himself: in seeking the connection with Bilham, Strether is proving he is not "too old." He is, rather, risking the "illusion of freedom" that will, from the inevitable perspective of Woollett, ripen to a "memory of that illusion" (215). And is not the "memory of the illusion of freedom" another name for the disposition to reread?

I do not think that *The Ambassadors* distinguishes between "life" and "living." In fact, the interchange in which Strether enjoins little Bilham to "live" conflates the two: he is not only talking about "living" but indulging in it more actively than ever before as he plays with and even risks the authority that he seems to assume. Bilham is, by virtue of his age and deference, Strether's pupil, and Strether's magisterial tone reinforces this relation. But the substance of Strether's statement reverses this hierarchy: by attributing to youth the supreme knowledge that it is "too late" for him to attain, Strether confers on Bilham the status of mentor. Strether thus provokes and lends authority to the response that turns his proclamation of abjection into the performance of its opposite: "you are amusing—to me."

"But what am I to myself?" is the question ultimately generated by Strether's injunction to "live." By the end of the novel, Strether seems to know how to approach this question, if not how to answer it. The "great difference" that he anticipates on his return to Woollett is the difference in his ability to "see," the difference between the melancholy rereading whose yield never changes and a rereading that risks connection and continuously redefines "freedom." "The strange logic of his finding himself so free" (112) that struck him in the Jardin de Luxembourg leads to his really "hav[ing his] life," even if what he is to "make of it" remains to be seen.

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THE REASONS BEHIND ANOTHER WOMAN'S suicide can only be mysterious. I came to Carolyn Heilbrun's essay hoping for clarity, and yet the essay she has written for *PMLA* seems to me as mysterious as the fact of her death. Why should Carolyn, a feminist mentor to me and hundreds like me, tout the accomplishments of mythy men of science to the detriment of her own grandeur and that of her female

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colleagues? Reading her encomium to scientific men who, "unlike women similarly endowed (and despite the recent accomplishments of feminists), were able to use these benefits to do significant and acclaimed work," I can only demur. In scientific fields like genetics and immunology, women are at the top of their fields. Moreover, "the young" and not so young in our own field are beckoning madly from interdisciplinary points wild and startling to behold.

Contemplating this and Carolyn's tough-minded, depressive, ironic description of her aging, I felt abandoned, bereft. How, from these dense coordinates, to pay her (and her astonishing work on behalf of women) homage? And then something glinted on the page, something shone. To be male-identified in the 1970s and 1980s represented, for many feminists, a failure of sisterhood. But what of our current era? What identifications do we honor now?

I'm fascinated with a recurrent image in contemporary American culture: the mischievous figure of John Wayne in drag, a male-to-female cross-identification. In Sherman Alexie's short story "Dear John Wayne," Etta Joseph, a witty 118-year-old Spokane Indian and one-time extra in John Ford's *The Searchers*, rescripts Wayne's psyche and penis. Etta Joseph recalls a day when "John Wayne wept." Amazed by his sex organ, surprised when he shares his too-human fears, she stammers, "But you're a star," and Wayne responds by bending his gender: "John Wayne is the star. I'm Marion, I'm just Marion Morrison" (200). Later, when a kindly Marion finds his sons dabbling in lipstick and mascara in the makeup trailer, his children cower, terrified at betraying their dad's masculinity. But Marion Morrison applauds their queer dreams. "Daddy," says the oldest, "[d]o you dress up like a woman?" "Well, I don't put on a dress or anything," Morrison replies. "But I often close my eyes and try to put myself into a woman's shoes. . . . I try to embrace the feminine in myself. Do you know what I mean?" "No," say the boys, so Wayne tries to explain (echoing Gayle Rubin) that "men and women are pretty much equals. I mean, gender is mostly a social construction" (203). This ventriloquism is a delicious reminder that parody is a double-voiced discourse that cuts many ways. While Alexie jiggles Joseph's prose until she changes a cowboy father into a feminist queen, the truisms of second-wave feminist theory also start to look shifty when inflected with Wayne's stagey voice. The story oscillates like a full-dress drag ball; whole gestalts start to crumble when everyone vogues.

If it's fun watching Alexie play with John Wayne in drag, why can't I allow Carolyn Heilbrun her own parallel play? When Carolyn cites Rebecca West's desire to have "become a man at the age of just under fifty," when she describes Darwin as "my favorite, the man above all others I would like to have been," what kinds of desires enter her essay, and how best to celebrate them?

We could imagine that, in celebrating male physicists, Carolyn is feeding her culture's longing to see the exceptional male as the epistemological being that's best. But the desire to play with identities that are off-limits, unavailable, also works its magic throughout Heilbrun's oeuvre. Carolyn's need to step "between the two cultures" is a longing not just to enter scientific self-certainty but to create an in-between of gender as well. Here the work of the young whom Carolyn repudiates seems pertinent. If male identification was once a source of moral or epistemological shame for relational feminists, it is now an intersection worth traveling. In *Female Masculinity*, amid chapters entitled "Drag Kings" and "The Androgyne, the Tribade, the Female Husband," Judith Halberstam magnifies the ways women may choose to identify with men but still maintain a critique of masculine privilege. "There is still no general acceptance or even recognition of masculine women and boyish girls" (6). Halberstam addresses "this collective failure to imagine and ratify the masculinity produced by, for, and within women" (15). She posits masculinity detached from the cultural and political attributes of maleness and asks scholars "to recognize how completely we have ignored female masculinity as a culture. Why shouldn't a woman get in touch with her masculinity? Why does female masculinity remain so much a stigma that many women, even lesbians, will do almost anything to avoid the label 'butch'? Why are we comfortable thinking about men as mothers, but we never consider women as fathers? Gender, it seems, is reversible only in one direction" (269). If Carolyn is, to her own detraction, drawn to a self-certainty she labels masculine, then we need, as leavening, the theorems of a queer scholar who has worked "to make my own female masculinity plausible, credible, and real" (19).

Carolyn's early book *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* was pilloried by critics because it

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envisioned a world where women could become like men but did not imagine the reverse (or revisit the binary).[1] But Halberstam opens a stalwart pathway to reconsider Heilbrun's potent lesson in cross-identification; she celebrates masculinities etched in women's bodies, deeds, and desires. When Heilbrun asks, What are the genders of old age? How do we sex the elderly? she also asks who will write the book of retirement, who will invent a subculture, a community, of masculine women who can plot beyond the pages of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Although Carolyn searches for new community by identifying with Darwin as queer scientist (reading female novelists, eschewing epic, he wants nothing but happy endings), I want a happy ending for multiply-gendered women, too. If marching into old age as a smart, powerful girl is not possible without the conventional weapons of femininity—a pretty face, uppity breasts—then can we put on queerer sexualities and genders? This is a question the young in our profession are trying to answer; it is a question that, in other venues, Heilbrun herself has asked. If aging women are thrust outside the giddy depressions of everyday drag, then we must have fiercer sites for senescence, queerer old cultures. We need butch empyreans without stigma where amazing minds like Carolyn's can keep being muscular; where even aging feminists can be king.

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Note

[1] I thank Valerie Traub for her help in framing this reading.

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