Guest Column: From Rereading to Reading

CAROLYN G. HEILBRUN

Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities Emerita at Columbia University and former president of the MLA, took her life in October 2003 at the age of seventy-seven. Heilbrun was a deeply respected scholar of modern British literature who brought Bloomsbury into the American landscape. The author of major books of feminist criticism—*Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (1973), *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979), *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), and *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women* (1990)—as well as a biography of Gloria Steinem (1995) and *The Last Gift of Time: Life beyond Sixty* (1997), personal essays on the joys and pains of aging, Heilbrun changed academic literary criticism and took feminist literary thinking into the world beyond the academy. Under the pen name Amanda Cross, Heilbrun published fifteen literate, witty detective novels, most famously *Death in a Tenured Position* (1981), which exposed the cruelty of the academic elite toward women scholars. In 1983 Heilbrun, with Nancy K. Miller, created the Gender and Culture Series (Columbia UP), one of few remaining publishing venues dedicated to feminist scholarship.

"So much living with so little life." Thus did Henry James, writing to Mrs. Humphry Ward, describe H. G. Wells, or so I remember it. (I should look this up, and probably will not. My research/scholarly instincts have atrophied, except in instances—more common in old age than formerly—when I cannot remember the source of some haunting phrase or fact.) James's words are perfect for those of us coping with retirement and old age (I am of the "call a spade a spade" school), "living" less and seeking more of life. I have, in this mood, reread Henry James's *The Ambassadors*.

Rereading is much recommended to those for whom time is, as Virginia Woolf once put it, flapping around one. I have long doubted that the determination either to pursue a course of rereading in retirement or to proceed with the first reading of books put aside until time allowed is ever executed. Those who plan to read *War and Peace* (the book most frequently mentioned in this connection) in the "leisure" years will not, I prophesy, do so. As Fats Waller said about jazz, if you don't know it by now, don't mess with it.

Rereading can, however, be instigated by the discovery that a book read long ago suddenly appears apposite to one's condition. I suspect that my foray into *The Ambassadors* occurred because, as I considered the conditions of my life, Strether asserted himself into my consciousness. Would he be likely to insert himself into the consciousness of other ex–professors of literature? We who are MLA lifetime members—members for forty years or more—constitute ten percent of all MLA members; we are around three thousand in number. (Members who retire after twenty years are also granted life memberships, and may thus be considered to be in the same age group and state of mind.) This completes my offer of statistics.

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I have no statistics about rereading, merely an opinion, but one not without some basis in experience. (The use of double negatives, to which I have long been devoted, tends to increase when one rereads James.) There may be the Alice books or novels by Jane Austen, to which one lovingly returns, but 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: frequently in both. Yet, remembering James's phrase of much living and little life, I undertook this particular rereading, hoping for what I scarcely knew. Returning to my bookcase of texts once taught, I retrieved *The Ambassadors*; it is, of course, about a man who for the first time experiences life as a preeminently interior adventure. Strether is the opposite of the hero of "The Beast in the Jungle." That gentleman failed to live because he was waiting for something to happen, some special fate to summon him. Unlike Strether, he was destined to be the man to whom nothing would ever happen—a fate feared by those in retirement. Strether, on the other hand, set down in Paris—a foreign country to him, as old age is to us all—allows his perceptions to sharpen as the opportunities for action retreat.

I do not and did not intend to undertake a rereading of all of James. He has been the strongest literary influence upon me, though I doubt the evidence of this in my own writing. As he once claimed, "I have endeavored to be thrilling," but I doubt that either of us was notably effective in that regard. I turned back to *The Ambassadors* because I recalled it as a work remarkably suited to my condition, the danger of languishing, in the absence of event, into a vain wish for something to happen. Strether, I recalled, was largely passive, allowing life to impinge upon him as it chose, taking it all in, allowing what he heard and observed to transform him inwardly, but neither taking nor hoping to take any positive action. He strove not to have got, as Strether put it to Maria Gostrey at the end of the book, anything for himself—the ambition of the not yet old.

"Myself when young did eagerly frequent" critics, most of whom I have forgotten. But upon rereading *The Ambassadors*, I recalled Ian Watt's long-ago, famous essay on the first paragraph of that novel. It is as unlikely a first paragraph with which to entice the reader as has ever been conjured. I remember contemplating it as an adolescent and tossing the book, in anger, across the room. But it is the perfect introduction to Strether. As I remember Watt pointing out—I do not reread critics, not having them easily to hand—the paragraph consists in passive and intransitive verbs, and a general sense of ennui with only a suspicion of anticipation. Certainly, whether Watt's words or mine, this well describes the paragraph. Strether, "on his learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening, was not wholly disconcerted" (17). Oh, those lovely double negatives!

I lent myself to Strether's adventures in a frame of mind altogether different from that in which I had earlier, and not infrequently, read the novel. The most famous and most often quoted lines in the novel are those Strether offers as urgent advice to little Bilham in Gloriani's garden: "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. . . . I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see" (132). This remark, supposed to be the germ of the novel, is, I being old now, universally misread. Strether is indulging in nostalgia and regret, the cardinal sins of old age. He is urging little Bilham to a future of rereading, not a condition like Strether's own of reading in a new way. Life is being offered, not living.

(And here an interlude must be allowed for a comment on Strether's age. He is fifty-five, and refers to himself as elderly. So, as I recall, does Mrs. Holt in George Eliot's *Felix Holt*. We don't call fifty-five old now; it is firmly middle age. But in 1903 and earlier, modern medicine in the Western world had not yet made its dubiously benefi-

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cial strides. James is writing of a man he considers elderly, a condition that, indeed, served James to describe his own life not long after his youth and middle age had passed. We must, I think, admit Strether to the ranks of today's elderly.)

If Strether has not lived, he has not done harm. He has edited his Review, agreed to be claimed by Mrs. Newsome in marriage, agreed to cross the ocean at her behest to retrieve her delinquent son, who is, certainly, "living"—culling the best from the *belle époque*. Only in France does Strether begin to grasp the meaning of the observed life. Chad, the heedless son, with all that living, plans to return to a large fortune and the promulgation of that most American of achievements, advertising; he has learned nothing but the most superficial of manners.

The pace of *The Ambassadors* is slow; that puts it mildly. If one tried to read the novel for plot, one would, as Samuel Johnson suggested in another connection, hang oneself. Here is the pace of old age, of retirement, of the opening of the self not to experience alone but to the residue of experience, to the understanding that comes with thought and reassessment: in short, to attention. James has given us, not only a novel of age and retirement, but the illuminating experience of that condition as it is best undertaken. When Strether speaks to little Bilham, he believes he knows what living is: it is either what we have, with ambition, luck, and talent, accomplished, or it is the failure of these attributes to have satisfactorily served us. By the book's end, Strether knows that he has, at last, lived; the evidence is in his final rejection of what is called getting something for oneself.

My students used to be very angry at Strether for not marrying or at least staying on with Maria Gostrey. Certainly, he hardly repays or honors her for her efforts on his behalf. James, I remember, excuses this repudiation on the grounds that Maria Gostrey is not a real person in his novel: she is what he called a *ficelle*, a means to an end, a channel of information. Women today may well feel she is a fool. But, unlike many of James's fictional men, she understands, she perceives; she does not, being a woman, expect to be highly rewarded, except by the company of interesting people. We are, after all, in 1903, not to mention the necessity of Strether's retreat from the marriage plot, or any other plot, to the exploration of his own subjective discoveries.

The rereading of *The Ambassadors* taught me much, yet can I, can anyone old and in retirement, really find encouragement in Strether, find, at the least, a happy resignation? There are no cures for aging despair, but there are hints to be found in *The Ambassadors*. Strether's journey into awareness may not seem as therapeutic as golf, or a late sexual adventure, but it is probably more lasting and more restorative. We who have given our lives to literature may want to go on writing; it is what we know best; so might Strether. He will not be allowed to continue as editor of his Review, sponsored by the disapproving Mrs. Newsome, but he may one day put his thoughts into the form of prose or even poetry. If he writes, 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.

Critics I may assiduously ignore, but I admit to having dipped into my shelf of biographies to learn how their subjects coped with arriving at the pivotal age of seventy. I found that despair at the age of seventy is almost as common among literary giants as among those who retire from academia, or, indeed, from any other line of work. Literary academics, I discovered, can have before them examples of the masters of their field, offering solace and even hope.

P. N. Furbank confirms that E. M. Forster endured the terrors usual to men and women reaching seventy:

> During the autumn of 1948 Forster fell into depression—one of the acutest depressions of his life. He was nearly seventy, thus on the threshold of old age. . . . He felt unproductive and, as it were, living from hand to mouth intellectually. . . . The perennial fear of his life, constantly

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> dispelled and constantly returning, was that his imaginative life should dry up; but under this, and allied to it, lay a worse fear—that he should lose the power to feel about people or take interest in them.

He wrote in his diary, "Unless I can settle down to some work this year, I may go wrong in my head" (Furbank 282).

Henry James had, at seventy, been surprised that his work, "in spite of everything, *is* going on." At seventy-one, he wrote to a friend, "These are golden days." At seventy-two, he admits that there are still "the two or three hours each forenoon, when I have come back to the ability to push a work of fiction of sorts uphill at the rate of about an inch a day" (Horne 534, 546).

Saddest of all is Charles Lamb, who, hating retirement, was only fifty-nine when he died. But the burdens of retirement appear to be the same whatever the age or whatever the life expectancy of men and women at the time in which one lives. Lamb wrote to a friend:

> I pity you for over-work, but I assure you no-work is worse. The mind preys on itself, the most unwholesome food. I brag'd formerly that I could not have too much time. I have a surfeit. With few years to come, the days are wearisome. But weariness is not eternal. Something will shine out to take the load off, that flags me, which is at present intolerable. I have killed an hour or two in this poor scrawl. I am a sanguinary murderer of time, and would kill him inchmeal just now. But the snake is vital. (225)

Thus is the fear of age and retirement most eloquently expressed. Forster, of course, eventually cheered up. Furbank reports that "the desolation soon left him, and it was never to return with such acuteness. By December he was recording that he had been very happy lately." At seventy-one, he published *Two Cheers for Democracy*. That same year, Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, for which he and Eric Crozier had produced the libretto, was performed. Two years later, he published an Indian memoir, *The Hill of Devi*. At seventy-six, he published *Marianne Thornton*. At seventy-seven, he completed an earlier story, "at his very best level," "The Other Boat." Later that year, he revised *Maurice*. Nearing eighty, he appeared as one of the leading witnesses in the *Lady Chatterley* trial (Furbank 283). Yet those of us in retirement, or approaching it—and our numbers increase daily—are left with Roland Barthes's agonizing question: "And afterward? —What to write now? Can you still write anything? —One writes with one's desire, and I am not through desiring."[1] We are none of us through desiring, 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? Even Shaw in his seventies, Michael Holroyd tells us, "would sometimes wonder whether he had finally shot his bolt" (146). He knew how unusual he was, and indeed he lived, astonishingly active, well into his nineties.

Rebecca West was nearly seventy-six when her husband died; she "felt that she would soon follow him." Instead, her biographer Victoria Glendinning reports, "she went to Mexico, . . . she went to Dayton, Ohio; . . . she went to France, she went to Beirut, . . . she went to Ireland." She made a confession that few women would acknowledge, even if they share it: "I would have liked to become a man at the age of just under fifty, and would have felt myself simply doing something amusing out of the pages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*." In a private notebook, she added that "most women do 'become' men as they get older, only the clever ones conceal it" (Glendinning 250).

This somewhat startling admission of West's, albeit in a private notebook (a confession that she knew to be shameful in the eyes of her world), gives the best recipe I know of for confronting the dangers of retirement and old age. My suggestion, therefore, following West but sticking closer to the realm of the probable and possible, is to undertake a radical shift in one's

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area of intellectual involvement. To dare, in short, to look through the same seasoned pair of eyes at a different world, in an unaccustomed way.

Needless to say, if, like James and Forster and Shaw, one is able to continue writing in much the same vein as formerly—that is indeed a blessing. Some of us do that, yet I doubt that, among academics, this task is widely undertaken. Even or perhaps especially for retired professors, there is, I believe, a need to shift, however slightly, the focus of attention. We share the despair of the great ones, but lack—so I have found—the impetus to continue in the same vein as before. To reread, to return to what we have taught and pondered, seems not to beckon. Therefore, the thought of encountering the formerly unread beguiled me.

I began exploring science, particularly the lives of scientists. With no fantasy of becoming one, I turned to reading of these men of science, with their destinies so plainly feasible at an early age, their ready-made support groups of men like themselves, their chance profoundly to affect human knowledge and action. I allowed the felicity of their lives to overpower me. True, class was a vital matter in their lives, from their education to their professional commitment, but given such privilege, the men, unlike women similarly endowed (and despite the recent accomplishments of feminism), were able to use these benefits to do significant and acclaimed work. The men I took to reading about were all scientists and famous ones: Galileo, Newton, Einstein, Darwin—my favorite, the man above all others I would like to have been, the one whose work was least strange to me—Feynman, Turing, Hawking, and more. I turned for help to the science journalists whose explanations were aimed at beginners such as I.

With the exception of Darwin, who was not, like the others, a physicist, ignorance of—indeed, aspersions upon—literary and philosophic studies was characteristic of the scientists. As James Gleick, Feynman's biographer, describes it, Feynman, in college at MIT, found English classes offering "supremely useless knowledge, a parody of what knowledge ought to be" (66). He was devoted to what could be proved. "Feynman did not flirt with philosophy long. His sense of what constituted a proof had already developed into something more hard-edged than the quaint arguments he found in Descartes" (67). This is not, in a scientist, an atypical judgment.

Watching the field of humanities, to which I had devoted my life, dismissed in this outright fashion did not surprise me; in truth, I found this strangely comforting. It evoked a memory of the 1950s, when the great Leavis-Snow controversy raged. C. P. Snow, a physicist by training and a popular novelist of the time, delivered the Rede Lecture at Cambridge in 1959, titled "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution." Snow, according to Ian Mackillop, F. R. Leavis's biographer, admirer, and defender, noted "the plain human benefits of material advance and satirized the traditional culture of 'intellectual persons' " (315).[2] Leavis responded with his usual acrimony and fierceness, and a great brouhaha ensued, reverberating in Columbia's English department as elsewhere. All I remember is that Snow declared literary persons to be ignorant of the second law of thermodynamics. It all sounds very long ago.

Except that, on 24 August 2003, Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard, was quoted in the *New York Times Magazine* as often saying "that one of the two most important phenomena of the last quarter-century is the revolution in the biological sciences. And yet, as he also often says, while it is socially unacceptable at an elite university to admit that you haven't read a Shakespeare play, no stigma at all attaches to not knowing the difference between a gene and a chromosome or the meaning of exponential growth" (Traub 45). Summers is an economist.

Whether Snow or Leavis triumphed in their clash, it remains undeniable that there are still, as Summers knows, two cultures. I experienced this as recently as June 2003, when I took part in a Virginia Woolf conference at Smith College. It

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happened that simultaneously attending a working group on DNA in Northampton was an acquaintance of mine, a biologist and medical researcher. On learning that I was at Smith, he suggested that we meet. Unlike my rather loose literary gathering, his group was stringently run—"boot camp" he called it—so that he was free only from six to seven. I went to have dinner with him and a few of his scientific colleagues; had I stepped into an unknown land I could not have found the shift more stunning. My new reading in science did enable me to understand a bit of this strange language.

Walking partway back with me to my literary conference, my scientific friend asked what Woolf and the Bloomsbury group had had to say about the marvelous work going on in the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge in their time. I told him that, as far as I knew, they had never mentioned it. Later I passed the question on to a prominent historian of Bloomsbury. No, he said, he didn't think they had ever mentioned anything about science or the Cavendish; Virginia Woolf was intrigued by astronomy, he said, and eclipses, nothing more. As though to underline this experience, I discovered that no one whom I asked at Smith, even members of the administration, knew that this study of genes and DNA had been a regular event at Smith for the last fifteen years. I had by chance stepped between the two cultures.

Having turned with pleasure from literature to science, I welcomed this testimony from Snow and Summers, among others, as confirming my shift. But I did not let myself forget that words were still what mattered and that of my favorite, Darwin, his biographer Janet Browne had written, "Darwin had no crucial experiment that conclusively demonstrated evolution in action. He had no equations to establish his case. Everything in his books was to be in words—persuasion, revisualization, the balance of probabilities" (55).[3]

In his autobiography, Darwin admitted sadly, "Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, gave me great pleasure. . . . But now, for many years, I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me." But then there were novels. Darwin read the Brontës, George Eliot, and their peers. He admitted that novels were "not of a very high order," but "have been for years a wonderful relief and pleasure to me, and I often bless all novelists. . . . I like all if moderately good, and if they do not end unhappily—against which a law ought to be passed. A novel, according to my taste, does not come into the first class unless it contains some person whom one can thoroughly love" (138)—like a detective, perhaps? I asked myself.

Is it worth noting that novel-relishing Darwin, alone of all the scientists whose lives I studied, did not as a boy show any particular talents while reading his way through poetry as a relief from school? For all the other men of science, high mathematical ability revealed itself in childhood. Oliver Sacks, speaking during the opening of the Mostly Mozart Festival in August 2003, considered the question of why music and mathematics were the only two fields sprouting infant prodigies. His answer was that these were fields where no human experience was necessary to brilliance; accomplishment need not await the rewards of having lived. And I had always thought it was a matter of genes.

With a survey no one could honor as statistics, I have persuaded myself that those who have labored in the humanities do not desire upon retirement to continue along the same path. Unlike those in science, the young in our fields are now somewhere else, in a place not to be disdained, but not beckoning either; developments in our field do not speak to us as readily as do the revolutions and experiments of the scientific young.

I once suggested to a fellow academic retiree, a man who had achieved much, who had taught and written with grace and brilliance, that he might like to join me in editing a book of essays—stringently honest essays—about how retired academics were coping with our unfa-

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miliar state. He showed a moment's interest, but, alas, my suggestion was ultimately rejected.

So I have here written what my contribution to the volume that will never be would have been. Others might not care to take up science, that other culture; they may already have confronted science more profoundly than I do now. I treasure my struggles because I can feel my brain exerting itself to understand and, like a believer in muscular Christianity and cold baths, I am convinced of the benefits of these efforts. To be sure, the works of Newton and Einstein are more available to the likes of me than either cosmology, about the birth of the universe and the death of stars, or string theory, the postulation of tiny one-dimensional invisible filaments called strings uniting quantum mechanics with general relativity. The reward in each case is in the striving to understand, and the glimpses of the scientists at their work. There is a particular pleasure in reading about those who solve problems that, once solved, do not return again. Twenty years ago, Rebecca Goldstein put this succinctly:

> At the end of the spectrum occupied by . . . professors of literature, where there is uncertainty as to how to discover the facts, the nature of the facts to be discovered, and whether indeed there are any facts at all, all attention is focused on one's peers, whose regard is the sole criterion for professional success. . . . At the other end, where, as the mathematicians themselves are fond of pointing out, a proof is a proof, no concern need be given to making oneself acceptable to others, and as a rule none whatsoever is given. (202)

As Strether declared to Maria Gostrey at the end of his Paris adventure, I sought in reading about science nothing practical for myself. 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. Science would, in the absence of life, provide what James called living. If we do not, with Strether, choose to remain in the Paris of a hundred years ago, or to continue to pursue the life of literary analyses, there are other worlds in which happily to dally.

As E. E. Cummings once reminded us, "there's a hell / of a good universe next door;let's go" (14).

Notes

[1] Qtd. in Miller 137. Barthes writes this at the end of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.

[2] See the chapter "Against Snow 1962–1963" (314–25).

[3] This perhaps accounts for an anomaly noted by Steve Jones: "I have never met a biology undergraduate who has read *The Origin of Species*. . . . It is, though, much studied by students of the humanities as an element of a philosophy or an English literature course" (xxvii).

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