

Editor's Note

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction, is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. . . . We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.

—Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision”

REREADING HAS HAD A SPECIAL URGENCY FOR ME SINCE I read Adrienne Rich’s essay in the heyday of feminist criticism. Originally presented as a paper at the 1971 MLA convention, Rich’s essay rereads not only Henrik Ibsen’s play and its treatment of women but also a number of women writers and poets. I am drawn to personal narratives of rereading experiences—both for their satisfying plots of change and discovery and for their more complex, less linear, records of how critical trends and our personal and professional self-understandings evolve.

When I became editor of *PMLA* last summer, I decided to solicit a guest column on an act of rereading. Such a brief essay, I hoped, would bring to the journal a personal voice reflecting on our profession and reclaiming the pleasures of reading (and rereading) that are certainly some of our most profound pedagogical, scholarly, and personal experiences.

Carolyn Heilbrun immediately came to mind as a guest columnist, not only because of the feminist tradition Rich called “writing as re-vision,” which I associated with rereading and which, for so many of us, her career represents, but also because of her direct, elegant writing. I thought that a column by Carolyn Heilbrun would disabuse those readers who project onto *PMLA* their most narrow notions of what counts as acceptable style in an academic journal. If the MLA is no longer what

Rich decried as “both a marketplace and funeral parlor for the professional study of Western Literature in North America . . . a congeries of old boys’ networks, academicians rehearsing their numb canons in sessions dedicated to the literature of white males” (33), we have in no small measure Carolyn Heilbrun to thank.

After an initial hesitation, Heilbrun agreed to write an essay looking back at a book that had mattered to her at an earlier stage in her life. She surprised me by contacting me in late September, before the deadline for the March 2004 issue, to let me know that her piece was ready and that she had enjoyed writing it. “It’s not very typical *PMLA*, to say the least,” she added, echoing the very projections about academic writing I had wished to counteract. I received her column in the mail less than a week before her suicide. Little did I know that just a few days after reading it and writing to tell her how much I liked it, I would myself have to engage in a difficult act of rereading.

“From Rereading to Reading” is Carolyn Heilbrun’s last piece of professional writing: it is her letter to our profession. Her rereading was, as she wrote, “instigated by the discovery that a book read long ago suddenly appears apposite to one’s condition.” Although she told me she did not intend to undertake the type of “re-vision” Rich describes in her essay, Heilbrun did look to *The Ambassadors* for, as Rich sug-

gests, “clue[s] to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves” (35). On rereading Heilbrun’s meditation after her death, I came to wonder whether in rereading Henry James’s novel she had not also found there reasons not to live.

I invited a few colleagues who were close to Carolyn Heilbrun or whose work is related to the issues she discusses to engage, personally and theoretically, the questions about reading and rereading she raises. Their responses, appearing in a special Forum section in this issue, enter her text from radically different angles. Generous, honest, and often painful rereadings of her work, these responses struggle to resist the temptation of using the unforgiving teleology of suicide as a determining frame. Different as they are, I read them as affirmations of reading, writing, and living that nevertheless in no way minimize the evident despair of Carolyn Heilbrun’s last writing.

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WORK CITED

- Rich, Adrienne. “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision.” *Of Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978*. New York: Norton, 1979. 33–49.