

and Joyce) to rigorous ethical scrutiny. She is no postmodernist, and is unequivocally evaluative in her commentary, concluding that her figures represent, in some ways, a 'ladder' of development, which culminates in the work of Whitman and Joyce, who manage to overcome the shame and disgust that mar our reactions to our emotions by 'restoring our love and attention to the phenomena of everyday life'. This generous acceptance and celebration of the full range of emotion is another welcome step forward. Much work that purports to be about emotional intelligence turns out to be ultimately recommending the suppression of emotion (impulse control, anger management, etc), in order to realize the dubious goals of personal success in the corporate world. Nussbaum clearly thinks emotion is far too important to be harnessed to the trivial goals of Microsoft, and this book provides a welcome antidote to what could be seen as this closet neo Stocism, focusing instead on the need fully to experience and accept our all our emotions, including difficult ones such as grief and guilt, cherishing them as the foundation of ethical personal and social judgement and action.

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WHAT DO MY MEMORIES CALL UP FOR YOU?

The last gift of time: life beyond sixty. Carolyn C. Heilbrun, 1997. New York: Ballantine; ISBN 0-345-42295-3, 226 pp., \$13.95 paper.

With the emergence of age studies as a discipline, a body of work is evolving that will no doubt soon be labelled – if it has not been already – 'autogerigraphy', the writing of one's old age. Carolyn G. Heilbrun's last book remains a welcome addition to the genre. It maps the upward years of a feminist scholar and novelist who, at the age of 70, added her insights into ageing to her previous views on life-writing and gender.

In the light of Heilbrun's suicide last year, *The last gift of time* will attract a particular kind of interest and be read in a particular way – not out of mere *Schadenfreude*, I suspect, but from a readerly tendency to look for clues to Heilbrun's decision to end her life at 77. There *are* clues to be found, of course – such as her reported conversation with a friend about 'leaving the party while it's still fun' (p. 9) – but to limit one's perception of Heilbrun to her death, simply because it was at her own hand and relatively recent, would be a mistake. For, as anyone who has read her work will know, Carolyn Heilbrun was much more than a suicide; and her determination to end her own life, rather than wait for illness to do it for her, apparently reflects not a depressive nature but rather a buoyant spirit and lively wit, at least as far as her writing persona is concerned. A desire to reconcile Heilbrun's work with her life, then, which is just one reason to explore this highly enjoyable text, is part of what her friend and colleague Nancy K. Miller has called 'a tension between life and text that is never fully resolved'.¹ The book has an emphasis on 'relational identity ... not about terminal "moi-ism" ... but, rather, a rendez-vous with others'.²

Since the 1970s, Heilbrun has advocated the use of personal material into her theoretical writing, part of her insistence on seeing women's lives as texts. *The last gift of time* is written in a relaxed, humorous style, which occasionally had me laughing aloud. Overall it offers an optimistic view of later life, which can offer new freedoms as well as difficulties to overcome. Each chapter is an autobiographical essay dealing with an event, opinion, or aspect of Heilbrun's life: 'The small house', for example, documents her attempt at solitude by buying a smaller country house than the family pile, a refuge from the city, which was intended for herself alone, and yet which ineluctably came to include her husband. He, it seemed, 'didn't want to be in the other house without [her]' (p. 23), but his unexpected appearance at the 'small house' was welcomed. 'I had wanted to prove I could be a woman alone, and I had failed' Heilbrun concludes cheerfully (p. 22), manifesting here as elsewhere her own personal variety of liberal feminism. Despite finding a house that was 'small, modern, and full of machinery that *worked*' (p. 15), she was not only incompetent in practical matters but found herself preferring the 'solitude together' (p. 23) that comes with a long marriage. Similarly, 'The dog who came to stay' offers insights into the especial kind of community a retired woman can find with a non-human companion. Heilbrun's declaration that having an animal may be a restriction on travelling, but that she dislikes travel anyway, is refreshing in its honesty: she claims she 'never understood the attraction of having been some-

where, taken pictures of the sights pointed out, and then returning to inflict the details of your journey on acquaintances' (p. 32). There are other positive changes with age: '[r]outine' Heilbrun asserts, 'which I used to scorn as next door to incarceration, holds new appeal for me' (p. 33). She includes a chapter of insights both personal and critical on her friend the writer May Sarton, for whom Heilbrun acted as literary executor: the portrait of Sarton is affectionate and realistic, and points out the importance of Sarton's work on ageing 'before that became a marketable subject' (p. 73).

Heilbrun continues to surprise her reader by challenging some of the assumptions about what the old(er) enjoy: she is delighted by the fast, cheap and non-invasive communication offered by email, whereas travel holds no appeal. She thinks about death, and it holds no fear for her except as it threatens the loss of loved ones. She deals entertainingly with friendship, love and sex. Far from insisting that age is no bar to sexual pleasure, Heilbrun suggests that "'the elderly" leave romance to the young and welcome friendship' (p. 112). Heilbrun had long been exasperated by the 'marriage plot' to which women have been confined in both literature and life. In this book, she attaches more importance to friendships of different kinds, including the 'unmet friends' made through writing; intergenerational friendship is important, she asserts, as is listening to the young(er) – but not about sex. Despite her celebration of friendships with both men and women, she maintains that men have poor listening skills, and she puts her conviction that 'psychoanalysis got off to such a sticky clinical start' down to the fact that 'Freud and Breuer ... are really lousy listeners' (p. 167).

Her thoughts on memory are as individual as other aspects of her personal philosophy. The memories of past events that haunt most people as they age are unwelcome to Heilbrun; for memory, she maintains, is unreliable and troublesome, and to be ignored as far as possible rather than held in consciousness to be recounted as a 'frozen anecdote'; not so experience, which once processed becomes a useful part of the self. In contradiction to her philosophy on memory, however, she recounts one or two random episodes of memory triggered by chance events; and the reader may forgive this apparent lapse, for the memories recounted are as entertaining as the rest of the text.

The book ends with a chapter on mortality. Heilbrun was preoccupied by 'the ultimate indifference of the dead' (pp. 205-206), but also found herself 'seduced' by indifference, and 'assaulted' by apathy, a tendency she considered dangerous and struggled to resist. Towards the end of her sixties she admits to being, in Keats' words, 'half in

love with easeful death' (p. 207). Conversely, in the previous chapter, on sadness, she attributes some of her melancholy to the idea that things will continue after her death without her presence there to see them (p. 184); but while drawn to death for herself, she cannot bear to contemplate the death of her husband, and reveals herself to be fully aware of the double standard this implies (pp. 210-11). These thoughts on death may shed some light on Heilbrun's decision to end her life. Her conclusion is that the awareness of mortality lends a particular quality to the latter years of a long relationship, the knowledge that the other person is unlikely to change their 'habits of loving' being countered by the knowledge that one may well lose him or her to death. Her recommendation for these final years is to live them in the moment, and she closes the book with a poem by Jane Kenyon on contentment and mortality, the oft-repeated refrain 'it might have been otherwise' a haunting reminder of Kenyon's own life-threatening illness and of the ephemeral character of the human subject.

This is a text that resonated powerfully for me, and while I cannot guarantee that it will do so for everyone, I found in it what Nancy K. Miller has called 'an unwitting but irresistible collaboration between other texts and other lives' (p. xiii). No doubt it will still hold a fascination for those with whom it does not resonate; for differences are as compelling as similarities, or in Miller's words, 'reading the lives of other people with whom we do not identify has as much to tell (if not more) about our lives as the lives with which we do'.¹

The last gift of time will have a popular appeal, not just as a specialist text on ageing but as a work of interest to scholars (and anyone else) interested in life-writing, feminism, or identity. Though not designed as an academic text, it demonstrates the literary/autobiographical essay at its best, and is accessible enough to be of value in undergraduate courses. *The last gift of time* is above all an amusing testament to one woman's take on the last years of life, and its acute observations and subtle humour make it a fine epitaph for Carolyn Heilbrun and an excellent contribution to the study of age.

NOTES

1 Nancy K. Miller, *But enough about me: why we read other people's lives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. xiv.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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