

For Patricia Yaeger: A Modified Eulogy

by Nancy K. Miller

--all sweetness and wings. "Happiness"
Mary Oliver

"It feels like the best piece I've written although it's *not* something" ("not" underlined twice in her note to me) "I wanted to write." That sentence became the point of departure for a talk I gave about Patsy at a symposium in her honor, organized by her colleagues, held in March 2015, at the University of Michigan, where Patsy had taught for many years. She died in 2014, after suffering relatively briefly from ovarian cancer, and so the symposium was also a memorial.

My original plan for what I've been calling my "feminist friendship archive" did not include Patsy, since I had conceived the project in relation to the three close friends who died in the first decade of the twenty-first century, while Patsy was alive and well. But some of what I wrote about Patsy for the symposium irresistibly found its way into that story: with Patsy I relived the loss of a precious friend, a friend with whom I had also shared intimate narratives, as well as important moments of feminist history. I realized that my coming to know her was bound up with Carolyn Heilbrun. In fact I met Patsy through Carolyn. And so their relationship is entangled with our friendship.

"This book would never have happened," Patsy writes at the beginning of the acknowledgments to *Honey-Mad Women*, "if it were not for Carolyn Heilbrun's 1982 Summer Seminar on "The Woman as Hero in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature." Of "Carolyn's presence both in and out of the classroom, I cannot say enough. She changed our lives, and made me, a reprobate Romanticist, into a feminist

scholar.” *Honey-Mad Women*, published in 1988, was the seventh book, Patsy’s first, to appear in the Gender and Culture Series at Columbia Univ. Press, a series Carolyn and I co-founded in 1983.

My introduction to Patsy took place when Carolyn invited me to speak in the 1982 NEH summer seminar identified in the book’s “Acknowledgments.” If memory serves, and at this point it will have to, Carolyn may have asked me to speak to the participants about French feminism mainly because Patsy was interested in it (Carolyn had her doubts about the subject.) My first impression of Patsy was mediated by Carolyn’s description: “She’s like Alice in Wonderland,” Carolyn said admiringly. Alice by virtue of her very long neck (which we both envied) and—by metonymy--her capacity for wonderment and daring.

The tutelary figure of Alice also makes a cameo as a heroine in *Honey-Mad*, capable of holding her own with intellectual theory giants like Arendt, Descartes, Foucault, and Heidegger.

The note from Patsy, undated, was tucked into my copy of *Honey-Mad Women*. Fortunately, her husband Rich Miller was able to pinpoint the date through its travel references: Rich and Patsy were about to leave for a trip to China and Bali in 1997. The note must have accompanied a new essay, about which Patsy added, “I may well expand it, so any input would be very welcome.”

I can guess which essay Patsy is referring to, and yes, it’s one of her best, but what matters to me more than its brilliance is the avowal of *not* having wanted to do the work, alongside the fact that the work had come with a high cost. What strikes me now is the mix of feelings—the yes and the no of intractable ambivalence about writing (and much

else), an affective stance that surfaced often, even in recent years, recognizing the worth of one's own work (always a challenge), avowing the sometimes poisonous swirl of emotional juices that fueled the writing, not to mention our lives, and, at the same time, dealing, as colleagues, with the ordinary business of the profession—providing feedback on each other's work. Patsy had often worried about boundaries, about how personal one could be in academic writing, a question that engaged both of us.

When Patsy became editor of *PMLA* (2006-11) we started meeting for dinner in New York. When I miss Patsy, I am missing how we connected in that period of reckless intimacy as friends, writers, feminists, teachers, and ridiculously insecure women in need of reassurance—ridiculous considering our advanced age, especially mine: Botox or no Botox, that is the question. If we had met through the web of academic feminism, that's not what kept our bond alive.

I saved many of our emails from that phase of our friendship. In an email from that period, what I now must think of as “late Patsy,” Patsy analyzed a resurgence of envy about a young woman she had met. Envy was the noxious emotion we both felt inhabited by and hoped to escape from: “the knife seems to be the fact of father love,” she wrote. What would things be like if I/you had fathers who recognized and adored us?” While I don't remember ever explicitly discussing our biographical respective fathers, both of us had written about the paternal body, and it was no doubt through our writing that Patsy makes the silent link to psychic life.

In 2011 for my 70th birthday, a birthday I approached with no small dose of anxiety, I received a heavily taped package from Patsy. It contained: a red “stem gem”—a plastic gadget for removing the ornery green stems of strawberries; a bottle of soap

bubbles—for blowing (complete with blower); a very small pillow stuffed and scented with lavender; multi-colored plastic suction cups with distinctive names to stick on drinking glasses so that people could tell them apart; a collection of different sized post-its with images of birds. I see from my thank you email that there were also “mini tweets”—though I don’t remember what they were...Joyfully silly, birthday sublime. Unique. Who but Patsy would create such a concatenation, and know it would work?

Necessarily, the joy of play and heady theorizing coexisted with emotional lows. In 2011, the day before my birthday, Patsy sent a dismal message about an invited lecture that had not gone well at a fancy institution, and how she then had gone on to have dinner with members of the audience, the hosts whose gaze she had experienced as hostile. It’s hard to imagine Patsy giving a talk that flopped, but we have all been there, at least I have, as Patsy knew, because I had described on other occasions what I’d experienced of public shaming. She goes on to talk herself out of the black hole of post-performance blues through the cognitive therapy tropes we had rehearsed many times, but the feeling is hard to shake: “Still—hate being here again—on the wrong road out of town.”

This mutual self-exposure allowed us to air those kinds of horrible feelings in safety. For here lies one of the complications of academic friendships—or rather, friendships formed in the medium of professional activity—how to reveal, without putting ourselves in danger, the dark side of otherwise successful lives, confess the failures that leave us standing on “the wrong road out of town,” as Patsy puts it. Or, as Patsy writes after a long phone conversation the following year, “shared struggle is always better than one is the loneliest struggle. But also strange and comforting to talk about Carolyn, and much else.” Carolyn, whose professional success was legendary, was

often our touchstone for analyzing the difficulties of women's lives in academe. After all, it was through Carolyn that we had begun our friendship, and if Carolyn suffered slights and disappointments, all the more so for us.

And then there was cancer, mine and soon after, hers. "I've joined the charmed circle," Patsy writes in April 2013. "Just got a diagnosis of advanced ovarian cancer. Happily I'm seeing a surgeon Monday. And I'm hearing that I'll have a good remission. O brave new world."

Cancer was not a struggle I looked forward to sharing, but I was glad that the diagnosis to her seemed to come with a ray of hope—"a good remission." I was impressed that Patsy had been able to reach in that mind shattering moment—the trauma of diagnosis—for an ironic grace note, embracing with a literary touch a prognosis that gave her time. I was also glad that my experience gave me some language, not that it was enough, not that it is ever enough to accompany her in spirit through the frightening labyrinths of Cancerland: the ultimate wrong road out of town. Amazingly, despite the awful, pain filled year she endured with treatments, Patsy remained in touch with her close friends. In an email to me she had Rich type for her shortly before her death, she expressed, from her bed, a poignant wish to "do a little dance in the front yard. Hands hurt, voice hurts, but I keep trucking."

It hurts to reread her hurt.

June 2015

nancykmiller.com