

AFTERWORD

The Simple Truth (1955)

Elizabeth Hardwick

(1916-2007)

In the 1950s I spent a year in the State of Iowa, the true Middle-West, the undistracted, steady heart of the country, or so we like to picture the spirit of the centre. For a writer, the State of Iowa was likely to mean that one was in some capacity connected to the celebrated Iowa Writer's Workshop, the first, or at least the first notable instance of an American institution, the "creative writing programme." In these graduate studies it was decided that the beginning writer might properly gain a Master's degree in the arts by foregoing the required scholarly thesis in favor of an acceptable batch of one's own stories or poems.

The programmes have been the object of considerable derision, especially on the part of the school-of-hard-knocks authors. But having taught in a good many, I would say they are a useful, or certainly harmless, sort of charity, providing income for writers and, for apprentices, a pleasant asylum among others like themselves. And perhaps there is a subliminal, forewarning profit to be found by communion with the often vain, disorderly, competitive teachers who have, in the suitable phrase, made it--well, made it more or less.

In Iowa I was not a student and not a teacher, even though I had published a novel and a number of short stories. I was present as the wife of a teacher and, while I can't say that I would have been employed in any case, I do seem to remember that there was at the time a legislative prohibition against husband and wife on the same faculty. Uncomfortable decisions feared, perhaps with fierce subsequent domestic distress.

I spent the year writing *The Simple Truth*, set in Iowa, and based on a murder trial that took place there. The Writer's Workshop does not appear except as the reason for the residence of one of the characters, Joseph Parks. Parks is a benign and rather well-set-up young man who, for want of an occupation agreeable to his exacerbated emotional curiosity, decides that he might set out to be a writer. His idle responsiveness could not be other than a handicap in the usual employments.

In my novel a young man, an undergraduate student, is on trial for the murder of his girlfriend, also a student. A large university in a small town in agricultural country is a lesson of some sort. Iowa had a distinguished medical school and, when I was there, a "great" football team, a member of the Big Ten. Also, international, cosmopolitan scholars, many displaced by the war in Europe, that is, by Nazism, roamed about the stubborn, flat plain which the goddess of architecture had passed over without a nod.

There is, in such a place, a gap between those who have come to a large public university for special interests and the general undergraduate student body, many of whom were from various parts of the state. The collegiate murder was played out amongst sorority and fraternity houses, proms, beer parties, and a landscape of provincial social cleavages.

My novel is in no sense a murder story or a mystery. Looking back on it now, I suppose I meant it as a kind of sad comedy, having to do with the attitudes and opinions of the two main observers of the trial, Joseph Parks and Anita Mitchell, each appointed only by curiosity. The outline of the case and of the trial was based upon what happened when I was in Iowa, but since I did not know anyone connected with the tragedy, as an observer or otherwise, my intention was to try to sort out the responses I heard around me. Tribal responses--they might be called--of the 1950s, the time of the action.

The two fictional characters whose emotions have become engaged by the trial are not so much persons of ideas as ones in whom a certain cluster of feelings leads to wishes about the outcome. A murder that might not have taken place the day before or the day after or if the telephone had rung or some other commonplace intervention had occurred does often arouse sympathy in a way that has little to do with the

command that justice proceed from the available evidence. Otherwise responsible people sometimes do not welcome justice or they see the exercise of it as too narrow, revengeful, lacking in all those allowances a busy imagination offers to motive. I cannot think this is altogether a bad thing for a mere observer, even if it cannot be recommended as valid for a juror.

The psychological disposition of the two observers in my novel prompts each to want an acquittal for the young man. With Joseph Parks, the social imbalance between the young man from poor, hard-working, immigrant parents and the dead beauty from a prosperous family arouses intense partisanship or ideological pity. With Anita Mitchell, a loose and generalized Freudianism plays its part in her anguish over the judgment at hand. Both look upon the jurors as "simple" Iowa folk, uncomplicated country people, and have little confidence in the working of their minds with regard to the subtleties of position, the ravages of obscure deprivations.

I wrote *The Simple Truth* many years ago. Since that time my own emotions have sometimes been caught up by criminal cases that seemed to depart from a brute exercise of malevolent will and instead appeared to have come about by entanglements that provided circumstance and passion to overwhelm the moment. I am not certain what tribal responses for mercy on the one hand or punishment on the other would be called forth today by the situation in my novel. Styles in heart-beat change.

The present sheer weight of crime, the violence of the homicide statistics, the over-flowing prisons have led the sophisticated observer to a preference for "high society" crimes. Those useless ones are most likely to attract a frenzy of gossip and what can only be called public hilarity. Useless, but not quite. In the 1980s greed is under every raincoat and so: who could not use another million? Disappointed love is a retrograde and "boring" motivation, rather countrified.

But the deprived or threatened millionaire is another story. *The Simple Truth* comes from a more sentimental time. I wrote it out of my thoughts about certain inchoate grounds of partisanship that attached themselves to a pitiful, small-town murder. The drama of feelings, the careless, transitory grip of an awful event upon the local or national scene, make, I hope, their own comment upon the distance between suffering and speculating.

Elizabeth Hardwick (1986)