

WIT & HUMOR



Elizabeth Hardwick

(1916-2007)

ELIZABETH

I do a lot of talking and the "I" is not often absent. In general I'd rather talk about other people. Gossip, or as we gossips like to say, character analysis.

Wasn't it Kant who understood that when we say "in my opinion," we mean instead, "All men able to judge will agree?"

Due to the fact that I had no respect for him I felt free to speak in the most dogmatic fashion and did so.

FAMILY

My family situation is distinguished by only one eccentricity--it is entirely healthy and normal.

The notions I have entertained about my family are fantastic manias... I staggered a bit when I actually came face-to-face with my own mother: she carries no whips, gives no evidence of cannibalism.

So many are children who from the day of their birth are growing up to be their parents. Look at the voting records, inherited like flat feet.

THE WORLD

The world was a dusty old pocket with the zipper stuck.

AMERICA

To be an American is to try to make a rock out of a waterfall.

All the American regions are breaking up, ground down to a standard American corn meal.

The true poet, the fiction writer--how will he flee the merciless strength of the American spirit, the cactus that lives without water?

The sheiks of Texas cruise around their desert.

The rich in their pyramids have a nice time.

NEW YORK

This is New York, with its graves next to its banks.

To be without sufficient money is like diving into the concrete of a drained swimming pool.

On the street, he has noticed that people keep turning around suddenly, as if future income taxes were brushing by, grazing coats like a pickpocket.

High heels drown in the splash at the curb and the mean West Side wind from the Hudson blows about as carelessly as crime.

New York once more, to remain forever, resting on its generous accommodation of women. Long dresses, arrogance, more chances to deceive the deceitful, confidants, conspirators, charge cards.

The place was clean and had once been a fine family apartment with a good view of the river, but most of the ladies living there were quite mad and had a way of dividing into warring camps over a foolish issue like the answering of the telephone and sometimes they engaged in the most distressing fights in the hall. I felt rather depressed about all of them because they were lonely and idle and, since I found one as pathetic as the other, I was inclined to be a bit unscrupulous and to try to take both sides in their arguments. This was disastrous; each side repeated what I had said and I sometimes trembled for fear of retribution when I put my key in the door.

EDUCATION

Harvard (across the river in Cambridge) and Boston are two ends of one mustache.

The young teachers in this position [at Harvard] live in a dazed state of love and hatred, pride and fear; their faces have a look of desperate yearning, for they would rather serve in heaven than reign in hell.

At college he had been an overbearing and sanctimonious young man who had never distinguished himself in anything except as captain of the debating team, in which capacity he delivered energetic arguments on safe subjects.

Bright, determined scholars, using the minutes, the hours, and the bibliographies, the footnotes falling into line obediently, like little soldiers in the ranks of documentation.

She has a Ph.D., a credential very agreeable and surprising, since her life was all about love and disillusionment, as if she had been a courtesan rather than a scholar.

He has one of those greedy and restless minds that takes in and chews up everything in sight, like a disposal unit attached to a sink.

LIBERALS

Dear Joanna has a mind fixed like a footprint in cement.

Here are the shards of his youthful liberal cliches, the chopped-off carrot tops of his adversary assumptions, the shriveled balloons of his generation's elated predictions of capitalist catastrophe.

While he was standing there a girl rushed up to the front of the hotel and took off her clothes. She stood there turning like a model, giving her message. The people stared in confusion, in silence. They were seeing it at last--the sixties. Ackermann decided at that moment to vote for Nixon.

POLITICS

History starves many, but fattens a few.

A president needs only to be, not to become.

The lie is the only thing we can count on in our image of the president.

The president appears like one of those television commercials run over and over again.

Having successfully attained an elective office seems to freeze the personality in its winning shape.

READING

Reading is a discount ticket to everywhere.

The story is true, but it cannot be accurate because of the artfulness.

Books give not wisdom where none was before. But where some is, there reading makes it more.

LITERATURE

Certain works, as if they were sovereign states, weaken from time to time and whole generations turn their attention away.

Fashion corrupts, but, like artificial respiration, it also gives a second life to the fallen.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

This collection is one long stutter.

The great is seldom a deterrent to the mediocre.

To assert greatness does not give us the key; it is only the lock.

We hardly know which to treasure most: expectation confounded or satisfied.

For some recurrent best-sellers...the readers would no more ask for a good review before giving their approval and their money than a parent would insist upon public acceptance before giving his new baby a kiss.

WRITING

Making a living is nothing; the real difficulty is making a point, making a difference--with words.

Don't you see that revision can enter the heart like a new love?

WRITERS

[Gertrude Stein] is as sturdy as a turnip.

[Edgar Lee Masters] has ideas as some have freckles.

In Roth's novels, the erotic pushes and thrusts where it will.

A novelist like Sinclair Lewis seems used up, absorbed, like a fertilizer.

We are reminded of the bad Philip Roth, creator for laughs of American Jewish life in its underwear.

Raymond Chandler said [Edmund] Wilson managed to make "fornication as dull as a railroad timetable."

[Lardner] wrapped his dreadful events in a comic language, as you would put an insecticide in a bright can.

Joyce thought the worst thing about World War II was that it distracted the world from reading *Finnegan's Wake*.

We know from Proust that a great French aristocrat can drop his Croix de Guerre on the floor of a male brothel without diminishing his prestige.

As a husband Lewes discovered his wife's genius [George Eliot], or rather he "uncovered" it as one may, peeling off the surface inch by inch, uncover a splendid painting beneath.

As a versifier he [Vachel Lindsay] had no more caution than a hobo hitching a ride, but somehow his voice prevailed for a time, even with some of the respected critics of the day.

Very few lives are of a piece in the way the Fitzgeralds were; with them youth and middle age are linked not so much in the chain of growth as in the noose of cause and effect.

Because of the habit of lying [in Lardner], it is a world without common sense. The tortured characters are not always victims. They may be ruined and made fun of, but they have the last word. They bite the leg that kicks them.

[Hart] Crane somehow never seems to feel he is galloping to destruction. In this he is very different from Fitzgerald, who had in the midst of chaos the rather cross-eyed power of gazing upon his deterioration as if he were not living it but somehow observing his soul and body as one would watch a drop of water slowly drying up in the sun.

[John Updike] writes on and on with great success about suburban landscapes or small-town ones efflorescent in observed detail, prodigal in image, and brashly knowing and accomplished in the rhythms of current dialogue and steaming with the orifices and bodily fluids of many fluent copulations.

Sex, anywhere in every manner, a penitential workout on the page with no thought of backaches, chafings, or phallic fatigue. Indeed the novels [of Philip Roth] are prickled like a sea urchin with the spines and fuzz of many indecencies.

Edmund Wilson...was dismayed by Nabokov's cast-offs, those universally admired works that seemed to be resting in overflowing boxes in the Nabokov vestibule, as if waiting to be picked up by the Salvation Army.

Even a schoolgirl must shrink with disgust from that loathsome young man, Boswell, "buttering up" Dr. Johnson, hanging about his coattails like an insurance salesman after a policy.

WORKS OF LITERATURE

His first utterance [Bartleby] is like the soul escaping from the body, as in medieval drawings.

Henry [James] certainly struck many observers as snobbish and outlandishly refined, but at the same time there is his literally mysterious energy and grinding ambition, his devilish application like that of an obsessed prospector during the gold rush.

James was wise to give Catherine the works [*Washington Square*]: her dismaying vital statistics, her dumpiness, and her baffled maneuvering will set her up like one of those dolls at the country fair, ready to be idly knocked down for a prize.

At the party, he goes for Catherine's attention with the watchful concentration of a sportsman waiting for the game to fly in the range of the gun.

The Mother's Recompense [Wharton]: A mother has abandoned her husband and daughter, and New York society has erased the blot of her existence as if she were a smudge to be washed off a window.

In *The House of Mirth*, her triumph [Wharton], she is not always clear what the moral might be and thereby creates a stunning tragedy in which the best and the richest society of New York reveals an inner coarseness like pimps cruising in Cadillacs.

"The Congo" is the supreme folly of Lindsay's foolhardy career...[as] the sweating reiterations of the amateur elocutionist might recall Tom Thumb at Queen Victoria's court.

The praise [of "The Congo" by Harriet Monroe] is short but unfortunately ranging in reference, like a kangaroo leaping over rich and spacious plains.

The talent of Philip Roth floats freely in this rampaging novel with a plot as thick as starlings winging to a tree and then flying off again.

[Roth's novel] *Sabbath's Theater* is mud, a slough of obscenity with some lustrous pearls of antic writing embedded in it.

Capote had [in *Answered Prayers*], like a leper with a bell announcing his presence, horrified those he most treasured, and with many he was marked with the leper's visible deformities, a creature arousing fear of infection.

In *Answered Prayers*, the unfinished nonfiction novel, using the actual names of a transcontinental cast of mostly well-known persons, or if disguised by a fictional name, carefully designed to be identifiable, Capote made his own shackled step to the social gallows.

PUBLICITY

Publicity, the bed sore of the fame-sick, inflicts its pains.

Publicity, so easy to swallow, so difficult to remember a moment later.

MEMORY

Middle age is a bill left by youth.

Every moment of the present is rushing into its fate as the past.

The days of the visit passed like a spool of slowly unwinding thread.

She remained outside every event, as if her memory were no longer than a sigh.

Mrs. Gorman never seemed to be actively considering the point at hand; she seemed, rather, to have already thought of everything of importance and to imply that conversation was merely a recollection of a former experience so similar to the present one that she had only to remember what had happened before and to repeat the pattern.

PLACES

A rush of heat enters the town like the roar of motorcycles on Sunday.

The apartment was rather like a dwarf's dressing room in a film studio.

One corner would be deserted, as if an entire side street had turned off its lights and closed its eyes.

Empty, dead Main Streets, streets with the ashamed gaze of nude mannequins in a shopwindow at night.

But just as I stepped upon the back porch I stopped and pretended to be admiring an old fat hen which the neighbors had intended to kill long ago but hadn't found the heart to do so because the hen has a human aspect and keeps looking at them gaily and as an equal.

MANNERS

It is a look without seeing, just like two mirrors exactly placed on opposite walls.

"Please don't be over Dodo's head tonight. It's bad manners." "But it is impossible not to be over Dodo's head. I thought manners was the art of the possible--or is that politics?"

During the meal, Clarence observed Dodo--trained the heavy ammunition of his mind upon her, as if he were a general besieging an undefended shepherdess on her lonely hill.

The feeling of falling into a well of disgrace.

GENDER

Biology is destiny only for girls.

Any woman who has ever had her wrist twisted by a man recognizes a fact of nature as humbling as a cyclone to a frail tree branch.

She thought suddenly, He will take care of me! And it occurred to her that she had found the reason for the existence of two sexes.

The halo of invalidism rose over her brow.

MEN

This odd harness of habit held him in a vicious embrace.

"I don't want no doctor looking up my ass to see if my hat's on straight."

Frazier was not mean-spirited so much as serviceably coarse, like an old army blanket.

A profound and bullying impudence emanated from Frazier, like steam escaping from a hot valve.

He could no more have refused her intense and flattering concern than a dry root could have refused the rain.

In the way he puffed, he managed to give the idea that smoking a cigar was the most important thing in the world.

He had the relaxed gaze of country people, the expressionless patience of men who had sat for generations in front of the country store.

He spoke with extreme care and always seemed to be searching his mind for some epigrammatic nonsense that would relieve him of the obligation to pursue any thought beyond two sentences, unless he had engineered the conversational turn himself. His attempts at wit had always been forced and he had now become one of those boring people who tell anecdotes about historical personages.

WOMEN

She was as free of irony as a doll.

The sister, coarse and homely as an old boot.

Perfume clung to her hair like a fragrant halo.

Mrs. Morton was all sap, and Clara was all bark.

She cannot maneuver with any more design than a trapped bat.

She dropped her head downward, like a duck slipping its bill into the water.

She was always behind a closed door--the fate of those addicted to whatever.

She drew on cigarettes as if they were opium, an addition to the opium within her, the narcotic of her boredom.

Her pale eyes did not seem to see anything. They might have been gazing back into the recesses of her own mind and merely pretended to look outward.

Clicking heels made sounds like the hooves of galloping ponies, and buttocks moved up and down rhythmically as the women filed into the reception room.

The sister was transfixed by the spectacle of her incapacities, lifted up to peaks of feeling by every ache and pain, quick to throw the magic of her sufferings into the air like crooked smiles.

She was wearing a dress of brown silk--the sort of silk dress worn so long that it seemed to be breathing.

There was a warmth about her, simple and comfortable as the warmth of a baking oven.

She hissed her words through teeth that jutted out like an awning over her lower lip.

SEX

Seduction is now a comedy in which both are laughing.

You cannot seduce anyone when innocence is not a value.

In those years I did not care to enjoy sex, only to have it.

He was very handsome and a little depressed by nature, but anxious to please and in this pleasantness somewhat impersonal. For that reason he was doomed to more fornication than he wished.

In *Dance the Eagle to Sleep*, the girls are constantly available and practical--I'm afraid rather like a jar of peanut butter waiting for a thumb.

The libertinism of the detestable sixties brought in the newfangledness of typewriter fucking.

LOVE

A few people, couples, looking into each other's eyes, as if they were safe.

In his love life, he is something like a telephone, always engaged, and even then with several on hold.

He expressed anxiety over impulses to take his own life and also to assault murderously the girl he was going with. He was alarmed. He said he was in love.

Nothing so easily unbalances the sense of proportion in a woman of artistic ambitions as the dazed love and respect of an ordinary man. I was nearly deranged.

He looked like some Neanderthal ruler, superb and forceful in a savage way, and quite eternal. My ghastly darling.

MARRIAGE

The wife economy is as obsolete as the slave economy.

A burden accepted is both a hump on your back and a star in your crown.

I didn't know what I was getting into, but even if I had, I still would have married him. He was not crazy all the time--most of the time he was wonderful.

She can take a cold, icy bullet into her flesh, pull it out with a wince, sugar it and offer it to the world, to herself mostly, as a marshmallow.

The wives--completely stunned by the marvelous possession of these blithe, busy husbands. They sigh tenderly under the delightful burdens of propitious marriages and smile at the less fortunate with queenly compassion.

In the long run wives are to be paid in a peculiar coin--consideration for their feelings. As it usually turns out this is an enormous, unthinkable inflation few men will remit, or if they will, only with a sense of being overcharged.

Suppose, great heavens, that I had married him. This idea completely unnerved me because I had wanted to marry him and would have done so if he had not violated one of those rigid, adolescent, feminine laws. I finally broke with him only because he went away for three days and didn't write to me on each of them. His infidelity crushed me and with real anguish I forced myself to say, "My heart is utterly broken. If you don't care enough about me to keep your promises...." The thought of the risk I had taken chilled me to the bone." [fiction]

She thought quite simply that she must get married.... She was so much absorbed by the idea and the obscure liberation it offered that she wished immediate fulfillment.

The paradox of the woman who reaches her true spinsterhood only after she is at last married and settled. She takes command and reaches a state of dominating dependency to which only she has the clue.

[Her mother] would have been satisfied in Victorian England, in a society where women had duties rather than rights.

She had profound convictions about a woman's right to be spoiled.

Monogamy drifted about him--the scent of a hot iron on a shirt collar.

She dangled on his arm like a...shopping bag.

THE NEW WOMAN

He was standing opposite her and intently watching the wrong exit.

She did not feel sorry for her husband and was therefore able to criticize him in a comfortable way.

Arthur was an awkward piece of furniture, which could be neither overlooked nor easily renovated.

She began somehow to sink into the mud of maneuver, manipulation, and her own marked self-satisfaction.

His coercive neatness inflamed me at times, as if his habits were not his right, but instead a dangerous poison to life, like the slow seepage of gas from the hotel stove.

Parks had no doubt Doris was cherishing some operatic protest in her bosom; in her silences he heard screams of accusation.

They are "new women," and their husbands represent to them an intolerable boredom they do not see themselves destined to endure.

There was something of the dizziness of a see-saw when the two figures were seen in juxtaposition, as though the ground beneath lay patiently waiting for the loud, defeated thump of one or the other.

She will have an apartment, a lover, will take a few drugs, will listen to the phonograph, buy clothes, and something will happen.

Madame de Stael, vexing and far-out as she was, needed her rather embarrassing love affairs to smooth over, like a cosmetic cream, the shrewd image.

Mary McCarthy has written in her memoirs of her detestation of [Edmund] Wilson's body and soul, information provided by her decision to become his wife. She has disguised him in satirical portraits in her fiction, a disguise on the order of sunglasses.

I see how much has changed since the 1950s, especially in the manner of life for women. You are still weaker than men in muscular force, but can sleep in the streets if you like, even, alas, if that is the only place you have to sleep, and go to Arabia in your jeans and knapsack...and much, much more.

The Second Sex is so briskly Utopian it fills one with a kind of shame and sadness, like coming upon old manifestoes and committee programs in the attic.

The two women do not know what they look like, do not see their lives, and so they wander about in their dreadful freedom like old oxen left behind, totally unprovided for.

MORAL COMPLEXITY

Pigs have to be killed and the robin's dismay is not to the point.

She had thought him innocently guilty.

THE END

Through support, flattery, and the wonderful plasticity of self-analysis, paranoia enters the wrongdoer's soul and convinces him of his own innocence as if it had been confirmed by the accounting of St. Peter at the gates of Heaven.

Dear spotted atheism, the homely, wrinkled queen of heaven for the Big Bang, mother of the depressing claims of the prehistoric upright ape and the joke of the Piltdown Man.

So, life after death is to fall in love once more, to set up a little business, to learn to drive a car, take airplane trips, go to the sun for vacations.

While you are living, part of you has slipped away to the cemetery.