

ANALYSIS

Sleepless Nights (1979)

Elizabeth Hardwick

(1916-2007)

"An extraordinary and haunting book."

Joan Didion

"This original novel does everything for lost times that an irreplaceable family photograph album does--except that here, the words are worth a thousand pictures."

Philip Roth

"*Sleepless Nights*--a novel of mental weather--enchants by the scrupulousness and zip of the narrative voice, its lithe, semi-staccato descriptions and epigrammatic dash."

Susan Sontag

"Brilliantly poised and confidently daring, *Sleepless Nights* is a chin-up tightrope walk along the borderline between fiction and autobiography...it is graceful, laconic, and wise."

Newsweek

"An inspired fusion of fact and invention, this beautifully realized, hard-bitten, lyrical book is not only Elizabeth Hardwick's finest fiction but one of the outstanding contributions to American literature of the last fifty years."

New York Review of Books

"The literary equivalent of polished onyx."

The Guardian

Review by Joan Didion, *New York Times*:

"I have always, all of my life, been looking for help from a man,' we are told near the beginning of Elizabeth Hardwick's subtle new book. 'It has come many times and many more than not. This began early'.... *Sleepless Nights* is a novel, but it is a novel in which the subject is memory and to which the 'I' whose memories are in question is entirely and deliberately the author: we recognize the events and addresses of Elizabeth Hardwick's life not only from her earlier work, but from the poems of her husband, the late Robert Lowell.

We study in another light the rainy afternoons and dyed satin shoes and high-school drunkenness of the Kentucky adolescence, the thin coats and yearnings toward home of the graduate years at Columbia, the households in Maine and Europe and on Marlborough Street in Boston and West 67th Street in New York. We are presented the entire itinerary, shown all the punched tickets and transfers. The result is less a 'story about' or 'of' a life than a shattered meditation on it, a work as evocative and difficult to place as Claude Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, which it oddly recalls. The author observes of her enigmatic narrative: 'It certainly hasn't the drama of: I saw the old, white-bearded frigate master on the dock and signed up for the journey. But after all, 'I' am a woman.' This strikes an interesting note, a balance of Oriental diffidence and exquisite contempt, or irony and direct statement, that exactly expresses the sensibility at work in *Sleepless Nights*.

She has chronicled again and again the undertow of family life, the awesome torment of being a daughter--an observer in the household, a constant reader of the domestic text--the anarchy of sex. She has illuminated lives traditionally misrepresented as tragic instances of the way all women live. In *Seduction and Betrayal*, for example, she located Virginia Woolf's special and claustal narrowness, her aggravated

femininity, less in her situation as a woman in the estheticism and androgyny of Bloomsbury; she saw the source of Sylvia Plath's destructiveness not in her time and gender but in her 'lack of national and local roots,' her 'foreign ancestors on both sides,' her peculiar and, once one has had it pointed out, quite unmistakable deracination.

This is all very original and interesting, and so is Elizabeth Hardwick's radical distrust of romantic individualism, her passionate apprehension of the particular havoc that a corrupted individualism can play with the lives of women. Women adrift, in Elizabeth Hardwick's work, indulge a fatal preference for men of bad character. Women adrift take dancing lessons, and end up on missing-person reports. Perhaps no one has written more acutely and poignantly about the ways in which women compensate for their relative physiological inferiority about the poetic and practical implications of walking around the world deficient in hemoglobin, deficient in respiratory capacity, deficient in muscular strength and deficient in stability of the vascular and autonomic nervous systems. '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 observed in an essay on Simone de Beauvoir some years ago, an assertion of 'woman's difference' at once so explicit and so obscurely shameful that it sticks like a burr in one's capacity for wishful thinking.

The method of the 'I' in *Sleepless Nights* is in fact that of the anthropologist, of the traveler on watch for the revealing detail: we are provided precise observations of strangers met in the course of the journey, close studies of their rituals. These studies take the form of vignettes, recollections, stories that at first offer no sustaining thread... We are shown music teachers fallen on old age and poverty, cleaning women and their stubborn diseases, breasts hacked off, rashes, degeneration of the kidney, husbands with blood clots and felony convictions. We are shown women who survive and women who do not. We are shown Billie Holiday in 1943. We are shown women of 'mad strength, hideous endurance, hostility, nightmares,' women who live on to 'wander about in their dreadful freedom like old oxen left behind, totally unprovided for.' We are shown women who do not account to men, men who do account to women, children who refuse telephone calls from their parents, disarray and derangements of every kind. 'If only one knew what to remember or pretend to remember,' the curator of these memories frets at the outset of *Sleepless Nights*. Make a decision and what you want from the lost things will present itself. You can take it down from the shelf like a can. Perhaps.'

'The fieldwork proceeds.' The meticulously transcribed histories begin to yield a terrible point, although not one that would astonish our mothers and grandmothers. In the culture under study, life ends badly. Disease is authentic. The freedom to live untied to others, however desired that freedom may be, is hard on men and hard on children and hardest of all on women. 'Why is it that we cannot keep the note of irony, the jangle of carelessness at a distance?' the narrator of this extraordinary and haunting book asks toward the end of her reflections. 'Sentences in which I have tried for a certain light tone--many of those have to do with events, upheavals, destructions that caused me to weep like a child.' Oh yes."

Joan Didion
New York Times (29 April 1979)

"In an essay on fiction and moral philosophy, Iris Murdoch has remarked that both virtue and freedom are concerned with 'really apprehending that other people exist,' and that this is also the essence of art. The artist 'is the good man; the lover who, nothing himself, lets other things be through him'; and she adds that this is probably what 'negative capability' means.

These remarks are apposite to Elizabeth Hardwick's virtuous and liberated novel (*Sleepless Nights*), or work, to beg the question of its genre. One feels its beauty and goodness, it is not so certainly a novel, or, more important, it seems that the ways in which, although it is fiction, it is not a novel, are themselves meaningful and perhaps admonitory. The charity and empathy with which the author experiences others in the world might not extend to the shrill 'I's of much contemporary fiction. Could Henry James have imagined a self-center? This is a work of negative capability.

The narrator is a woman, Elizabeth, thinking back on her part, of her childhood home in Kentucky, of time spent in Boston, New York, Amsterdam, Maine. She remembers people she has known, is mystified and moved by their courage and separateness, and brings them to life for us in vignettes connected by the

thread of her own life and thoughts. She remembers rooms, houses, association prompted by a hairpin, a lipstick stain on white paint. The memories that frame her contemplation of the lives of others eventually also define her own, of which she at first says, without apology, that is 'certainly isn't the drama of I saw the old, white-bearded frigate master on the dock and signed up for the journey. But after all, 'I am a woman.'

This is not mere dinner-table diffidence, the hostesslike stance of the well brought up ('tell me about yourself'), but the essence of the sensibility that informs the work and the nature of its virtuousness, born, perhaps, of the need to confirm, as one might worry an aching tooth, 'the tendency of lives to obey the laws of gravity and to sink downward, falling as gently and slowly as a kite, or violently breaking, smashing.'

Hers is a pessimism with a long tradition, 'the fierce pessimism of experience and the root empiricism of every troubled loser.' It is the abiding preoccupation of our oldest literature and the burden even of the great nineteenth-century novels most expressly contrived to conceal or deny it with conventions involving progress or retribution. For all its modern inconclusiveness, it is to nineteenth-century European literature that one feels the affinity of this work. Causality, that essential ingredient of things we call novels, has been left out, but a dignified conception of personality has been left in.

Sleepless Nights might be a notebook called 'Ideas' for Chekhov or Zola to work from; if it were longer, because of the nature of history, it would become as dramatic as Proust. All the characters would meet up; Alex, the bachelor intellectual, would rescue Miss Lavore from her rooming house. As it is, we use other names for works of this kind--memoir, meditation with *exempla*, spiritual exercises with a common theme: 'despite the kindness of damp afternoons, the solace of opening the door and finding everyone there...the cemetery wait to be desecrated.'

This book rejects crisis, denouement, and also confession. Some may find the narrator's reticence disappointing. The rewards offered for personality are always, it seems, larger than those offered for thought, though why this should be is unclear. Nor it is clear why the spectacle of another contemplating his Self should fascinate, or why selflessness has lost its moral charm. When Matthew Arnold said of Charlotte Bronte that her mind was filled with 'hunger, rebellion, and rage,' he meant to reproach her. Now it would be considered a compliment.

'After all, 'I am a woman' is not said with a sense of injury, although it is said with the knowledge that womankind presents special difficulties. Here, as in many of her essays, Hardwick claims for a woman the rank of person, differently preoccupied but as worthy as men to attract the notice fortune, to be in the game and to be dealt a hand, good or bad. This is not to be a victim but a gambler. There are few female gamblers in modern fiction--there are more victims--and consciousness, and the power of reflection, are more usually the properties of male protagonists and gamblers. Not of victims--not, say, of Tess of the D'Ubervilles. (If the women in this book have harder fates, if the men in it feel sorer for themselves than she feels for them, it is not because she lacks sympathy, this is just something women notice about men.) Of women--of her mother, for instance, the narrator concludes that she should not 'make too much of my mother's dreadful labors, labors laid to rest long ago.' In the long run she gives every human being a lot of credit.

That is, she forbears to feel that people get what they deserve. Character is not necessarily destiny. She is sympathetic to 'the balm of the vices,'; has a 'prying sympathy for the victims of sloth and recurrent mistakes,' and keeps in mind that 'what began as a green start may turn overnight into a desert filled with alarm.' Eventually this particular tone of awareness and acceptance makes the narrator the main character, the person of Character, an unusual heroine in the era of the injured tone.

So we become involved with 'Elizabeth,' as we do with the main protagonist of any fiction; yet we have a sense of her unwillingness that we should. She wants neither to complain nor to dominate. Her observations and emotions nonetheless become the account of her own passage. The 'I' has watched and inquired (in 'asking a thousand questions of many heavy souls, I did not learn much'), has learned much, and is now wise, resigned, a lover--an excellent spiritual condition which in her reticence she cannot call attention to, or, absorbed in art, is perhaps unaware of.

For the narrator-artist, the thing is to describe and reflect, to carry us on the flow of each interesting episode, each paragraph, each interesting *word*. She exercises care. She has a tremendous power of summary and analysis which she alternately indulges and corrects, mindful that our sense that other people are heroes to lead the lives they do is to some extent patronizing, in need of correction. Her summarizing self is witty, shrewd, incisive: Alex '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.' 'His handsomeness created anxiety in me, his snobbery was detailed and full of quirks, like that of people living in provincial capitals, or foreigners living in Florence or Cairo.'

The corrective is pity, charity, and love. 'Her large, muscled arms hold me for a moment in a pounding embrace. The smell of the laundry is, truly, like a bitter, sacred incense. Her cropped hair is damp. Her legs are swollen, the large, aching ankles seem to groan as she pulls her weight along. She stands there, the great teeth throbbing in her round, gleaming face. Oh, Ida.'

'The bag ladies...have mercy on them, somebody.' Of course if this book contented itself with instancing the pathetic, which is always apparent to everyone, it would not be so impressive. It is harder to venture into people's happiness. Of the cleaning woman, Josette, and her timid husband, Michael, 'many, many beautiful memories they had of the way the water and lights hooked up, the wandering people with their news of other parks, good sites and bad, the comradeship, the radio, the cans of beans for the miraculous little stove, the cans of beer from the perfect cooler.' Or Miss Lavore, who 'had a life': 'Nearly every night of the week she went to Arthur Murray's dancing classes. A framed, autographed portrait of Murray and his wife hung over her bed. It would be florid to say it hung there like a religious icon, but certainly the two secular persons filled Miss Lavore's heart with gratitude. It could be said they had changed her life.'

In this Hardwick runs the greatest risks, but faces down the danger that haunts the writer of fiction: How do you know? Do you presume? How do you know Miss Lavore dreams of being 'Lavore and ----, famous European dancing team'? Perhaps her dreams are simpler, or grander, than this. The specter of condescension is routed by the sincerity of the narrator's love--in turn somewhat belied by the astonishing, inventive language. Brilliance always calls suspicions down on itself. Easy to imagine the narrator sharing in the sadness of Michael's decline, harder to imagine that she can imagine the pleasures of a trailer park.

Yet finally she can, and more than that. As James remarked of Balzac, she does not love these characters because she knows them so much as she knows them because she loves them. And here, finally, is why this, although not a novel, is a work of fiction, or a 'new novel,' but not history, not autobiography. It makes the invisible visible, it goes beyond the evidence, to borrow E. M. Forster's phrase: 'each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence.' Hardwick's power of embodying it is singular.

For the artist, the material and the state of grace are the same thing. Her attention is on other and on the *manner* of speaking of them, the brilliance of her language almost a liability, like one more vanity the virtuous artist must mortify. Ultimately the language is the triumph here. 'Tell me, is it true that a bad artist suffers as greatly as a good one?' she asks, but she finds with ease it seems, the startling adjective, the amazing simile: a city has 'contaminated skies like a suffocating cloak of mangy fur.' Of possessions she writes, 'of course these things are not *mine*. I think they are usually spoken of as *ours*, that tea bag of a word which steeps in the conditional.' She is at once a Symbolist and a master of the ordinary discursive properties of language. It is a style that is literary, learned, manly--how many women have such courage of their aphorisms?--and womanly, bounded by images of windows, mantelpieces, the behavior of people indoors.

Prose fiction cannot show us ourselves, it can show us others, better than poetry or pictures or essays can. If it is true, as seems likely despite much contemporary talk to the contrary, that we know ourselves through the recognition of the otherness of others, with whom we share the condition of humans, then prose fiction can do the best that can be done for us to console and affirm. That is why, in spite of its traditional skepticism, this book brings happiness."

Diane Johnson
"The I as Female: Elizabeth Hardwick"

"Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights* is not really a novel, but a sequence of episodes controlled only by the narrator's consciousness. They are 'dream' sequences which are the by-product of sleepless nights: night dreams presented as waking dreams. That is, there is no attempt to capture the language or flow of dreams, no effort to approximate the dimension of sleeplessness in fragmented or disjointed images. Language is controlled, instead, by a lyrical literary consciousness: a metaphor, as it were, for sleepless nights.

Observations rove back and forth between layers of the past. Hardwick announces on the first page: 'This is what I have decided to do with my life just now. I will do this work of transformed and even distorted memory and lead this life, the one I am leading today.' Observations are disconnected, associated only by way of her ability to evoke them. Many of them are patently distorted, memories heaped upon memories. She speaks of cafeteria food in the Automat, commiserating with herself for the vileness of poverty. She speaks of 'watery macaroni, bready meat loaf, the cubicle of drying sandwiches; mud, glue and leather, from these textures you made your choice.' Yet the Automat was quite different; the macaroni, actually, was a superb dish for the price, the very opposite of mud, glue, and leather. Her memory of the past is impeded by a kind of romanticization of poverty; by inverting her suffering, she makes it seem heroic, all for art.

Billie Holiday is evoked, her elusiveness almost captured. Hardwick cannot fully succeed, because Holiday staged herself, and elusiveness became part of her genius as a performer. She was always far more than the parts, and Hardwick's 'segments' can only suggest the whole. The Hardwick passage locates Holiday in the dark, as a dim personage, perhaps trafficking with satanic elements; emerging only to sing, and then creating her own dark around her. But this is only the physical presence.... Hardwick... accumulates external details, and by way of them attempts to strike through to essences. Sleepless nights do not produce profundity, but flashes, presences [Impressionism].

She films, in her mind, a woman whose news is all bad, and so her talk was punctuated with 'of course' and 'naturally,' and 'of course' she had got married very young, before she knew what she was doing. 'Now? The boy's just sitting around, actually living with a couple, both psychiatrists, and it's supposed to be therapy. They hate me, naturally. When he was with me a few months ago it was a nightmare.' Since the woman is not famous, unlike Holiday, Hardwick can contain her brilliantly; the woman's phrases resonate from a world she has had to accept without comprehending her place in it. 'Naturally' and 'of course' carry the freight of her bewilderment. We know her soul; whereas Holiday's soul--because so famous, so much part of the performer--remains buried ever more deeply the further Hardwick tries to penetrate it.

She is best with people who do not reverberate, who can live in phrases small-town men who seem so appealing, but who, upon examination, provide 'death traps' for women who marry them. 'I know what the men are like, but I do not know what she is like, with her washing of clothes, her baking, her dangling shutter never mended by the husband-carpenter, the broken lamp never fixed by the household electrician, the flowerless, shrubless plot of land of the town gardener.' She catches the appearance of the men, who appeal with their manly ways, their mastery of their type of life; while their women toil in the home, live beyond the charm, in the life itself."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940/1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 415

"In three novels—*The Ghostly Lover*, *The Simple Truth*, and the remarkable *Sleepless Nights*—and four essay collections, the latest of which, *Sight-Readings: American Fictions*, is being published this month by Random House, she has established herself as one of the idiosyncratic yet authoritative voices in contemporary American letters. As a co-founder of and now an advisory editor at *The New York Review of Books*, which celebrates its thirty-fifth anniversary this year, she has provided a forum for new voices as well. Both her life and her work are triumphs of style and substance....

On the page, Hardwick falls in love, again and again, with people and cultures she stands outside of yet identifies with.... While Hardwick pursued her studies at Columbia...she subsisted on fellowships and family assistance, living in a succession of dorm rooms and residential hotels... In 1942, while she was a tenant at the Hotel Schuyler, 'a dump of a hotel' on West Forty-fifth Street, she became involved with a young gay man named Greer Johnson, whom she had grown up with in Lexington. They lived in separate rooms but shared a kitchen. In *Sleepless Nights*, Hardwick acknowledged this rarely discussed kind of relationship: 'Our friendship was a violent one and we were as obsessive, critical, jealous and cruel as any ordinary couple. The rages, the slamming doors, the silences, the dissembling. Each was for the other a treasured object of gossip and complaint. In spite of his inclinations, the drama was of man and woman, a genetic dissonance so like the marital howlings one could hear floating up from the courtyard or creeping up and down the rusty fire escapes....' Attached but unmarried, Hardwick accompanied Greer as he made nightly forays in search not of men but of jazz. And in the jazz clubs on West Fifty-second Street—'Swing Street'—in the early forties she became acquainted with the 'great performers...'

Lowell's first marriage, to the novelist Jean Stafford, had not ended amicably, and he was already suffering from severe manic-depression.... Hardwick and Lowell were married in Lowell's parents' house in Beverly Farms. Hardwick told Ian Hamilton, 'He wanted to do it, and I wanted to do it. I don't think it was a very happy occasion for anybody else.' And for the next twenty-eight years Hardwick nursed and advised and supported Lowell through repeated breakdowns. He was committed to Payne-Whitney for depression shortly after their honeymoon. From the clinic, Lowell wrote to his new bride, 'Dearest, dearest, dearest Lizzie. I think of you all the time, and worry so about all I have dumped on you. We are going to work it all out, dear, be as wonderful as you have been.'

She saw him through four major manic-depressive episodes during the first four years of their marriage. In 1957, their daughter, Harriet, was born. Throughout the marriage, Hardwick suffered through Lowell's infidelities, which usually precipitated periods of breakdown. Describing to Hamilton the end of an affair that Lowell had had with a dancer in 1965, Hardwick recalled that the woman retaliated by 'sending Lowell a lot of bills with demanding notes,' and that 'he dropped them on the floor, and I picked them up and paid them.' This gesture—heartbreaking in its propriety and dutifulness—also has a great deal to do with a by now *arcane notion of fidelity*: Hardwick had chosen Lowell, and she accepted responsibility for that... [Italics added]

'Of course I suffered a good deal in the alliance,' she told me, 'but I very much feel it was the best thing that ever happened to me. An extraordinarily original and brilliant and amazing presence, quite beyond any other I have known.' And Lowell, unlike many brilliant and demanding husbands, respected his wife's mind and her work. In a *Paris Review* interview conducted by Darryl Pinckney and published in 1985, Hardwick states, 'On the whole, Cal was encouraging....' Lowell's deep emotional commitment to Hardwick never diminished. In 1977, after he left Blackwood and returned to Hardwick, they spent the summer in Castine, Maine, in a house that had been left to Hardwick by a relative of Lowells. That fall, he returned to England to collect some of his things. In a cab on the way home from Kennedy Airport, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

In 1979, Hardwick published what remains her most widely read book, the gorgeous *Sleepless Nights*. In it, she explored a hybrid genre: fiction written in the form of a meditative essay. Hardwick told me that she loved writing *Sleepless Nights* because it allowed her not only to fictionalize aspects of her own life but also to quote writers she loved and weave them into the fabric of her story. Elizabeth, the narrator, is a reader who has always been consumed by literature. She says of her life, 'It certainly hasn't the drama of: I saw the old, white-bearded frigate master on the dock and signed up for the journey. But after all, "I" am a woman.' What follows is a string of impressionistic reminiscences—of a gentlemanly pervert in Kentucky, a self-absorbed lover in New York, a formidable washerwoman in Maine, a philandering doctor in Amsterdam.

The primary relationship in the book is that of the protagonist to us, and yet Hardwick constructs the book so that Elizabeth nevertheless remains at a distance, her irony intact. This is no 'tell all'; she is merely lending herself to us for a while. At times, these intimate glimpses are almost unbearable as she flirts with the reader's curiosity; at the end of one chapter, she casually adds, 'Goodbye? I have left out my abortion,

left out running from the pale, frightened doctors and their sallow, furious wives in the grimy, curtained offices on West End Avenue.' Even so, the voluptuous shapes and textures of her sentences continue to seduce us."

Hilton Als
New Yorker (13 July 1998)

"This dense, compressed, singular work was described when published in 1979 as a novel. It bore, however, a peculiar relation to the genre. It was a novel without a plot, with a protagonist who shared the name of its author, and whose successive circumstances followed the known contours of Elizabeth Hardwick's life; a novel that could allow itself to move in any direction in time that it chose, that could shift its attention from one person or situation to another as abruptly as a filmmaker might splice together two incongruous images; a novel that seemed to declare the impossibility of separating itself from life, yet admittedly one 'seeming to be true when all of it is not.' ('A good deal of the book,' Hardwick stated in an interview at the time, 'is, as they say, "made up".') *Sleepless Nights* might be taken as an exploration of the problem of genre, the problem of distinguishing fiction from what is so coarsely described as 'nonfiction,' except that the book is more like a demonstration that the problem is illusory.

The book inhabits that divide in so inevitable a fashion as to dissolve what was then--and is often still--perceived as a natural barrier. The norms of fiction, the reader of *Sleepless Nights* might well conclude, are after all a construction, or at least a superfluity: Since to live is to make fiction, what need to disguise the world as another, alternate one? At the same time strict reportage, with its prohibition against invention, imposes its own aesthetically intolerable demands. *Sleepless Nights*, an alchemical tour de force, reports by inventing and invents by reporting. It continues to remind us how the novel can become richer by permitting itself the resources of essay, journal, memoir, prose poem, chronicle. It is a commonplace that every book needs to find its own form, but how many do?

Sleepless Nights enlarges on Hardwick's earlier novels (*The Ghostly Lover* and *The Simple Truth*) by allowing itself the structural and stylistic freedoms of her literary essays. For Hardwick the essay has always been a form allowing for sudden transformations. Frames dissolve; writers become characters; characters reenter the world as independent beings; real events assume the stylization and symbolic weight of scenes in novels. There is a constant interpenetration of the fictive and the experienced. A description of the last days of Dylan Thomas has the density found in some ancient chronicler--Plutarch or Tacitus--whose every sentence has a ring of calm fatality: 'The people near him visited indignities upon themselves, upon him, upon others. There seems to have been a certain amount of competition at the bedside, assertions of obscure priority. The honors were more and more vague, confused by the ghastly, suffering needs of this broken host and by his final impersonality.' Discussing Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* in her famous essay 'Seduction and Betrayal,' Hardwick does not merely allude to or analyze *Clarissa* and Mr. Lovelace but rather allows them the scope of living beings, discontented forces escaping from their fictional frame: 'Words are her protection. Her cries to heaven go out in the next post. Her powers are not perfect, but they reduce the insuperable Lovelace to rape, the most unworthy resource. Are they lovers, or opponents? They have furiously, curiously tested each other and the consummation is death.'

Writing--part of life and yet not of it--is the medium that permits movement through, across, beyond. In *Sleepless Nights*, the narrator begins: 'It is June. This is what I have decided to do with my life just now.' It is life, then, that we hold in our hands: real time, the actual room in which the words--"This work of transformed and even distorted memory"--are being written. The past will be made part of the book--the past is what the book is all about--but only by being incorporated into the present moment in which one word is added to another. All that has been or might have been real once will be made into an object. 'If only one knew what to remember or pretend to remember. Make a decision and what you want from the lost things will present itself. You can take it down like a can from a shelf. Perhaps.' In that 'perhaps' is the whole art of *Sleepless Nights*. The experiences that are evoked, described, brought to life, are at the same time shown to be words, tokens, emblems. The book stands for everything that is not the book, that could never be in a book. The building up of a world in prose is countered by its equally meticulous dismantling, until we are left with--what, exactly? This object, this structure that haunts as much by what it leaves out as by what it contains.

She writes of her mother: 'I never knew a person so indifferent to the past. It was as if she did not know who she was.' Omission here is description, more faithful than the fruits of careful research could be: it is life with the blanks left in, and all the questions that flourish in those blanks. Unanswered, unanswerable questions are a recurring feature of the book. The prose often finds its resolution not in a full stop but a question mark. Both novel and memoir are conventionally expected to provide definite answers--who really did what and what finally became of them and what it meant. *Sleepless Nights* is more comfortable--indeed, can only be comfortable--among uncertainties, insufficiencies, unsatisfyingly partial or obstructed views. Billie Holiday appears (the real Billie Holiday, and it was at this point that one began to gauge how unlike other novels this was), intimately penetrates the lives of others, but is not, finally, to be apprehended: 'The mind strains to recover the blank spaces in history and our pale, gray-green eyes looked into her swimming, dark, inconstant pools--and got back nothing.'

The collage-like texture is crucial. To fill the gaps--to explain the connections--would be a betrayal, a papering over of those breakups, those ruptures of contact which in some sense are the point. The paratactic laying-out of details--in Kentucky the 'wrinkled, broken jockeys with faces like the shell of a nut,' in Manhattan the affluent young couples 'taking off the stoop so that drunks cannot loiter, making a whole floor for the children to be quiet on'--stripped of connective material becomes a kind of music, punctuated by aphorism and tiny anecdote, a music suitable for emphasizing patterns of recurrence and points of no return, the way the rhymes of lives and neighborhoods and eras can turn, on a dime, into stark asymmetry. Whole towns, years, marriages are fitted into a paragraph or two. Juxtaposed, the paragraphs form a map, a grid of spatial and temporal relations within which the narrator exists. We thought we were exploring a single life, and are brought to see that no life can be single, that anyone's solitude is dense with the imagined solitude of others.

The book is as much a questioning of the first person as of genre. The most intimate self-portrait might turn out to be a sketch of someone else, built up out of glimpses, rumors, imagined secrets, fragmentary admissions: bachelors, maids, radicals, adulterers. Just at the point in its arc when a reader might expect the book to move inward, it moves outward into the contemplation of other lives. Thus it is a novel after all and not a memoir, but a novel that searches for ways to describe the shapes of lives without having to recount each of them step by step. The search is overt; *Sleepless Nights* is among other things an essay on the difficulties, emotional and technical, of undertaking such a work. The reader is enlisted to participate in that search and those difficulties--and thus to share the exhilaration of finding a form adequate to express 'the tendency of lives to obey the laws of gravity and to sink downward, falling as gently and slowly as a kite, or violently breaking, smashing.'

We come upon paragraphs that might be notes toward a taxonomy of situations and responses. 'True, with the weak something is always happening: improvisation, surprise, suspense, injustice, manipulation, hypochondria, secret drinking, jealousy, lying, crying, hiding in the garden, driving off in the middle of the night.' Who needs the three-hundred-page novel if a paragraph or two can carry its essence, in the same way that a fragment of memory--an exchange of glances at a party, a mistimed joke--can stand in for years of experience? Embedded in *Sleepless Nights* are a hundred potential novels, swarming milieus compacted into gists: 'Weaknesses discovered, hidden forces unmasked, predictions, what will last and what is doomed, what will start and what will end.' An immense Balzacian chronicle held in the palm of the hand: such a possibility makes novel-writing a fresh enterprise, capable of foregoing thickets of plot development, all the better to get at the live moments that plots are built from.

In the end we are left with an extraordinary apprehension of all that is elusive, haunting, unrecoverable in the human past and, simultaneously, of something proportioned, fixed and flexible in shape, an object to be contemplated: the book, or more precisely this book. What the book cannot hold is lost, and even what it can hold is lost, but the book is not lost. In some sense *Sleepless Nights* asks the impossible of writing, that it share in the life of which it is made, that it remain unfinished, that the door stay open. The result is an object at once open and closed, mysterious and fully articulated: a book written in the form of a life."

Geoffrey O'Brien
Introduction
Sleepless Nights

(The New York Review of Books 2001)

"It is impossible to write about Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights* without writing about Elizabeth Hardwick. The novel--if it can be called a novel--is the story--if it can be called a story--of a woman named Elizabeth. She is a writer, a Southerner, born and bred in Kentucky, as was Hardwick. She spends much of her adult life living in an artist's studio on West Sixty-Seventh Street, and summers in Maine, as did Hardwick. She is divorced--'I am alone here in New York, and no longer a we' (51)--as was Hardwick, who was famously married to, then not married to, then reunited with the poet Robert Lowell just prior to his death.

Before her marriage, she shares quarters and a tempestuous friendship--a '*mariage blanc*'--in New York City's Schuyler Hotel with a young homosexual man from Kentucky, as did Hardwick. 'He was quite handsome, but also soft and rounded and as determined against sports as if he had been born with a handicap. But one year he began the recreation of himself in a daily horrible contest with barbells, push-ups and excruciating exercises. And slowly the neck thickened, the chest expanded, the muscles of the arms were visible...by enormous effort, he finally succeeded in looking like the others.' (38) Hardwick and her friend spend time with Billie Holiday--a time she describes in a 1976 essay in *The New York Review of Books* that contains many descriptions and details, sentences ('One winter she wore a great lynx coat and in it she moved, menacing and handsome as a Cossack, pacing about in the trap of her vitality') that are identical to the corresponding scene (p. 33) that she later wrote as fiction in *Sleepless Nights*.

Why does this matter? Gotcha? Hardly. Hardwick, one of the great critics and intellectuals of her time, and a founder, along with Lowell, and Jason and Barbara Epstein, of *The New York Review of Books*, openly defied genre. As a critic, she was less interested in theory than in what the critic Denis Donoghue called a 'working psychology' and this psychology--the shape of a mind, thinking--is what shapes *Sleepless Nights*. Incandescent, elliptical, challenging, her language itself is the story, and the question of what is true and what is invented, what is fiction and what is memoir--arguably one of the more tiresome literary questions of our current day--pale against the excitement of watching Hardwick's formidable (and at times hilarious) mind at work. Reading *Sleepless Nights*, we are absorbed, not by the momentum and velocity of story, but rather, by the fascinations of inner life.

Action, Aristotle once wrote, is not plot, but merely the result of pathos. And pathos itself is what forms *Sleepless Nights*. Pathos does not exist in a temporal reality. Nor is it linear. It moves along a poetic circuitry that creates itself, much the way consciousness creates itself. 'If I want a plot,' Hardwick once commented in a *Paris Review* interview, 'I'd watch *Dallas*.'

And so these layers, transparencies, of the fictional Elizabeth laid atop the real Elizabeth are like the layers of time and place that make up *Sleepless Nights*. We are led into a fretting, sleepless mind occupied by its agitated turning, a life expanding and collapsing upon itself so that it's all playing out at once. Hardwick's mind is a bit like her beloved New York, which she describes in terms at once acerbic and nostalgic: 'The Hotel Schuyler is gone now. Uncertain elevators, dusty "penthouse" suites, the greasy, smoking ovens of "housekeeping units," the lumpy armchairs--a distracted life, near the Harvard Club, *The New York Times*, the old Hotel Astor, the Algonquin, Brentano's. In the halls you would sometimes hear a baby crying--child of a transient--and it was a sound from another world. The irregular tenants were most pitiful when they received visits from relatives, from their ex-wives, their grown children. They walked about sheepishly then, as if they had met with an accident. Soon the disappointed sons and daughters left, wives went back home, and at the Schuyler, free once again, our people returned to their debaucheries, their bills, and that stain of life-giving paranoia--limited, intact--each one wore like a tattoo.'

Aside from the sheer joy of reading a writer who nails character the way Hardwick repeatedly does (I confess several times, while reading, I found myself grateful that she never had the opportunity to turn her gimlet gaze on me) it's striking too, that the vanishing city of which she writes has since been painted over by several generations of ever-vanishing cities. Brentano's has been shuttered for years, not to mention Scribner's, B. Dalton, and The Doubleday Bookshop--all within a few blocks that now teem with tourists getting good deals at Prada. The old Hotel Astor has faded from memory. Even *The New York Times* has moved to a soaring tower a few long blocks west. Institutions. You can't count on them. And yet,

Hardwick's city--New York, 'with its graves next to its banks' (50)--is at once a ghost, and alive as it ever once was. 'A brilliant night outside in New York City. It is Saturday and people with debts are going to restaurants, jumping in taxicabs, careening from West to East by way of the underpass through the park.' (108)

It is only fitting that this literary excavation of the pathos of interior life should contain, near its end, the phrase 'the battered calendar of the past.' Indeed, the entire slim volume is a battered calendar, its pages flipping back and forth as if by a gusty wind. The experience of reading *Sleepless Nights* is a profoundly intimate one. Hardwick will never read these words, but I wanted to do her proud. I hoped to apply my 'working psychology' to hers, and in so doing, add a layer to the ongoing, ever-evolving, edifice of transparencies, as soaring and beautiful somehow as real as her New York--or mine--or the cities still to come. No matter. 'In truth,' she writes, 'moments, months, even years were magical. Pages turned, answering prayers, and persons called out, Are you there? The moon changed the field to the silvery lavender of daybreak!'

Dani Shapiro
danishapiro.com (1 January 2014)

"Needs hurt. *Sleepless Nights*, with its swells of feeling, chains that hurt to history. The novel, published when Hardwick was in her sixties, casts a clarifying light on the essays, as the fiction goes further into the mind that made the prose. *Sleepless Nights* attempts, with delicate lapses, to tell the story of "Elizabeth": her blue-collar beginnings in Lexington; her distant, pretty mother; and her brief dalliance with the Communist Party before her escape to literary New York.

But the novel flies beyond Hardwick's particular life to relay the fates of those who touch her: people groping at their comforts but strapped to their defeats, defeats that correspond, with punitive exactitude, to their place in the world. A pompous radical is discarded by his benefactress. A mother is punished for her devotion. A Holocaust survivor is helpless in love. Billie Holiday--with whom Hardwick, fresh from Kentucky, had a few strange, radiant encounters--is shown being swallowed by the excesses that she rapturously poured into art. The poor of Kentucky dream, with desperate justification and life-regulating passion, of a socialist future, "under the quilts and under a blanket of papers, as if the old *Daily Workers* could give the body warmth, like rags."

History bursts in savagely, crashing into the psychic furniture, and you realize that the lapidary Hardwick, Hardwick the wit, Hardwick the idiosyncratic critic and long-suffering wife, are mere facets on the diamond. She strove, quietly, to deploy a political conscience, to remain a woman in thrall to the wrenching, poignant relations between things, someone sensitive to sharp reversals and delicate rearrangements--sensitive, that is, to style.

A whole chapter of *Sleepless Nights* is given to working-class women who scrub, cook, serve, age. In many ways, it is a book about the poor. When I think of cleaning women with unfair diseases I think of you, Josette. When I must iron or use a heavy pot for cooking, I think of you, Ida. When I think of deafness, heart disease, and languages I cannot speak, I think of you, Angela. I hear murmurs of Selma, of feminism, of revolution; I hear the sighs of Dorothy Wordsworth and the ragged screams of Watts. People thrashed by circumstance and fleeced by systems are the muses of Hardwick's novel of depletion. She wanted to call it *The Cost of Living*."

Tobi Haslett
"The Cost of Living"
Harper's (17 December 2017)

"There are books that enter your life before their time; you can acknowledge their beauty and excellence, and yet walk away unchanged. This was how I first read Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights*, after it was recommended in David Shields' 'Reality Hunger,' a thrilling manifesto that tries to make the case that our contemporary world is no longer well represented by realist fiction. While I loved *Sleepless Nights* on that first read--it is brilliant, brittle and strange, a book unlike any preconceived notion I had of what a novel could be--I moved on from it easily. I've lived two thousand and some odd days since, read

hundreds of other books and published three of my own, all in a bright, hot landscape of somewhat-realist fiction.

The middle of the night has become a lonely stretch of time, especially in the past few years, with vastly increased anxiety--over climate change and politics and what lies in wait in my little sons' future. I normally salve insomnia with reading, but few new books have felt so revolutionary or so brave as to be able to rock my tired brain to attention. Only the great ones remain: George Eliot's infinite wisdom in *Middlemarch*, Jane Austen's gracious and low-stakes sublimity, Dante's *The Inferno*, which makes our world above seem downright kind. And strangely, of all the books I have reread to comfort myself, I have turned most often to Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights*, not without a little bitter tang of irony because of its title. The book didn't dovetail with my heart on the first reading, but the world has changed around me, and now I find myself hungering for its particularity, the steady voice of Elizabeth Hardwick's balm to my aching, vulnerable mind.

Elizabeth Hardwick grew up in Kentucky, a charming young woman with a dagger of a mind. She left for New York City after college and took up with the *Partisan Review* crowd, becoming best friends with Mary McCarthy and writing for *The New York Review of Books* from its inception. [She also *founded* it, with others.] *Sleepless Nights*, her third novel, is unambiguously her *chef d'oeuvre*; it was published when she was 63, after a career of writing sharp, ingenious pieces of criticism and after her long marriage to (and divorce from, then reunification with) the poet Robert Lowell, whose profound psychological struggles and infidelities and plagiarism of Hardwick's letters in his books must surely have tested her strength. As a result, *Sleepless Nights* feels elemental, an eruption of everything that had been slowly building up over decades. Though there are books that are distant kin to it--Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*--I have read nothing close enough to be called a sibling. This is rare; a feat of originality.

Sleepless Nights brings the profound gift of plotlessness, as it is organized more like a piece of music than like a traditional novel, with its long slow build of themes and lives; as such, you can open it to any chapter and start to read, just as you can play movements from a symphony out of order without damaging the experience of letting individual movements pour over you. You can put the novel down at 3 a.m. and toddle off to bed, then pick it up in a different place a week later, and be carried away by its voice and description and sheer astonishing linguistic power and flexibility.

In the novel, our protagonist, also named Elizabeth, is seen only out of the corner of the eye, not as the focus or subject of the book, but rather as the one who draws an outline of herself through precise and laserlike observations of the places and the people she has loved. In her review of the novel at the time of publication, Diane Johnson called it a 'work of negative capability.' It is also a vision of a radical new kind of writing, one suited to a woman's body and language and experience outside of the primarily masculine narrative tropes of the past.

It slowly occurs to the reader that Hardwick is developing her own sharp vision of a female narrative mode in her work: fragmentary, allusive, shifting in its layers of time, sharp as a Fury's whip. Most of the subjects of her memories are women: Elizabeth's Kentuckian mother who'd had nine children, with her 'round, soft curves, her hair twisted into limp curls at the temples, her weight on the stepladder washing windows, her roasts and potatoes and fat yeast rolls; and her patient breathing in the back room as she lay sleeping in a lumpy old feather bed.' From New York City of the 1940s, Billie Holiday walks seductively into the text, 'glittering, somber and solitary,' a woman singing her own oracular doom. There is a loyal, ravaged Irish housekeeper in Boston named Josette, whose 'grayness was filled with light and it is an embarrassment to speak of one so good.'

From *Sleepless Nights*, I have moved on to other Hardwick books, particularly to her essays, which never fail to dazzle with their lightning-bolt insights and cool clarity. Her book *Seduction and Betrayal* is an early feminist consideration of literary history, a passionate and conflicted and exhilarating tour through the mind of a critic who seems to know absolutely everything. Hardwick's own great passion was reading: in her *Paris Review* interview, she said that 'in reading certain works, not all works, I do sometimes enter a sort of hallucinatory state and I think I see undercurrents and light in dark places about the imagined emotions and actions.'

Darryl Pinckney writes gorgeously of his friend, saying that 'She believed in the masterpieces and defined a genius as someone who cannot be imitated but who somehow leaves the literary landscape changed,' and that 'she thought a flawed work often had more to teach us,' than a perfect one does.

Elizabeth Hardwick has become a friend, although she died before I could meet her. I delight in her wit and intelligence, and find her criminally underappreciated by bookish people, perhaps because she is subtle, and because her light beams outward into the world, not back to illuminate herself. She shows us the many ways of being a human, if we could only look harder and love more deeply all that we're seeing.

There is such sympathy in Hardwick's fleeting glances; it feels that each character, writer, or book she considers is held, for a moment, in her generous yet unsparing palm. Her sympathy extends all the way to the exhausted reader, the heartbroken reader, the reader who, like *Bartleby*, would prefer not to engage with the world, the reader who is too frightened or anxious or weary or sick; this reader too is carried along with Hardwick's fine intelligence. With Elizabeth Hardwick as a guide, for a minute or for along white night, one can almost forget the darkness pressing in."

Lauren Groff
New York Times (26 July 2018)

"I am sure I did not find this novel--and the presence in it of Elizabeth Hardwick--as endearing as some readers will. But I think that's my fault. Elizabeth Hardwick is an American Virginia Woolf, concerned with peripheries and with making them near-central. Woolf's diaries are the closest thing I've read to *Sleepless Nights*. (Particularly Part Nine, which deals with Josette and Ida and Angela, Hardwick's--as far as I can tell--cleaning ladies.) And Woolf's diaries are one of my favorite books to go back to.

Sleepless Nights is an odd construction. Not always, I think, deliberately so. I wouldn't say it's fragmented so much as not assembled. If it's a novel, it doesn't concern itself with a central character's gradual development. It is about a writer looking and writing. She looks well, and she writes even better. She makes of her little more than enough. 'Oh, M., when I think of the people I have buried, North and South. Yet, why is it that we cannot keep the note of irony, the jangle of carelessness at a distance? Sentence in which I have tried for a certain light tone – many of those have to do with events, upheavals, destructions that caused me to weep like a child.' That's an encapsulation, offered by Hardwick, on the penultimate page. For the tone of the book, nothing could be more accurate than 'the jangle of carelessness at a distance.' And there are many sentences where you stop and think, 'That couldn't be bettered.' Even when they seem not to connect with what goes before or after....

What flows within the book takes place as set pieces. Some of these are astounding. Part Three, about Billie Holiday is one of the best written portraits I've ever read. 'The sheer enormity of her vices. The outrageousness of them. For the grand destruction one must be worthy. Her ruthless talent and the opulent devastation. Onto the heaviest addiction to heroin, she piled up the rocks of her tomb with a prodigiousness of Scotch and brandy. She was never at any hour of the day or night free of these consumptions, never except when she was asleep'....

Often Elizabeth Hardwick writes by compiling list after list of objects or attributes. There was an artwork I once saw, in the reception of Penguin Books. It was a vast sheet of paper, about the proportions of A4, listing every noun in *War and Peace*. At moments, with adjectives and attitude, *Sleepless Nights* resembles a Manhattan version of that: 'Skirts and blouses and jackets of satin or flowered cloth, Balkan decorations, old beads, capes, shawls, earrings.'

Probably, you would need to know a lot more about the details of Elizabeth Hardwick's life and influences to know where to place this as a work (published 1979). But I avoided finding out, because I wanted to take this book by itself. It is fascinating and sad, drab and brilliant. I am sure it's better on the fifth reading than the first. But I'm not sure what it's about, apart from watching lives disintegrate, and trying to integrate what one has seen of that into sentences."

Tobylitt
tobylitt.wordpress.com (11 February 2019)

"*Sleepless Nights* reads like a blend of autofiction, memoir and prose poetry. 'All chorus and no plot' is Hardwick's assessment of Virginia Woolf's fiction, which might seem like a bit of cheek when you read her own novel, *Sleepless Nights*, first published in 1979.... She sets out her stall right from the start, in a dreamy, declarative style reminiscent of James Salter: 'It is June. This is what I have decided to do with my life. I will do this work of transformed and even distorted memory and lead this life, the one I am leading today.' Her memory drives itself on details, on colors and textures ('Pastels blue as a sea and green as the land...luminous, aristocratic, tropical faces'), and the associative quality of memory means that multiple times lines stack up together to be riffled through. The result is a dense work that needs to be savoured. So compact is the model that in one short passage, where a flat mate is introduced on one page and killed by a car accident ('an ecstatic terrorism') on the next, we feel the grief of the lifelong bereaved. Each chapter is like a novel in itself, an imperfect miniature, built with sentences you could live in and explore for years. In the end what *Sleepless Nights* proves is that, from critic to novelist, Hardwick can indeed stand toe to toe with the great 20th century Modernists. It's a relief to have her back."

John Self
Irish Times (17 August 2019)

"Within the first few pages of *Sleepless Nights* the narrator writes of her fondly remembered, now long-deceased, mother: 'I never knew a person so indifferent to the past. It was as if she did not know who she was.' It's an unsentimental, matter-of-fact kind of assessment of a life which, having failed to be the occasion of much self-examination in its possessor, is now dwindling unhindered into a soon-to-be-forgotten past. Hardwick's narrator--and fellow Elizabeth--doesn't fault her mother for this dimly lit sense of self or lack of strongly asserted identity. Rather, in much the same way that she and her many siblings respond to their mother's prodigious childbearing by offering up a singularly low birth rate of their own, she simply adopts a fundamentally different approach.

Sleepless Nights--first published in 1979 when its author was sixty-three, renowned and respected as one of the preeminent writers in her field--stands in polar opposition to this maternal model of the deserted self and, most particularly, of the deserted female self. There is no confusion of ipseity [selfhood] or incoherence of purpose. This is a narrator who knows who she is and, pretty much, how she got to be that way. The resultant, restive narrative is a deep delve into the processes of her thinking as she sleeplessly rolls back and forth across ideas, memories and conclusions. For the reader it is this encounter with a formidable mind, working hard, mapping the journey from its root consciousness through a myriad of perceptions and recollections out into the physical world--where it may, or may not, allow itself to be changed by what it finds--which forms the spine of pleasure that holds the fragmented narrative together.

Hardwick's narrator cares to see rather than be seen by the world. And just as we are privy to her innermost thoughts on whatever her perception casts itself across, so she also holds in scantily clad contempt those too blinded by their own self-interest to see themselves, or their actions, with anything other than the most blistering truth. At the same time her empathy, and sympathy, for the harshly endured lives of many of the women her gaze falls upon is without question. Even if powerless to comfort them, her careful witness is an act of respectful recognition the like of which most have been denied for all of their turbulent, difficult lives. What matters is that she sees them and the manner in which she makes us see them, and herself, is significant too. Her selection of a dislocated narrative mode only increases the reader's sense of absorption into her late-night multiverse.

As one of the great literary critics of her era, arguably of any era, Hardwick had little truck with the perennially voguish notion that literary fiction should spend less time thinking and more time devising convoluted plots. On being quizzed about the absence of the twists and turns of genre in her work, she replied: 'If I want a plot I'll watch *Dallas*.' This understanding that plot and story are not the same, that plot is not appropriate to every narrative while story is indispensable to all, propels the book forward and permits a richer, more satisfying exploration of her subjects to take place. So, although there are chapters here, paragraph breaks, section ends etc., there is no real reason for them. The narrator's thoughts follow their own insomnia-infused logic, jumping easily across space and time, connected only by the slimmest of associative threads.

This disinterest in a rigid delineation of form also filters through into the book's content. While published as a work of fiction, *Sleepless Nights* contains many verifiably autobiographical elements: Hardwick was born into a large family in Kentucky. She did move to New York and live there in a *mariage blanc* with a young gay man. As a writer, she did hold a place at the centre of the literary world. In real life she spent time with Billie Holiday and, famously, did fall 'out of the commonest of plurals' to become 'no longer a *we*' when the poet Robert Lowell left her after twenty-three years of marriage. That said, however, the novel still remains too formally and intellectually promiscuous to be consigned either to the cul-de-sac of 'auto-fiction' or the imaginative straitjacket of memoir. It is certainly the case that many of the places she personally knew--the Kentucky of childhood, the inherited house in Maine, the fraternity sofa upon which she spent a 'woeful night' and the scuzzy yet transformative delights of her beloved New York 'with its graves next to its banks'--are all present and correct.

Present also are the people she knew, liked and loved in those places: parents, friends, old lovers who bitterly claim 'only those women with money can violate the laws of probability,' the aforementioned Billie Holiday with her 'murderous dissipation' and 'luminous self-destruction,' the neighbor for whom poverty 'came like a bulldozer' and the incestuous bourgeoisie of intellectual Amsterdam--not to mention the stream of ill-fortuned maids. And we mustn't leave out her abortionist, who afterwards handed her a card for his funeral business. She fixes him there in time along with the rest of them, although, tellingly, he's the one she nearly forgets. The reader's impression is certainly that these beautifully, humanely drawn portraits are of actual people with whom her path has crossed. That they have lived and struggled in their own right, beyond the cliché to which they might so easily have been condemned. 'Society tries to write these lives before they are lived.' Hardwick says, 'It does not always succeed.' Neither does she fall into that trap. Her descriptions of them are absorbingly sensual and contain the kind of linguistic tactility that might easily lull the lazy or sentimental into reading every aspect of the novel with the foreshortening expectation of finding merely autobiography there.

If a verifiably historical record was what Hardwick had wanted to create, however, there's no reason to suppose she would have been coy about carrying it out. Although, for example, her divorce from Lowell is obliquely referred to, his ruthless appropriation of material from her personal letters to him in the year afterwards, and its subsequent appearance in his published work, remains unexcoriated. Indeed, when read in the light of such intimate betrayal, *Sleepless Nights*' unwillingness to engage in any score settling or setting straight of the record is nothing short of remarkable and, for hungry wound-hunters, doubtless a disappointment. While the book does possess a quality of allowed intimacy, verbatim reports of unpleasant happenings are not what are preoccupying Hardwick's busy mind as it ranges around its night thoughts. If anything, her antipathetic response to Lowell's aggressively specific 'Yet why not say what happened?' might be contained in her very different question: 'Can it be that I am the subject?' perhaps this is a latent shade of the maternal self-desertion showing through or it may, more simply, be the rejoinder of a woman who has made a self for herself and therefore finds that self under no obligation to prove anything to anyone. Either way, the immobility of the literal and factual is too restrictive for Hardwick. For her sum of a life's acts is far too insufficient a calculator of value, or meaning, to warrant the effort required to catalogue them.

Fittingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Hardwick chose to remain both ambiguous and ambivalent on the issue of autobiography in *Sleepless Nights*. In response to Darryl Pinckney's 1985 assertion--in an interview for the *Paris Review*--that the novel had 'the tone of lived experience, of a kind of autobiography' she replied: 'I guess so. After all, I wrote it in the first person and used my own name, Elizabeth. Not very confessional, however. And not entirely taken from life, rather less than the reader might think.'

Hardwick may have kept her own counsel on the specifics rather than reduce her work to an oversimplification of itself, or because she had no wish to be subjected to the type of forensic personal intrusion to which artists of all stripes are now routinely expected to submit. Most likely, however--as she writes in the penultimate paragraph of *Sleepless Nights*--it is because: 'Sometimes I resent the glossary, the concordance of truth, many have about my real life, have like an extra pair of spectacles. I mean that such fact is to me a hindrance to memory.'

Attempting to shoehorn *Sleepless Nights* into a single, readily identifiable form is as ridiculous an exercise as it is unnecessary. It is as much a novel as a letter, a letter which has become an essay, an essay certainly more than a memoir, and a poetic chronicle of time, thought and the inventive capacity of memory far greater than any of these categories alone can contain."

Eimear McBride
Introduction
Sleepless Nights
(Faber & Faber, London 2019)

ANALYSIS IN DETAIL

Sleepless Nights (1979) is an experimental Impressionist novel underrated by critics who require a novel to be conventional, rather than novel. In the midst of the "second wave" feminist revolution that began in the 1960s promoting the independence and self-realization of women, the female narrator-protagonist embodies feminist concerns but not the dogmas nor animosity of later radical Feminists. The narrative is experimental primarily in replacing a linear plot with a gradual holistic revelation of her sensibility that generates suspense and is most impressive for its poetic style and wit, as in her symbolic compressions: "This is New York, with its graves next to its banks."

Her first name is Elizabeth but no surname is given, encouraging the reader to see her story as only partially autobiographical. In the tradition of Realism, she is not merely an individual. She presents herself as a social type, a term used several times by Hardwick, as she continues to "strain toward the universal." Elizabeth is "one who stands for the whole," representing the younger generation of women who have, in contrast to her mother and other women in the past, "a singularly low birthrate." Unlike the author, who had a daughter, the protagonist has no children and seems driven to accomplish something that will compensate for rejecting a traditional female role. Like childbearing, marriage also is problematic: "Husband-wife: not a new move to be discovered in that strong classical tradition." Even a married woman may find herself in "a state of dominating dependency." Homosexuality seems no better, though she lives with a gay man for awhile--"as obsessive, critical, jealous and cruel as any ordinary couple." The one lesbian she describes lived "a nightmare of betrayals, lies, deceits, shocks, infidelities, dismissals." All considered, "To be single and busy--nothing bad in that. Such people do much good."

All her letters are addressed to M except one addressed to "Mama," one addressed to her "Folks" and one she only imagines to her homosexual friend J after he got killed in an accident. She begins the last page of the novel with "Oh, M." as if the whole narrative has been addressed primarily to her mother not only in the letters but in her mind apart from them, then she reinforces the identity of M at the beginning of the next paragraph with the word *Mother*. Elizabeth's letters contrast her life to that of her mother, who was born in Mecklenberg County, North Carolina, the place of the Mecklenberg Declaration of Independence in May 1775, but who is not a rebel, she is a traditional, even archetypal woman: "My mother's femaleness was absolute, ancient..." She had *nine* children. Contrary to the Feminists, she said "It did not make me miserable, if that's what you want to know."

Her mother is not a bourgeois conformist of the 1950s under the dominion of "The Patriarchy," she is willingly "under the dominion of *nature*," with a "natural acceptance" of the traditional female role [italics added]. Elizabeth loves and admires her mother but does not want to be like her, especially when she thinks about relations with men: "No, no it was impossible that it was the same." It is also impossible because she is a creative intellectual, very different from her mother by nature. What she chooses to do with her life is just as natural as what her mother does with hers. Elizabeth's love of the natural is expressed in her love for her mother, her love of a man, her rescue of the dog chained in the alley, and the motif of her gardening and house plants. At the same time, she depicts human nature and victims of circumstances with the resignation common to disillusioned reformers.

"It is June." Ironically, the novel opens in the month associated with weddings, whereas Elizabeth has been abandoned by her husband, though some readers would be unaware of this. A reader aware of it would be looking for the evidence. For the latter, the novel is a tease until the end, when it turns into a successful literary seduction. She opens with confident determination: "This is what I have decided to do with my life just now. I will do this work of transformed and even distorted memory and lead this life, the

one I am leading today." This is *Existentialism*, popular among liberal New York City intellectuals when Hardwick joined them in the 1940s: She asserts her *free will* as an *independent* woman and *creates herself* with her *decisions* in *commitment* to a *project*, the writing of *Sleepless Nights*, "this work of transformed and even distorted memory." On the last page of the novel she suggests that she was motivated, or provoked, to write it as she did by resentment at the "concordance of truth, many have about my real life"--by the common fixation on gossip: "I mean that such fact is to me a hindrance to memory," that is, to the creation of a work that transforms memory, transcends biography and sublimates fact in art. Fact is merely literal, whereas memory transformed into literature is a figurative transcendence of the world--and often a sublimation of suffering. Elizabeth is like her roommate Louisa: "No one was more skillful than she in the confessions of an insomniac.... Her hypnotic narration is like that of some folk poet, steeped, as they say, 'in the oral tradition'."

In the first paragraph of the novel her crocheted bedspread is the metaphor of a life representing the past and a future she hopes to avoid, made by a "broken old woman in a squalid nursing home." The colors pink and blue evoke the genders in symmetrical order and gray the inevitable aging and death of us all, introducing major themes. "More beautiful" to her are the disorderly sights and sounds of her favorite city, though she is poor and "this is no city for poor people." Just as her husband had affairs with other women, Elizabeth has affairs with other cities (without hurting anyone), traveling to Marseilles, Coblenz, Rome, Amsterdam, and Boston on page two. In flight, she voids herself: "When you travel your first discovery is that you do not exist." This is a symptom of self-effacement rather than transcendence.

Her suppressed grief over abandonment tilts her observations of human types toward the negative: The adulterous Dr. Z is "the eternal husband." Bartenders are "watchful, stubbornly crooked, resentful, silent thieves." This tendency is epitomized in her depiction of the legendary black singer Billie Holiday when she identifies temporarily with the suicidal celebrity's cynicism: "Only a fool imagined that it was necessary to love a man, love anyone, love life." Throughout the novel, there is "Beauty formed out of negatives," like the singing of Billie Holiday. For another example, Elizabeth's self-criticism exhibits the beauty of virtues--humility and dedication to the truth: "In my heart I was weasel-like, hungry, hunting with blazing eyes for innocent contradictions, given to predatory chewings on the difference between theory and practice"--in reference to her friend Alex's inauthentic Marxism.

Her reading of many books--"all consumed in a sedentary sleeplessness"--has been unsupported by the real life experience she seeks in travel and in exploring cities and human lives. She defines her intellectual orientation with quotations and allusions to writers including Goethe, Nietzsche, Borges, Shakespeare, Pasternak, Heine, Cabell, Verlaine, Mann, Proust, James, Hawthorne, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Voltaire, Dr. Johnson, Henry Adams, Balzac, Dumas, Gibbon, Koestler, Sartre, T. S. Eliot, Kafka, Donne, Maritain, Rousseau, Descartes, and Motley. *Sleepless Nights* belongs to a literary plot tradition as old as western civilization: A youth journeys from the countryside (Kentucky) to the city (New York) in quest of worldly success has been a recurrent plot since the origin of the novel in ancient Greece. In the 17th century Benjamin Franklin's version of the plot in his *Autobiography* established the myth of the "self-made man" and heralded "the American Dream." Since the 19th century the Horatio Alger "rags to riches" formulation of the plot has been a mainstay in popular entertainment. A liberated young woman goes to New York to succeed in the world is the latest version: "She will have an apartment, a lover, will take a few drugs, will listen to the phonograph, buy clothes, and something will happen."

The snow in Boston brings some peace, "like a great armistice." But she remains at sea in her soul with an iceberg under the surface. Courageous in her circumstances, she writes this novel as a discipline of grace under pressure, in the phrase of Hemingway, a transcendence of self in writing about herself. For rather than feel sorry for herself, as Feminists do, she feels sorry for others: "Have mercy on them, someone." The first victim is the "idiot man" in an alley who "keeps a dog on a chain, day and night... In the interest of the dog I call the police." However, most of the people she writes about are victims of Nature and themselves and cannot be helped by the police. She dreads being kept on a chain herself. There is something of her in most of the women she describes, even the call girl Miss Chad-wick that Miss Hard-wick lives with for awhile: "Complicity entwined us and her smile came back to me as if I were looking in a mirror." "Store clerks and waitresses are the heroines of my memories, those ladies cast off with children to raise" [also like Hardwick]. At the same time, "I have always, all of my life, been looking for help from a man." She

succeeds without one, as represented by the novel she writes, except insofar as it derives from the anguish caused by "him who has left," forcing her to become more independent than she cares to be as evinced by her reference to "events, upheavals, destructions that caused me to weep like a child." This novel is therapy for her. "Don't you see that revision can enter the heart like a new love?" The last page is poignant, as if in her confession to her mother she inwardly bursts into tears.

Elizabeth acknowledges the social oppression of women, but she does not complain. She does not blame society, she is elated by "the joy of New York" and embraces the city for "its generous accommodation of women." She feels "afraid of the country night" and is more comfortable among the masses--"the millions in their boroughs--that is truly home." And again, "A woman's city, New York," a statement immediately followed by a description of bag ladies on the streets. Unlike Fitzgerald, she does not idealize wealth--though "the rich in their pyramids have a nice time"--nor women, who have in New York both "more chances to deceive the deceitful" and more chances to use charge cards. She contrasts her life with that of the broken old woman in a squalid nursing home who crocheted her bedspread: "More beautiful is the table with the telephone, the books and magazines, the Times at the door, the birdsong of rough, grinding trucks in the street." Like Dreiser and Fitzgerald, Elizabeth is infatuated with cities. In American literature, New York has been allegorized as a Hell by writers from Melville to Caroline Gordon, but to the liberated woman represented by Elizabeth, New York is "the holy city." Elizabeth was religious when young in Kentucky--"I accept Jesus Christ." But God is absent in her secular New York, where in the tradition of Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*, success has replaced salvation as the goal in modern life. "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."

Also absent is Robert Lowell, ironically. He is the iceberg under the surface, the subject she avoids. Lowell had died in 1977 and at the time of publication in 1979, many readers of the novel were curious about how Hardwick would render Lowell's frequent infidelities, his recurrent mental breakdowns, his betrayal and desertion of her and their daughter after 23 years of marriage, and his publishing falsified versions of her letters. She accepts his outrages with grace by largely reducing him to a pronoun: An old lady gave "us" the farm in Maine. "It came to us, especially to him who has left, as a refuge." And "When we first moved to 67th Street... Come and see Miss Cramer in her car, I would say to my husband." She has "tried for a certain light tone" when writing about her life while married to Lowell--which "caused me to weep like a child." She suppresses self-pity until, finally, on the last page she confesses that this whole novel has been written in torment: "O you could not know / That such swift fleeing / No soul foreseeing-- / Not even I--would undo me so!" The novel ends with this revelation that her loss is the cause of her insomnia, of her need to talk to someone. The two Elizabeths fuse in this confession that she herself belongs to the community of victims she has depicted. Her pity for them and for humanity in general enlarges as the reader becomes one of those she "must talk to throughout the night." She once said, "I love to be known by those I care for." Above all her virtues as a writer, Hardwick was known by her faithfulness and forgiveness in caring for Robert Lowell, in spite of his cruelty. He died in her arms and she remained charitable to him in her novel as well as throughout her life, still caring for him in death.

Hardwick's wit and poetry are expressed in abundant Impressionist similes and metaphors: "beds tigt as a bandage"; "lidded turkey eyes"; "the open canvas flaps of conversion"; "The halo of invalidism rose over her brow"; "She dangled on his arm like a black shopping bag"; "the lascivious gardenias, worn like a large, white, beautiful ear"; "the splendid head, archaic, as if washed up from the Aegean"; "the sister, coarse and homely as an old boot"; "her life was all about love and disillusionment, as if she had been a courtesan rather than a scholar"; "the hearse of love"; "the cautious hinges are squeaking out a sort of accusation"; "Arguments are like the grinding of rusty blades"; "Monogamy drifted about him--the scent of a hot iron on a shirt collar"; "This odd harness of habit held him in a vicious embrace"; "it is a look without seeing, just like two mirrors exactly placed on opposite walls"; "She drew on cigarettes as if they were opium, an addition to the opium within her, the narcotic of her boredom"; "the feeling of falling into a well of disgrace"; "New alliances among this restless people were like the rearrangement of familiar furniture"; "A rush of heat enters the town like the roar of motorcycles on Sunday"; "Every great city is a Lourdes where you hope to throw off your crutches but meanwhile must stumble along on them"; "One corner would be deserted, as if an entire side street had turned off its lights and closed its eyes"; "I am looking out on a snowstorm. It fell like a great armistice, bringing all simple struggles to an end."

Hardwick's most unique stylistic distinction is her gift for Expressionist phrases: "the fierce pessimism of experience"; "seizures of optimism"; "a savage suspicion of destiny"; "martyrdom to detail"; "violent perfume"; "ferocious hope"; "furious incredulity"; "frozen alarm"; "theatrical eyelids"; "cigarette eyes"; "vigilant passion"; "malicious splendor"; "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"; "The mobile home, the large box, resting on its plot, asleep, dreaming of the road, dreaming of being pulled along forever, someplace beyond."

As illustrated by this last sentence with six commas, by its emotional rhythms and the voice they create, Hardwick has what might be described as a feminine as contrasted to a masculine style: mostly subjective rather than objective, freely expressing her feelings--especially on the last page--rather than suppressing them as in Hemingway. Hardwick is one of the few fiction writers who developed a distinctive personal style. She often uses sentence fragments lacking verbs--receptive and passive rather than assertive--and she frequently deviates from the straightforward momentum of "masculine" subject-verb-predicate sentence structures dominant in writers such as Hemingway and Gordon. The cumulative effect throughout a novel of rhythms generated by sentence structures often becomes more obviously feminine or masculine. Feminists resent these terms, but in literary analysis such distinctions transcend gender, they are aesthetic. For example, Henry James had a feminine style very different from Hardwick's. Also feminine are Hardwick's jumps from one subject to another often without contexts--her abortion is mentioned almost in passing. The meanings implied in narrative jump cuts from one situation to another are often feelings evoked through juxtaposition rather than or as well as ideas. Elizabeth is able to render and evoke feelings in relation to others while suppressing her own deepest feelings until the end. Once a reader learns on the last page what those feelings are, the novel deepens poignantly.

Sleepless Nights is Postmodern in some of its moral implications, in its fragmentation of sentences and narration, and in calling attention to its artifice: two Elizabeths self-consciously writing the same novel. Yet the novel is also Realistic, the opposite of Postmodern, because it sustains a convincing illusion of real life and seeks the truth. Postmodernists do not believe in truth or consensus reality. The novel is Modernist in its intellectual orientation, literary allusions, respect for religion, universality, egalitarianism, transcendence of self, coalescence of mind and Nature, images as revelation, nonlinear structure, openended conclusion, techniques including understatement--"the iceberg principle"--unique individuated style, and synthesis of literary modes, in particular Impressionism and Expressionism.

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