ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF ELIZABETH HARDWICK

(1916-2007)

"I love Elizabeth Hardwick's sentences. They're strange and wayward. They avoid the point. Sometimes they are specific, but often they grow soft-focused and evasive at the crucial moment. They fuzz out by adopting a tone at once magisterial and muffled. When I was writing a biography of Andy Warhol, I told myself, 'Imitate Elizabeth Hardwick.' By that advice, I mean: be authoritative but also odd.

How to explain or summarize the Hardwickian tone? It offers tenderness where another critic might offer trenchancy. Its every gesture is gloved. From her introduction to *The Susan Sontag Reader*: 'Essays lie all over the land, stored up like the unused wheat of a decade ago in the silos of old magazines and modest collections. In the midst of this clumsy abundance, there are rare lovers of the form, the great lovers being some few who practice it as the romance this dedication can be.' Strange syntax that second sentence has. Admire, in this opening salvo, her articles, their offer of a misleading specificity. 'Essays lie all over the land...' Which land? Another piquant 'the': 'like the unused wheat of a decade ago...' Her use of 'this'--article? adjective?--astounds: 'this clumsy abundance'; 'the romance this dedication can be.'

From her essay 'Wives and Mistresses,' In *Bartleby in Manhattan*: 'The famous carry about with them a great weight of patriarchal baggage--the footnotes of their lives. Footnotes worry a lot. They, loved or unloved, seem to feel the winds of the future always at their back. The graves of the greatly known ones are a challenge to private history...' Everything here is tone, sonorous yet gracefully stumbling, a tone cemented by judicious, generous articles ('the famous,' 'a great weight,' 'the footnotes of their lives') and by weird, sudden personification, a metaphor coming alive without warning: 'Footnotes worry a lot.' I savor, too, the insertion of the appositive 'loved or unloved' immediately after the 'They' of the second sentence: "They. loved or unloved, seem to feel...' Divorcing 'they' from 'seem,' she inserts 'loved or unloved' like a great raw piece of beef soliciting our appetite.

In her later work, her effects grew bolder. The following, from a 1999 review of Andrew Morton's *Monica's Story*: 'The shabby history of the United States in the last year can be laid at the door of three unsavory citizens. President Clinton: shallow, reckless, a blushing trimmer; Monica Lewinsky, aggressive, rouge-lipped exhibitionist; Judge Kenneth Starr, pale, obsessive Pharisee.' Hardwick's art lies in the immortal, cruel epithet, the wine-dark sea of precise excoriation. Final example, from her novel-which-is-not-a-novel, *Sleepless Nights*: 'Every morning the blue clock and the crocheted bedspread with its pink and blue and gray squares and diamonds.' No verb. She means: 'Every morning I wake up to confront the blue clock and the crocheted bedspread.' But she omits the seeing, knowing 'I,' and she omits the verb. Every morning the blue clock gives forth the bleak yet solacing fragrance that is the Elizabeth Hardwick sentence, worth our careful study."

Wayne Koestenbaum
"Elizabeth Hardwick's Sentences"
My 1980s & Other Essays
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2013) 93-94

"On taste. When I cannot find the right tone and tenor in my writing, when it seems that a measure of control is wanting, or rather a kind of control that might well lead me to a place where I can relinquish the same, I turn to the essays of Elizabeth Hardwick. She is better known for her influence on and her presence in certain literary contexts than for her own accomplishments, which are not many, nor various, but undeniable in wisdom, intensity and style. Hardwick was a crucial presence for sure: the wife of Robert Lowell, in which capacity only the phrase 'long-suffering' will do; instigator of *The New York Review of Books*, where she published for decades and mentored younger writers; a sharp but generous teacher of creative writing. Her personal charm and pointed opinions were much admired, but she was also a writer of elegant, incising, strangely pitched essays and some fiction, which grew in time very close to her essays.

Introducing one of Hardwick's essay collections, Joan Didion wrote of her 'eccentric rhythms' and 'the extreme gravity of her remembered world. I found her late, a few years after she died in 2007. I've read many, not all, of the essays, and there is one, the first thing of hers that I read, whose fractured rhythms and peculiar phrases I cannot get out of my head.

Hardwick had published two novels by the time her first essay collection, *A View of My Own*, appeared in 1962. It contains an extraordinary essay on the decline and death of Dylan Thomas, in which she crystallizes the sadness and resentment that marked the poet's final days:

> 'He died grotesquely like Valentino, with mysterious, weeping women at his bedside. His last months, his final agonies, his utterly woeful end were a sordid and spectacular drama of broken hearts, angry wives, irritable doctors, frantic bystanders, rumors and misunderstandings, neglect and murderous permissiveness. 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 horrors were more and more vague, confused by the ghastly, suffering needs of this broken host and by his final impersonality.'

Here are the outlines of the Hardwick I love. In a sense this is a conventional, melodramatic, quite familiar scene. The story of Thomas's alcoholic decline, the punishing complexity of his relationships with women--all of this had already been told when Hardwick wrote the essay in 1956, and would be rehearsed again many times by critics, biographers, journalists and the scriptwriters of TV biopics.

Hardwick gives us the terminal scene, but there are other things going on in this opening paragraph, and they have to do with style and the special ability of a biographically inflected critical essay to reflect at the level of its cadences and textures, its precise but unpredictable word choices, its deliberately awkward punctuation, something of the emotional intricacy and the accusing ambiguity of its subject. Hardwick's paragraph is certainly 'well written,' which means: quite oddly written, but subtly so. Consider the admirable opening sentence: 'He died, grotesquely like Valentino, with mysterious, weeping women at his bedside.' Sonically, musically, it is a straightforwardly beautiful sentence: the rhyme and more between 'died' and 'bedside,' the 'i's in 'Valentino' and 'mysterious' elongated into the double 'e' of 'weeping,' the keening sound (and look) of 'mysterious, weeping women' slowing the sentence's progress toward the image of the deathbed. We may imagine, without their being named, the roles and characters of those women, the regrettable cliches that apply: intimates, and admirers perhaps with aspirations to intimacy, or with some secret hold on the dying poet unknown to the others. The sentence performs its role perfectly, reminds us of a lineage of literary deathbeds. There is enough assonance and alliteration to remind us also of Thomas's poetry itself. Hardwick admired the prose of poets: 'I like the offhand flashes, the absence of the lumber in the usual prose...the quickness, the deftness, confidence, and even the relief from spelling everything out, plank by plank.'

But isn't there something peculiar about the placing of that first comma? When I read the essay for the first time--and reading it now I must remind myself that this is not what it says--I thought Dylan Thomas had died grotesquely, like Valentino. But that is not it, or not quite: the grotesquerie belongs not to the death itself, or not only, but to the resemblance--in death. Thomas was *grotesquely like Valentino*. The distinction may seem subtle, hardly worth making; except I suspect Hardwick of pausing over the comma's placement, suddenly aware that the mere parallel of the two deaths--poet and silent star, both loved by many women, though the poet a little more bafflingly--was not enough: what truly appalled was the fact one could, in fact must, set these men alongside one another in the first place. In the condensed scenography of the opening sentence, in other words, it is not just Dylan Thomas's fame and his womanizing that Hardwick wishes to remark on, but the fact the poet courted such an end, in his private and public life, and squandered his talents at the last in personal melodrama. Further, Hardwick knows, must know, that reeling the comma back a notch does not rid us of the expected sense--the one I mistakenly settled for at first. She gets to have the seamlessness and its subversion.

On sentences. In 1976, Hardwick published in *The New York Review of Books* a recollection of her youthful friendship with Billie Holiday. There is a version of it in Hardwick's novel *Sleepless Nights*,

published three years later, but it is far inferior, the strangeness of tone in the essay considerably smoothed out and in the process the intensity of the original traduced. (This is saying something, because *Sleepless Nights* is still an extraordinary piece of work: a half-essay to which I've gone back sometimes daily, in search of the *echt* and elegantly energizing Hardwick edge.) The prose in this piece seems to me perfectly to justify Benjamin's claim that the greatest sentences are those in which the whole having been perfectly composed and polished, some element has been botched or excised.

Listen for a spell to Hardwick as she describes the New York of the 1940s in which she and her gay male roommate got to know the singer:

> 'The small, futile shops around us explained how little we know of ourselves and how perplexing are our souvenirs and icons. I remember strangers to the city, in a daze, making decisions, exchanging coins and bills for the incurious curiosities, the unexceptional novelties. Sixth Avenue lies buried in the drawers, bureaus, boxes, attics, and cellars of grandchildren. There,blackening, are the dead watches, the long, oval rings for the little finger, the smooth pieces of polished wood shaped into a long-chinned African head, the key rings of the Empire State building. And for us, there were the blaring shops, open most of the night, where one could buy old, scratched, worn-thin jazz records--Vocalian, Okeh, and Brunswick labels. Our hands sliced through the cases until the skin around our fingers bled.'

Hardwick's skill with such texture and detail is impressive: if her prose achieved only *this*, it would still be worth reading. She is expert in certain violent sorts of image. Here she is describing a young trumpet player (it is probably Joe Guy) with whom Holiday was then involved: 'He was as thin as a stick and his lovely, round face, with frightened, shiny, round eyes, looked like a sacrifice impaled upon the stalk of his neck.' Or recalling Holiday's coiffure: 'And always the lascivious gardenia, worn like a large, white, beautiful ear.... Sometimes she dyed her hair red and the curls lay flat against her skull, like dried blood.' There is a strain, also, of ironic exaltation. Holiday's huge dogs, always present, are 'like sculpted treasures, fit for the tomb of a queen.' As an admirer and hanger-on of the perennially 'over-scheduled' performer, 'one felt like an old carriage horse standing at the entrance, ready for the cold midnight race through the park.'

But another sort of language--it's hinted at already here in the 'futile' shops and 'perplexing' souvenirs--interrupts the measured progress of her comma-bound clauses towards that last sentence, which is naked and sharp and clean of all punctuation but its period. Once she begins to write about Holiday herself, Hardwick sounds otherwise--her syntax starts to stagger, her word choices loom eccentrically, the sentences sit alongside each other as if they have nothing to do with their neighbors. ('His sentences do not seem to be generated in the usual way; they do not entail,' said Susan Sontag of Walter Benjamin, a writer with whom you might say Hardwick has nothing else in common--though there is something more than a little Benjaminian about those record collector's fingers grazed on antique sleeves and nicked by the edges of old shellac.) There are vexing repetitions and sly inversions: 'She was fat the first time we saw her, large, brilliantly beautiful, fat.' In her most dismally concise image, Hardwick writes regarding Holiday's death: 'The police were at the hospital bedside, vigilant lest she, in a coma, manage a last chemical inner migration.' The commas begin here to do more than practical work: they mark some hesitation before the singer's deathbed and the abuses visited on her at the last. And 'lest she, in a coma, manage...' has more force than 'lest, in a coma, she manage...,' even if it sounds a deal less graceful. And it is still graceful."

Brian Dillon
Essayism: On Form, Feeling, and Nonfiction
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STYLE IN *Sleepless Nights* (1979)

Hardwick's wit and poetry are expressed in abundant Impressionist similes and metaphors: "beds tight 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." There is an elegiac undertone throughout the novel generated by recurrent evocations of death.

One trick of Hardwick's wit is hyperbole, exaggeration or incongruity that renders the effects of feelings on perceptions, as in some of her Expressionist phrases, her most unique stylistic distinction: "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--Elizabeth's 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, open-ended conclusion, techniques including understatement--"the iceberg principle"--unique individuated style, and synthesis of literary modes, in particular Impressionism and Expressionism.

Michael Hollister (2020)

The explanation for Hardwick's appeal has something to do with that old blade critics like to flash around: *style*. Not so much a word but a way of separating. Certain writers are said to have it, others not. If we take the term, at minimum, to mean something on the order of "deviance" — a

swerve from the usual manner of expressing things — then Hardwick was flush with it. Her prose is occasionally so stylish that it does not make sense. Words melt into misshapen mental impressions, sentences lose track of themselves, meaning smears in different directions. Of the great stylists with whom she is often grouped like Sontag, Janet Malcolm, Joan Didion, Cynthia Ozick, Renata Adler — all of them women alive at midcentury, who lived in New York, and published both essays and fiction, or something in between — none is more strange than Hardwick.

Here is an opening sentence from *The Uncollected Essays*: "Our country, from the first a vast transcendental diaspora under the celestial protection of two oceans, in the thirties fell heir to, by way of unprecedented disasters, a radiance of genius." I am curious if any readers, without knowing the subject of the essay, can, with a single read, determine what Hardwick is talking about. (Personally, I could not.) We are accustomed to introductory sentences that invite us into the home of an essay, that entice or orient or welcome like a vestibule. But here, our host has dropped us into a room that is pitted with commas, dependent clauses, unusual modifiers ("transcendental diaspora"), some decently antique language ("from the first," "fell heir to"), the meaning of all of which is suspended until the last echoing phrase (note the slight assonance: rad*iance*, g*enius*). Not to mention the classically disorienting Hardwickian metaphor: "the celestial protection of two oceans."

The sentence is knotted and halting and vague. It seems less interested in conveying a particular idea than in imposing a mood. Hardwick often begins her paragraphs this way. From another essay in the forthcoming volume: "A gray Sunday afternoon, smoky light, and a sanctified drawing between our rivers East and West, a quiet except for the sacrificial athleticism of the joggers, running or preparing to run in the park, as a rabbit out of its hutch will surely hop off." Here we have one of the most recognizable signatures of Hardwick's style: the dropped verb. The arrangement of static images, a slightly frozen atmosphere.

I am curious why Hardwick, now, has become an object of such attention. What about this style of hers, this body of work — why has it become so ripe in our own time? She is not what can be called a "neglected" writer. She published widely in magazines and literary journals and newspapers — *The New York Review of Books*, *Partisan Review*, *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *Harper's*, *The New Yorker* — her books were abundantly reviewed across America and Europe; she was routinely given awards, invited to sit on panels, and praised. And yet there is an air of neglect that clings to her reputation, that creates a certain mood of heroism and rescue to the recent slate of books.

Hardwick was born in 1916, in Lexington, Kentucky. She grew up in a neighborhood on the north end of town where poor and working-class families, Black and white, lived side by side. Lexington had a population of around 40,000 at the time and was known for thoroughbred racing and tobacco. Hardwick was not enthusiastic about the cult of racing, though many of her early memories revolve around skinny jockeys and horse farms, the large feathered hats worn by women to the tracks, "the tranquil curve of the empty grandstands."

Her mother, Mary Ramsey, was from North Carolina and of Scotch-Irish descent; her father Eugene was from Lynchburg, Virginia, and owned a plumbing and heating business. Both of them had been orphaned at an early age, and neither went to college. The eighth of 11 children, Hardwick seems to have groped her way toward a literary education with little resistance or encouragement. Her siblings became cashiers, plumbers, and beauticians; one of them was a race horse owner, another a director of a playground, another a post office clerk. But as a teenager, Hardwick was drawn to the public library on the corner of Gratz Park.

In 1934, she enrolled at the University of Kentucky and, despite having a strong appetite for politics — she thought of herself as a Trotskyist — she rigorously avoided student associations and clubs. (It's worth listening to her talk about this period through the University of Kentucky's Oral History Project, if only to hear her voice, which is often described as a Southern "drawl" but stands out for being distinctively genteel and wry; there is an amused exasperation in her tone

that's hard to not hear in her writing once you've heard it spoken.) When she wasn't busy reading *Partisan Review*, or working her way through Goethe and Proust, Hardwick liked to spend time with the other English majors, drinking whiskey and talking about books. Her favorite professor was a man named Francis Galloway, who taught a survey of poetry and prose beginning with Milton. He introduced her to 17th-century literature and the Metaphysical Poets — John Donne, in particular — who T. S. Eliot had helped bring back into vogue. It was the subject Hardwick would choose for her PhD at Columbia in New York, where, after getting a master's degree in Kentucky, she went in 1939 on a Greyhound bus.

Hardwick's life from this point, until 1980, is more well known and well documented, largely because living in New York as a writer involves writing about being a writer in New York, and being surrounded by other writers who are writing about the same thing — or at least correspond about this shared fate. The 1940s were important years for Hardwick: she dropped out of Columbia (the thought of authoring "some dull little textual thing" no longer appealed); she starting publishing stories in literary magazines (*New Mexico Quarterly*, *The Yale Review*, *The Sewanee Review*); and saw the publication of her first novel, *The Ghostly Lover*, in 1945, which attracted a letter from Philip Rahv and brought her into the circle of *Partisan Review*. She met Robert Lowell in the summer of 1947 at a party in Rahv's apartment.

There is a feeling of inevitability that seems to build in Curtis's biography, as we see Hardwick turn down a fellowship to LSU, where it so happens Lowell and his then-wife Jean Stafford would go a few years later. Hardwick then moves North, getting her first novel reviewed by Gertrude Buckman (someone with whom Lowell had an affair), and then reviews Stafford's novel *Boston Adventure*. The orbit gets smaller, a centrifugal force operating on them as they move toward each other. By the time Hardwick and Lowell start dating in 1948 at Yaddo, the artist's colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, their relationship seems almost fated in its mirror opposition: Hardwick, the critic and novelist, the daughter of a plumbing and heating contractor, one of 11 children; Lowell, a poet, an only child of *Mayflower* stock, "born under the shadow of the Dome of the Boston State House." Hardwick, a Southerner who moved North, aspired to be a New York Intellectual, and fell in with the crowd at *Partisan Review*; Lowell, a Northerner who moved South, apprenticed with the Southern Agrarians, and gained a lifelong Southern accent. Hardwick, small, thin, and graceful. Lowell, large and disheveled. It was "as tho a bear had married a greyhound," he wrote.

In the stacks of American libraries, there is usually a shelf, somewhere, sagging with books about Robert Lowell. Biographies, critical studies, surveys that present his poetry in the sweep of a broader literary moment. With Hardwick, there might be a novel, a collection of essays or two, and a few of the volumes for which she has written introductions. But in the way of scholarly essays, biographies, PhD dissertations even — the sustained attention of other people — there has been almost nothing, until recently.

Curtis says at the outset of her book, in a stand-alone author's note, that she plans to only mention Lowell insofar as it is necessary. But for more than two-thirds of the biography, between the moment when Lowell arrives on stage in 1947 and dies in 1977, it's rare that a page goes by without some mention of "Cal." It would be nearly impossible to write a biography of Hardwick without him. He was not only her close companion and husband but also the chief source of her anxiety and woe. The manic upswings, the depressive crashes, the prolonged and repeated hospitalizations, the affairs, the ranting and raving, the management of his finances, all of it culminating in what amounted to the greatest wound in Hardwick's life, according to her: *The Dolphin*, a Pulitzer Prize–winning book of poems that Lowell published after their divorce, not only documenting his affair with Caroline Blackwood, an Irish writer and Guinness heiress, but effectively thieving and altering quotations from Hardwick's letters for his own artistic needs.

Part of the challenge for Curtis, and for any biographer of Hardwick, is that she was not merely overshadowed by Lowell but oftentimes hid behind him. A visit to the Hardwick Papers at the Harry Ransom Center reveals how much she scrubbed and pared down her own legacy, ensuring that hungry researchers and disciples would have little to work with. Across seven boxes of

material, a substantial portion of it concerns Lowell. There is more than half a box just dedicated to condolence letters written to her after Lowell's death. When it comes to what would seem like the meatiest part of the archive, Hardwick's drafts — which, from what we know about her process, sometimes involved six months of writing and revising one 15-page essay — we are only permitted to see near-final typescripts with light changes of tense, occasional cross-outs and emendations. Unlike Lowell, the arch "confessionalist," Hardwick was not someone who wanted to be known — or at least not by us.

Much of what we learn about her in the biography involves a certain everydayness, not the flashing of a brilliant mind at work. She is getting surgery on her middle toes or dealing with bacterial illnesses. Other days, it's leaky roofs and squirrels, packing and unpacking, acquiring furniture and handling suitcases. This is the stuff of life; I am not faulting Curtis for including it (especially if this is all we really can know about Hardwick). But the regrettable impression one gets from the biography is that Elizabeth Hardwick is not exactly worth knowing. The complexity and interestingness of her writing seems to exist at a mysterious remove from her life, which is lived by a person who, at least on record, spends a lot of time gossiping, griping, and scolding other people. By one student, she is remembered for her "appetite for malice." Another says that her teaching style was not "particularly suited to nurturing a promising talent." In social settings, she is often "[l]ubricated with martinis," or drunk on wine, and quarreling with aristocrats or berating people over dinner. One starts to wonder: where is the person who the poet Derek Walcott once described as "more fun than any American writer I have known"?

The other question that the biography never answers, and which feels crucial to any accounting of a literary life, is: Why does Hardwick matter? Or rather, why has she mattered to so many people? Even if the book is not a so-called "literary biography," and is just a biography of a literary figure, it still seems incumbent on the biographer to go beyond the "benign lump of fact," as Hardwick called it, and to find a way toward a spirited engagement with the main source of drama in her life: the writing itself.

With Hardwick's short stories and essays, Curtis tends to summarize them, and then give telegraphic appraisals (bad writing is "heavy-handed," good writing is "timely" or "gorgeous"). But she does not engage with Hardwick's much-admired style. The biography is much more interested in stances. There is a diligent accounting, for instance, of her troubled relationship to feminism, and her concern for the poor and working class.

From the earliest short stories onward, Hardwick wrote about the lives of waitresses and maids and the condemned, displaying what she once described as "a prying sympathy for the victims of sloth and recurrent mistakes, sympathy for the tendency of lives to obey the laws of gravity and to sink downward." She was put off by "the moral numbness" of art that turned away from poverty and suffering. Having grown up in Lexington, she recalled the "legal lynchings" that took place in front of the local courthouse and developed a lasting attention to the pain and struggle of Black life in America. Engagements with race in her nonfiction ranged from her first piece in *Partisan Review*, about Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, to a string of essays in the 1960s on the "revolutionary ecstasy" of the Watts Rebellion, on Selma, and on the death of Martin Luther King Jr.

Hardwick was more inconsistent in her treatment of women. *Seduction and Betrayal*, her most celebrated collection of essays, was published in the heyday of second-wave feminism and yet shares very little of its spirit. (Sontag described it as "the most subtle of feminist books.") In fiction by and about women, Hardwick revered the "silent sufferers" (to use Curtis's phrase). She admired self-sufficiency, fortitude, and endurance. Literature that trafficked in political stunts or graphic sex were artistically compromised and empty. "Subject matter is not what counts," Hardwick said. "It's the radicalization of view and style that matters." This led Hardwick to downplay the role of gender — "Of all the problems writers have, being a woman is the least grave" — or to be utterly denigrating at times. Take, for example, a letter she wrote to Mary McCarthy from Italy in 1973:

What an extraordinary collection of dull people are assembled here. Strangely torpid, aging academics […] And the wives, of all sizes, yet somehow one size in their heads! They mutter about typing His manuscripts, and they have not made one single demand upon themselves, whether of mind or body, and go forth without any effort or artifice as if they were dogs adopted by their *professore*. They are mostly kindly, but there is this thorough acceptance of their nature and they seem to have lived in a world without mirrors. Needless to say the only two women one can talk to at all, and also the only two given to any "dressing" have Ph.D's in their own right. It is a perturbation — the laziness of wives.

It's the cutting remarks likes this one, the almost enthusiastic cruelty, that makes Hardwick's recent apotheosis in the literary world unexpected in some ways. There is an inconsistency and murkiness to her politics; she occasionally signed open letters and petitions, and was something of a news junkie, but a vocal champion of the oppressed? No, not really. Much has been made of her sympathy for the poor, as if to secure her literary saintliness, but when you look at how she actually wrote about the poor, she was sometimes patrician and slightly fetishistic, despite her upbringing. In an interview about *Sleepless Nights*, she spoke of an "unconscious identification with damaged, desperate women on the streets, cleaning women, rotters in midtown hotels, failed persons of all kinds. *C'est moi*, in some sense." This was after decades of employing live-in housemaids and grumbling about them in her letters. It seems hard to imagine our reverence for a contemporary writer who shuttled between the elite precincts of Manhattan and coastal Maine, identified with the working class and poor, made good literary use of their struggle, and yet continued to find women guilty, in part, for their own oppression.

Hardwick once said that she agreed with Sontag's formulation about style, which is that a writer who had it wrote "beyond the useful and necessary." This did not mean that style was decorative. (It was a "consuming essence," Hardwick wrote, "from which morals, politics, vices, and virtues cannot be expunged.") But for writing to be stylish, it had to be autotelic and daring. It could not be angled toward a particular end, a function, a use.

Perhaps this is part of what we relish in Hardwick today, the uncompromising spirit of her work. It is as bewitching and beautiful as it is impossible to edit and difficult to read. "I'm very against editors," she told an interviewer. "Lots of books are really quite transformed by editors, but in my work nobody ever has anything to say. They can't do it any differently than I do it. You have to take it or not." Isn't this the narcissistic dream of writers hunting for a so-called "voice"? To be able to write so singularly that no one can alter or improve upon their writing, much less imitate it?

A different interpretation of Hardwick's popularity, perhaps a more predictable one, would involve a familiar clump of words: material conditions, precarity, branding. There is lots of talk now, in the world of criticism, about how social media, job scarcity, and paltry freelance pay are conspiring to change the way literary critics write their criticism. The compromises are said to involve essays that seem over-inflated with praise, or artificially cruel, or "themed" (i.e., attempting to brand some hidden trend in the contemporary novel) — all of them efforts of exaggeration and misrepresentation, designed to attract more readers online. It so happens that some of these critics are writing more and more like Hardwick. There are similar phrasings and words and syntax; sometimes the very same words, even. But why? Is Hardwick's influence just a symptom of their admiration for her, or possibly suggestive of something else?

Many of Hardwick's essays, taken whole cloth, would be considered unpublishable by some of the same magazines she used to write for regularly. (It is an under-recognized aspect of her career that, as cofounder of *The New York Review of Books*, she had, in Barbara Epstein and Bob Silvers, two very sympathetic editors who encouraged her to write the way she did, and at great length, with very little intervention, for decades.) Perhaps the new interest in Hardwick, then, is a reaction to the perceived irrelevance of long-form literary criticism. What better way to sneer at mass-market fiction and the flat Globish prose of "world literature," say, than to insist on writing like Hardwick: stunningly, unsaleably, and right on the border of the illegible? Are the Hardwickian critics wallowing in their own irrelevance? Resisting it? Or trying to distinguish

themselves from their peers, to write in ever more bending lines of prose, hungering for strange choices of diction and dreamy adjectives that not only delight their sensibilities but attract the notice of new editors, new opportunities? Or do they, like her, believe that literature is the greatest of great things, and that she happened to write about it better than the rest?

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