

ANALYSIS

Poetic Justice: Elizabeth Hardwick's

Sleepless Nights (1979)



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Throughout the wretched summer of 1973, while the Watergate scandal raged, Elizabeth Hardwick was in the limelight as the publicly abandoned wife of the man often touted as America's foremost poet. "I hate the glossary, the concordance of truth that some have about my real life," she complained. "Such fact is to me a hindrance to composition." In June she had in fact begun what she described both as a "novel in progress" and "a sort of short-wave autobiography, one that fades in and out." A four-page extract from it, provisionally entitled "The Cost of Living," was published in the *New York Review of Books* in October. Work in progress is rarely published at such an early state; it suggests that Hardwick wanted her work to be read in the context of Robert Lowell's public exposure of her private feelings.

In the July of that summer, three volumes of poetry by Lowell--*History*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*--had been published simultaneously. The triple presentation took the literary world by surprise. Only *The Dolphin* was entirely new; the first two books contained poems previously published in *Notebook*, revised and rearranged. "I hope...that I have cut the waste marble from the figure," Lowell wrote in a note introducing *History*, portraying himself as the sculptor who refashions life into art. Where some critics were hoping for a radical new form (it had seemed for some time as if Lowell was merely imitating himself); what they found in *The Dolphin* was a radical new formulation. "Half fiction" (as Lowell described it) and half autobiography, it was not quite either.

The poems in *For Lizzie and Harriet*, in their newly arranged form, focused mainly on Lowell's happy family life with Elizabeth Hardwick and their daughter Harriet (though it also contained a sequence of poems about a love affair Lowell had in Mexico), but what did it mean to dedicate one book, in its very title, to an ex-wife and daughter, when the third volume, *The Dolphin*, was all about Lowell abandoning them? Dedicated to "Caroline," whom Lowell had married the previous year, *The Dolphin* describes the break-up of Lowell's marriage to Hardwick, life in London with Caroline Blackwood, his mental breakdown, and the birth of their son Sheridan. Real names are used throughout. Several poems recast passionate letters to Lowell from both Blackwood and Hardwick.

With *The Dolphin* Lowell had exhibited his domestic dramas to the public. It was not the first time Lowell had left Hardwick, very publicly, for another woman. Twenty years earlier, Hardwick had complained to a friend: "He has completely exposed to the world all of our sorrows which should be kept

secret.... I've put on a show to some extent. But he has opened the curtain and let everyone look in." That episode had blown over. This time it had not. Lowell had married and had a child with another woman; worse, he had turned the whole wretched business into art. Hardwick, a novelist and essayist, a brilliant, acerbic critic once associated with the *Partisan Review* group and later one of the founding editors of the *New York Review of Books*, was well known in her own right, but that summer, after twenty-two years of a marriage that was both rich and tortured, she had to endure being refashioned by Lowell into the abandoned woman with the "rapier voice" on the end of the phone from New York.

"An unhappy summer," wrote Hardwick, "and yet not a happy subject for literature." Her story, she was finding, did not lend itself to literary transformation as well as Lowell's had apparently done. She believed it had something to do with the textual construction of women. Passages from her forthcoming book of critical essays, titled (rather pointedly) *Seduction and Betrayal*, appeared in consecutive June issues of the *New York Review of Books* and showed that Hardwick was musing about the stereotype of the abandoned woman in fiction. "Secret sympathy for the man is everywhere in literature," she wrote in the title essay: "Women, wronged in one way or another, are given the overwhelming beauty of endurance, the capacity for high or lowly suffering, for violent feeling absorbed, finally tranquilized, for the radiance of humility, for silence, secrecy, impressive acceptance. Heroines are, then, heroic."

The male protagonist, Hardwick writes, is allowed to be flawed, roguish, and irresponsible. She did not mention Lowell, but he was certainly in her mind that summer. The pronoun "I" struts across his verse-narrative. At the center of *The Dolphin*, musing, writing, reading, loving, and hurting others, is Robert Lowell. (We understand the narrator to be the author, and he mentions his own name more than once.) His situation--the man between two rival women--reminds him of a "movie," a "melodrama." The drama being enacted in his life is, he reflects, one of the oldest in fiction. "One man, two women, the common novel plot" ("Exorcism"). *The Dolphin* is "half fiction"; it is also, he claims, his life. Perhaps addressing both women, he writes: "Fiction should serve us with a slice of life; / but you and I actually lived what I have written. ("Artist's Model") Bolstering his life with fiction, he also bolsters his fiction with the notion of "truth"; "I waste hours writing in and writing out a line, / as if listening to conscience were telling the truth." ("Summer Between Terms")

Autobiographical writing, writes Sidonie Smith, is "one more of those cultural discourses that secures and textualizes patriarchal definitions of Woman as the Other through which Man discovers and enhances his own shape." In *The Dolphin* women--subsidiary figures, congealed in their respective relationships to Lowell--have three roles: the abandoned woman, "woman loving," and woman as mother. Much is made of the desperation of the abandoned woman. Indeed, the way Lowell conflates life and art is strangely sadistic. First he deserts Hardwick, then he observes and dramatizes her anguish, turning it into poetry. Since, Lowell implies, woman is measured in terms of love, the woman who is scorned suffers more than rejection; she feels worthless. Lowell, playing here with the Cogito (traditionally associated with men), is quite clear about this difference between the sexes: "I know what it is for a woman to be left, / to wait in the ante-room of apprehension: / *Inasmuch as I am loved I am--*" ("Exorcism")

More cruel (and controversial) than Lowell's dwelling on Hardwick's humiliation and pain was his colonization of her voice. Various different drafts of *The Dolphin* among Lowell's papers at the University of Texas at Austin show that Lowell changed phrases attributed to Hardwick, yet still presented them as quoted speech. An early draft of a poem, based on an anguished letter from Hardwick, was called "From My Wife": "And that new woman-- / When I hear her name, I have to laugh. / You have left two houses, two thousand books, / a workbarn by the ocean, and a woman / who kneels and waits on you hand and foot -- / tell us why in the name of Jesus." The published poem, called "Voices," replaces "that new woman" with "that new creature"; the "woman who kneels" becomes "two slaves / to wait upon you hand and foot" (Hardwick and Harriet, presumably). In his refashioning Lowell has exaggerated Hardwick's reaction, making her more angry, more resentful, less dignified.

Then there's "woman loving." Here Lowell creates another female stereotype. He has Caroline gazing at her lover's "underjaw" as they make love and reflecting (in quotation marks, though the attitude expressed is certainly Lowell's): "A woman loving is serious and disarmed, / she is less distracted than a pastured mare, / munching as if life depended on munching..." ("Before the Dawn of Woman") Lowell has chosen

an unnervingly debased image to describe a woman in love. Both women are presented as somewhat desperate in their love for him. (One imagines that their desperation in fact mirrors his own.) "In the Mail" conveys Hardwick's devotion from New York: "I love you, Darling, there's a black void, / as black as night without you." And there are anxious letters from Caroline Blackwood, also in quotation marks.

The few *actual* letters from Blackwood among Lowell's papers in Austin give some insight into the way Lowell raked over his private correspondence to turn it into blank verse in *The Dolphin*. Some fragments he took from letters verbatim; at other times he condensed, invented, and embellished to suit his purposes. We find this note from Blackwood, penciled in July 1970, a few weeks into their new relationship, after Lowell, suffering what had more or less become an annual manic-depressive breakdown, was admitted to a London nursing home: "Darling Cal--I think about you every minute of the day, and I love you every minute of the day.... I know it is better if I don't see you or speak to you until your attack is over even though I really long to and without you everything seems hollow, boring, unbearable. I still feel as if I am under some kind of emotional anesthetic and can't plan or think. But that will change. I feel in an odd way and against obvious appearances that everything is going to be alright."

In *The Dolphin* the whole of the poem "Marriage" is within quotation marks: "I think of you every minute of the day, / I love you every minute of the day; / you gone is *hollow, bored, unbearable*. / I feel under some emotional anesthetic, / unable to plan or think or write or feel; / *mais ca ira*, these things will go, I feel / in an odd way against appearances, / things will come out right with us, perhaps." Several other letters confirm that Lowell kept close to the originals and at the same time qualified Blackwood's prose, made it *his*."

Finally, there is woman in her maternal glory. The mother, too, is reduced to a type. "Why are women a fraction more than us?" is the opening riddle of the poem Lowell--with a wink to male readers--calls "They." Civilization, he tells us, relies on "the mothers of its children." "Knowing" conveys the ease and irresponsibility of paternity and the sense of pride Lowell feels in his family's male dynasty. Addressing Caroline (not yet his wife), Lowell is thinking of his grandfather: "when his son died, he made his grandchildren plant trees; / his blood lives, not his name.... We have our child, / our bastard, easily fathered, hard to name... / illegibly bracketed with us. My hand / sleeps in the bosom of your sleeping hands.... / you carry our burden to the narrow strait, / this sleepless night that will not move...." ("Knowing")

"Knowing" was bound to remind Hardwick of the poem "Man and Woman" in *Life Studies*, published in 1959, ten years into their married life and dedicated to *her*. "All night I've held your hand," Lowell had written. "Sleepless, you hold / your pillow to your hollows like a child." Hardwick, with her pained sense of life's ironies, may well have taken her own eventual title, *Sleepless Nights*, from these two poems.

Lowell's attitude to motherhood is clearest in the poem "Flight." His airplane flight to New York is also a flight from his infant son: "Born twenty years later, I might have been prepared / to alternate with cooking, and wash the baby-- / I am a vacation-father." Lowell treats his own flaws with boyish indulgence. His talent for transforming responsibility, or even reproach, into beguiling innocence is demonstrated by another letter among his papers--this one from Adrienne Rich, once a close friend of his. When she heard about his new life in England and his decision to become a father again at the age of fifty-four, she wrote to him: "Men and women are having such a hard time with the intense fragility of their own relationship that adding a complication seems foolhardy, except perhaps for the very young, who don't know what it's like."

In "Overhanging Cloud," Lowell gives Rich's words, which obviously marked him, a different twist. An earthy, sensuous poem about the advent of baby Robert Sheridan in their life, the image of a bed of hay imbues the scene with a Nativity innocence: "This morning the overhanging clouds are piecrust, / mile long Luxor Temples based on rich runny ooze; / my old life settles down into the archives. / It's strange having a child today, though common, / adding our further complication to / intense fragility.... / By ten the bedroom is sultry. You have double-breathed; / we are many, our bed smells of hay."

During the summer of 1971, Lowell showed the *Dolphin* manuscript to various American friends passing through London. The news of his work in progress reached Hardwick, as he must have known it would. She was upset about the use she heard he was making of her letters, cables, and telephone calls.

Lowell wrote to her: "My story is both a composition and alas, a rather grinding autobiography, what I lived, though of course one neither does or should tell the literal or ultimate truth. Poetry lies. I'll send it to you if you wish (when it's in neater shape), you won't feel betrayed or exploited but I can't imagine you'll want to scrape through the sadness and breakage now."

Was his poetry "lies" or "truth"? Elizabeth Bishop suggested it was the combination that was pernicious. Thomas Hardy, she told Lowell, described "the mixing of fact and fiction in unknown proportions" about someone who is dead as "infinite mischief." "Lizzie is not dead, etc.--but there is a "mixture of fact & fiction," and you have *changed* her letters. That is "infinite mischief," I think....aren't you violating a trust? If you were given permission--IF you hadn't changed them...etc. But art just isn't worth that much."

Prepublication responses anticipated those to come. Stanley Kunitz told Lowell that certain details seemed to him "monstrously heartless." Mary McCarthy, who had heard about the poems but not seen them, wrote to Hardwick: "I think he might have made the sacrifice, for the time being, of these poems. But Cal is not a sacrificing man, least of all, I suppose, where his poetry is concerned, which means more to him than any people. People in fact are sacrificed to *it*, to keep the flame burning. It is a Jamesian subject, I guess--the Moloch-artist."

Lowell, in an attempt to "blunt and angle" the use he made of Hardwick's letters, decided to change the chronology of certain events. He told Frank Bidart, "Even fairly small changes make Lizzie less a documented presence." He added, "The terrible thing isn't the mixing of fact and fiction, but the wife pleading with the husband to return--this backed by 'documents'." With this rhetorical move Lowell distanced himself from Hardwick's passionate letters, turning them into "documents"--a legalistic term that made him the official arbiter of "truth." Since they were documents, they were "truth," and the artist cannot flinch before the truth. The "terrible thing" was no longer what the poet was doing, it was Hardwick's behavior.

When *The Dolphin* appeared, a chorus of critics protested. Anatole Broyard, in a *New York Times* review entitled "Naked in his Raincoat," dismissed the book as "so much blabbed biography, a hamburger of a life served up with little garnishes of poetry like parsley." Adrienne Rich was disgusted by the "aggrandized and merciless masculinity at work" in all three books, particularly *The Dolphin*. And she described Lowell's borrowings from letters as "one of the most vindictive and mean-spirited acts in the history of poetry."

Lowell did not show the manuscript to Hardwick before it was published. She would later tell Ian Hamilton, Lowell's biographer, "I was genuinely shocked and appalled when I saw the book, the use he made, the distortion of the letters, the writing of some for me." She thought Lowell's publishers "contemptible." To Elizabeth Bishop she wrote that the book seemed to her "inane, empty, unnecessary" and she did not understand "how three years of work could have left so many fatuities, indiscretions, bad lines still there on the page."

If Lowell had raised "revelation" and "truth" to a moral ideal, Hardwick, in her writing, would restore the dignity of silence. If the male hero is often heartless, Hardwick would celebrate a very different sort of female heroism. In the extract from her work-in-progress, "The Cost of Living," Hardwick's narrative strategies dramatize a tension between self-revelation and self-concealment. Her first-person narrator is recognizably herself, but she quickly declares she is "seeking distance" and switches to third-person narration, focusing attention on other characters. She describes her "short-wave autobiography" as a "novel" in which, she declares, "truth should be heightened and falsity adorned." By making no claims to be telling the "truth," Hardwick subverts any simple autobiographical reading, but--as is always the case with autobiographical fiction--the reader is teasingly encouraged to look for resemblances, for hidden meanings. There is a lengthy description of a male writer and his wife. He is "a short pear-shaped man" (unlike Lowell) and he is "rumpled" (like Lowell); "his clothes are a scandal." He tells his wife "All writing is about writing, especially poetry."

Hardwick, whose entire text is "writing about writing" (writing in general and Lowell's in particular), now returns to first-person narrative: "The odd thing is that I have taken the two, husband and wife, from

life, but they have come out false to their real meaning." Then she muses enigmatically: "But how is the man's genius to be made manifest--at breakfast, making love, engaging in his ruling passion which is writing? How is his art to become real in my novel? What is a writer's motif, his theme song, except stooped shoulders, the appalling desolation of trouser and jacket and old feet stuffed into stretched socks." Hardwick knew (at least) one "rumpled" male writer, one "genius" whose ruling passion was writing. He had attempted to make her life "real" in his art; she now wondered about making his art "real" in her "novel." What do we make of this bewildering textual labyrinth?

"The Cost of Living" contains three letters addressed to "dearest M," signed "Elizabeth." They refer to places and dates which we know, mainly from Lowell's poetry, to have biographical accuracy. One is dated 1972: "Dearest M: 'I have sold the big house in Maine and will make a new place there, beginning with the old barn on the water. 'Existing barn,' the architect's drawings say. But I fear the metamorphosis, the journey of species. The barn, or so I imagine of all barns, once existed for cows and hay. Then later it was--well, a place. (For what I do not like to say. Too much information spoils the effect on the page, like too many capitals within the line, or the odious exclamation point. Anyway you have the information.)"

We are first to suppose that "M" is Mary McCarthy, whom we know to be a close friend of Hardwick's. The letters, we imagine, are possibly real. But then we realize that the voice is not right; the letters are not quite anchored in time. In this letter, Hardwick, referring to the house in Maine where she and Lowell spent summers, with Lowell working in his barn-studio, is talking not to Mary McCarthy but to her readers. She is, in fact, spelling out her narrative credo: "Too much information spoils the effect.... Anyway, you have the information."

When she read "The Cost of Living" in the *New York Review of Books*, Mary McCarthy told Hardwick she was impressed by this device of the vented letters: "'M.' You spoke of that to me this summer, but 'M' of course isn't me. It isn't anybody. It's you. I thought that was wonderfully done: I started thinking to myself 'But Lizzie, this doesn't sound like a letter. And/or like a diary or thinking aloud.' And then it turns out that's what you were doing with it." What Hardwick is doing by addressing passages every so often to 'M' is constructing her reader: one who already knows the broad facts of her life and who will read her with sympathetic benevolence. A reader who is like a friend, a *woman friend*. [her mother?] Whereas Lowell's implied reader is definitely male, Hardwick's is female.

Gender is a central preoccupation of Hardwick's. Because (as Patricia Meyer Specks puts it) autobiography is a genre that "implies self-assertion and self-display," it presents problems for women writers. Hardwick's hesitation between self-disclosure (autobiography) and self-concealment (fiction) extends, it would seem, to a more fundamental hesitation between self-assertion and self-denial. She is acutely aware that the autobiographical subject is male-identified: "Memories: felonious pages in which one accuses others of real faults and oneself only of charming infidelities, unusual follies, improvidence but no meanness, a restlessness as beguiling as the winds of Aeolus, excesses, vanities, and sensualities that are the envy of all."

These are strong words--especially coming from someone who is experimenting with autobiographical narrative. Whose felonious pages was Hardwick thinking of? It is surely no coincidence that her catalogue of "charming" and "beguiling" qualities are precisely those exhibited to Lowell in *The Dolphin*. And when Hardwick worries, as she does, about "unsavory egotism" or coming over as "embarrassing, over-reaching," she is almost certainly thinking as much about his writing as hers. This is truly writing about writing.

"Is it possible for a woman to write a memoir?" she finds herself wondering. "Courage under ill-treatment is a woman's theme, life-theme, and is of some interest, but not if there is too much of either." She adds that women's writings often fail to interest "because there isn't enough sex in them, not even enough longing for consummation." "Women do not like to tell of bastards begotten, of pawings in the back seat, of a lifetime with its mound of men climbing on and off. That will not make a *heroine* of you, or even a *personage*."

How does the male gaze reflect the female autobiographer who cannot boast like Byron? If "charming infidelities" are largely seen as male conquests, in what light does writing about sex cast the woman writer? With considerable rhetorical skill, Hardwick turns the tables on Lowell, transforming "charming infidelities" into a dreary series of repetitive, faceless, sordid sexual encounters. "Pawings in the back seat" and the anonymous "mound of men": this is imagery stripped of any gloss of romanticism.

The final paragraph of "The Cost of Living" vacillates between third-person and first-person narration. "Now my novel begins," writes Hardwick. "No, now I begin my novel--and yet I cannot decide whether to call myself I or she." Implicitly, by affecting a representational role (she claims her misery is shared by many), she portrays herself as "we women": "An unhappy summer, and yet not a happy subject for literature. Very hard to put the vulgar and common sufferings on paper. I use "vulgar and common" in the sense of belonging to many, frequently, everlastingly, occurring. The misery of personal relations."

This is typical of the ambiguity and self-concealment of Hardwick's writing, for she is actually using "vulgar and common" in the other sense too. What she does not want to write about are such "vulgar sufferings" as jealousy, fury, resentment, panic, and desperation. By presenting "the misery of personal relations" generally, she can be true to her melancholy mood and lack of sense of self without constructing herself as "I." Only in one brief paragraph does Hardwick reveal that she does not, in fact, believe herself to be like everybody else. It is a fleeting glimpse of her real emotions: "Tell me, dear M, why is it that we cannot keep the note of irony, the tinkle of carelessness at a distance? 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. Some removals I have never gotten over and I am, like everyone else, an amputee (Why do I put in "like everyone else"? I fear that if I say I am an amputee, and more so than anyone else, I will be embarrassing, over-reaching. Yet in my heart I do believe I am more damaged than most.)"

Whereas *The Dolphin* is built on the claim that life and art are a continuum, Hardwick constantly emphasizes the gap between life and narrative. Her other central theme, the difficulty of portraying the self, also implicitly sets up a contrast with Lowell's text. For men, she seems to be saying, the heroic script is already written: "excesses, vanities, and sensualities that are the envy of all." The woman writer, on the other hand, neither a "heroine" nor a personage, finds herself floundering between "I" and "she," between self-revelation and secrecy.

Lowell, who certainly read "The Cost of Living," must have been both intrigued and disconcerted by it, for he wrote to Hardwick three years later: "Don't tell me anything, but let me surmise that you are writing something close to autobiography, closer than plot will usually allow.... Don't tell me either if, where and how I turn up." Lowell was not the only one to be curious as to how he would be treated in Hardwick's forthcoming book. Mary McCarthy also told Hardwick that "The Cost of Living" had made her wonder how Hardwick was "going to cope with the huge fact of Cal." As it happened, Lowell never read Hardwick's "shortwave autobiography." He died in September 1977, at the age of sixty, in a taxi on his way to Hardwick's. They had spent the summer in Maine together. [sic]

By the time *Sleepless Nights* was published in June 1979, the public must have been curious. How would Hardwick write about her marriage, about her life as an intellectual? The seventies had seen explosive changes in women's consciousness and in the way women wrote about their personal experience. Carolyn Heilbrun considers 1973 "the turning point" for women's autobiographical writing, the year in which May Sarton broke the rules of feminine decorum in *Journal of a Solitude*. "Above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger," writes Heilbrun, "together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life." Strangely, Heilbrun does not mention Kate Millet's autobiography *Flying*, which appeared in 1974 and caused a much greater scandal. With *Flying* Millet revealed herself to be every bit as vainglorious, egocentric, and indiscreet toward others as Lowell had been in *The Dolphin*. If Lowell had expanded the territory for poetry, Millet certainly opened up new horizons for women's autobiographical writing. She also made gender stereotyping more problematic.

Sleepless Nights could not have come as more of a contrast. On the surface the portrayal of gender is pre-seventies conventional. With its tightly controlled writing, suffused with melancholy and nostalgia, *Sleepless Nights* contains no overt anger and no obvious self-pity. Gone is the early draft's reference to the

unhappy summer of 1973 and the remark about "felonious" memoirs. Gone is the too revealing comment about Hardwick feeling "more damaged than most." *Sleepless Nights* is as oblique as an autobiographical narrative could possibly be. It is as discreet as *The Dolphin* is indiscreet.

"How to have a very present first person narrator and yet leave out everything--in a way," comments Darryl Pinckney. The third sentence of the narrative describes it as a "work of transformed and even distorted memory." Details of Hardwick's successful career as a journalist, novelist, and essayist are completely omitted. One of the few (shadowy) allusions to her life as a public intellectual is steeped in wistful irony; the narrator implies that the honest simplicity of her cleaning woman represents "home" in a way the rarefied, bookish world she herself inhabits never could. "After a year, more than a year, I return to you, Josette. In the meantime I have been to Honolulu and to Russia. A lifetime of worrying and reading may bring you at last to free trips you are not sure you wish to take. In the company of others not sure they should spare the time just now."

Apart from the dedication--"To my daughter, Harriet, and to my friend, Mary McCarthy"--Hardwick does not mention her daughter, nor her best friend. Robert Lowell is nowhere mentioned by name. Once only, Hardwick refers to "my husband"; three or four times she refers to "him." Joan Didion comments: "*Sleepless Nights* is a novel, but it is a novel in which the subject is memory and in 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 own earlier work, but from the poems of her husband, the late Robert Lowell."

This, of course, is precisely the point. If a sense of irony made Hardwick decide to leave out the two most important people in her life, it works as well as it does because her memoirs were framed by Lowell's own writing, in which both Lowell and Harriet are significant characters. Hardwick's male friend, "the stately Alex," whom she describes in detail in *Sleepless Nights*, had made a brief entrance in *The Dolphin*. When Hardwick writes, five paragraphs into her narrative, "Dearest M: Here I am in Boston, on Marlborough Street, number 239," she knows that readers are already acquainted with the house on Marlborough Street, with its white magnolia blossom, from "Man and Wife" in *Life Studies*. It was because Lowell had written so much about it that Hardwick chose to depict their marriage (indeed, marriage generally) in the most abstract, metaphoric terms: "I am alone here in New York, no longer a we. Years, decades even, passed. Then one is out of the commonest of plurals, out of the strange partnership that begins as a flat, empty plain and soon turns into a town of rooms and garages, little grocery stores in the pantry, dress shops in the closets, and a bank with your names printed together for the transaction of business."

The most detailed fragment about Lowell has Hardwick consciously playing with his narrative representation and with the truth. She renders the "mister" so abstractly and ambiguously that nothing about him is quite tangible. She has been describing the life of Josette, her cleaning woman in Boston: "How is the Mister this morning? Josette would say. The Mister? Shall I turn his devastated brown hair to red, which few have? Appalling disarray of trouser and jacket and feet stuffed into stretched socks. Kindly smile, showing short teeth like his mother's." Hardwick's retaliation is playful, and just a little mocking. (We recognize the male writer from her early draft.) Her tone is affectionate, tolerant, slightly condescending: this was the man she loved; this was what her disheveled husband looked like to others. Why, of all the things she could say about him, would she choose to say *this*? It is as if he is so short of distinguishing features that the narrator wonders whether to turn his hair to the rarer shade of red. There are three more paragraphs about Lowell, only three. He is not named. And Hardwick chooses to describe him to the same close friend (in fact her reader) who already knows that he is mentally unbalanced, difficult, amusing, and charming.

"Dearest M.: You ask me about his life in Boston. It is odd that, since this is his city, we do not seem quite to belong here.... He does often have the preoccupied look of a secret agent. Just as always he reads and writes all day, here in this house on the top floor, drinks quarts of milk, smokes cigarettes. He hates for me to play my jazz records, but sometimes I do late at night and then he dances around, off the beat, like a bear. His health? All right. There is an absurd little midget of a doctor here, a psychiatrist, sweet as a

chaplain... What distresses the doctor, makes him look at his watch, are long "free associations" about Goethe. Is he a family connection? the little doctor asked."

The narrative is sprinkled with these letters to "M." In contrast to pained, passionate letters from a woman to a man, these are deeply affectionate letters between women friends. They are *from* the author, not *to* the author; there is no breach of copyright involved, no breach of ethics; they are fictional and do not need to be in quotation marks. Where Lowell appropriates--and manhandles--other people's letters, Hardwick invents.

The letters also show Hardwick to be someone whose sense of identity is connected with others. In stark contrast to Lowell's solitary "I," Hardwick's is a relational identity. The very last sentence of *Sleepless Nights*, unusually mundane and day-to-day in register, highlights this sense of a community of loved ones: "I am always on the phone, always writing letters, always waking up to address myself to B. and D. and C, --those whom I dare not ring up until morning and yet must talk to throughout the night." (Always the restrained female, she does not in fact make the nocturnal phone call that would invade some friend's sleep.) The critic Mary Mason points out that "this recognition of another consciousness...this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other" is a common feature in women's autobiographical writing. The "other" may be a man or men, a community, a woman, or women generally.

Sleepless Nights is a carefully wrought book, without any of the quality of rawness or careless spontaneity found in *The Dolphin*. Its dreamy nonchronological reminiscences, the descriptions of places in which Hardwick has lived--Kentucky, Amsterdam, Boston, and New York--are sensuously evocative. The imagery is as polished as gemstones. The rhythmic, elliptical sentences, the gaps and silences in the prose, its evasions, and its suggestive power resemble prose poetry. Nabokov once said that the "bamboo bridge" between poetry and prose is metaphor, and *Sleepless Nights* is as stuffed full of metaphor as the mister's stretched socks.

Throughout *Sleepless Nights* Hardwick, every bit as much as Lowell, alludes constantly to other literary figures--to writers and to fictional characters. Lowell, by invoking Baudelaire, Stendhal, Hamlet, *War and Peace*, and so on, reinforces his self-image with the stage props of world literature. As a woman Hardwick is unable to turn to writers or to fictional heroines as a form of self-enhancement. Nor does she want to. "It is a burden to me that certain of our male writers now are consumed by their image," she would tell an interviewer in 1988. "We [women] are not allowed to throw ourselves around in that way." For her, great literary minds provide valuable reflections on life, and where they shed light on her own life, the comparison often casts her in an ironical light. Recalling the Kentucky Derby and the beauty of the old race track "before the barns burned and the horses screamed all night in their prisons," she suggests that it was coming from Kentucky that made her a gambler in life. She concludes, "As the gambler in Dostoevsky's great story says: It is true that only one out of a hundred wins, but what is that to me?"

Other people, fictional or real, are the lens through which Hardwick looks at herself. Inasmuch as she reveals herself at all, she does so vicariously. *Sleepless Nights* portrays in colorful vignettes the sorrows and mistreatment of the "deprived others" (the losers) she has known. They are mostly women. The narrative ranges from Billie Holiday's "luminous self-destruction," to Juanita, the prostitute who contracted venereal disease and "went out in unbelievable suffering," to Judith, the unhappy Ph.D. with the son on drugs, to the "bag ladies" in New York's parks who "wander about in their dreadful freedom like old oxen left behind."

In *Sleepless Nights*, vaguely reminiscent of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," Hardwick is the writer-observer who represents herself by representing others. But this is a far cry from that male "song of myself." Entirely lacking Whitman's self-reliance and mastery, his jaunty posing and exuberant optimism, Hardwick reveals herself by depicting the thwarted and tragic existences of other women. She told an interviewer: "The narrator is an observer of others. Now that I look back on my choice of what to observe, I suppose there is 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."

Like Lowell, Hardwick portrays women as the second sex, the weak sex. The only time in the entire narrative that she presents Lowell's voice (in indirect speech; no quotation marks) has him expounding that very view. Hardwick writes: "I was then a 'we'." He is teasing, smiling, drinking gin after a long day's work, saying something like this to the air: The tyranny of the weak is a burdensome thing and yet it is better to be exploited by the weak than by the strong.... Submission to the powerful is a redundancy and very fatiguing and boring in the end. There is nothing subtle or interesting in it...mainly because the exercise is too frequent. A workout in the morning, another in the evening... Husband-wife not a new move to be discovered in that strong classical tradition."

In *The Dolphin* Lowell is complacent about this sexual hierarchy; Hardwick, in *Sleepless Nights*, finds it tragic. "I have always, all of my life, been looking for help from a man," she writes. "It has come many times and many more it has not." Hardwick does not rebel against it; it is the way it is, that is all. And since she wholeheartedly conveys a woman's trajectory in terms of what Sidonie Smith calls "a story of silence, powerlessness, self-effacement," she continues to have difficulty with the notion of a female autobiographical subject: "Can it be that I am the subject? 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."

Her own life, she reflects, is hardly the stuff of narrative: "From Kentucky to New York, to Boston, to Europe, carried along on a river of paragraphs and chapters, of blank verse, of little books translated from the Polish, large books from the Russian--all consumed in a sedentary sleeplessness. Is that sufficient--never mind that it is the truth. 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.'"

It seems to Hardwick that "I," that dubious linguistic construct, needs to be put in quotation marks when one is a woman. Whereas the male "I" strides out and signs up for adventure, the female "I" is tentative. The female virtues Hardwick celebrates in *Sleepless Nights*--indeed, the virtues she herself exhibits by leaving herself out of the narrative--are those of "fortitude, austerity, silence, endurance." As she points out in *Seduction and Betrayal*, these are "the only paths to moral dignity" for women in fiction deserted by their men. Hardwick conveys no sense of satisfaction in her own achievements. Readers are given no indication of her successes. She identifies with the "bag ladies," the "old oxen left behind." The "heroines of my memories," she writes, are "store clerks and waitresses...those ladies cast off with children to raise." What lingers, when one closes the book, despite the ubiquitous emphasis on "the torment of personal relations," is an all-pervasive nostalgia for the "we" that once was.

On the last page, talking about the many losses in her life, she quotes mournful lines from "Going," a Thomas Hardy poem laden with regret, written after the death of his wife: "O you could not know / That such swift fleeing / No soul foreseeing / Not even I--would undo me so!" All writing, it might be argued, is manipulative, but does Hardwick's text, its tone heavy with resignation, represent what Lowell calls "the tyranny of the weak"? Years earlier, in the early sixties, Randall Jarrell had written a harsh appraisal of Elizabeth Hardwick's role vis a vis Lowell. His poem "Well-to-do invalid," which addresses Lowell, reveals his exasperation with the woman who dealt with Lowell's drunken binges, mental illnesses, and manic "child's play" by turning herself into a nurse, saint, and martyr. A section from the middle reads: "She has stood by you like a plaster Joan of Arc..." Jarrell had died in 1965, his own wife nursing him throughout his mental breakdowns. Hardwick had again been made into an archetypal woman (*mater dolorosa* this time) in a male text.

It is surely true that Hardwick had not embarked on *Sleepless Nights* entirely for its own sake. She had wanted to demonstrate to Lowell and the public *another* way of writing about life--her own and others. She had wanted to attempt an autobiographical narrative in which the self is not at the center. Even if she had not consciously started out with this as her aim, she had produced a narrative in which the sense of self is missing; and what is more, the text *celebrates* this. Hardwick, after all, had seen the male "I" at work; no one was in a better position to see the damage Lowell's narcissism had done to others.

Why, given the radical spirit of the times, was *Sleepless Nights*, with its gloomy passivity and its negative depiction of women as heroic but hapless sufferers, celebrated almost unanimously by critics? It

was not simply the excellence of the writing that was admired; it was its gaps and silences. "Nothing in *Sleepless Nights* will embarrass its readers," wrote Edmund White. "Even its experimentation is quiet, unobtrusive.... I trust and admire this writer." Angela Carter, usually the feminist iconoclast, declared the book "most moving in its stoical reticence." Laurie Stone, in the *Village Voice*, commented, "Hardwick passes the test autobiographical works always set: to write about passion, anger, and betrayal without blathering, sentimentalizing, or fuming."

Not one reviewer mentioned *The Dolphin*. Not one critic openly made comparisons. But what was happening, surely, is that just as *Sleepless Nights* was written with *The Dolphin* in mind, it was also *read* in the context of Lowell's treatment of his ex-wife. Hardwick had walked straight out of a text in which she had been "wronged"--to use her own term. She had taken up her own pen; she had, so to speak, seized her dagger. This was her chance to tell her side of the story; she had not taken it. She was quite right: the heroic woman was, indeed, the woman whose beauty lay in her capacity for "violent feeling absorbed,...for silence, secrecy, impressive acceptance." But Hardwick had not been passive; she *had* spoken out. Her lyrical, meandering narrative paid tribute to the sufferers, the women in the wings--the real heroes in life.

When Mary McCarthy wrote to Hardwick to congratulate her for writing "a true work of art," she mused, just as everyone else was doing: "I wonder what Cal would think. He'd be put out somewhat in his vanity to find himself figuring mainly as an absence and an absence that the reader doesn't miss.... I like your idea of wondering whether you might change his hair color to red--very funny, and it demonstrates how little his *thisness* (haecceitas) rather than mere thatness, matters. When I read the first bits in the *New York Review*, I couldn't see how you were going to cope with the huge fact of Cal: it didn't occur to me that you could do it by simply leaving him out. That's a brilliant technical stroke but proves to be much more than that: he becomes a sort of black hole in outer space, to be filled in ad lib, which is poetic justice: he's condemned by the *form* to nonexistence--you couldn't do that in a conventional autobiography. In any case, he couldn't patronize your book by appearing to be generous about it, though I suppose he might try."

It was, quite literally, poetic justice. Hardwick's was no conventional autobiography. It was, in fact, a brilliant countermove, or response, to *The Dolphin*, to Lowell's highly intimate confessional writing in general, and to the construction of male autobiographical narrative. Appearing to be the silent woman, Hardwick had the last word, with Lowell and with the public. In her subtle way she had spoken out, eloquently.

Contemplating her past at the end of *Sleepless Nights*, Hardwick implies that as a woman she could never be the subject she aspired to be in her youth. She makes no claims for herself as an individual who has left her mark. That illusion dashed, she is happy to make a more or less anonymous contribution to the rich brew of existence, to find herself dissolved into a common humanity. Once again she returns to gender stereotypes in literature: to sprightly heroes in books and to passive women at the window.... [She is] "one who dislikes the theater and would instead stay at home reading the text out of which spring the actors in boots, letters on trays, and handsome women at the window."

What Hardwick does not say, skilled as she is at omission, is that she, seemingly the stay-at-home reader of texts, was herself the woman in the text--a man's text. And although she makes out that she likes to stand passively at the window of life, she had answered the letter on the tray. Indeed, quite stealthily, from the wings, not center stage, she had sneaked up behind the actor in boots and become the hero of her own text after all.

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