

REVIEW

The New York Stories of Elizabeth Hardwick (2010)

Elizabeth Hardwick

(1916-2007)

Tim Adams



Elizabeth Hardwick in Castine, Maine in the 1980s

Over a range of troubling themes--the uncertainty of belonging, the inscrutability of men--Elizabeth Hardwick's fiction shines with wisdom and craft. There is a gap of 20 years in this selection of Elizabeth Hardwick's short stories, between the late 1950s when she and her husband, the poet Robert Lowell, moved from New York to Boston, and 1980, when, after their divorce and Lowell's death (in a taxi on the way to her apartment), she seemed to discover her fictional voice once more. Hardwick was not idle in between times. She helped to found the *New York Review of Books* in 1963 and illuminated its pages with her essays until her death in 2007, each sentence weighted with sifted wisdom and delicious humanity--Derek Walcott called her the "best prose writer in America." And throughout the 1960s she devoted herself with legendary dignity to the almost overwhelming work of shoring up her famous, and famously manic, husband, as he migrated between his study, the outpatient ward or various mental institutions, and the bedrooms of women younger than herself.

A southerner, from Kentucky, Hardwick had set out, though, when she came to New York in 1939, to write fiction, from a somewhat liberated woman's view (her first act on getting off the Greyhound bus in Times Square was to buy a new-minted American edition of *Finnegans Wake*). She was quickly cornered and hemmed in in this enterprise by the dazzle and success of her friend Mary McCarthy, and sometimes lost heart. By 1969, as her marriage to Lowell was unspooling chaotically, she found herself questioning whether fiction was appropriate to describe modern life at all, wondering if it "seems more threatened than the other arts by alienations in sensibility, by the unease of the world, the sense of destiny beyond control or comprehension, by the feeling of borrowed shortened time and relationships subject to cancellation..." Hardwick was not an overtly autobiographical writer--after Lowell's death she resisted entreaties to revisit their life in writing--but she is nevertheless distinctly present in everything she committed to paper. The best literary essays always involve a working through of the author's own anxieties and an untangling of that morning's state of mind, even as they purport to examine the workings of the novels of, say, Herman Melville, or dwell on the motivations of Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*. Hardwick raised that pressure to the

point of sometimes mesmerizing self-knowledge; she seems to have sought out or was drawn to subjects that could unravel some of her knotted and extreme emotions in relation to Lowell and, more importantly, that gave her a space to measure and assert her own exacting voice. She had no wish to be defined by her impossible husband--"Elizabeth Lowell never wrote anything," she was fond of saying--but still, in 1970, the year Lowell finally left her for Lady Caroline Blackwood, the novelist and Guinness heiress, she brought out a collection of essays about women in literature entitled *Seduction and Betrayal*.

One of the compulsions of this selection of stories, then, is how much, or how little, of Hardwick's biography you should read into it. The opening stories written after the war, when Hardwick was approaching 30, are sharp tales that seem to draw directly, in their sensibility and concerns, on the author's arrival in New York, some years before. "The Temptations of Dr Hoffmann" is a haunting and haunted character study, told in the voice of a young girl in a co-operative apartment at Columbia University, that explores the life of her neighbor, a German theologian, who has fled to the city from the Nazis, but has discovered that escape is not always a straightforward act.

The uncertain, schizophrenic identity of the incomer to the city is explored again in "Evenings at Home," in which an aspiring writer, who has moved to Manhattan, returns to visit her folks in Kentucky. There she discovers that the impression she has formed of her family while in exile, the small-mindedness and jealousies that she has ascribed to them, are "complicated, willful distortions," demons of her metropolitan neuroses. Nothing can prepare her for the shock: "Each smile is a challenge, each friendly gesture an intellectual crisis..." It is only when she meets a man that her teenage self used to lie awake over, used to dream of marrying and worse, that she confronts the life that she was born to, and has left behind: "Had he always looked so sinister, so bloated with ignorance and lethargy?" she wonders. The answers leave her and her understanding of love exposed. She has no idea who she was, or how this man might have changed her.

In the stories written in Boston, a city Hardwick found oppressive after the freedoms of New York, the insinuation of one life into another becomes more pointed. Hardwick had been married to Lowell for seven years when she wrote "The Oak and the Axe," in which a successful, independent woman falls for and marries a possibly brilliant man who has lived alone in a hotel room for the previous 10 years, and who has never worked at anything but esoteric bits of private research. She believes she can bring some structure and light to his life, that her enthusiasm and ambition will prove an inspiration. She is wrong--she loses her job, and finds his lassitude infects all that she placed her faith in. These stories read like case studies in a way, beautifully crafted, amused by the lies we tell ourselves for love. Not long after this one, she gave up on them altogether.

The stories that Hardwick wrote after 1980, after all that went in between, seem to come from a different writer altogether. Still limpid in their expression, and startlingly precise in their understanding of character, they have no interest in conventional form or shape or resolution, or even in relationships. They focus on individuals, mostly men, lyrically adrift in the city, and alone in their heads, people who do not exactly add up, even to themselves. She wrote about these figures, and their stunted vestigial relationships, on and off for a decade, as if fascinated by dislocation, and the unknowableness of some men. And then at the age of about 75, she stopped, and went back to writing, beautifully, about books and the people who wrote them.

Tim Adams

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