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THE ART OF FICTION NO. 87
ELIZABETH HARDWICK

Elizabeth Hardwick lives on the West Side of Manhattan, on a quiet street near enough to Central Park to have heard the crowds and speakers at the great political demonstrations that happened in Sheep's Meadow. Her apartment is light and spacious. "Like modern architecture," she says, "it looks much better in photographs." The building was designed for artists, and the living room is dominated by a large window. Behind the enormous plants and the freestanding tiles, one can see a comforting fixture of urban life: a fire escape.

Her home is clearly that of a writer constantly at work, and strewn throughout is a lifetime's accumulation of furniture, objects, paintings, posters, photographs, records, heirlooms, and countless books. On either side of the living room are more books: ceiling-high shelves of histories, fiction, and poetry. It is a working library, accumulated with her late husband, the poet Robert Lowell. The daily effort to keep a large library in order has made Hardwick favor paperbacks, preferably those lightweight and storable ones that can be whipped out on a bus or an airplane—nonsmoking section—without too much fuss.

Just as there are books everywhere that indicate the life of the mind, so one frequently comes upon notebooks and notepads on the coffee table, and on the dining room table, things in which she has jotted down lines, questions, ideas. The typewriter goes from room to room, one day upstairs in her study, the next morning downstairs. And then there are the manuscripts from former as well as current students from her various writing classes, which she will read and comment on extensively.

This interview took place in her home, where she occasionally puttered, setting stray books in their places as we talked.

—Darryl Pinckney, 1985

INTERVIEWER

I have the feeling you don't like to talk about yourself, at least not in a formal way.

ELIZABETH HARDWICK

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

INTERVIEWER

Sleepless Nights is reticent, perhaps, but it certainly has the tone of lived experience, of a kind of autobiography.

HARDWICK

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.

INTERVIEWER

Many of the essays in *Seduction and Betrayal* have an oddly personal tone. The stress on certain parts of the texts shows that you have dug things out in an unusual, somehow urgent manner, as if you had lived them. I'm thinking of the Jane Carlyle essay and your way of looking at Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*.

HARDWICK

Jane Carlyle was real, but of course I didn't *really* know her, as the saying goes. The people in *Rosmersholm* are figures of Ibsen's imagination.

INTERVIEWER

What is the reason for your deep attraction to Ibsen?

HARDWICK

I don't know that I have a deep attraction for Ibsen. Sometimes I think he's an awful dolt . . . wooden, and in certain plays stolidly grandiose like the mountains that are such an unfortunate apotheosis in *Little Eyolf* and *When We Dead Awaken*. I don't like the poetic Ibsen, but I have found myself deeply engaged by the beauty, you might call it, of the old Ibsen domestic misery.

INTERVIEWER

Someone once said to me that he was fascinated by your essay on *Rosmersholm*, about the triangle between the man and the two women. But when he went to the play he couldn't always find your ideas there on the page. What do you make of that?

HARDWICK

I certainly hope what I said is on Ibsen's pages and of course I think it is. Still, you're not writing an essay to give a résumé of the plots. You choose to write because you think you have something fresh to say on a topic. That is, if you're writing from choice and not just as a journeyman doing a job. Perhaps it's true 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. This often stimulates me to write, particularly about novels. Of course the text is the object, the given, and the period is not often one's own and if there is anything detestable it is the looking at fictional characters as if they were your friends. I have found that horrible inclination among students, more and more so. They don't know the difference between calling a character "silly" and realizing that they are reading a masterpiece of created, located, visionary "silliness." I think every reader and critic falls into a hallucinatory state and that is as true of the technocrats, the deconstructionists, as of any others.

INTERVIEWER

When you say "hallucinatory state," are you trying to describe how the creative process works for you?

HARDWICK

Perhaps *hallucinatory* is too strong or too mysterious a word. What I meant was that in reading books and planning to write about them, or maybe just in reading certain books, you begin to see all sorts of not quite expressed things, to make connections, sometimes to feel you have discovered or felt certain things the author may not have been entirely conscious of. It's a sort of creative or "possessed" reading and that is why I think even the most technical of critics do the same thing, by their means making quite mysterious discoveries. But as I said, the text is always the first thing. It has the real claim on you, of course.

INTERVIEWER

Do you fall into this state when you write fiction?

HARDWICK

I don't fall into a state at all. I just meant to describe something happening in the brain when it is stimulated by reading imaginative works. As for writing fiction, well, you don't have any primary text, of course. You have to create that, and yet the struggle seems to be to uncover things by language, to find out what you mean and feel by the sheer effort of writing it down. By expression you discover what you wish to express or what can be expressed, by you. Things that are vague in the beginning have to be made concrete. Often, what you thought was the creative idea ahead of you vanishes or becomes something else.

INTERVIEWER

What comes first in sitting down to write—I guess we're talking about fiction. Is it a concept? Is it a character? Is it a scene?

HARDWICK

It takes many things to make a work of fiction, but I suppose it is true that there is a kind of starting point in the mind, a point that may be different for each piece of work. Sometimes I have had the impulse to begin fiction from a single line I had in my head.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give an example?

HARDWICK

I remember that I started writing *Sleepless Nights* because of a single line. The line was: "Now I will start my novel, but I don't know whether to call myself I or she."

INTERVIEWER

Was this a first line, a beginning line?

HARDWICK

No, it was to be the last line of the opening scene. I published the first chapter in *The New York Review of Books* and the line was the ending of the scene. But as I went on to write the book, I did call the narrator "I" and so I deleted the line from the final text. Some readers noticed the omission and asked me about it. I think now that I could have retained the line and just gone on with the narrative "I," as if to say I had made the decision.

INTERVIEWER

What did the line mean to you? That you knew it was going to be an autobiographical novel?

HARDWICK

Of course that line is not a theme. It is a wondering aloud about structure and also meant to indicate that sometimes in novels the use of the third person is really a disguise for the first person. I mean certain fictions have the strong feeling of autobiography even if they are written in the third person. It's something a sensitive reader can feel.

INTERVIEWER

When you started *Sleepless Nights* did you know anything more than that it would be an autobiographical novel?

HARDWICK

I wrote the first scene, starting with a description of a place and then going on to the writing of an imaginary letter to "Dearest M." The opening scene dominated the book, set the tone, and then, of course, as I worked on it I had to write the book—that is, create scenes, encounters, and so on.

INTERVIEWER

Has the impulse for writing ever started from a last line?

HARDWICK

Maybe not a last line, but a notion of the ending can be a useful stimulus.

INTERVIEWER

Does the opening paragraph mostly concern mood? Or plot? Or character?

HARDWICK

I don't have many plots and perhaps as a justification I sometimes think, If I want a plot I'll watch *Dallas*. I think it's mood. No, I mean tone. Tone arrived at by language. I can't write a story or an essay until I can, by revision after revision, get the opening tone right. Sometimes it seems to take forever, but when I have it I can usually go on. It's a matter of the voice, how you are going to approach the task at hand. It's all language and rhythm and the establishment of the relation to the material, of who's speaking—not speaking as a person exactly, but as a mind, a sensibility.

INTERVIEWER

Can you always arrive at the tone you want?

HARDWICK

No, I can't, and when that happens I put the work aside. But I've noticed that the effort is always useful. I mostly use the things, sometime, somewhere, that I've abandoned. They've been worked on, exist, if only in a few pages—and the old yellow pages flaking away in a drawer turn out to be useful. I don't know what I'm thinking about a particular thing until I have some kind of draft. It's the actual execution that tells me what I want to say, what I always wanted to say when I started.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean when you say that you don't know what is in your mind until you've written it?

HARDWICK

I'm not sure I understand the process of writing. There is, I'm sure, something strange about imaginative concentration. The brain slowly begins to function in a different way, to make mysterious connections. Say, it is Monday, and you write a very bad draft, but if you keep trying, on Friday, words, phrases, appear almost unexpectedly. I don't know why you can't do it on Monday, or why I can't. I'm the same person, no smarter, I have nothing more at hand.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find that unique with yourself?

HARDWICK

I think it's true of a lot of writers. It's one of the things writing students don't understand. They write a first draft and are quite disappointed, or often *should* be disappointed. They don't understand that they have merely begun, and that they may be merely beginning even in the second or third draft. For the great expansive prose writers, obviously this isn't the case. Somehow everything is available to them all the time. That's the real prose gift.

INTERVIEWER

What writers have had this gift?

HARDWICK

Tolstoy, Dickens, Henry James. All the greatly productive geniuses. I am very struck by the revisions of Henry James. They seem to me always interesting, but in the end quite minor—changes in a few words, shiftings. The powers of concentration the great writers show are extraordinarily moving.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any tricks or devices that seem to help?

8.

The beginning of June was hot. I took a journey and, of course, everything was new. When you travel your first discovery is that you do not exist. The phlox bloomed in its faded purples; on the hillside, phallic pines. Foreigners in the arcades, in the basket shops. A steamy haze blurred the lines of the hills. A dirty, exhausting sky. Already the summer was passing away. Soon the boats would be gathered in, ferries roped to the dock.

I am looking for the fosselized, for something-- persons and places thick and encrusted with final shape; instead there are many, many minnows, wildly swimming, trembling, vigilant to escape the net.

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Kentucky-- that is certainly part of it. My mother lived as a girl in so many North Carolina towns they are confused in my mind. Raleigh and Charlotte. She hardly knew her own parents; they died quickly as people did then of whatever was in the air-- pneumonia, diphtheria, tuberculosis. I never knew a person so indifferent to the past. It was as if she didn't know who she was. She had brothers and sisters and was raised by them, passing their names down to us. I met one of her sisters when I was a child. She ran a hotel in Asheville, North Carolina.

Her face, my mother's, is not quite clear to me. A boneless, soft prettiness, with small brown eyes and the scarcest of eyebrows, darkened with a lead pencil.

1962

Dearest M: Here I am back in New York, on 67th Street in a high steep place with long, dirty windows. In the late

An Elizabeth Hardwick manuscript page

HARDWICK

For me, writing has not become easier after all these years. It is harder—perhaps because of the standards you set for your work. I suppose you have, by effort, a greater command than you imagine. The fact that writing remains so difficult is what puzzles.

INTERVIEWER

What is it about the writing process that gives you the most pleasure?

HARDWICK

The revision. That's what I like, working on a page or a scene.

INTERVIEWER

What about help with revision? Did Cal [Robert Lowell] ever help you with the books or essays?

HARDWICK

Not really. His suggestions were always wonderful, but so general I couldn't make much use of them. And he was always revising his own work and showing it to me and to his friends. He was revising something from the moment he got up until the moment he went to sleep, if only in his head, and so much of the time with him when you were alone, was spent reading and talking to him, about what he had done during the day. And that was very pleasant to me, it was always very interesting reading it, and it wasn't just to me that he read his work in progress. I have noticed the same method with other poets. I can remember having dear old I. A. Richards to dinner, and we weren't sitting there very long before the sheaf came out of the pocket of his coat, and he read his new poems, and that was wonderful.

INTERVIEWER

You didn't offer your own work in progress in that way?

HARDWICK

Well, it was a little bit different, you know, prose being longer, and it's not quite the same as seeing a quatrain at the end of the day. Cal did read my work, of course, and he was very encouraging and nice about it, and all of that, but it wasn't the same as going over each little part.

INTERVIEWER

How about the intellectual content of the essays?

HARDWICK

I must say he often looked discomfited on that score. Sometimes he thought I was too snippy.

INTERVIEWER

Really? He'd ask you to de-snip?

HARDWICK

I remember in one of the first issues of *The New York Review* I wrote a piece about a biographical book on Robert Frost. It was more or less mild, but Cal was quite annoyed—annoyed for a short time. I noticed in Randall Jarrell's letters that he gave a bit of approval to my Frost essay and so I said to myself, OK, Cal? On the whole, Cal was encouraging. He liked women writers and I don't think he ever had a true interest in a woman who wasn't a writer—an odd turn-on indeed, and one I've noticed not greatly shared. Women writers don't tend to be passive vessels or wives, saying, "Oh, that's good, dear."

INTERVIEWER

Was it stimulating to your own work to be involved in that sort of tremendously volatile writers' atmosphere?

HARDWICK

What do you mean "involved"? That would have been my

atmosphere no matter what. Literature was always my passion. I do remember, however, that I was once asked if I had felt overpowered by Lowell's work, meaning, I guess, if it overpowered my own. I said, "Well, I should hope so." I had great regard and admiration for it; learned from him and from it, got pleasure from it.

INTERVIEWER

If you could say what was particularly enriching about your life with Lowell, what would it be? The spirit of it, or technical literary matters?

HARDWICK

The quality of his mind—quite the most thrilling I've known. Once at dinner something came up about what people you have known whom you considered to be geniuses. Mary McCarthy was there. We all thought for a while and Mary and I came up with the same two names: Cal and Hannah Arendt.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think is the essential piece of equipment a writer must have?

HARDWICK

Well, you know, there is such a thing as talent, a bit of talent. I'll leave it at that.

INTERVIEWER

Given the talent, should writers be concerned with the issues of the times . . . things like that?

HARDWICK

Not necessarily. Of course they usually *are* concerned with the issues of the times in some way. The variety and strangeness of literary works is amazing. You wake up one morning and someone's done something a little bit new, something fresh and genuine, a

new accent, quality of experience, way of composing and structuring. That's very beautiful to me. I am very happy when I see an interesting, gifted struggle with fictional form. I know as well as the next person that many fine things use traditional methods of narration and there will be, naturally, much that is traditional in those who experiment. Here, I am not talking about a great innovator like Joyce, but about lesser struggles. When I open a new work of fiction I like to notice the way it is constructed, to learn something from it. Like Milan Kundera's latest novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The narrator comes in and out and yet the form shifts to stories, to feelings, actions the narrator could not have known. I think it is done successfully there. There is always the problem of who is seeing, who is thinking. I am excited when I feel the author is trying to cope with this dilemma—and it is often a compositional dilemma.

INTERVIEWER

Can talent be taught?

HARDWICK

Perhaps not. I try to uncover what talent may be hiding by teaching creative reading. That turns out to be rather difficult—to read as a writer reads. I guess that is what I meant by reading in a "hallucinatory state." Not the perfect phrase.

INTERVIEWER

What state of mind are you in when the writing seems to be moving along?

HARDWICK

I don't know. I don't know why I am so helplessly led to condensation in both my fiction and my essays. Some people find it hard to follow my meaning because I don't spell it out, not entirely. My writing is simple but I like to be sort of emphatic and then let it go. I remember when I was writing exams in school I'd be the

first one finished. All these people writing away. As I look back on it I think I didn't want to tell the teacher what he already knew, but to try to get at things from an angle—nothing very grand, just a little twist. That little twist always got me an A minus.

INTERVIEWER

In your first novel, *The Ghostly Lover*, and in your early short stories that appeared in various magazines, you seemed to be a Southern writer. And then you became much more identified with New York. Why is that?

HARDWICK

I don't like to quote myself, but since one doesn't have many ideas—or perhaps just *I* don't have many ideas—I will have to quote what I said in a Southern literature discussion. That is, that being a Southern writer is a decision, not a fate. Naturally, I love the best Southern writing and spent my youth, up through the university, in Lexington, Kentucky, a very beautiful and interesting place. But I think a critical, defining moment came into my life one summer. I had received a fellowship to LSU, a magical place then, with the *Southern Review* and all sorts of brilliant writers around. And then in August I suddenly didn't want to go and instead I went to Columbia . . . and without a fellowship. I'm amazed I was accepted.

INTERVIEWER

And then what happened?

HARDWICK

Well, ever trendy, I decided I had to specialize in the seventeenth century because that was the time of the metaphysical poets, John Donne and so on. That was the hot period. After the first seminar I woke up and thought, I don't even know when the seventeenth century was! Of course I rushed out and read some books fast, filling in my literary knowledge, which began in 1920. It was

all rather fun. It was New York and even back home I had been reading *Partisan Review* and had already been a communist and an ex-communist, left variety, before I got here.

INTERVIEWER

Is that true?

HARDWICK

Yes, I wouldn't say it otherwise.

INTERVIEWER

I remember you once said that your dream when you were young was to be a Jewish intellectual.

HARDWICK

I said that as a joke, but it was more or less true. What I meant was the enlightenment, a certain deracination that I value, an angular vision, love of learning, cosmopolitanism, a word that practically means Jewish in Soviet lexicography. Right now, I'd say my remark depended upon which Jewish intellectual. I am not sympathetic with the political attitudes of certain members of the new right who happen to be Jewish intellectuals, and less sympathetic to the Christian right, most of whom are scarcely to be called intellectuals at all. I don't like the chauvinism, the militarism, the smugness, and the social Darwinism, that jargon term, the support of Ronald Reagan . . . and all the rest.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about the religiosity of the new right, the fundamentalists, and Reagan's courting of them?

HARDWICK

I think the fundamentalists' and Reagan's use of religion is an appalling blasphemy. The idea that God wants a strong America. Many Americans will naturally want a strong America, but I don't

know that God is in agreement. I hadn't thought of Him as being a patriot . . . I hadn't thought of Him as in a state of desire except against idolaters, and as we know from the Old Testament it is very easy to sink into idolatry, which a good deal of the flag-waving is just now. As for evangelizing Christians, their vulgarization of the Scriptures surpasses belief, their incredible assumption of Jesus as a pal in the cheering stand.

INTERVIEWER

Are you interested in religion?

HARDWICK

Of course, even though I'm a nonbeliever. I was brought up a Presbyterian. I still feel an attachment to the Presbyterian Church, where I know all the hymns and where I first felt the beauty and resonance of the Scriptures. Actually, when I lived in New England I was surprised to find that the denomination hardly existed there—not that if it had I was ready to put on my pumps and trot off every Sunday. The Scotch and the Scotch-Irish, which my mother's family were, mostly migrated to the upper South, especially to North Carolina, where she grew up. In New England you're supposed to think that the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists are more or less the same, but my seventeenth-century studies told me otherwise.

INTERVIEWER

What are you trying to say about religion . . . as a nonbeliever?

HARDWICK

I don't know. It may sound glib but I suppose for me religion is a vast, valuable museum . . . and, yes, I know the treasures of it are not the same as going to the Louvre . . . although now that I think of it, there's a good deal of overlapping, isn't there?

INTERVIEWER

Do you see any literary influence of the new right, of the neo-conservatives?

HARDWICK

I don't know about influence, but I do see that, as always, cultural and political attitudes swim along in the same bloodstream. Defense of American values, as these notions are called, can have a wide swing, picking up all sorts of things like homosexuals or fast women who are not doing their bit for the preservation of the American family . . . For myself, I like many homosexuals and many self-absorbed, childless women, and I can't see them as a menace to the republic, or even to Republicans. Some of my best friends . . . and so on.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find any conservative attitudes specifically literary?

HARDWICK

I notice the creeping development of what I would call the conservative realism, because it brings to mind the intellectual follies of socialist realism. You get the idea that disaffected, even laid-back, attitudes in fiction, certain choices of despairing subject matter, are contemptible in a writer residing in the fullness of the United States. Certain tones of reflection are seen as a snide assault on the free world.

INTERVIEWER

For instance?

HARDWICK

It's a rich field, but I happen to remember a particular review of Ann Beattie's stories that said, "They seem treacherous to the energy and heroic idealism that are her country's saving grace." Now, I ask you! That appeared in *Partisan Review*, which is not a

neocon magazine, but "bore from within," as we used to say. Also, there is Norman Podhoretz's consignment of Henry Adams and all his works to the ash heap of history.

INTERVIEWER

You have taught a great deal. Why do you think many writers resent teaching? Do you agree with them that it interferes in subtle ways with their own writing?

HARDWICK

Nothing interferes with my own writing except my often irresolute character and of course the limitations of my talent.

INTERVIEWER

You seem rather accommodating and modest, and yet you can be aggressive in your writing.

HARDWICK

And not only in my writing, alas. I don't like aggressiveness and I detest anger, a quality some feminists and many psychiatrists think one should cultivate in order to express the self. I was astonished by the number of obituaries of Lillian Hellman that spoke with reverence of her anger. I don't see anger as an emotion to be cultivated and, in any case, it is not in short supply.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk a bit about your background: school, childhood?

HARDWICK

Childhood? I came from a large family and many of my brothers and sisters were older than I, and I learned from them since they were, most of them, going to college when I was growing up. It was not an intellectual atmosphere, but a stimulating one. Like all writers I know of, the early days were dominated by a love of reading, just reading, like eating, anything around. It was not until

I got to the University of Kentucky that the range of books was quite suddenly and very excitingly extended. I had some extraordinary teachers, some of the refugees from Europe, and very smart friends, some clever and "know-it-all" from New York, which appealed to me, and some very bright and lovable from just down home. I was not aware of any intellectual deprivation and there was none in the general sense. But aren't we all self-educated, and of course our self-education never includes all of the things we would like to know or need to know.

INTERVIEWER

And your career?

HARDWICK

Is it a career? I mean is that the right word for being a writer? It's a strange life . . . The most peculiar thing about it is that when you write you are required to think, and having once noticed that, you observe how little the rest of life makes such a demand. It demands something else, many things of course, but not sitting and thinking the way you must when you write, when you revise, when you abandon, start over, refine, all of that. About my own efforts, I sometimes feel I can say, "Well, I'm doing my best, or have done my best." That is not the supreme thrill for one who has spent her life reading superb writings of all kinds. But I am happy to do what I can.

INTERVIEWER

Some young women I know think of you as very fortunate to have your place in things, your work and so forth.

HARDWICK

As I have grown older I see myself as fortunate in many ways. It is fortunate to have had all my life this passion for studying and enjoying literature and for trying to add a bit to it as interestingly as I can. This passion has given me much joy, it has given me

friends who care for the same things, it has given me employment, escape from boredom, everything. The greatest gift is the passion for reading. It is cheap, it consoles, it distracts, it excites, it gives you knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind. It is a moral illumination.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there are special difficulties in being a woman writer?

HARDWICK

Woman writer? A bit of a crunch trying to get those two words together . . . I guess I would say no special difficulty, just the usual difficulties of the arts.

INTERVIEWER

So you feel it's the same for men and women?

HARDWICK

Nothing is the same for men and women.

INTERVIEWER

Not the same and . . . what else?

HARDWICK

Actually I have noticed lately a good deal of bitchiness with regard to certain women writers. Susan Sontag, for instance. The public scourging she was subjected to from all sides seemed to me disgusting and unworthy.

INTERVIEWER

What "public scourging" are you referring to?

HARDWICK

A sort of extended flap about a speech she made at a public

gathering in which she spoke of communism as “fascism with a human face” and other matters. This was followed by attacks from the left and the right that seemed to go on for months. She was also scorned for writing so much about Europeans, the French particularly. I think her being a woman, a learned one, a *femme savante*, had something to do with it. As an intellectual with very special gifts and attitudes, it was somehow felt that this made her a proper object for ridicule of a coarse kind. I believe the tone was different because she was seen as a very smart, intellectually ambitious woman.

INTERVIEWER

Intellectual woman? Aren’t you yourself one of them?

HARDWICK

Let me quote from *The Land of Ulro*, the latest book by the poet Czeslaw Milosz: “The history of my stupidity would fill many volumes.”

INTERVIEWER

But, these days, women writers fare about as well as men, don’t they?

HARDWICK

In general, of course. Just as many atrocious women writers are laughing all the way to the bank as men. But I do feel there is an inclination to punish women for what you might call presumption of one kind or another.

INTERVIEWER

Which women?

HARDWICK

For instance, Joan Didion and Renata Adler. I haven’t found two books recently that have seemed to me more imaginative,

intelligent, and original than *Democracy* and *Pitch Dark*. In the reviews, at least in many of them, I felt a note of contempt and superiority, often expressed in a lame, inept effort to parody . . . And when you think of what the big guys have been turning out! And the ponderous, quaking reviews they receive!

INTERVIEWER

You mean they're getting away with something? What big guys?

HARDWICK

Never mind, never mind.

INTERVIEWER

What about reviewers today?

HARDWICK

I notice that many of them in very important places haven't written anything except their reviews, their quick, short reviews, composed with an air of easy authority. For the most part, I think the authority should be in some way earned. Well, they pass the night perhaps . . . When a real writer discusses literature and culture you will notice a difference in style, in carefulness, and you will actually find ideas, illuminations, oddities and not merely yes-or-no opinions.

INTERVIEWER

Are you saying it's not entirely fair for a critic to do nothing but practice criticism?

HARDWICK

No. Let me say that criticism, analysis, reflection is a natural response to the existence in the world of works of art. It is an honorable and even an exalted endeavor. Without it, works of art would appear in a vacuum, as if they had no relation to the minds

experiencing them. It would be a dismal, unthinkable world with these shooting stars arousing no comment, leaving no trace. But it is the mind of the critic, somehow, the establishment of his own thought and values, that counts; and that establishment is the authority of the voice, whether it comes from creative work in the arts or creative work in criticism. When I read a review, a mere short review, I am more interested at first in who is doing the reviewing than in the work under discussion. The name, what is attached to it by previous work, by serious thought, tells me whether it is likely to have any meaning or value for me. It is not a question of right or wrong specific opinions, but of the quality of the mind.

INTERVIEWER

You have been criticized for your review of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in *A View of My Own*. Would you still stand on that?

HARDWICK

No, I wouldn't. It's a wonderful, remarkable book. Nothing that has come since on the matter of women compares to it. When I wrote my comments I was thinking of existentialism and the idea that one can choose and not be dominated by the given . . . something like that. And of course thinking back on my remarks I see how much has changed since the 1950s, especially in the manner of life for women. You are still weaker than men in muscular force, but can sleep in the streets if you like, even, alas, if that is the only place you have to sleep, and go to Arabia in your jeans and knapsack . . . and much, much more.

INTERVIEWER

I was present a few years ago at a panel discussion where you were asked who was the greatest American female novelist, and you said Henry James. I had the feeling you meant something serious about that.

HARDWICK

Such remarks don't bear scrutiny. Did I actually say that? I do remember saying once that maybe the greatest female novelist in English was Constance Garnett. Sometimes I try to lighten the gloom of discussions but I notice that no one laughs. Instead you see a few people writing down the name.

INTERVIEWER

I have the impression that in your most recent stories about New York—"The Bookseller," "Back Issues," and "On the Eve"—you are using the city almost as a text and the characters you have chosen are instruments of decoding. Or is that too mechanistic for the way you place these people, catch the start and stop of their lives?

HARDWICK

I don't know about decoding New York. It's a large place, oh yes. And it's a place, isn't it? Still very much a place, or so I think. There's not much good feeling about New York, in spite of the T-shirts and the Big Apple and so on.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to be faithful to it.

HARDWICK

I like cities, big cities and even medium-sized cities. If I were traveling about America, I'd always want to spend the night downtown. If I could still find downtown. Yes, I'm faithful to New York, one might say. It's ours, our country's, our great metropolis. Many people no longer like the melting-pot notion and seem to feel there are too many poor trying to be melted in the great vat. Of course everybody hates poor people. They're a damned nuisance. Always wanting something. Perhaps they used to be a part of the scheme of things, a part of nature, always with us, and so on. But you might say they don't fit in anymore, or so I think many people see it.

INTERVIEWER

In a talk at the Columbia School of Architecture, you spoke of the increasing "Bombayism" of New York. What did you mean?

HARDWICK

Well, Bombay is called the New York of India, and I guess New York is becoming the Bombay of the U.S. What I had in mind was the increasing separation of the classes, the gap, as of another species. The streets filled with untouchables. Just look the other way and move on. The intractable, milling others for whom you have no solution. Roll up the window of the limo. Step aside and into a cab . . . New York is a city of the rich and the poor. It's a terrible place for the middle classes, and for what you would call the workers who run the elevators, build the buildings, clerk in the stores, cook in the restaurants. Manhattan is not for them. They get on the subway and go to the other boroughs at night. So the culture of the city, the vitality, the promise is more and more restricted. There's not a foot of living space and what there is is so overpriced as to raise the dead. That is a violation of the contract of the city as we knew it. When you think of old New York, I, at least, don't think of the patricians, but of the Lower East Side and Harlem—both are gone, wiped out as images of promise, change, relief from the old country or from the South or whatever, as places that created styles like the jazziness of Harlem that captivated Europe and the experience of generations of immigrants.

INTERVIEWER

Are you trying to express this in the fiction you're working on?

HARDWICK

I know that I can't. I realize how narrow my knowledge of the city is. I can't take it in as a whole. I feel I know less about it than when I first came here, but I very much like to think about it and care about it. I am using it as the landscape of my fiction just now, but whether I can make an image of the city itself I don't know.

Everything in the stories I have done recently is imaginary. I even had to go to the public library and look around.

INTERVIEWER

You mean in "Back Issues" where you met the Greek?

HARDWICK

I've never met a Greek in my life.

INTERVIEWER

The shop in "The Bookseller" reminded me of every secondhand shop I've seen in Manhattan.

HARDWICK

I hardly ever go into a bookstore because, instead of buying, I would like to give away about five thousand of my seven thousand books, which are weighing on me like some suffocating plague.

INTERVIEWER

I'll take them.

HARDWICK

They're yours. Bring your van. I can't find those I want, thousands have not been dusted in years. I miss the time when I used to go into the old secondhand shops, looking for the modern classics. What a pleasure that was, not having them and finding them. And then to get volumes of history, all the odd tomes.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the state of publishing just now?

HARDWICK

Insofar as making money is concerned it is better now not to be an *author* when you write a book. Being a writer just mucks it up. I see that when I look at the best-seller list of books by movie

stars and doctors, although some *literateurs* make money, fortunately. But of course the best-seller list, poor old thrashed dog, is not what things are about. Otherwise I don't think publishing changes much. It's still sort of a running faucet and words and pages pour out. I doubt that many worthwhile books don't make it to the printing presses. I like sometimes to think otherwise.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you like to think otherwise?

HARDWICK

Just the idea that something brilliant and unacceptable, something too quirky and original is being created. In general I guess I feel that what we have is what is there.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that the European novel, the Latin American novel, the African novel, the dissident writings are superior to what is being done here?

HARDWICK

Superior, who knows? In some ways, I suppose we are left behind in the great themes that arrive from the feeling of displacement and loss. V. S. Naipaul said something about English fiction—it's all tea parties or something like that. We seem to have divorce and adultery and being young with your parents and being a bit gay here and there, or quite gay—can I still say queer?—and drinking beer at the truck stop instead of getting ahead. But we live in a world of displaced, agonized talents who have lost country and language and family and whose condition represents so much of this century. The survival of those talents, the imaginative rendering of their experience is extraordinarily moving and large. Of course it's all in the telling. We are a protected country even though so many of us are whipped to a frenzy about the dangers around us and feel the best thing we can do for our citizens is to push them

into a siege mentality. But meanwhile . . . meanwhile, you can be quite happy and make quite a good living crying havoc and getting out the siege vote. Let me say that I would not want our country overrun in order to create fiction and poetry. All I'm saying is that the introversion of our literature just now makes it narrower than the exile writing. But everyone knows that.

INTERVIEWER

Who are the readers?

HARDWICK

I don't know. It is thought that the present young generation doesn't know much about literature, hasn't read much . . . and yet a lot of the writing of the last decades is full of parodies, mimicry, learned references of a sort and readers seem to get it. I always wonder who buys the books. *100,000 in print*, the ads say. Fifty thousand may have come from knowing that the first fifty thousand bought the book. That's OK. Especially if it's something of value. I don't think it's a good idea for writers to think too much about the publishing world. I sense in a good many books, even in books by the best writers, an anxiety about how it will do in the marketplace. You can feel it on the page, a sort of sweat of calculation. As if to say, well, it will be a few years before the next one and I had better be sure I don't let this chance to make some money pass by. But no more about publishing.

INTERVIEWER

OK, no more about publishing. May I ask you how you feel about growing older?

HARDWICK

You can always ask. Or perhaps no one need ask. Just another piece of rotten luck. No, I haven't found anything good to say about it. Not a condition that can be recommended. Its only value is that it spares you the opposite, not growing older. People do

cling to consciousness, and under the most dreadful circumstances. It shows you that it is all we have, doesn't it? Waking up, the first and the last privilege, waking up once more.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it is more painful for women than for men?

HARDWICK

More about women and men? About something so burdensome it doesn't seem valuable to make distinctions. Oh, the dear grave. I like what Gottfried Benn wrote, something like, "May I die in the spring when the ground is soft and easy to plough."

INTERVIEWER

I notice that you quote poets a lot.

HARDWICK

Well, you don't exactly quote prose I guess, although I often remember prose lines and sayings.

INTERVIEWER

Has the reading of poetry and the knowing of poets influenced your own style? Some have thought so.

HARDWICK

I don't know. Certainly Cal had a great influence on every aspect of my life. In literary matters, his immense learning and love of literature were a constant magic for me. As an influence on my own writing, that is more difficult to figure out . . . Let me shift the subject a little. Maybe I was led to this by Cal's library, led to the prose written by poets. The poet's prose is one of my passions. 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.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give an example?

HARDWICK

Well, here is a beautiful sentence, just right, inspired, a bit of prose I've memorized. It is by Pasternak. It goes: "The beginning of April surprised Moscow in the white stupor of returning winter. On the seventh, it began to thaw for the second time, and on the fourteenth when Mayakovsky shot himself, not everyone had yet become accustomed to the novelty of spring." I love the rhythm of "the beginning of April . . . on the seventh . . . on the fourteenth" and the way the subject, Mayakovsky's suicide, is honored by the beauty of this introduction to the account. It's in *Safe Conduct*, Pasternak's autobiographical writing.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps this leads to the subject of biography. You had a review in *The New York Times* of a biography of Katherine Anne Porter. There you had some rough things to say about the present practice.

HARDWICK

Last summer I had a striking experience. On the same day I received two letters, written by different people, each saying she was writing a biography of an author recently dead, an author not at all a household word. Two letters on the same day. I didn't know the author, but perhaps I'll merit a footnote in the book saying I did not know her. Or be thanked in the preface. Biography is a scrofulous cottage industry, done mostly by academics who get grants and have a good time going all over the place interviewing. How seldom it is that one has ever heard of the person writing the biography. What are the models, what are the qualifications? And it is not only the full-scale computer printout that these things are, but the books brought forth by lovers, friends from youth, cousins, whatever. I remember how horrified Dickens was when he met, in

later life, the model for Dora in *David Copperfield*. Now Dora would hire a hack and write about Dickens. I have just read *Auden in Love* by Dorothy Farnan, the stepmother of Chester Kallman. I quite disapprove of the impertinence and the celestial glow around herself and her intimacy. Both Auden and Chester would be *mute, motionless, aghast*. Such books diminish the celebrated object and aggrandize the biographer or memoirist. I understand from the reviews of a new book about Agee that the swarm and smarm of little "facts" degrade the memory most of us have of Agee. Think how sweet Trelawny now appears; and De Quincey's beautiful memories of the Lake poets, candid indeed, are almost a valentine because there is some equity between the subject and the author. And serious, incomparable reflection.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about Ian Hamilton's biography of Lowell?

HARDWICK

Hamilton is very intelligent and a very fine writer. Still the book is composed along contemporary lines and there is too little of Hamilton in it since most of the stage is given to raw documentation. When I finished it, I was reminded of Sir Walter Raleigh's executioner, who said, "There is not another such head to be chopped off!"

INTERVIEWER

Are you working on any fiction now? A future novel?

HARDWICK

Oh, yes. What are you working on? When one writer asks another that, he immediately apologizes, as if for a *gaffe* . . . I might say I'm working on working on a novel . . . I do hope I'll be writing a novel. I have some of it, but it is slow, of course, the writing. I hope not the work. Yes, I am writing fiction.

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