

A painting of a woman in a room. She is seen from the back, wearing a white top and a dark skirt. She is looking down at something in her hands. To her right is a table with a lamp that has a white shade with a floral pattern. On the table is an open jewelry box containing a necklace. The room has floral wallpaper and a dark wooden floor.

**SEDUCTION
AND BETRAYAL**

ELIZABETH
HARDWICK

INTRODUCTION BY
JOAN DIDION

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

SEDUCTION AND BETRAYAL

ELIZABETH HARDWICK was born in Lexington, Kentucky, and educated at the University of Kentucky and Columbia University. A recipient of a Gold Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she is the author of *Seduction and Betrayal*, three other collections of essays, a biography of Herman Melville, and three novels, including *Sleepless Nights* (also published by New York Review Books). Elizabeth Hardwick lives in New York.

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INTRODUCTION

ELIZABETH HARDWICK is the only writer I have ever read whose perception of what it means to be a woman and a writer seems in every way authentic, revelatory, entirely original and yet acutely recognizable. She seems to have seen early on that the genteel provincial tradition of “lady” novelists and essayists served mainly to flatter men, that there would be certain wrenching contradictions between growing up female and making any kind of sustained commitment to write. She understood at the bone the willful transgression implicit in the literary enterprise—knew that to express oneself was to expose oneself, that to seize the stage was to court humiliation, that to claim the independence implicit in the act of writing could mean becoming like the women she described in *Sleepless Nights*, left to “wander about in their dreadful freedom like old oxen left behind, totally unprovided for”—and she accepted the risk. Every line she wrote suggested that moral courage required trusting one’s own experience in the world, one’s own intuitions about how it worked.

Hardwick created a voice that carried the strength of that moral courage, a way of putting words together that could make the most subtle connection seem at once thrilling and domestic, subversively matter-of-fact, the quick stunning judgments of the kitchen. In *Seduction and Betrayal*, our sympathies are seen to stray from the spurned wife in *The Master Builder* because “depression is boring, suspicion is deforming, ill health is repetitive.” Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* is seen to have “the charm of a wayward, schizophrenic girl,”

Zelda Fitzgerald's life to have been "buried beneath the ground, covered over by the desperate violets of Scott Fitzgerald's memories." The daunting persistence of Bloomsbury as a literary ideal is briskly dismissed: "To see the word 'Ottoline' on a page, in a letter, gives me the sense of continual defeat, as if I had gone to a party and found an enemy tending the bar."

These are bold assessments, rendered no less adamant by either the pleasure they give or the exquisite diffidence with which they are offered. "Essays are aggressive," Hardwick once wrote, "even if the mind from which they come is fair, humane, and, when it is to the point, disinterested. . . . The true prose writer knows that there is nothing given, no idea, no text or play seen last evening, until an assault has taken place, the forced domination that we call 'putting it in your own words.'" Yet the aggression derives in this instance from an aching empathy: in *Seduction and Betrayal*, first published in 1974, she observes both women in literature and women who have made literature with the loving but fretful familiarity of a troubled sister. She gives us Emily Brontë's "spare, inviolate center, a harder resignation amounting finally to withdrawal," and she also gives us Emily Brontë waiting up to carry her drunken brother Branwell ("like a pestilence") upstairs, and "brutally beating her dog about the eyes and face with her own fists in order to discourage him from his habit of slipping upstairs to take a nap on the clean counterpanes."

She gives us the "strange and striking *stardom*" of Hester Prynne, the mysterious center of a novel in which the characters emerge as "not characters at all, but large, fantastically painted playing cards." She gives us Sylvia Plath as yet another star, "both heroine and author," and "when the curtain goes down, it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her plot." She gives us this breathtaking understanding of Dorothy Wordsworth, whose literary effort was largely

restricted to recording the weather in her journals, a woman whose “dependency was so greatly loved and so desperately clung to that she could not risk anything except the description of the scenery in which it was lived”: from Dorothy Wordsworth’s earliest years, Hardwick writes, “her situation was close to the dreaded one we find in novels: she was a female orphan. The dearest things mysteriously vanished from her life. She had only her intelligence, her exacerbated sensibilities, and her brother.”

And her brother. “Sweet to be pierced by daggers at the end of paragraphs,” as the author of those lines wrote in *Sleepless Nights*. This is a writer who can read *An American Tragedy* and see Clyde Griffiths as “in many ways a trusting, yearning *girl*.” This is a writer who can read *Clarissa* and see the drugging and rape of its heroine as “not exactly a betrayal of her expectations.” And to the point of Dorothy Wordsworth’s brother, a further piercing, in fact a veritable tattoo: “We may feel a grain of smugness or some outsized concentration on self in Wordsworth’s poems on Dorothy. At times, in some peculiar way, he seems to be *misleading* her, always insisting on the moon and misty mountain-winds as her freedom and salvation. In the end the congratulations are to himself.”

Elizabeth Hardwick was born in Kentucky, and grew up in Lexington. “In the summer the great bands arrived,” she told us in *Sleepless Nights*, “Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Chick Webb. . . . They were part of the summer nights and the hot dog stands, the fetid swimming pool heavy with chlorine, the screaming roller coaster, the old rain-splintered picnic tables, the broken iron swings. And the bands were also part of Southern drunkenness, couples drinking Coke and whiskey, vomiting, being unfaithful, lovelorn, frantic.” Although she exiled herself from this as soon as she could get up to graduate school at Columbia (“1940. Dear Mama: I love Columbia. Of course I do. The best people here are all Jews—what you

call 'Hebrews' . . ."), we hear Kentucky still in her voice, not only in her eccentric rhythms but in the extreme gravity of her remembered world, both its destructive romanticism ("*Drinking himself to death*: I could name many who did not reach twenty-five") and its dramatic promises of redemption. "Yes, I accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior on the west side of town in June, accept Christ once more in the scorched field in the North End in July, and then again on the campgrounds to the south in August," she wrote in *Sleepless Nights*. "Perhaps here began a prying sympathy for the victims of sloth and recurrent mistakes, sympathy for the tendency of lives to obey the laws of gravity and to sink downward, falling as gently and slowly as a kite, or violently breaking, smashing."

The redemption she found was in the exercise of her luminous mind, in the "assault" itself, the "forced domination, "the act of making something where nothing exists, of "putting it into your own words." In *Seduction and Betrayal*, she quotes Robert Southey: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life," he had advised Charlotte Brontë, who had sent him a few of her poems. "The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation." She does not find it necessary to note that the making of literature has been for many women precisely about the abandonment of those proper duties, the ultimate seduction. Nor does she find it necessary to note that Robert Southey is no longer read, and Charlotte Brontë is. At the time *Seduction and Betrayal* was first published, a reviewer in *The New York Times* complained that if the book had a fault, it was that its author failed to "make sufficient distinctions between the real and the literary." That there are no such distinctions to be made, that the women we invent have changed the course of our lives as surely as the women we are, is in many ways the point of this passionate book.

—JOAN DIDION