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ANDREA DWORKIN: THE INTERVIEW

The Bill Clinton scandals have left Andrea Dworkin, the archetypal radical feminist, more isolated than ever. Will Self meets a surprisingly vulnerable pariah.

by Will Self

I MET her in a coffee bar on Greenwich Avenue in the Village. It was a typical enough joint for downtown Manhattan, called – somewhat grandiloquently – Cafe des Artistes. It had stripped-board floors and distempered walls. There was a base-to-nape counter, overgrown with pot plants and ballasted with a Gaggia, around which hovered a dwarfish collection of waiting staff. The first room was dark enough, but the second – the one she'd told me she'd meet me in – was almost crepuscular.

She'd arrived before me, and arranged herself carefully in a throne-like chair behind a table by the door. She drank sparkling mineral water – although she told me that the food was "excellent" – while I contented myself with small glasses of tart red wine. The talk strayed – as it will between bookish people – to the reputations of writers we have loved and I asked her about Baudelaire. Her voice was deep and smoothly throaty. She chuckled before replying: "I still love Baudelaire ... I just can't ... y'know ... intellectually I think he's pathetic, but the poetry still holds me." She went on to say that she read him in parallel translation.

A seed was sown and finding myself the following day in the Strand Bookstore, just south of Union Square, with its "eight miles" of secondhand books, I went looking for a parallel translation of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, thinking that maybe now was the time to renew my quest for the poetic. I

found a first edition of Edna St Vincent Millay's translations and, idly flipping the cut and annotated pages, chanced on this verse:

*Hope – if you're hopeful – or despair;
Nothing's to hinder you; but hark!
Always the hissing head is there,
The insupportable remark.*

It seemed to me a small piece of uncanniness; St Vincent Millay translates the title as "The Fang", but L'Avertisseur really means "the horn", and it's as a foghorn that we perceive this woman, my coffee bar interlocutor; a foghorn blaring out Cassandra-like prophecies of sado-sexual immolation – certainly not as I describe her above, in the guise of a poetry lover, a coffee-bar intellectual, whiling away the early evening in the West Village.

Expectations are made to be defeated, and on this trip one was and one wasn't. I'd expected to turn up at my half-brother Nick Adams's house in upstate New York and have him yawn when I told him why I was in the States; instead, he said "Andrea who?" "Dworkin," I replied, "the radical feminist – surely you've heard of her?" He hadn't – and I suppose this wouldn't be too remarkable if he were a plumber or a farmer, but he's the Professor of Architectural History at Vassar and a widely-read liberal intellectual. That evening he returned from the college almost skipping with glee: "Hardly any of my colleagues have heard of this woman either; a couple of them know of her through her work with a lawyer called Catherine MacKinnon, trying to get anti-pornography legislation enacted – and you say she's well known in Britain – "

"Well known?! Her name's almost a synonym for radical feminism."

"Well, it isn't here. I mean look" – he brandished a copy of that day's New York Observer, a tittle-tattle broadsheet printed on yellow paper – "see here, the headline reads, "New York feminists stand by their bill not by Broaddrick"; and they've gone round interviewing Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi and Gloria Steinem about their reactions to Juanita Broaddrick's rape accusation against Clinton, but not this Dworkin woman."

I grabbed the paper off him. It was true: under a garish cartoon which depicted The Great Cocksman and his entourage of Democratically faithful, bikini-porting feminists, tooling along in a red convertible, there were no fewer than three pieces anatomising the unwillingness of prominent New York feminists to countenance the truth of Broaddrick's accusations. Katrina Vanden Heuvel, the editor of Nation (and believe me, well known over there),

summed up the prevailing ennui when she remarked, "Forget Teflon, he's the iridium president. He's like someone from another planet."

Most of the women questioned were, I realised, not the sort of "feminists" Andrea Dworkin would have any time for anyway, but Gloria Steinem I knew to be a personal friend. It seemed to me, as the week went on and the strong flows of accusation and counter-accusation continued to course through the American body politic, that I couldn't have chosen a better, nor a potentially more painful time to interview Andrea Dworkin. For she's the woman who has made it her life's work to counter the way she believes existing power structures enshrine the ability of men to exercise violence on women and sexually abuse them. Furthermore, she's someone who has never hesitated to fuse the personal and the political; adding to this most painful of festschrifts her own accounts of her several sexual assaults, rapes and myriad beatings at the hands of men.

I first heard of her when I read her book *Intercourse* in the early Eighties. It is a searing polemic which advances the proposition that all penetrative sex is freighted with the possibility of being rape. I – as a young man with a more than average obsession with penetrative sex – found the work simultaneously repugnant and beguiling. Repugnant because it forced me to address the basic antinomies of my gender-based sexuality, and beguiling for exactly the same reason. Dworkin's arguments might have been extreme, but they pushed the true agenda to the surface. One thing was clear – this woman was fearless.

A few years later, on its British publication, I read her novel *Ice and Fire* and found it to be not at all what I expected. Beautifully and hauntingly written, this was a description of a woman's *saison d'enfer* in the Hiroshima landscape of the South Bronx. So far from revealing a cold, puritanical sensibility, Dworkin's descriptive prose was lush and sensuous. That was enough for me – I resolved that were I ever in a position to do so, I would meet this writer.

Clanking down the Metro North line and into the throbbing Grand Central heart of Manhattan, I read her latest collection of writings, *Life and Death*. Certainly Dworkin still had all her ice and fire intact. In essays on subjects as diverse as Nicole Brown Simpson, the Serbian death/rape camps, and Israeli state-sponsored misogyny, she honed her prose into an incantation of measured outrage. Dworkin always focuses on the language of her opponents, pointing out how the very ascription of Nicole Brown Simpson being a "battered wife" was disallowed by Judge Lawrence Ito. How, in other words, OJ Simpson's defence team was able to distort the truth of his

persecution and battering, even when his victim was beyond the grave.

My second expectation had been that I would get on well with Andrea, and in this, at least, I wasn't disappointed. I suppose if I'd stopped to think about it for even a few minutes, it might have occurred to me to worry what this much persecuted woman might make of a large, heterosexual man with an extremely chequered history of relations with women, but I didn't. Perhaps it's the raw quality of Andrea's bulk (she must weigh more than 300lbs) that effectively muffles such concerns; perhaps somebody being so extravagantly overweight effectively desexes both them and their interlocutors. The alternative – and I hope true – explanation is that she didn't peg me as a misogynist.

We spoke of Baudelaire, as I say, and of how the degradation of male writers is often perceived as enhancing their aesthetic value, while the same would never be true for a female writer. It was a point she'd made in her introductory essay to the last collection, *My Life as a Writer*, but she enlarged on it for me, saying she now found Henry Miller's work "embarrassingly negligible and repulsively anti-Semitic," and Ginsberg to mean "nothing to me, nothing at all".

I asked what she was currently working on, and she replied, "I'm actually extremely dull because I've been working on footnotes." The footnotes are for her next book, *Scapegoat*, which deals with a subject as inflammatory as any she has covered before: "It's about the Jews in Israel and women's liberation. What women-hating and Jew-hating had in common, and then the whole history of how that changed for Jews with the establishment of the state of Israel; how the Jews then subordinated women and created a racial enemy in their image." Did the Israelis construe the Arabs as effete? I mused. "Sure," she went on, "if you're an Arab you're a castrated individual; so then you go home and take it out on the real woman ... this chain which never seems to stop."

But didn't she feel a great sense of achievement having finished this book? A sense of ... parturition? She paused for a moment, then said, "When I finished *Intercourse* I remember how I felt ... Ah! This is done ... I haven't had that feeling in a long time." Was it, I wondered, in part because of the recent politico-sexual events? And then it began to come out, the hot effluvia of her pain: "I'm sure that's part of it, it would be very hard not to be in despair in this country right now. When I sat down each night to write, I had to force myself to believe that I was writing something which somebody, somewhere, sometime would read. When I first started publishing I thought there was a community of people I was writing

for, but over the years the hostility I've met has changed that vision."

My brother's analysis of Dworkin's invisibility on the American political scene was succinct, and nothing to do with her nocturnal working habits. "It's the First Amendment," he told me – not without a slight smirk. "This legislation she and Catherine MacKinnon have tried to get passed has been struck down because it infringes a perceived right to free speech. The minute you assault the First Amendment, libertarians of all political stripes are arraigned against you. It's the American way." So Dworkin was squeezed out of the very middle of the political spectrum; while in Europe her books are in print, in the USA only the last is in circulation. It was an incongruity I'd never heard any British journalist remark on before. What did Andrea think?

"In Britain more people actually read what I write – here my name is a curse word."

I trotted out Nick's analysis to see if it bore fruit and she said, "Whatever it is, it's that need people have for absolutes. This is our faith – and it's taken such hold. It's enormously comfortable to have one principle you honour no matter what its consequences are, forget about everything else that has to do with liberty, equality, freedom – just forget it. It's a brilliant way for people not to have to take the responsibility for what's out there. In this country everything is a legal question: is it legal or illegal? Then there's nothing more to say about it."

"Take Mapplethorpe" – and this was entirely apposite, for Nick had raised the issue of the "homoerotic" photographer to highlight why it was that American liberals had no time for Dworkin – "It's impossible in America to say anything about his racism. People only want to know if it's legal." I concurred, but went on to hazard that her critics were so vehement because they feared her vision of an egalitarian eroticism, as being a sexless utopia where hermaphroditic beings wandered the wan earth wearing shapeless dun shifts. She didn't want that, did she? "No, I don't. I do think there's a genuine eroticism of equality, a kind of intimacy that is peculiarly different from male dominance, regardless of which side is acting out their role. I have come to believe that it's very hard for people to even think that their sexual feelings could ever exist in a context of equality.

"What I object to is the taking of pornography for feminine consent – I never used to use those words as synonyms, it wouldn't've been just. But people don't seem to have noticed the enormous growth of fetishism and voyeurism in this country – and there are consequences and they are synonymous." Consequences that Dworkin and MacKinnon sought to combat, but

has their legislative programme ground to a halt entirely now? "Pretty much." She sighed. "There to be reawakened at the right time, when people want it. When people begin to feel that there are consequences to pornography that they find intolerable. The problem is that pornography changes people – it so desensitises them to any real, authentic connection with other people. And the more desensitised they become, the less they can see."

It was time to broach the barrel of pain and get it out in the open. How, I asked, would Andrea have responded if she'd been asked by the New York Observer to comment on Broaddrick's rape accusations against the President? Her reply was presaged by a short, guttural, mirthless laugh: "I will never be asked that question." But if she was? "I believe that Clinton is a rapist. I believe the woman – and if I had doubts about the woman, I trust what I perceive about him – and in my view people have misunderstood what he did to Paula Jones: that that was an assault. When you understand that that was an assault, it's a very clear line to rape."

She didn't raise her voice or speak with odd emphasis, this was the spoken Dworkin, L'Avertisseur, like her prose: a repetitive incantation, designed to honk home the truth. And how did she feel about all of this? "I am beside myself. If I wasn't numbed by footnotes I don't know what I'd do – it causes me such distress. I'm sure a lot of women will've gone through what I've gone through ... Suddenly, every time you look at this man you have to think about rape. It's harder to sleep, it's harder to work ... because this man is the President. That's obscenity – right there."

And what did she feel about the response of Steinem et al? "That has been extremely hurtful. I'm about ready to cut up my card and send it back to the office. It's only what the grass-roots women do that keeps me from completely disavowing the mainstream feminism in this country. And, of course, a lot of these women are friends of mine, so it hurts on a personal level.

"I sent Gloria Steinem – with whom I'm very close – a fax a year ago in January. It was just before a piece of mine about Clinton and what he'd done was about to appear. My note said, 'People are beginning to circle their wagons. I hope you won't be part of it.' Two days later her Op-Ed piece was in the New York Times saying: 'Well, he took no for an answer – what is the problem? With Jones he took no for an answer – with Lewinsky it was consensual, so what's the problem?' And I was just appalled and I still am, beside myself."

I knew that Steinem was one of the feminists who had effectively fed and clothed Dworkin during her dog days. Was this the end of all conversation between them? "I hope we can find a way to talk, but we can't now. It was so condescending what she said. She said women who had been sexually assaulted did not have the sense of freedom that she had, because she had always been respected and we were ignorant of what consent means. I found that so upsetting. Now that the charge is rape, I think that we're the experts."

"It's this kind of splintering that's so difficult to take – women you consider to have saved your life because of the work they've done, and then they're saying to Ms Broaddrick 'drop dead'; and when they say it to her, they're saying it to me. Essentially, while what's left of the women's movement shows any support for Clinton, they're destroying the movement itself as any kind of refuge for women who've been sexually assaulted."

That, for me, was a clinching remark and one which made a mockery of the vacuities many mainstream feminists debate, as if theoretical concerns were anywhere near the heart of these issues. Dworkin had said it: support a possible rapist as president and you broach the very hull of the movement, leaving it to flounder and sink; and leaving to sink along with it all of the allegedly pro-women legislation which has been passed during Clinton's administration. "Of course Clinton is pro-choice," my wife opined back in London. "He needs easy access to abortion for all the women he's knocked up."

But in Manhattan I didn't unleash such incisive irony on L'Avertisseur. Instead I switched off the tape recorder and told Andrea that she no longer needed to sound either sonorous or oracular. And she didn't. We talked about her upbringing in New Jersey, and her "intensely supportive" father, who's still alive. We spoke also of how her mother, permanently invalidated by heart disease, had gone into therapy in her sixties, after "outliving all her doctors". Despite her belief in the importance of a personal praxis for those who are political writers, she didn't seem a depressed person: "I really love being alive – not that I think that every story has a happy ending, but I have an almost biological excitement with the wide world."

Andrea had pithicisms to make about neuropharma-cology: "I think they're aiming to replace all illegal drugs with legal ones." And depression: "In this country it's a blanket term that's pulled over to cover everything: melancholy, sadness, ill-fortune..." We also talked – or rather I did – about me. Indeed, the whole interview had commenced with my telling her at length about my other reason for visiting my brother: my need to read the

many intimate diaries left by my dead mother, which are in his possession. This is the character of the woman – she is a brilliant and sympathetic listener. I'd read other journalists' accounts of Dworkin and they'd described her as being, surprisingly, "very nice". It isn't niceness – it's sympathy. The sympathy of a woman who's had her convictions tempered at the same time as her emotions have been tenderised.

After a couple of hours she asked what I was doing and I said I was going uptown to meet people for dinner. Earlier she'd told me she too had a rendezvous, but now she said she would be meeting them right here in the Cafe des Artistes. I bade her farewell and said I'd look her up when I was next in town. Out in the street I paused at an open-plan phone to make a call. As I was hanging up, I saw a globular figure coming up the street towards me – it was Andrea Dworkin.

What incredible pathos, I thought to myself, for clearly she had finessed my earlier departure, just as she'd arranged to be in situ before I arrived, so that I shouldn't see quite how obese she's become. I hurriedly turned on my heel and walked off. I didn't wish to embarrass her. I'd deliberately avoided discussing either her weight or her sexuality in the interview. In the past journalists have pried, carped and crowed about both. The fact that she lives with a man called John Stoltenberg but, according to both of them, does not have penetrative sex with him, seems to be a source of irresistible, prurient fascination for people. Just as the fact that she has an eating disorder seems to provide her critics with endless ammunition for shooting down her arguments about the war against women: "Her-her-her ... the only reason she goes on about pornography/ rape/ exploitation is that she can't get a man to look at her..." and so misogynistically on.

Watching Andrea for those fleeting seconds as she ponderously traversed Greenwich Avenue, I didn't think any of those things. Rather I saw her excess weight merely as a burden, which must, in part, have descended on her as a result of the abuse she's been subjected to; and in my inner ear I raised a toast to her as a brave spirit, for, as long as Andrea Dworkin is with us, *"Always the hissing head is there, / The insupportable remark."*