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AHR Roundtable Why Biography?

ALICE KESSLER-HARRIS

FOR YEARS I RESISTED THE NOTION that an individual life could speak to the larger historical processes I was interested in exploring. Biography, I told myself, is closer to fiction than to history. It is, as the literary critic Catherine Parke points out, located right next to fiction on library shelves and in the public's imagination.¹ The life of an individual might instruct and entertain, I thought, but even at its best, it couldn't tell us as much as we might learn if we explored the issues with which that individual was involved. Even feminist biographies, those that attended to "the facts of both the individual life and the condition of women in history," tended to employ history as background illumination.² I think now that I was wrong—perhaps not about the way many biographies are written, but about what a historian can bring to biography.

The doubts first began to creep into my head when I read Virginia Woolf's essay "The Art of Biography." As an art, Woolf tells us, biography is built on the author's imagination. But unlike fiction, she adds, "biography resides in facts and is bound by them," so it is "the most restricted of all the arts."³ Woolf found this distinction between the work of the novelist and that of the biographer her major challenge. "How can one cut loose from facts," she wrote in her diary while she was working on her own biography of Roger Fry, "when there they are contradicting my theories."⁴ Fiction, Woolf averred, "is created without any restrictions save those that the artist . . . chooses to obey." But a biography's authenticity "lies in the truth of the author's vision." This "very cruel distinction," thought Woolf, consigned the biographer to the role of a craftsman rather than that of an artist.⁵

The tension between the play of facts and the search for truth is familiar to every historian: our bread and butter consists of the hunt for new and illuminating "facts." Insofar as we imagine history to be a social science, the facts are our data. But our art rests on our interpretive skills, on the elegance with which we weave both new and old facts into persuasive arguments. If these arguments help to alter the per-

This essay is offered, with humble apologies, to Judith Babbitts, whom I once discouraged from writing what might have been a great biography. I extend grateful thanks to Susan Ware, Nancy Chodorow, Nancy Cott, the Schlesinger Library, and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study for their important roles in my thinking on this topic.

¹ Catherine Parke, *Biography: Writing Lives* (New York, 1996), xv.

² *Ibid.*, 90.

³ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays* (1925; repr., New York, 1967), 221.

⁴ Leonard Woolf, ed., *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf* (New York, 1973), 281.

⁵ Woolf, *Collected Essays*, 221, 225, 221.

ceptions of our readers about the world we live in, so much the better. Unlike the novelist-turned-biographer, the historian rarely sees facts as challenges to be surmounted. Rather, we tend to view them as the material from which we craft our stories; the building blocks of explanation; grist for our mills. We argue over what constitutes an appropriate or usable fact, but not over whether we need them.

Suppose, then, that we imagined the life of an individual, not as a subject to be studied for its own sake, but as evidence that could provide a different path into the past. Suppose that we could, as the great British historian E. P. Thompson suggested in his introduction to a biography of William Blake, take as our task that of “placing” the individual whom we wish to study. Our effort would then lead us to search for what Thompson calls “the nodal points of conflict”: the tensions between our subject and the social/political world, the world of ideas that he or she encountered. Our object, as Thompson so succinctly put it, would be to explore “the way his mind meets the world.”⁶ The individual then turns into a “fact”—more complicated than most, but capable of illuminating the past in new and exciting ways.

I’ve been enticed to think this way partly by recent forms of historical analysis that have privileged subjective viewpoints, rendered experience an object of exploration, and turned the collective memories of individuals into historical sources. Like many others of my generation, as I’ve come to terms with the limits of what we used to call “objective” standpoints and begun to interrogate the perspectives from which our subjects speak and write, I’ve paid increasing attention to the importance of the individual actor—not for what he or she may have done, but for what his or her thoughts, language, and contests with the world reveal. Like many historians, I am skeptical about whether there is a “truth” to be found in the past, but I resist the notion that we are therefore engaged in our own form of fiction writing. Virginia Woolf put it this way: the biographer’s facts, she writes, “are not like the facts of science—once they are discovered, always the same. They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change . . . thus the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner’s canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe.”⁷

In this spirit, I want to invert the questions that biographers typically ask. I imagine myself writing something perhaps better called an anti-biography, or, in the jargon of the day, “biography not.” My object is less an examination of the internal tensions and contradictions (those are my “facts”) that produced the experiences of a relatively public person than it is an exploration of what those experiences can tell us about the American past. Rather than offering history as background, or introducing it in order to locate an individual in time, I want to ask how the individual life helps us to make sense of a piece of the historical process. I want to see through the life. My claim is grandiose: I think an individual life might help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time

For these purposes, Lillian Hellman is an astonishingly good subject. I am often asked why I didn’t choose to write about Frances Perkins or some other visible public

⁶ E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York, 1993), xii, xix.

⁷ Woolf, *Collected Essays*, 226.

figure who made a difference in the working-class arenas I've spent most of my life studying. Had I done that, perhaps I would now be exploring a different slice of the past. But it is, I think, precisely because Hellman remained in such constant and lively dialogue with several of the key social and political currents of her day that I find her life intriguing. She offers access to four arenas that are central to understanding the direction of twentieth-century American society: the revolutionary transformation of sexual life and gender roles; the swirling political currents produced by the challenge of socialism and communism and the tensions of the Cold War; the fluctuating and contested nature of identity and its political uses; and the impact of a newly vibrant culture of celebrity.

As I research and write, as I recuperate Hellman's past, I find myself drawn into the conflicts and the resonances around which she wove her life. I am struck by the dissonance within her daily life (loud, self-promoting) and its contrasts with her articulated view of herself (southern, family-centered, loyal). I wonder at the conflicts generated by a frequently reaffirmed worldview that claimed social justice as its primary goal, and public perceptions of those claims as self-serving and tendentious. As I seek to identify the traditions within which Hellman operated—to revisit pieces of that tradition that are already evident—I find myself exploring how much of the tradition remained invisible, not just to Hellman's friends and foes, but to Hellman herself. I am drawn to the complicated role that sensibility, emotion, and feeling played in her life, not so much as evidence of her internality as in constructing social behavior and in fostering political commitments. Through Hellman, I think I understand a little more fully the politics of the 1950s and after, and perhaps something of their larger role in shaping the worldviews of ordinary citizens and intellectuals alike. My questions rotate not so much around whether, and how, angry she was, or how alternately courageous and fearful, as around how others interpreted her anger, named it, and used it for political purposes. Looking through Hellman, I believe I can see something of the ideological forces that shaped the stance of Cold War America, and of the tensions that circumscribed our domestic and foreign agenda during her lifetime and after. Though I don't want to bypass the difficult questions posed by the structure and character of Lillian Hellman's controversial persona, I try to focus on its capacity to tell us something of how it was shaped in dialogue with a social and cultural and political milieu of which she was an active part.

I chose Hellman, then, precisely because she seemed to me such a replete subject. Gone now for nearly a quarter of a century, Hellman still exerts a powerful sway: few of those who remember her do so neutrally. She remains the object of a remarkably resonant anger, amounting sometimes to venomous hatred. How was it that this small woman could loom so large in the American imagination? Why have successive generations of Americans responded to her with such passion; why was she perceived as so fundamentally, so *deeply* ugly? Playwright, memoirist, politically engaged activist, friend, and lover, she evoked controversy in all these incarnations. She has been the subject of several conventional biographies and of much literary analysis, which together have exposed both the flaws in her character and its multiple attractions.⁸ I welcome these as releasing me from the obligation to reconstruct what

⁸ The best of these are Carl Rollyson, *Lillian Hellman: Her Legend and Her Legacy* (New York, 1988), and Deborah Martinson, *Lillian Hellman: A Life with Foxes and Scoundrels* (New York, 2006).

we already know about her birth, her family, and the outlines of her life. For, as I discovered with mounting excitement when I started to rummage about in her life, the Hellman who touched on some of the most important elements of twentieth-century American thought and behavior remains a mystery. My task, then, as a historian is to examine the explicit and implicit contradictions and tensions that permeated her life and underscored some of the most pervasive fault lines of twentieth-century American culture. These contradictions turned her into an object of public scrutiny, the subject, alternately, of public loathing and of admiration. Not many people have attracted such conflicting firestorms of emotion: of love and revulsion; of admiration and contempt; of anger and even of fear. If we could understand something of the currents of emotion that she regularly produced, we could, I thought, understand something of the American twentieth century.

These issues haunted me as I researched and began to write this comment. Perhaps one extended example—her position as a woman and as a feminist—will illustrate what I mean by this.

Arguably, there is nothing more important in the social history of twentieth-century America than the transformation in what we used to call family life. Partially fueled by changing patterns of consumption and production, the change is marked by the continuing struggle of women to live economically independent lives, and the profound alteration of gendered relationships and sexual behavior that has been both its cause and its product.

In some ways, Hellman's life exemplifies this transformation. Born in New Orleans in 1905, she grew up mostly in New York City, although she spent some months of every year in the South and retained strong ties with her relatives there. She attended college briefly, and in 1924 went to work for a couple of years at an avant-garde publishing house, where she enjoyed living the life of a quintessential flapper. She married at age twenty, left her husband when she was twenty-five, and embarked then on what was to become a complicated and long-lasting relationship with mystery writer Dashiell Hammett. They lived a bi-coastal life in Hollywood and New York, each occasionally taking other partners (Lillian more seriously than Dash). Always they remained committed to each other. Lillian's career as a playwright flourished. She achieved fortune and earned celebrity status as a result of her politically and emotionally charged movie screenplays and her work in the theater. Devastated by the McCarthyist furor of the 1950s, she rapidly rebuilt her reputation, reemerging in the 1970s with a series of three memoirs that led a younger generation of second-wave feminists to idolize her, and a newly resurgent conservative movement to hate her. She died in 1984, blind, almost bedridden, and defending herself against accusations of lying.

In many ways, this story tracks the emergence of women from the private into the public sphere. And yet a closer examination reveals some of the ways that a new culture of modernity provided mixed messages to its female population. Like other members of the generation of women who came of age too late to join the first wave of feminists, Hellman seized the opportunities suggested in the years during and after World War I. In this new world, women who wished to do so could take sexual freedom and autonomy for granted. Hellman could and did claim the sexual prerogatives commonly associated with men: initiating and ending sexual liaisons at her

pleasure; retaining a relationship with Hammett as primary but not exclusive. She also smoked, swore, and cursed with abandon, spoke loudly and aggressively, and demanded loyalty above all else. In none of these ways was Lillian Hellman unusual, but her stubborn refusal to change as times changed set her apart.

The sexual freedom that seemed so admirable to many in the 1920s would in the Depression of the 1930s become less comfortable. By the 1940s, it was downright unpatriotic. If some members of her rebellious generation, catching the shift in the times, or growing just a bit older, settled into marriages—even into successive marriages—Hellman refused to change. And in remaining true to herself, she challenged cultural norms. As she grew older and maintained her sexual persona, commanded the attention of young men, and occasionally swam naked at the Martha's Vineyard beach near her house, admiration changed to ridicule, even revulsion. Once again, the times shifted in the 1960s: a younger generation of women seeking what was then called sexual liberation turned to her emerging memoirs to find an example of a life lived to its own tune. Hellman's insistence on remaining true to her own code of morality once again drew admiration and respect. Hellman, however, had not changed. The times had.

In her lifetime, Hellman did everything demanded of a man and more. She achieved success on male terms, in a male arena, by force of hard work and talent. She wrote film scripts that have led to classic movies, and plays that became Broadway hits. Her work spoke to some of the most pressing themes of the 1930s and 1940s, including class and money, family unity, and political commitment. Some have lasting resonance and are still regularly performed. Hellman turned these achievements, and those of Hammett after he died, into a financially secure and stable life. By paying close attention to the business aspects of her achievements, she managed to provide a comfortable lifestyle for herself for pretty much all of her adult life. She bought and sold property, managed her investments, and sustained Hammett financially when he could no longer support himself.

But accomplishments that in a male might have been seen as commendable fueled negative views of a woman. Despite a private and public record of generosity to good causes and friends down on their luck, Hellman's image is hardly one of warmth and generosity. Rather, she was commonly perceived as overly concerned with business details, watching her pennies, and pleading poverty. She was also, and perhaps ironically, critiqued for living luxuriously, wearing designer dresses, sporting fashionable hats, and modeling mink coats. By the 1970s, late in her life, the adjectives most often used to describe her (many of which still resonate) included a range that have far greater negative inflection when applied to women than when applied to men. In the popular imagination, she was greedy, selfish, impatient, determined, demanding, loud, and abrasive. Undoubtedly she was all of these, and I could, as a biographer, choose to defend her by citing the positive adjectives that also defined her personality. According to her friends, she was, after all, charming, warm, caring, loyal, generous, and above all funny. Why, then, do the negatives so insistently outweigh the positives? What chord did she touch that led so many (even among some of her friends) to identify her in such deprecating ways? What led some to walk away from her gravesite believing that once she was dead, they could and should distance themselves from her?

As historians, we know that the emotional truth in any history (much less in a biography) derives from the present day, so we are led to suspect that the record of judgment against Hellman (true or untrue) suggests something of the social meaning of a woman's success story, even in the enlightened twentieth century. When do these adjectives emerge? To what undercurrents do they speak? How widely are they used by women as well as against other women? Are we here experiencing the special venom directed at successful women, or is something else going on? Surely some of the explanation for Hellman's continuing hold on the American imagination lies in the details of her own life. Why did she not bow to social pressure, grow old gracefully, alter her behavior to conform to an acceptable public morality?

Was her judgment of others so pitiless, her character so stubborn, as to explain a constant and continuing stream of attacks? Or are we called, as historians, to watch how an unfolding life is called to account in different ways as the social climate changes and the political tides turn? I believe that we will learn something if we watch the weather change, the value systems shift, the storm descend and retreat: as we observe the engaged life struggle to maintain its balance.

I am not foolish enough to believe that all of the controversy in Hellman's life can be attributed to her female sex and the ways that her life violated commonly accepted gender boundaries. In her case, her politics, her occupation, her southern roots—all of these and more demand investigation. In Hellman's case, too, the life fosters engagement with a nexus of concerns that include the uses of memory, the meaning of lies, the function of identity, the contradictions of left-wing politics, the dimensions of women's freedom, and the culture of gender. I flatter myself that even though Hellman resisted the idea of biography, she would not have disliked this one. She once refused to cooperate with a well-known publisher who wanted to write a biography of her friend Dorothy Parker. "I'm not sure," she wrote, "that anybody's life shows us much about their work. What difference can it make in the end? Most of us live a life of accidents, anyway. It's all a form of gossip columns. A sort of modern racket."⁹

But what if the subject of biography illuminates more than the personal? What if the historian's biography can successfully see through the life—revealing how the tensions in the life emerge from historical circumstance and speak to the historical process? Such a biography might not satisfy Virginia Woolf's desire to write unconstrained by the facts, but it would surely teach us something about the political and social conflicts that shaped the American past.

⁹ Lillian Hellman to William Maxwell, 1971, Folder 5, Box 45, Lillian Hellman Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

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