CHAPTER VII

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The preceding study shows that Miss Hellman projects the picture of a totally good and brave person without being in the least simpleminded. Those around her readily take cognizance of the force of her personality. Alfred Kazin tells us that an editor refused critical review of her *Scoundrel Time* because it was hard to go up against Lillian Hellman. But what is more astonishing about her achievement is the patience at the core of her explosive temperament. "A tangled fishnet of contradiction!" she calls Dorothy Parker (UW, p.218), and this is equally true of her.

In politics Miss Hellman has by turns been a Socialist and an individualist, a radical and a liberal; but she eventually realized that she would fit into no political party (ST,p.46), thus eminently justifying Emerson's definition of man: whosoever would be a man must be a non-conformist.

Miss Hellman is a non-conformist. Sometime she supported the Nazi German-American pact, and later asserted that it was her fault not to be able to recognize the sins of Hitler. And when she turned anti-Nazi, she took the line of Soviet Russia. During the Soviet-Finnish War she attacked a theatrical relief
committee for raising funds on behalf of the Finnish government; but then she was among the first to condemn the repressive measures of the Soviet government. She had visited Russia twice as a cultural representative and had received the unique honor of being invited to visit the front during the last days of the Second World War. But when in 1948 Tito broke with Russia, she was the first to go to Belgrade and write a series of sympathetic interviews with Tito which were not at all well-received by the Communists in America or in Russia. Thus she is as Joseph Rauh, her defense attorney in the H.U.A.C. trial rightly summed up, a "maverick" (ST, p.89).

"In my case", Miss Hellman says in her memoirs, "I think the mixture of commitment with no commitment came from Bohemia as it. bumped into Calvin; in Hammott's it came from never believing in any kind of permanence and a mind that rejected absolutes." (Pentimento, p.238). According to her, people in general are often interested in theories (ST, p.46) whereas theories for her are no answer to problems. She preaches no particular theory; she holds a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving the problems of this world.

Miss Hellman is an anti-capitalist, she hates those who wade and wallow in money but all the same she recognizes the power of money. She is rather fond of money, not for its own sake but for its power to buy things. She did not care to count money but then she cared so much in fact, that she pretended not to care, as she herself says (UW, p.176).
On one hand she finds fault with society and writes a play like *Days to Come*, centering around an industrial conflict with the Marxian moral that men are sundered from one another by a difference in class interests which no personal goodwill can bridge. *The Little Foxes* is a bi-thematic play. On one hand she condemns capitalistic society and appeals for a social change; but on the other hand she upholds that an individual cannot escape the responsibility of his deeds and that only the system—the social setup—is not to blame. When we see characters like Reginas and the Hubbards, we become convinced that it is not so much the vicious capitalistic system which is to blame for the evils of this world as the fact that man is still largely unregenerated—still at heart a beast of prey.

In her acceptance of the immediate contradictions as absolute Miss Hellman may be called a pragmatist. It is because of this pragmatic tendency that she seems to be vacillating on all issues. Sane soul as she is, she believes that the actual universe is a wide open thing; it cannot be confined in system: Perfection in practical life is something far off and like El Dorado still in the process of achievement. This is the finding of *Candide*. Since there are 'no saints and no utopias' we should remain satisfied with this earth reminding us of Frost's sensible statement that earth is the right place for love. Since there is no absolute truth—absolute good to be found, we should remain satisfied with the finite and the relative.
Miss Hellman is a pragmatist in the sense that in her Candide the narrow naturalism of Martin and extravagant idealism of Pangloss get reconciled. Now Candide stands "not for an imaginary or ideal life of a hypothetical being but, for the normal working life of instinct and desire, of adaptation and environment." 2

She is a pragmatist also in the sense that she preaches an attitude of orientation—away from principles and isms—and of looking towards fruits and consequences. She believes in utility and success with which a doctrine works; she clings to facts and concreteness, observes truth in particular cases and generalizes. This is what she does in Days to Come. She finds a general solution to a particular problem. She believe in ideas insofar as they help her to get into satisfactory relation with other facts of our experience. An idealist without being an ideologist, she stands committed to the welfare of people of this world.

She was a liberal, a humanist who preached tolerance and compassion to our fellow beings whatever be their follies; but she always tempered her humanism with self-restraint and with an inner check. It is her rational humanism that prompted her to repress her excess of sentiment. As she says, "The pure and innocent sometimes bring harm to themselves and those they love and when they do, for some reason that I do not know the injury is very great." (TA, p. 747). We may recall here Bertrand Russell's essay on the harm that good men do. One
cannot help appreciating the modesty and balance suggested by the phrases, 'for some reason that I do not know.' She believes in one absolute immutable reality valid for all the times and places, that is, love—'love is a thing that never goes wrong'—but the love of Lily for Julian creates havoc due to her fierce and sentimental attachment to him. Thus Miss Hellman dislikes this over-doing of anything even though that 'thing' is love. She is free from those musty sentiments—"a promiscuous benevolence, what the Greeks call philanthropy." 3

The same rational attitude she shows with regard to religion. Hersey said that Lillian Hellman "had a hidden religious streak but an open hatred for piety. She hated piety because it was born of sentimentalism and she was religious because religion saw in love the means for ultimate salvation." 4 But all the same she holds the traditional religion to ridicule because it did not have a value for concrete life. Though she ridiculed traditional religion with its rites and rituals, she believed in the power of prayer (APF, p. 403).

In her later works she reveals her existentialistic outlook depicting the sad predicament of human beings. She shows the helplessness of man in the face of the inscrutable force of circumstances but she does not show him as unchangeable, unadaptable and handed over helpless to fate. What she shows is that human beings are thus and so because conditions are thus and so, and conditions are thus and so because human beings are thus and so. She is
thus a humanist and an idealist never losing sight of a possible prospective paradise on earth. In her dramatic world virtue is subjected to a lot of trials and tribulations, but all the same she sees that the unjust evildoers are not allowed to flourish.

While she espouses the cause of freedom of the sexes, she vehemently condemns reckless promiscuity. While she recognizes the power asserted by the opposite sex she preaches the need of the discipline of conscience. A humanist, she is in entire accord with the holy injunction to love one's fellowmen, but she upholds the severe realism of an eye for an eye. She ruthlessly metes out this type of justice to Count de Brancovis in Watch on the Rhine.

And we see that the qualities which are integral to her personality—her faith and philosophy are attributes, her literary art also.

Though Miss Hellman never associated herself with any theatre that produced radical propaganda plays, most of her own plays belong to the camp of the earnest thinkers. She never wrote a line merely to entertain an audience, to win fame or to make money, she never wrote a line that would not help put man on the right path. But while she instructs, she entertains too. She is an artist, a playwright whose message is invariably woven into words which hold us by their artistic qualities.
With regard to her art Miss Hellman objected to being called a writer of well-made plays and she had no theories of the process of creation; but all the same 'she did things the most hard way.' While she had declared for realism, social as well as dramatic, she liberally uses impressionistic devices like symbolism and other inventions like flashback and lighting for intense dramatic effect.

Though a realist, she amply displays romantic traits too. While in most of her plays she deals with the drab realism of our humdrum life with all its common men, manners and milieu, she casts a spell of romance on human beings in her The Lark. We escape from what limits or fetters us. This sense of escape thrills us and we wander into the vague and the infinite flying high with the lark. When Birdie tells about her cheerful youth, the whole past unrolls before our eyes with swift deeds and we find ourselves in the remote South. We escape by means of them from all known surroundings and move in the atmosphere of enchantment and romance. She recreates that agrarian world so ideally that we yield to the mood of reminiscence and nostalgia.

As a person, Miss Hellman cared deeply for all fellow beings, but as an artist she always maintained a complete objectivity. In her dramas some of the characters, particularly those of some autobiographical importance, have had a very sympathetic treatment so much so that she almost identifies herself with them. They are phantoms from her
past—from her life. But even in their case she shows a peculiar economy and objectivity. Thus she is at once objective and subjective.

It is this objectivity—this "customary detachment from the characters that distinguishes her plays from tragedies and places them in the category of serious drama", 5 says Doris V. Falk. Tragedy, she further adds, requires a protagonist whose fall can excite pity and terror but this detachment on the part of the writer saves us from such sentimental involvement. 6 We feel no pity for the Berniers or the Bagtries. But there is the other side of the issue; there are some characters—Griggs, Crossman, Andrew, Whalen and the like—who persist in the face of the absurd. It is not their pain and suffering but the dignity with which they endure—their noble reaction to these sufferings—that makes the plays true assertions of the worth of human beings.

Miss Hellman wrote her plays to be staged. Drama to her was mainly a visual art. She strongly felt that "to do a play no matter how much one wishes to stay away from it, one has to know the theatre, ... A play is not only on paper. It is there to be shared with actors, directors, scene designers, electricians." 7 But she did not ignore the permanent value and worth of her plays as literature. "The manuscript, the words on the page, was what you started with and what you are left with. The production is of great importance, has given the play the only life it will know, but it is gone in the end,
and the pages are the only wall against which to throw the future or measure the past, she says (Pentimento, p. 151).

Thus her plays are not only good dramas with their visual flair; they are good literature of permanent value. They are not only mirabile visu, they are mirabile dictu.

Such is the portrait of Miss Hellman—as a person and as an artist. It is not a complete portrait—a finished portrait. It does not pretend to have covered all the shades, all the complexities of this legendary lady—this mythical woman (Recently the 'Julia' episode of her personal life as it appears in her Pentimento has been filmed, thus keeping her image ever fresh, ever alive before our eyes.).

But from whatever we have come to know about her, she appears to us a balancer an 'equipoiser' in her life and works. In a world which is torn apart by conflicts and contradictions, she does the service of reconciling contraries. She brings in the diagonally opposite halves to give us the whole, the complete vision of this world as it is with a contingent reflection on how it should be. An upright person, she cherishes only those ideals which are humanly valid, practical and practicable. A polished stylist, she resorts to a method which is only a pis alter.

And in that light her plays prove to be, to borrow the words of G.B. Shaw, a factor of thought, a promotor of conscience and elucidator of social conduct, an armory against despair and darkness and a temple of ascent of man.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Alfred Kazin, "The Legend of Lillian Hellman, Review" Esquire, p. 28, Aug. '77.

2 Ralph Barton Perry, Present Philosophical Tendencies (New York: Longmans, 1912), p. 197.


5 Ibid., p. 43.

6 Ibid., p. 44.
