

TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

THE LESTER AND SALLY ENTIN
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
THE SHIRLEY AND LESLIE PORTER
SCHOOL OF CULTURAL STUDIES



אוניברסיטת תל-אביב

הפקולטה למדעי הרוח
ע"ש לסטר וסאלי אנטין
בית הספר למדעי התרבות
ע"ש שירלי ולסלי פורטר

Autobiographies of the In-Between: Eugene O'Neill and Lillian Hellman

Thesis Submitted for the Degree "Doctor of Philosophy"
by Shalhav Gadi

SUBMITTED TO THE SENATE OF TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY
July 2017

This work was carried out under the supervision of
Prof. Milete Shamir and Prof. Yael Levo

Abstract

This thesis defines and explores a phenomenon in autobiographical writing which I term "overt fictionalization." There are many ways in which writers negotiate the role of fiction in their autobiographical texts: some employ fictional elements to enhance the believability of their stories while others disguise their autobiography under the cloak of fiction. Indeed, it has become impossible to discuss autobiography without consideration of some method of fictionalization, the two have become intertwined. However, the strategy of overt fictionalization has not been discussed as of yet. Autobiographers who employ this strategy emphasize their text's fictionality, and its condition as artifice, rather than claim for it the status of a natural confession or personal history. They subvert the conventions of autobiographical telling in overt and obvious ways, drawing the readers' attention to the fact of their doing so. They manipulate the genre's convention so as to expose them as nothing more than textual elements, disrupting the illusion of reality which the autobiographical text aims to create. Overt fictionalization is a systematic strategy that operates against an autobiographical reading, and which undermines the autobiographical framework of the autobiographical text. It does so by disrupting the illusion of reality which the autobiographical text is expected to create, while amplifying and intensifying the role of fiction in the making of the text. Overt fictionalization seeks to defamiliarize and subvert the well-known. It questions the norms of presenting the real, instead highlighting the writer's craft.

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) and Lillian Hellman (1905-1984) are two American writers who wrote several autobiographical accounts, all of which make use of overt fictionalization. In this thesis I will be analyzing their autobiographical oeuvres in light of the new perception and implications that overt fictionalization

lends to their autobiographical works. They do not use authorized discourses of truth in order to convince their audience, or produce an autobiography that fits into dominant standards of truth. Rather, they highlight the fictionality involved in such games of truth-telling, downplaying familiar discourses of truth. They undermine autobiography at the same time that they employ the genre, collapsing the text into itself. Overt fictionalization, then, is an extreme form of fictionalization: while other forms of fictionalization may be used to make a text more believable, such as rendering a life story in a familiar formula, overt fictionalization seeks to do the opposite. As such, it is a distinct strategy in autobiographical writing. The focus of this research is on overt techniques and gestures that signal to the readers that they are entering murky grounds. Such signals point to the text's unreliability. The accumulation of such signals throughout the text shapes unreliability as a dramatic component of the work—it is not only a central theme but an essential part of its aesthetics. Unlike most autobiographers, Hellman and O'Neill are busy crafting insincerity, presenting their works not as historical truths or keys to their psyches, but at best as honest lies.

This strategy takes shape in light of the epistemological turn in modernist aesthetics and thought, whereby the story is deemed secondary to the ways of deciphering and making of the story, and truth is deemed secondary to the methods and norms of understanding what is true. Modernist thought made significant changes in the field of autobiographical writing and it is at that period in which writers experimented more wildly with the borders between fact and fiction in their autobiographical tales. Overt fictionalization with its self-reflexive tendencies—the ways it directs the audience's gaze to the methods of the medium and form in which

the text takes shape—is specifically borne out of modernist's aesthetic and ideational framework.

O'Neill and Hellman were both influenced by modernist thought and aesthetics with its self-reflexive tendencies and its suspicion of realism as a genre that can represent reality and truth. Hellman and O'Neill were both playwrights, albeit with very different reputations: Hellman has been considered a middlebrow writer, and her works were deemed political calls for action, carrying a simple message about the world's moral problems. O'Neill is "The" American playwright, father of modern American theatre, and his works have been deemed highbrow art, with their focus on the complexities and inner struggles of the human psyche. Hellman and O'Neill deal with very different scopes and realms of existence. O'Neill focuses on the most private, personal sphere. If he has criticism of American culture it is expressed in terms of the effect of social norms on the individual. In contrast, Hellman uses the domestic and private sphere to discuss events and issues of wider political implications and horizons. It is interesting that despite the many differences between Hellman and O'Neill, even in their final choice of autobiographical form, both employ the strategy of overt fictionalization, and use similar techniques to bring it to life. Mainly, they challenge, question and even sabotage autobiography at the same time that they employ the genre, and write their works in relation to the autobiographical pact, even when they transgress all of its rules.

Although autobiographical material is incorporated to some extent in all of O'Neill's works, those I've chosen to discuss contain the greatest amount of such material and are referential to specific people and phases in O'Neill's life. The early "Tomorrow" (1917) and *Exorcism* (1920) as well as the late *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1939) all center on the year 1912. It was a

crucial year in O'Neill's life: it began with his suicide attempt at one of his old haunts, "Jimmy the Priest," and ended with his admission into a TB sanitarium, where this second brush with death eventually helped him launch his career as a writer. I will also discuss *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), a play from the middle period. As a comedy, it is atypical of O'Neill's oeuvre, which consists mainly of tragedies. This play was a result of O'Neill's struggle to break free from his own tragic formula and experiment with the limits of the autobiographical genre. *Wilderness* features the comic negative of the family in *Journey*, and the two plays may be regarded as conflicting autobiographical narratives.

Hellman wrote four autobiographical works: *Unfinished Woman* (1969), *Pentimento* (1973), *Scoundrel Time* (1976) and *Maybe* (1980). The memoirs overlap in periods of Hellman's life, at times retelling previous incidents, at others revealing what has been left out as gaps in other texts. Her memoirs read together operate as memory itself—moving back and forth, shedding different lights on events, yet also emphasizing the fiction behind memory-making, how the craft of the story-teller makes the memory. This effect is especially apparent in *Three* (1979), the collection of her first three memoirs, in which she offers yet another rereading of these works through italicized comments. Her last memoir, *Maybe*, is radically different from the rest of her oeuvre, offering a different voice for Hellman's narrator, thus exposing her earlier persona as a theatrical act impersonating the Hellmanesque heroine.

The scholarship regarding Hellman and O'Neill's autobiographical works generally divides into two camps: those who read these works biographically, trying to unearth what really did happen in the writers' lives, and where do their works contain lies or subjective rendering of historical truth. The many biographies about O'Neill and Hellman fall into this category. Then there are those who interpret these

works solely on their artistic merit and examine their tales as if they were fictional works, thus avoiding the issue of historical data, leaving it for the biographers. In my research I show that the tension between autobiographical truth and fiction is a major component of Hellman and O'Neill's autobiographical works. Their use of overt fictionalization brings this internal conflict to the fore and it is a significant part of these works' aesthetics. Therefore it is problematic to view them as either sources of biographical information or works of fiction without historical basis. The dissertation discusses the central techniques and devices Hellman and O'Neill employ to carry out their strategy of overt fictionalization:

Upturning Realism: the realist mode is closely tied with autobiography because it proposes a connection with the extra-textual world. Hellman and O'Neill do not take at face value realism's supposed privileged and direct relation to reality and truth. Instead, their works emphasize realism's inability to capture the real. They present the false in realism, or rather, realism as false. Hellman and O'Neill turn the skeptical eye towards realism by showing its inability to serve as a standard of truth. Their two major techniques for challenging realism are (a) clashing it with other, supposedly more fictive, genres of writing that seem to bear more insight regarding the autobiographical tale and (b) massive usage of metafictional and metatheatrical gestures which disrupt the illusion of reality. Hellman and O'Neill's abundant use of meta-fictional and meta-theatrical gestures disrupts the realistic framework which requires effacing the medium in order to preserve the illusion of reality. Instead, they expose the highly crafted, fictional and theatrical "real" backstage of realism, emphasizing the process and ways of crafting the autobiographical.

Meta-Fictional Gestures: Hellman and O'Neill's autobiographical works feature a debate about literature, which draws attention to the writers' own choices in

how they tell their life-stories. One major way in which this debate comes across is by dramatizing a battle between competing fictionalizers. This battle of story-tellers destabilizes the autobiographical framework in several ways: (a) by dramatizing the autobiographical act, the battle elevates the performance of autobiographical telling over the autobiographical content and draws attention to the text's mode of production; (b) by intertwining conflicting narratives, the battle challenges authorial power over one's personal life-story and questions the truth value of the stories being told; and (c) the battle emphasizes the fiction involved in making one's autobiography, thereby also questioning the nature of truth.

Theatricality and Meta-theatrical Gestures: Hellman and O'Neill were playwrights and the theatre informs their autobiographical writing. It is the very idea of the theatre with its artificiality and pretense that shapes their autobiographical sensibility, generating tensions with such autobiographical intentions as sincerity and truth. While autobiography claims to express reality, the theater as the medium of appearances and play-acting is directly opposed to it. Hellman and O'Neill's use of theatricality and meta-theatrical gestures serves to highlight the inauthentic and artificial, as a way to question the norms of autobiographical telling. Both employ melodramatic elements, devices and conventions in order to undermine realism, in turn undermining the real of autobiographical telling. Since melodrama is obviously contrived and formulaic, it goes counter to what is perceived as authentic or real. By using melodramatic formations within their autobiographical works, Hellman and O'Neill turn sincerity into an obvious, manufactured and formulaic form of self-presentation, which fails to convince even the speaker. Thus, they use melodrama in an ironic way—as an artifact of the past which no longer signals its original meaning, and therefore is left as a sign of overt theatricality.

The same goes for the idea of selfhood they present in their autobiographical works: they go against the dominant idea of the interior, psychological, deep self. Instead, Hellman and O'Neill present selfhood that is not merely performative, but downright theatrical. In their autobiographical works, the psychological self becomes another performance--they do not portray a genuine psychological self but the theatricality of such selfhood. Performative gestures retain and contain certain meanings in relation to the cultural systems in which and against which they operate. O'Neill and Hellman employ conventional gestures that lost their value because the cultural system in which they bear meaning collapsed. Thus the gestures remain as a theatrical gesture par-excellence—there's nothing but the gesture itself, which is not performative of anything but the performance. For Hellman and O'Neill, digging into the self and its depths can reveal only more costumes, acting parts, and inauthentic surfaces. For them, the self is theatrical.

Renegotiating the Autobiographical Pact: Phillipe Lejeune and Elizabeth Bruss define autobiography in terms of the implicit rules of discourse which shape the autobiographical text. These requirements can be summarized as follows: (a) in contrast to a fictional story, the autobiographical text can be verified, (b) there's a relation of identity between the writer, narrator and a central character, and (c) the writer is sincere. Moreover, writers may posit an autobiographical reading for their texts through extra-textual means such as interviews and dedications.

Hellman and O'Neill's autobiographical works operate in relation to these requirements, but instead of following them they go against them: (a) many elements in their stories cannot be verified; O'Neill presents conflicting narratives for the same story and Hellman uses such "evidence" as diary excerpts, letters and court transcripts in order to show them as false, misleading or partial. (b) Hellman suggests a relation

of identity between herself and her narrator, but although she is the story-teller, in many cases she is not the central character. The center of action is usually someone else, whose life is the subject matter. In his late autobiographical plays, O'Neill's proxy is not a central character. Moreover, in some cases, O'Neill's personality is filtered through more than one character. (c) Hellman and O'Neill's use of overt fictionalization in their autobiographical texts—through obvious theatricality and fictionality, ironic presentation of autobiographical confession, stark deviation from personal history and explicit refusals to divulge all—point to the writers' insincerity in crafting their life-story.

It is a crucial aspect of autobiography that the relation between the autobiographical text and the world outside it is complex, and there are bound to be some gaps between the text and the reality it aims to describe. Such discrepancies are part and parcel of any autobiographical text, but different autobiographers negotiate them in different ways. Hellman and O'Neill bring these tensions to the fore, toppling the text unto itself. They use a variety of techniques to amplify internal tensions, all of which point to the source conflict of the autobiographical text—the discordant relation between fact and fiction. By dramatizing the incongruities, discrepancies and discontinuities inherent in autobiographical writing, they inevitably emphasize the text's fictionality and highlight its own process of making. Instead of revealing a self, they expose the backstage mechanisms for constructing truth.

Poststructuralist critiques of autobiography emphasize that it operates as a social text: autobiography is guided by consensual assumptions regarding what is real and true. What is perceived as real has to do with it complying with certain norms of discourse—not only of what is told but of how it is rendered. Thus, autobiographers are expected to tell the truth, but what is regarded as true is bound up in conventional

fictions about it. Postmodern studies in the realm of autobiography then take as their focus not the life of the autobiographer, but the ways in which the self is situated in relation to discourses of selfhood and truth. This approach is especially productive in examining the autobiographical works of Lillian Hellman and Eugene O'Neill, because, as I argue, these writers present a curious anomaly: they do *not* use authorized discourses of truth in order to convince their audience, or produce an autobiography that fits into dominant standards of truth. Rather, they highlight the fictionality involved in such games of truth-telling, presenting their own life story as a crafted artifact which downplays familiar discourses of truth.

However, the reception history of Hellman and O'Neill's autobiographical works also teaches us about the limitation of the poststructuralist approach to autobiography: although these works send highly ambiguous signals to their readers, which makes it problematic to treat them as straight-forward autobiographies, both the critics and the general public approached these texts as personal histories and even as reliable sources of these writers' lives. Hellman and O'Neill's works are loaded with instances of obvious fictionality. Despite this major aspect of their work, the readers' intuition and understanding of these texts as autobiographical were so strong that they ignored the writers' attempts to destabilize the genre.

Elizabeth Bruss and Philippe Lejeune's theories of an autobiographical pact may shed light on readers' intuitions. They both claim that what makes a text autobiographical is a pact between autobiographers and their readers: the autobiographical pact directs their dynamics, posing certain limitations on the ways autobiographers write their life stories by bestowing them with special responsibilities (to which fiction writers do not adhere), and leading the readers to approach the text as set within an autobiographical framework. As stated earlier, Hellman and O'Neill

write their autobiographical texts in relation to the rules of the pact, yet they follow none of its requirements. Indeed, they bring up an autobiographical pact only to undermine and subvert it, yet for the readers the autobiographical framework is still highly salient.

Modernism is an important historical context for the strategy of overt fictionalization. Not only because modernist writers muddled autobiographical writing with fiction, but also because it is at that period in time when the autobiographical pact changes its terms to a more amorphous, phantasmatic pact, in which the reader is the decipherer of truth and the autobiographer and his life become an elusive riddle. The growing popularity of the genre has to do with its double game with the "real": autobiography is turned into a guessing game, keeping readers interested by creating for them the role of detectives who reveal encrypted secrets about the writer's self, while at the same time evading clear statements about autobiographical truth. Such autobiographies are read on the register of inference, rather than reference—truth is implied and not told directly, which ironically makes them more believable, truer than truth. What we witness, in other words, is a change in the conventions of sincerity and truth-telling, which ultimately affects the terms of the autobiographical pact.

The massive blurring of boundaries between the real and the fictional is in part a result of modernist aesthetics that sought to break familiar distinctions and considered new ways to relate to the real at a time when the concept of reality has been radically transformed. With modernism's new imaginative ventures into the field of autobiography, the genre's conventions, and modes of reading it changed. Modernism radically changed autobiography since it complicated the relation between reality and its representation. Due to its focus on epistemology, modernism diverted

the gaze from the object of representation back to the mechanisms of making sense, understanding truth and creating art. Hellman and O'Neill revitalize autobiography as a genre and transform it to deal with modernist assumptions and preoccupations as they shift from representing truth to questioning the ways autobiographical telling reconstructs reality, past, and memory. Specifically, their usage of self reflexive methods, such as meta-theatrical and meta-fictional gestures, is a product of modernist aesthetics' self-conscious stance.

The change to a phantasmatic pact is also in part the result of autobiography's familiarity as a genre: autobiographical reading of texts became so entrenched that even fictional texts were read under these lenses. Indeed, modernism's play with autobiography became possible because the kind of reading that is produced by the autobiographical pact was understood as a given. Only under these circumstances could writers renegotiate the pact: Hellman and O'Neill's strategy of overt fictionalization is allowed precisely due to the salient autobiographical reading in the background. Although they offer a phantasmatic pact, their readers, critics, and even biographers read their works as operating under the assumptions of an autobiographical pact. We can draw two conclusions from their cases: (1) the autobiographical pact as formulated by Bruss and Lejeune does follow the general readers' expectations, even if it does not always apply to writers' literary experimentations. (2) The change in conventions of sincerity, in how reality is understood, and how truth can be written, affects how autobiography takes shape within modernist aesthetic – the phantasmatic pact takes precedence over a traditional autobiographical pact which is its underlying source and on which it relies, because it makes the text more convincing and persuasive in its truthfulness.

This is where the poststructuralist approach to autobiography converges with Bruss and Lejeune's discourse-based theory: part of what makes readers understand a text as autobiographical has to do not only with truth in the basic meaning of referentiality, but also with culturally manufactured stratagems to mediate truth. The autobiographical pact is subject to transformations in its terms because the way we understand the "real" varies in relation to context. Autobiography became a hybridic genre which takes a double stand in both worlds of fact and fiction. The innovative element in Hellman and O'Neill's autobiographical works is not that they are simply fictional, as some poststructuralist critics might claim, but that they use the genre's hybridity and internal conflict as a new kind of aesthetic. This self-conscious and highly ironic aesthetics fits modernist perceptions of reality and art, which seeks to subvert familiar structures of understanding. It is not incidental that readers considered these texts as straightforwardly autobiographical; Hellman and O'Neill do raise an autobiographical pact. But their main interest is in subverting it and downplaying its conventions through the strategy of overt fictionalization. The result is an autobiographical text that collapses onto itself.

In my examination of their works, I ask the old-fashioned question about "what really happened" in order to show how they do link their texts with their personal history and extra-textual lives. As I claim, they do pose an autobiographical pact, and if future autobiographers have anything to learn from their experimentation it is that it's very simple to suggest an autobiographical framework, but extremely difficult to dismiss it once it has been even vaguely hinted at or implied. I also discuss how extra-textual forms of mediation, such as interviews and critics' reviews created an interpretive framework which directed readers to approach these texts as

autobiographical. At the same time, the more important question are how O'Neill and Hellman themselves answer the "what really happened" conundrum.

This is where the poststructuralist approach with its emphasis on what happens textually becomes useful: with their strategy of overt fictionalization, O'Neill and Hellman show how their autobiography is in many ways a matter of textual reality. Their point in bringing up their own history is not that history in itself, but the act of writing it, dramatizing how their life story is "made", even if it is not entirely made-up. Eventually, their autobiographical works are really about how one writes one's life story—the autobiographical text is just a setting for the theatre of the autobiographical act.