

Lying, Self-Deception, and Biography: Writing the Life of Lillian Hellman

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God forgives those who invent what they need.

—Lillian Hellman, *The Little Foxes*

Every Word a Lie?

Misrepresentation of self is a fact of life and a perennial challenge to lifewriters. This applies both to autobiographers and biographers, not least to that select group—the biographer whose subject wrote autobiography. Biographers of Lillian Hellman must decide how to deploy her four “autobiographical” volumes: *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), *Pentimento* (1973), *Scoundrel Time* (1976), and *Maybe* (1980).¹ This is no easy matter because, in the words of one chronicler, they are notoriously prone to “self-aggrandizing fabrications” (Wright 1986, 14). Mary McCarthy demanded of William Wright, the first to write Hellman’s life: “How can you write a book about a liar? It’s like building a castle on sand” (qtd. in Martinson 2005, 359). McCarthy’s most famous denunciation of Hellman was made on American television in 1980: “every word she writes is a lie, including the ‘and’ and the ‘the’” (McCarthy). A later Hellman biographer observes that whoever writes the life of a subject who was “addicted to lying from childhood on” inevitably “stumbles

through a minefield” (Mellen 1996, xvi). In this paper I consider Hellman’s most controversial piece of autobiographical narration, the portrait entitled “Julia” in *Pentimento*, and some of the issues it raises for biographical theory and practice.

The great majority of Hellman scholars now believe that the purportedly biographical “Julia” is perniciously unreliable. Some are fierce in their denunciations, but in his judicious biography of Hellman, Carl Rollyson argues that “the fictionalizing that assuredly took place” therein “seems less important than the artistic and biographical truth that for Lillian Hellman, Julia was real” (1985, 528). Rollyson is right to suggest that Hellman’s autobiographical deceptions, far from being a kind of narrative dross, are grist to the biographer’s mill: they reveal much about her fantasy life, her self-image, and her disposition towards truth-telling. It does not necessarily follow that such insights are more “important” than questions about the factual reliability of the narrative—as we shall see, the “Julia” controversy involves some serious ethical and historical issues—but Rollyson’s formulation allows some nuance to enter a debate that has all too often degenerated into mud-slinging accusations of lying, on one hand, and blanket defenses of Hellman’s honor, on the other. His comment opens out a more complex terrain of assessment, one that might enable us to assess deceptions such as those to which Hellman was prone with reference to a spectrum of explanatory possibilities. The following chart orders some such possibilities according to how far each entails the imputation of purposiveness (that is, the assumption that motivation of some kind is present), on one hand, and the imputation of conscious, strategic intentionality, on the other:

- Lying (both purposive and strategic)
- Self-deception (often, but problematically, construed as “lying to one’s self”: purposive but arguably not intentional)
- Pseudologica fantastica (a personality disorder involving compulsive lying and/or self-deception, but where these behaviors are not entirely delusional, improbable, or resistant to subsequent recognition by the subject: purposive but presumably not intentional)
- Delusional psychosis (where the capacity to grasp or to participate in “truth-telling,” either with self or other, seems to collapse: perhaps neither purposive nor intentional)

In the light of this spectrum, we might ask two preliminary questions about “Julia”: first, does the narrative appear to be substantially

“factually” true or not? If not, to which of the above causes might we ascribe its unreliability? Answers to the first question will depend in part on one’s views about the referential powers of language in general. If one thinks that language is intrinsically unreliable, Hellman’s deceptions may be adduced as evidence for this view, but might not constitute cause for censure, and may not even seem particularly interesting. But if one thinks substantial narrative reliability at least in principle possible, then one might want to ask which of the above four explanatory constructs is most appropriate in this case.

Narrative Reliability

The assumption that language is intrinsically unreliable is now deeply entrenched in some domains of lifewriting scholarship. The most influential source here is Derrida. Witness this statement by James E. Young, a significant figure in Holocaust studies: “what was evidence for the writer at the moment he wrote is now, after it leaves his hand, only a detached and free-floating sign, at the mercy of all who would read and mis-read it” (1987, 416). Young’s Derridean claim is that the victim of Holocaust trauma is *in principle* unable to impart a truthful account of her experience during the Annihilation. It would seem that some contemporary lifewriting scholarship has a problem with “truth”—not just an epistemological problem, but an ethical one as well: how desolating for a survivor of Holocaust atrocity to be told that it is intrinsically impossible for him to give a sufficiently accurate account of his suffering! How desolating, too, if a prominent Jewish writer and intellectual like Lillian Hellman were to lay bogus autobiographical claim to participation in the fight against Fascism.

Derrida’s part in all of this is hard finally to assess. He was a Holocaust-haunted thinker who said that “‘Auschwitz’ has obsessed everything that I have been able to think” (qtd. in Eaglestone 2004, 279), and he often objected to what he regarded as reductive construals and applications of his views about linguistic reference. Whatever we take these views to be, they are deeply linked to his account of other matters, including the “intentional” structures of consciousness and the resultant complexities of speech acts. So too are his discussions of truth-telling, especially of lying, and of lifewriting. His deconstructive theorizing about constative speech acts (2002, 37) is typically ambivalent: it affirms the pragmatic necessity of a “frank concept of the lie” (2002, 36), that is, a concept which sees lying and intentionality as necessarily and structurally

linked, but at the same time deconstructs this (“frank”) concept, proclaiming it to be “overdetermined to infinity” (2002, 35). The latter view is unsurprising, given that deconstruction so insistently problematizes the circuit between intention and act, especially intention and speech act. Derrida also considers the historicity of lying. He discerns a pattern of “*mutation* in the history of the lie” (2002, 40), and concludes that the concept of the lie must be relativized to particular, contingent cultural environments. The general thrust of his writings is indeed to relativize the lie and to dilute what many analytic philosophers and humanist literary scholars would see as the concept’s analytical and ethical force. Similarly, Derrida’s critique of “positivistic biography” construes biographical “truth” as being subject to interminable deferral. Such biographical narratives, he argues, instantiate “the structure of textuality in general” (1988, 51); thus there can be no signing off on a biographical subject because “his”/“her” signature is always subject to textual interpretation by the Other, who, being other, will perforce process the signature in a manner that is finally unassimilable to interpretations that spring from alternative perspectives. On this view, the “truths” of biography must always be under erasure. These are contentious claims whose problematical consequences are apparent in Derrida’s quasi-biographical account of Nietzsche, which unproductively complicates the already thorny issue of possible pro-Fascist tendencies in the latter’s thought (1988, 3–38).

Like Nietzsche, Derrida sees the “self”/“subject” as a kind of auto-construct, albeit one subject to powerful ideological determination. Again like Nietzsche, he seems to prize the energy that issues in dramatic, and particularly, in oppositional acts of self-construction. So conceived, “self”—or “subject”—comprises a series of dramatic and provisional projections and iterations, ongoing reinventions of the “I”; it is not conceived as a settled entity with core defining features. Such views, of course, occur widely in postmodern theory. Lacan construes the subject as structured by a doomed craving for the “mask” that projects and divides it (1979, 107). Judith Butler sees acts of self-fabrication as emancipatory, since they involve refusal of imposed identities and are thus resistance to inauthenticity. The “performative subversions” for which she calls expose the fact that the alleged “‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of ‘the person’ are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather socially constructed and maintained norms of intelligibility” (1990, 23). Further, being generally anti-Cartesian,

postmodernism's engagements with lifewriting, and with autobiography in particular, typically presuppose that introspection cannot yield reliable representations of interior worlds.

Refutations of the views I've just outlined must start at the source, especially Derrida's writings about the "intentional" structures of consciousness, interpretation, and linguistic reference. I have discussed his stance on these matters elsewhere (Freadman and Miller 1992). My purpose here is to take this and similar critiques of Derrida as already familiar to readers, and instead, focus principally on humanist lifewriting scholarship and biographical practice. This is necessary, I believe, in part because Derrida's project is essentially one of intellectual critique. He has much more to say about what's wrong with the "frank concept of the lie" than about how it actually manages to function in real-life contexts, including life writing, or about how it might be assisted to function better in such contexts. Similarly, his critique of "positivistic biography" belabors the alleged difficulty of deriving efficacious information from such texts, but has much less to say about how we do in fact derive apparently reliable information from biographies—not least, the information presupposed in Derrida's own deconstructive account of Nietzsche's life and thought. By contrast, there exists among many "positivistic" biographers, as among many humanist life writing scholars and analytic philosophers, a can-do spirit that trusts in our ability to elucidate and apply certain concepts, and trusts these concepts' capacity to inform, shape or help rationalize associated form of practice. For instance, analytic philosophers have worked hard to elucidate the concept of the lie, together with the related notion of self-deception. Both of these concepts do indeed inform and to some extent shape humanistic scholarly and biographical practice, albeit, I shall argue, in heavily implicit or insufficiently coherent ways. The account of self-deception I give later in this paper draws upon analytic philosophical explorations of the phenomenon and tries to show how these might guide and help to rationalize scholarly and biographical treatments of Lillian Hellman's deceptions. We should not, however, assume that "humanist" approaches, understood in the rather sweeping way I have had to bundle them here, are wholly separated, as if by an iron paradigm divide, from the insights of, say, Continental philosophy. Indeed, Herbert Fingarette's account of self-deception, upon which I will draw heavily, is indebted to Sartrean existentialism.

Let's now sketch the picture with which humanist theory might counter the postmodern one outlined above. For the humanist, the notion of "self" entails, first, agential activity, for instance, living and reflexively preferring, endorsing, and amending, a personal identity. Second, the idea of the self assumes the existence of certain "core," persisting features, including personal identity; third, it entails the existence of other, more contingent, features which can be subject to rapid and even radical change. Many humanists assume that one task of theories of representation is to explain how selves can change yet in some important respects remain the same, and how some representations, both within and beyond lifewriting, are in fact more reliable than others and are, indeed, manifestly helpful in our attempts to understand and negotiate our world. Those who believe that, in principle at least, autobiographical and biographical narratives can be substantially reliable may feel moved to account in theoretical terms for this conviction. If they can, such a theoretical account might help to balance "the hermeneutics of suspicion" that drives postmodern critique with what I call a "hermeneutics of discerning trust" in ascertainably reliable representations.

I believe that conspicuously accurate narrative representations are a powerful and necessary feature of social life, and that, consequentially, the *aspiration to narrative truthfulness*, including among biographers and autobiographers, is intrinsically a good thing, even if that aspiration can never fully be realized. Here Bernard Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (2002) is a useful corrective to postmodern views. Williams insists that our dispositions towards the notion of "truth" and the spirit in which we seek to disclose it have fundamental social and political implications. (He also argues that "truth" has extra-instrumental, intrinsic value, a claim I would not dispute but which I do not need to take up here.)

Over thirty years ago, Elizabeth Bruss's pioneering work on autobiography proposed that lifewriting texts be considered as extended speech acts. The following discussion of Lillian Hellman's factitious autobiographical speech acts, and of her biographers' accounts of her deceptions, construes such acts as springing from complex motivational histories and seeks to deepen our understanding of how such acts threaten the reliability of life writing modes. It is, finally, for the biographers to decide how Hellman's autobiographical deceptions should be characterized. My purpose here is to provide a sharper sense of how they *might* be characterized.

The biographies of Hellman are strikingly reluctant to venture upon detailed philosophical or psychoanalytic explanations of her unreliability. In this, as in many other respects, these texts reveal an unhelpful division of labor among lifewriting scholars whereby positivistic biographers tend to practice their craft without much reference to academic discussions of the epistemological issues that biography, autobiography, and other lifewriting modes so often raise.

“Julia”

In “Julia,” Lillian Hellman claims that in 1937 she took money to Berlin via an intermediary called Johann to aid the antifascist underground. She reports that she did this at the behest of a childhood friend, “Julia.” Hellman explains that “Julia” had gone to Vienna to be analyzed by Freud, had become a much admired resistance fighter, and had paid for her heroism with her life. Hellman asserts that she took her old friend’s body back to the United States and made repeated attempts to find out what had happened to Julia’s daughter. In shoring up the story and, presumably, trying to disarm skepticism, Lillian employs certain boozy, “gone to dogs” locutions that are familiar in her writing: recalling her reaction to the news of Julia’s death, she writes, “It is never possible for me to cry at the time when it would do me some good, so, instead, I got very drunk for two days and don’t remember anything about them” (1979, 444). Such locutions impart a general impression that Hellman’s feisty pursuit of the truth had been stymied by the chaos of war, the foredoomed degradations of memory, and the nefarious unreliability of others.

Since the early 1980s, various well credentialed people have claimed that the “Julia” story is a lie. The long list includes Mary McCarthy; Martha Gellhorn, war journalist and former wife of Ernest Hemingway; researcher Thomas McCracken; and the poet-autobiographer Stephen Spender, who had a personal interest in this saga, as we will soon see. It is now widely accepted that Hellman never had a friend whose life corresponded to that of “Julia” and that she never undertook the hazardous journey described in *Pentimento*. The current consensus is that the figure of Julia is based on the American resistance fighter and psychoanalyst, Muriel Gardiner, whose modest and lucid autobiography, *Code Name “Mary,”* appeared in 1983. Gardiner, whose story was well known to Hellman’s lawyer and is likely to have reached her through him, was a medical student in Vienna and was under analysis with a protégée of Freud. She was much admired, and it is not surprising that

many, including her former lover, Stephen Spender, were outraged by what they saw as Hellman's theft of salient aspects of Gardiner's life story. To the end, Hellman denied that Gardiner's narrative had been her source. Nor did she make a concerted effort to meet Gardiner and sort the matter out (Wright 1986, 414).

Biographical Presuppositions in the Humanist Secondary Literature on Hellman

The consensus about Julia's real narrative origins exists largely among humanist scholars and biographers. So far as I know, there has been little postmodern work on "Julia." I want now to survey humanist theoretical and biographical accounts of "Julia" and to suggest that, even though they have humanism in common, they are often at odds in terms of what I will call their "biographical presuppositions," that is, presuppositions about the nature and efficaciousness of biographical explanation.

During the last fifteen years of her life, Hellman, who detested biography and did everything in her power to thwart unsolicited biographical treatments of her, put a deceiving account of herself on record before any of the biographies were written. The biographers had, therefore, to confront not just a life but a legend, and to distinguish between researched biographical "truth" and a carefully fabricated self-image. Hence the references to "legend" or "image" in the titles of three of the four substantial biographies of Hellman that have so far appeared: William Wright, *Lillian Hellman: The Image, The Woman* (1986); Carl Rollyson, *Lillian Hellman: Her Legend and Her Legacy* (1988); Joan Mellen, *Hellman and Hammett: The Legendary Passion of Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett* (1996); and Deborah Martinson, *Lillian Hellman: A Life with Foxes and Scoundrels* (2005). A fifth volume, Ruth Turk, *Lillian Hellman: Rebel Playwright* (1995), is a thin and uninquiring narrative, apparently pitched for a general market.

Of the four detailed biographies, only Martinson's seeks to defend Hellman over the "Julia" narrative. It is regrettable that this, the most recent of these volumes, demonstrates remarkable unawareness of the larger implications of the debate. It is also an indication that the debate has not made sufficient conceptual headway. This, I suggest, is a reflection both on positivistic literary biography and on the humanist lifewriting scholarship that might assist the biographers better to rationalize and refine their practices. Martinson erroneously writes,

“Literary scholars now dismiss the furor as a tempest in a teapot, covering the same old literary ground, fought endlessly over the place of self in art” (351). Elsewhere, she notes that “Hellman insisted that Gardiner might be someone else’s Julia, but not her Julia. Hints of this woman’s identity come through in the Hellman archives” (131). But she does not elaborate on this key claim. This is surely negligent biographical writing. After all, if research were to vindicate Hellman’s version of the “Julia” debate, it would have massive implications for our understanding of Hellman as a significant figure in American cultural and political life.

Martinson’s defense reveals little about biographical presuppositions. It is simply a case of poor execution of conventional biographical protocols. Timothy Dow Adams, author of *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (1990), is a humanistic lifewriting scholar-critic who is not a biographer. His spirited reading of Hellman seems to rest on two incompatible presuppositions. On one hand, he argues, rather sweepingly, that autobiographical “truth” is an impossible goal: “telling the truth about oneself on paper is virtually impossible” (9); on the other hand, he says that autobiographical accounts of actual events can have “credibility” (144). Elsewhere, he presupposes a distinction between “literal accuracy” and “personal authenticity” (x) in autobiography. As we shall see, this is an important distinction; however, it is striking that such an able lifewriting scholar should write in apparently contradictory terms about something so fundamental as autobiographical “truth.”

Let’s now consider some of the main issues, presuppositions, and arguments that arise in humanistic critical and biographical discussions of Hellman’s unreliability.

1. Arguments Predicated on Conceptions of Genre

Hellman’s defenders often argue that she writes in a composite genre that fuses elements of autobiography, fiction, and rumination, and that this composite genre does not commit her to strict autobiographical truth, or even to an aspiration to such truth. Thus Adams: “Hellman’s four autobiographical books are actually hybrids of several forms of lifewriting” (124), including fictional “story” (127). This argument presupposes that nonfictional lifewriting can have an intermittent commitment to literal “truthfulness.” The narrative commitments that we associate with autobiography include participation in what Philippe Lejeune calls “the autobiographical pact” (3–30), whereby the autobiographer undertakes to write as if under oath and the reader takes this undertaking

on trust, subject to appropriate textual confirmations. In his biography, Wright argues a position that seems incompatible with Adams's: "To call a piece of writing nonfiction does not by any means guarantee its accuracy, but it does call into play an immediate obligation on the part of the writer to make the writing as accurate as possible" (426). Unless an autobiographer clearly signals to the reader when and where the narrative is deviating from the constraints of the autobiographical pact, such deviations can reasonably be seen as abuses of narrative trust. Hellman seldom sends such signals.

2. Arguments about the Nature of Memory

Arguments here proceed from presuppositions about the reliability or otherwise of memory. Too often, as when Adams asserts "the mendacity of memory" (141), these assume that generalizations about memory can be made that will hold for all individuals, including all autobiographers. This assumption is clearly not sustainable: some people's memories are far more powerful than others, a fact that applies quite as much to autobiographers as a group as to any other. Such arguments also tend to presuppose that when writing autobiography, people's memory will basically function as it does when they are going about other aspects of their life. This presupposition too is misleading. Writing often triggers, redirects, and fires memory in ways not otherwise available to that individual.

Those who argue that memory is constitutively unreliable generally impute its limitations to one or more of the following causes: the frailties of our perceptual equipment, the degrading impingements of time, the distorting effects of ideology, and the forms of psychological interference that spring from the individual's personal history. Among Hellman's biographers, Mellen is most astute in recognizing that memory is more than mere recollective mechanism. Its operations are intricately entwined with psychic needs: "Lillian fictionalized, not because memory was ineffable, but because reality did not measure up" (385).

3. Arguments about the Nature of Truth

Familiar epistemological problems arise here: Is there such a thing as the "whole truth"? If not, does that fact render the aspiration to truth futile? If such aspiration has value, how might it be exercised? Postmodernists, but also some humanists like Adams, assert the Nietzschean perspectivist view: all I can know is "my truth," but there is no synthetic point of view which will enable us to derive "the whole truth" from various individual

perspectives. It is ironic that this position is so often embraced by postmodernism, because it is a form of epistemological individualism—a construct that postmodernism generally opposes. Positivistic biographers have to tread warily here. The more thoughtful among them understand that simple invocations of “the truth” are inadmissible in modern biography. Thus Martinson commends the fact that, as she sees it, “Hellman often subordinated factual history and truth for another kind of knowing.” Yet as a biographer, she must finally write under the conviction that there resides “a truth behind a story” (xv). To the extent that, as she concedes, Martinson derives some of her information from earlier biographies of Hellman, she participates in an incremental biographical endeavor whereby a nearer approximation to the “truth” of Hellman’s life will presumably emerge from the collective efforts of five biographers than could issue from one alone. But of course, many biographers are reluctant to see their efforts in this way. Often—not least for market-driven reasons—they see others in the field as competitors rather than collaborators. Unfortunately, biographers in the highly charged world of Hellman scholarship are not exempt from this tendency.

If our biographical presuppositions construe autobiographical truthfulness in terms of causal connections between the conscious intention to write as if under oath and a substantial degree of resultant narrative reliability, then Hellman’s autobiographical volumes are substantially damned. Another and contrasting presupposition involves sundering the analytical link between conscious intention and narrative reliability, on one hand, and on the other, assessing the volumes’ truth content according to what might be termed their “non-intentional evidentiary value.” In this view, as we have seen, autobiographical fantasies, lies, masks, and so on have important evidentiary value for biographers because they provide windows in on the fantasy lives of their subjects. Fantasies often drive the deed; they also provide psychic compensation for the unachieved or unavailing deed. Thus Adams argues that we learn a great deal about Hellman from her need to pen “Julia,” regardless of whether we believe the story or not (153).

4. Arguments about Identity and Psychic Need

Paul John Eakin conceives autobiographical writing as a later and extended installment in the process of identity formation. For him, autobiography involves a storying and re-storying of the self in which aspects of the past are called up with inevitable selectivity and contextual distortion “to serve

the needs of present consciousness" (1985, 5). A well-known line from Hellman's *The Little Foxes* makes a similar point: "God forgives those who invent what they need" (1979, 162). Most of the biographies of Hellman make a similar presupposition: they see her deceptions as a response to internal conflict, threat, and feelings of insufficiency that were laid down in childhood. An explanatory biographical motif here is the famous fig tree of her youth. When at age eight or nine Lillian discovers that her father has been unfaithful to her mother and thus in a way to her, she throws herself from the fig tree and suffers a broken nose. Carl Rollyson notes that Hellman is the sort of autobiographer who makes "her reminiscences of childhood crucial to her adult experience" (22) and that the fig tree episode reveals profound early distress that gave rise to consolatory and self-protective behavioral patterns later on. Lying might be one such pattern; self-deception another.

The identity-formation account of deceiving self-presentation has complex moral implications. One version of this account might see the "needs" that lead to self-fabrication as unconscious psychic precipitates from childhood and therefore perhaps not as lies, but rather, as some form of self-deception. A second and contrary version would see these needs as at least intermittently available to consciousness and would therefore deem Hellman "a consummate, highly crafted liar" (Mellen 1996, 440). Lying as it is usually understood requires that there be a conscious intention to deceive (Bok 1980, 8). The identity formation approach is particularly apt in Hellman's case because she is a multi-volume autobiographer. As Martin French (2002) has argued, multi-volume autobiographies can replicate identity construction patterns in a usually precise way since each volume must take account of the identity descriptions included in an earlier volume or volumes and review these in light of subsequent and imagined developments. In epistemological terms, however, the identity formation argument needs to be made with care. When Eakin writes that autobiography "expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness," he does not sufficiently distinguish between self-knowledge and knowledge of the autobiographer's social environment (1985, 5). The same is true of Adams' *Telling Lies in American Autobiography*, a book indebted to Eakin's work. The fact that successive narrative installments revise earlier representations of self does not necessarily mean that representations of external reality are similarly revised. For example,

Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, the first volume of Simone de Beauvoir's four-volume autobiography, gives a searing account of patriarchy that undergoes little revision in later volumes, even as Beauvoir narrates transformative changes in her post-existential self.

5. *Arguments about Aesthetic Value*

Some Hellman scholars argue that her autobiographies are redeemed by their aesthetic excellence. Few would deny that they are fluent, compelling, and at their best strangely poetic. William Wright asserts that "the person she creates in these books, whether or not an accurate likeness of Hellman, is a superb example of humanity. That alone makes them an exhilarating pleasure to read" (327). This judgment, which presupposes that aesthetically accomplished fictive representations of exemplarity can trump the need for mimetic reliability in autobiography, is problematic. The truth-telling "pact" is arguably the primary defining feature of autobiography as a genre. If that pact does not operate, the writing, however fine, is writing of a different kind. The autobiographical pact, moreover, is triangular in structure: the writer is assumed to aspire to be true to herself in holding her autobiographical mirror to herself, and true about herself in the narrative-of-self she presents to the reader. *Qua* autobiographer, an autobiographer cannot be an "exemplary" being if the relationship to self that structures her life narrative is dishonest. There cannot be morally "exemplary" narrative self-falsifiers among autobiographers.

6. *Arguments about Moral Responsibility and Moral Implications*

Mellen's description of Hellman as one "addicted to romantic fantasy, with herself as heroine" (36) raises the question of moral responsibility in autobiography. We would generally assume that addiction paralyzes freedom of will and that people cannot be held (fully) morally responsible for compulsive behavior, even though such behavior may have significant moral implications. Autobiographical self-falsification that seems to spring from purposive but unconscious motivation is thus arguably exempt from moral censure. However, Mellen's characterization of Hellman as a "consummate, highly crafted liar" (440) seems contradictory in that it construes the deceptions of a supposed addict as in fact purposive in the sense of intentional, that is, strategic, knowingly deceptive. Mellen appears unsure how to take Hellman's autobiographical unreliability. Carl Rollyson, by contrast, apparently presupposes that most writers' autobiographical deceptions are strategic, that they are lies and therefore available to the

consciousness of the perpetrator. Rollyson thus makes Hellman unusual in being unaware of the magnitude of her own propensity to autobiographical deception: “Hellman’s peculiarity as a writer is that she does not seem to have realized how much of an imaginative construct she made of her life” (472).

7. Arguments Based on Hellman’s Commentaries in the Autobiographies on Memory and Truth

Those who seek to defend Hellman often cite her frequent autobiographical appeals to the frailties of memory, the radically illusive nature of “truth,” and so on. Such arguments presuppose that authors can be trusted as epistemological guides to their narratives, even where they impugn their own authority or where their unreliability is conclusively demonstrated by internal and external evidence. A notorious example that has elicited such “undiscriminating trust” (as I will call it) is Hellman’s autobiographical titles, three of which seem perhaps to foreclose on the possibility of substantive “truth”: *An Unfinished Woman* can be taken to imply that because Hellman’s life and personality are incomplete, no definitive story of that life can be told, even by the author. *Pentimento*, a term from fine art that refers to the way earlier images can show through later layers of paint on a canvas, can be interpreted as signaling on-going changes of mind by the author, entailing competing accounts of the truth that cannot be reconciled in or by a final image; and *Maybe* seems quite simply to imply that “I just don’t know for sure” (1979, 309).

Other defenders cite Hellman’s pronouncements about “truth,” though she is notoriously hard to pin down on such matters. She claims to be driven by an aspiration to truthfulness—“In the three memoir books I wrote [the first three volumes] I tried very hard for truth” (1979, 50–51)—and makes the kinds of narrative commitment that we associate with autobiography: “It goes without saying that in their memoirs people should try to tell the truth as they see it or what’s the sense?” (1980, 50). But the phrase “as they see it” is typical in balking at any notion of truth that admits of evidentiary corroboration or consensus among witnesses. Most of her comments are deeply skeptical about “truth”: “What a word is truth. Slippery, tricky, unreliable” (1979, 9). A typically “slippery” formulation is this:

I do regret that I have spent too much of my life trying to find what I called “truth,” trying to find what I called

“sense.” I never knew what I meant by truth, never made the sense I hoped for. All I mean is that I left too much unfinished business because I wasted too much time. However.

(1979, 300)

“However” is from the same stable of suspended qualifiers as “maybe.” The most striking thing about this passage is that its epistemological pessimism applies not just to the possibility of finding absolute truth, but to the very aspiration to truthfulness—even, it would seem, to relative truthfulness. Elsewhere Hellman’s pessimism is more qualified, as in this typically vague perspectivist comment: “What I have written is the truth as I saw it, but the truth as I saw it, of course, doesn’t have much to do with the truth” (1980, 51). The pessimism is consistent with her largely distrustful view of memory: the past, she thinks, gets lost “in deep summer grass” (1980, 64). Again: “But memory for all of us is so nuts” (1980, 63).

She is likewise skeptical about the effectiveness of discerning patterns in one’s own life narrative and identity development: “traceries from what you were to what you become are always too simple” (1979, 612). But she does at times reveal a sharp awareness of the complex entanglements of memory and psychic need: she writes that in her case the child’s “need of dream, led to distortion of what happened” (1979, 412). This shows that a part of Lillian Hellman knew that she habitually perpetrated untruths. Did she know it as she did it, in which case she was clearly a liar? Or did she only know it retrospectively, in which case she was a pathological deceiver whose knowledge of earlier deceptions could not assuage the compulsion to deceive again? Significantly, the “need of dream” comment occurs in “Julia” and is intended to affirm the *truthfulness* of that particular narrative: “But I trust absolutely what I remember about Julia” (1979, 412). It would take a fine-grained and conceptually precise biography to help us decide what to make of these jostling formulations. Perhaps the “dream” disclaimer is merely a rhetorical ruse to convince the reader that she does indeed have a grasp of truth. Perhaps she can admit her own deceptions in some places but not where her identity, her life with Dashiell Hammett, or her prestige as a writer are at stake. Complications are compounded by the process of revision. The publication of *Three* in 1979, replete with commentaries by Hellman, afforded her an opportunity to set the record straight; to correct misrepresentations in the light of regret and later awareness—of

the real “facts” or of her tendency to misrepresentation. Misrepresenting herself and her experiences the first time round *might* be exempted from imputations of lying on the ground that they were compulsive at the time of writing, but such an exemption is harder to grant the second time round when the same untruths are recycled after ample opportunity for authorial reflection.

I think that I have said enough to indicate that attempts to anchor interpretation of Hellman’s autobiographies in her meditative effusions about truth, memory, self, and other things are doomed to inconclusiveness. There is a swashbuckling, boozy, Hemingwayesque intellectual carelessness in these books and their pessimism about memory that make Hellman a singularly unreliable guide to their epistemological landscapes. It might be countered that autobiographers aren’t philosophers and shouldn’t be expected to probe epistemological issues with intelligence, but in fact many great autobiographers—Augustine, Rousseau, Mill, Russell, Sartre, and Beauvoir, to name a few—were philosophers and have used autobiography as a medium for searching philosophical analysis. One of many problems with the “legend of Lillian Hellman” is that, if embraced, it fuels the all too common perception that autobiography is an intrinsically and rampantly “subjective” genre. Historically, this is not the case, nor does our cultural condition require it to be so now.

Forms of Deceit

Somewhere between the conscious, strategic, full-bloodedly intentional deceptions of the lie and the collapse of rational linguistic intentionality that seems characteristic of full-blown psychosis lurks perhaps the most puzzling source of narrative unreliability of all: self-deception.

According to standard definitions, self-deception involves believing, or believing that one believes, in a preferred image of one’s self and/or of one’s situation, despite apparently compelling evidence that this belief is erroneous. Such a belief, which can be momentary or long-standing, is motivated by desires or other such predisposing states. The concept can seem elusive—because the very notion of successfully deceiving one’s self strikes some as counterintuitive, and because many academic discussions of it seem to occur in a discursive twilight zone where philosophical psychology, abnormal psychology, psychoanalysis, and other disciplines compete but also often overlap.

Accounts of self-deception can be mapped in various ways. There are competing theories; for instance, so-called “Traditionalist” ones that

conceptualize self-deception on the model of interpersonal deception. These generally presuppose some compartmentalization of mind such that one mental entity or sub-agent in effect deceives another. Freud's early account of repression is a case in point, as is Donald Davidson's influential version of compartmentalization which, as Hjort memorably argues, "Reduces the self to a constellation of monologic monads" (Hjort 1993, 217). By contrast, "Deflationist" theories construe self-deception as one among many forms of epistemic error; in this case, a form of motivated error, or "motivated irrationality" (Mele 2004, 246–52), in which desire (or the like) causes the self-deceiver systematically to misinterpret information in a way that is consistent with his preferred self-understanding. "Traditionalist" and "Deflationist" views are generally promulgated by Anglo-American analytic philosophers and typically involve fine-grained conceptual analyses based on "snapshot," often thinly or barely contextualized, experiential examples.

A third tradition, sometimes termed "Existentialist" mainly because of Sartre's famous treatment of *mauvaise foi* in *Being and Nothingness*, tries to understand self-deception in terms of larger modes of personal engagement and orientation in the world—modes that may find expression in, and require description via, extended life narratives. The Sartrean model rejects the concept of the unconscious (Sartre 1956, 50–54). It explains self-deception as a denial of the negativity that lies at the heart of consciousness and a clinging to "the ontological mirage of the Self" (Sartre 137). "Humanist" approaches, a fourth variant, may also adopt a larger narrative perspective and often focus on the moral implications of self-deception—for the self-deceiver, but also for others who might be affected by the self-deceiver's behavior, including the wider community, which will be rendered dysfunctional if serious forms of self-deception become endemic.

Theories of self-deception can also be mapped with reference to particular problems: so-called "static problems," which pertain to the mental states of self-deceiving individuals at particular times, and "dynamic problems," discussions of which seek to reconstruct the mechanisms of self-deception. Other approaches, sometimes combinations of approaches, seek to understand the etiology of self-deception: how does it come about, and why are some individuals habitually, even pathologically, prone to it? And indeed, given that we all practice some degree of self-deception at times, and that it is probably necessary to "healthy" psychic life, how might we distinguish between its necessary, its

relatively benign, and its pathological forms? “Static,” “dynamic,” and “etiological” perspectives converge on the thorny problem of intentionality: is self-deception necessarily an intentional behavior, and if so, in what sense? Some acts of self-deception seem to be more intentional, more a matter of conscious stratagem, than others. What kinds of moral appraisal are appropriate in various sorts of cases? Such appraisals must take account of complex chronological questions: self-deception in some people can be remarkably sustained across time; in others, it is more occasional; and some seem prone to patterns of alternation, for instance between sincerity, lying, and compensatory self-deception.

To what extent can or should we generalize about such matters? What about broader cultural issues, for instance? Is self-deception essentially the same thing in a “shame” culture as in one less concerned about humiliation and loss of face? Behavioral expectations, often internalized as expectations of self, are of course subject to vast cultural variation. Will culture-specific forms of expectation merely influence what we might call the “thematics” of self-deception (say particular beliefs about one’s self that cannot be faced), or will they influence the dynamics of self-deception as well? Even within a given culture, conflicts among roles and normative expectations may cause discrepancies between “the agent’s *focal* beliefs and desires, and his or her *disposition* to believe or desire quite the opposite” (Hjort 1993, 219). In other words, the individual’s patterns of adaptation to varying roles and expectations may appear to an observer to involve contradictory and so self-deceiving postures, and this may in fact be the case. But it might also be that the agent is practicing non-paradoxical, context-sensitive shifts in internal prioritization among commensurable existential orientations and that the observer is misreading these shifts as inherently paradoxical. With Chanowitz and Langer (1985), Hjort argues that, though such shifts may entail self-deception, they can occasion a subsequent process of “self-inception” (219) that corrects the distortions caused by self-deception and enables more coherent forms of engagement in the world. This is to say that, of course, self-deception need not be intractable. Some who experience it try to chart its causes, defray its effects, and make good its misrepresentations through therapy, or—to take a particularly pertinent example for my purposes—by writing autobiography. All such measures can reflect an agential commitment actively to reconfigure lives and to loosen the hold of unrealistic, distorting, or otherwise unproductive self-images.

It is important to differentiate between perspectives, especially between the first-person perspective of one who may be a self-deceiver and the third-person perspective of an observer who might construe an individual's behavior as self-deceived. A third possible perspective is that of the witness, by which I mean someone who is in some sense invited by the agent to listen to his account of self but also to participate from the standpoint of a second-person in a dialogic "working-through" of that account. As Susan Dwyer (2008) argues, "we rely on those with whom we are in close relation—second-persons, not merely third-persons—to help show us to ourselves" (5–6). Examples here include therapists and, in a somewhat different sense, readers of autobiography. The "witness" so conceived is more than an observer; she is a participant-observer whom the individual invites as part of an effort to re-orient or re-choreograph her life. While the witness-therapist can participate in "real time" dialogue and interpretive activity, the reader of an autobiography of course cannot. Hers is necessarily a "time-lag" form of "participation" that must depend heavily on interpretive procedures and sources of evidence: biographical evidence, both historical and psychological; internal textual evidence; but also, very importantly, the evidence offered by the autobiographer's *style*, where "style" includes the whole gamut of her narrative and syntactical practices. So we can speak of three perspectives: first-person reflexive (the self-deceiver in relation to self); observer (the self-deceiver as seen by an uninvolved third party); and the witness, who participates in a triangular, dialogic structure comprising self-deceiver, narrative, and witness.

In general, and in any particular case, we need to ask what importance should be accorded to personal (including temperamental) and cultural-ideological factors respectively. Self-deception occurs in multiple overlapping contexts, and lifewriting studies, among others, need to be wary of unduly schematic and reductive accounts. At this point, an example will be helpful.

Let's suppose that John is married with five children. He believes himself to be happily married and to be unambiguously heterosexual in sexual orientation. His active marital sex life provides evidence for these beliefs. Yet at times, both before and during his marriage, he has had sexual relations with men. Before they married, his wife Jenny was told about this by a friend and asked John outright whether it was true. He assured her that it was not, that he was unambiguously heterosexual. Having accepted this, Jenny is later puzzled by nagging feelings of unease

in the marriage and wonders why, as she sees it, they are not a happy couple. This may be one of several ethical consequences of John's deception. Deception of whatever kind puts the Other at a disadvantage. Typically, as in Jenny's case, the disadvantage manifests as a lack of comprehension of one's situation with respect to the Other. This in turn often causes asymmetrical power relations: in marriage, as in so many spheres, comprehension and power are inextricably entwined.

Immediately, a number of questions arise. Did John lie to Jenny about his sexuality? To answer that he did entails that he knew himself to be, say, bisexual and that he consciously and strategically misled her on this important point. If, on the other hand, John is and was self-deceived about his sexuality the situation looks rather different. Let's imagine that his father was a very masculine figure, a "man's man," and that having grown up in an intensely masculinist, homophobic environment, John was incapable of admitting to his homosexual tendencies, even to himself, incapable of seeing homosexual desire as an acceptable aspect of personal identity or as potentially compatible with other aspects of his identity—say, with the fact that he also experiences strong heterosexual desire. Thus John represses his homosexual "tendencies" and constructs his identity as wholly heterosexual. A "Traditionalist" account of this would say that John's process of denial involves one "part" or sub-agent of his psyche deceiving another, rather as one individual might deceive another. Opinions will differ as to whether such an act of deception need be seen as merely purposive or as more strategic than that. If merely purposive, it is motivated but not intentional in the sense that John does not believe that he is bisexual and is not conscious of the fact that he is in some sense withholding this knowledge from himself. If it is purposive but also intentional, John consciously knows himself to be bisexual and consciously, strategically, sets out to withhold this knowledge from, in effect to "lie" to, himself. Depending on which version of "Traditionalism" is invoked, John's self-deluding state of mind can be seen as more or less paradoxical, with implications for "static" understandings of his emotional state.

A "Deflationist" reading would deny the presence of radical paradox and would try to map the sources and mechanisms of cognitive biasing involved in John's self-deception. The account might run like this: John has reason for believing that he is unambiguously heterosexual (his attraction to women); he also has evidence that he may be bisexual (his attraction to men). But being the son of a very "masculine" father

and the product of a homophobic environment, his strongly preferred self-image is that of uncomplicated heterosexuality. In order to defuse evidence that is threatening to this self-image, he systematically misinterprets it. For instance, he tells himself that the anxiety he feels about his sexuality is just another instance of the pervasive and often “free floating” anxiety to which he is prone generally. “Spooking” himself into feeling that he is attracted to men is just one example among several of the way he uses anxiety to punish and disconcert himself. He does this (he tells himself) because he is a self-loather. It does not mean that he is in fact bisexual. Indeed another ingenious casuistic turn (such processes can be highly resourceful, even creative) brings him to the conviction that he is only thus “spooked” *because* he is *not* in fact attracted to men. The very thought of same-sex desire appalls him! Biasing of this kind becomes more difficult when he is sexually involved with other men, but in principle he can still rationalize his “moonlighting,” say, as rebellion against a brutal hyper-masculine father, and so on. So he continues to see himself as simply heterosexual, “in the teeth of the evidence.”

An “Existential” perspective might seek to understand John’s situation in terms of his engagements in the world more generally, arguing that he repudiates the freedom implicit in negativity and remains fixated on a mirage of ontological substance that “impure reflection” (Sartre 1956, 159–60) presents to him in the form of an ideal of masculine selfhood. He is in bad faith because he will not avail himself of the power of (self-)transcendence and because his denial of freedom entails a denial of responsibility. Here “responsibility” can mean taking moral responsibility for one’s feelings and attitudes, in the sense of agreeing that they should attract moral appraisal; it can also mean something like “owning up” to those feelings and attitudes, acknowledging them as John’s. In order to seize the free power of self-constitution, John needs in fact to rupture his sense of personal continuity, to break with rigid, inauthentic—and in this case heavily ideological—past self-constructions.

The humanist is likely to endorse the existential emphasis on larger life engagements and moral implications. Indeed, a humanist account of John’s self-deception may tend to be more explicit about ethical matters, though not necessarily more judgmental, than an existential one, but less likely to see John as a product of a narrative history from which he can simply detach “himself.” Rather, he is an agent embedded in a history, but he is also possessed of a will—a power of the self that is most free

when most responsive to rational counsel (Freadman 2001, 42)—which may enable him to re-negotiate that history. John’s prior decisions, including his self-deceptive ones, have been made by an agent who possesses, if he has not always hitherto exercised, a capacity for discriminating choice under the coordinating aegis of what may metaphorically be conceived as a relatively stable “core” of self.

In various ways and degrees, these approaches will try to interpret other aspects of John’s situation. A Deflationist reading might point to context-specific discrepancies in the roles John plays in various settings; for instance, the fact that he seems vulnerable and reflective around artist friends but garrulous and combative when drinking with fellow supporters of his football team. Humanist and other culturally inclusive readings might trace John’s need for self-deception to culture-specific attitudes towards homosexuality and the “thematics” of his denial (say, the way he sometimes tries to “cover” up “feminine” tendencies in himself by assuming hyper-masculine forms of self-presentation) to specific cultural constructions of “gayness.” There might also be broader cultural considerations: how does his culture compel or counsel individuals to deal with feelings of “shame”? And broader etiological questions like whether bisexuality is ascribed to genetic or personal causes, or some combination of the two.

Life narrative inquiry might focus on the fact that an early lie—the lie to Jenny—is deeply implicated in John’s current situation. Indeed, John’s history of deception is not just psychologically complex, but complex also in terms of the trajectory and chronology of its modes of misrepresentation: he seems early to have embraced self-deception (whether intentionally or not), then to have deceived Jenny about his sexuality. This in turn has led to further and perhaps more elaborate deceptions of self and others, to more deceiving stories. How might a counter-narrative be employed to address this narrative and its emotional and psychological effects? One answer may be therapy. Another might be writing an autobiography. He may do both; indeed, in therapy, he will in part produce assisted autobiography. But if he opts to write an autobiography as well, he chooses to choreograph his life activities in a way that in effect gives him “another go” at this complex history. In narrating it, he can reconsider his falsehoods and his other deceptions, both intentional and merely motivated; he can tell the story in a way that “comes clean” and changes his interior state in doing so. Writing autobiography offers opportunities for moral reparation with

Jenny and others and may contextualize his history of deception with reference to his father, his upbringing, his cultural-ideological milieu, his genetic endowment, and more. If John were to become the subject of a biography, his autobiographical testament could provide a key to understanding this complex man. This would especially be the case if he has used his autobiography as an opportunity for “self-inception” and has constructed the reader as a *post facto* witness. But even if he has not done this, his autobiography will be a source of *de facto* biographical information about his preferred self-image, his fantasies, and his patterns of self-deception.

Many analytical philosophical discussions of self-deception focus heavily upon specific beliefs that the self-deceived person holds and on the (often thinly contextualized) “dynamics” whereby these beliefs are arrived at. But given that self-deception is a reflexive phenomenon driven by intense needs and related motivations, it makes sense to ask in a more context-rich and chronologically inclusive way *who* is doing the deceiving; or, more precisely, what sense can be made of self-deception in the context of the self-deceiver’s larger life and identity story. Among analytic philosophers, Herbert Fingarette is perhaps most alert to such questions. In *Self-Deception* (1969), he argues that

The self-deceiver is one who is in some way engaged in the world but who disavows the engagement, who will not acknowledge it even to himself as his. That is, self-deception turns on the personal identity one accepts rather than the beliefs one has.

(66–67)

In other words, people self-deceive when they have engagements in the world that threaten their preferred self-understandings. To ask the “who” question in this way is to ask it in a manner that reflects the interests of lifewriting scholarship—a set of disciplines, I take it, in which the fundamental unit of analysis is the individual life story and its associated identity story (or stories).

Fingarette is a remarkably versatile thinker. The author of a study of Confucius, he also has strong interests in Continental philosophy and Freudian theory. Indeed *Self-Deception* attempts to provide a theoretical account of self-deception that can reconcile a humanist analytical philosophical perspective with Sartrean existential and Freudian ones. At a time when lifewriting studies is often torn between humanist and anti-

humanist approaches, not least on matters like representation and truth-telling, Fingarette's adventurous and masterly little book, written over forty years ago, remains important.

The following is a necessarily selective summary of Fingarette's position. In effect, he answers the "who?" question by replying "an agent," that is, someone who is capable of choosing, acting, and exercising skills. He argues that in order to characterize the way such activities might work in the case of self-deception, we need to shift from the "cognition-perception" family of locutions ("appear," "see," "know," "ignorance") that are customarily employed in this connection, to "action-volition" ones like "spelling out." Instead of picturing consciousness as "a sort of mental mirror," we should think of it as "the exercise of the (learned) skill of 'spelling-out' some feature of the world as we are engaged in it" (Fingarette 1969, 39). Spelling-out entails making that engagement explicit and is a skill exercised for a reason, based on assessments. Self-deception occurs when someone refuses to spell-out, that is, to "avow" (71) some engagement, refuses to "reflect upon, some project of Consciousness" (98). Such disavowal, like avowal itself, is an "inner act" (71) that is in some sense *performed* by the self-deceiver. Importantly, in self-deception, the act and its precipitating intentionality are disavowed, not just the "engagement" itself. Fingarette's analysis sees self-deception against a normative picture of identity formation. Whilst he arguably understates the part that self-deception necessarily plays in functional lives (for instance, the way we "sideline" justified internal doubts in order fully to embrace a project in which we deeply believe), the normative picture is suggestive. It sees the "self" as an impressive achievement, an act of "synthesis" (81), possessed of "an enduring centre, a personal core whose unity colors and shapes his various particular engagements" (84). These engagements drive and also constitute a process of "identity avowal" (74) that carries the individual from infantile narcissism through various developmental phases on to the condition of selfhood (or personhood).

Fingarette's account of self-deception construes it as an *act*, a form of "disavowal" that deflects awareness from unwanted and putatively unassimilable materials, thereby sundering psychic integration and debilitating reflexive moral agency. He argues that such a picture is consistent with Freud's later account of "ego-splitting," given some fine-tuning which he believes Freud had embarked upon in his unfinished final paper, "The Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence."

Fingarette proposes, with Freud, that defense mechanisms produce a “counter-ego nucleus” (130) which, though relatively primitive and static and therefore uninviting to the integrating ego, is nevertheless “a complex of motive, purpose, feeling, perception, and a drive towards action” (129). It is, then, purposive—indeed more so than Freud had earlier allowed—and it is the result of a strongly and pointedly purposive ego process: “the defensive process is not something that ‘happens’ to the ego but something the ego *does*, a motivated strategy” (130). The defensive strategy is an active process of disavowal aimed principally at covering its own tracks. Fingarette’s redescription of these processes replaces epistemological locutions (“seeing,” “hiding”) with the volitional notion of disavowal and its consequent inability to “spell-out.” Taking a cue from the way Freud’s ego psychology erodes rigid divisions between conscious, preconscious, and unconscious, this redescription construes what we would call “repression” in maximally intentional terms—as a displacement of certain contents into the preconscious, rather than as “repression” into the unconscious as classically conceived.

Freud never put it in this way, that the mental act denoted by “hypercathexis” is essentially a kind of linguistic or paralinguistic act. It is, I suggest, much the same as what I have called “spelling-out”. I think it is reasonable to say that preconsciousness is the state of being available for spelling-out on particular appropriate occasions, and that what Freud means by “conscious” is what I have called “explicit consciousness.”

(120)

Fingarette’s emphasis on language is suggestive for a speech act such as autobiography, which offers such extended opportunities for reflective “spelling out.” The phrasing “is what I have called” typifies the book’s method. His critiques of Freud, Sartre, and others are not designed as demolitions, but rather as corrective re-descriptions that will bring those accounts into line with Fingarette’s own. Just as Freud’s ego-splitting proves with a little fine-tuning to be in principle consistent with “spelling-out,” so Sartre’s *mauvaise fois* can be re-framed to the same end. Sartre’s denial of the unconscious is potentially congenial to Fingarette’s *de facto* theoretical prioritization of the preconscious, and of course, he welcomes Sartre’s focus on ethical implications. Fingarette re-frames Sartre as follows: Sartre construes bad faith (for current purposes

a form of self-deception) as a denial of freedom and transcendence resulting from “impure reflection”; Fingarette transposes this into his own terms as “the refusal to reflect upon, some project of Consciousness” (98), that is, the refusal to “spell-out.” He sums up:

The denial by reflective consciousness of freedom is not, as Sartre holds, the root of self-deception; the denial of freedom is the outcome of the refusal to reflect upon the disavowed project, and, as a consequence, the refusal to reflect upon the possibilities of that project. To put it another way, the denial of freedom in bad faith is the outcome of establishing a Self (by means of impure reflection) which excludes the project in question.

(99)

The “disavowed project” is the identity to which the individual has laid claim and the particular modes of engagement and deception this choice brings with it.

Fingarette’s book has been widely discussed, and this is not the place for a review of its reception. I would note, however, that his re-descriptive method tends to involve highly selective appropriations from other thinkers that can make aspects of their theories (e.g., Sartre’s denial of the unconscious, his belief in radical ruptures in identity continuity) look more compatible with Fingarette’s humanist existentialism than they necessarily are. It could be argued that, in fact, Fingarette is a traditionalist compartmentalizer, his ego and “counter-ego nucleus” agent and sub-agents involved in intrapsychic lying. And so on. Yet this enterprising and subtle attempt to integrate aspects of humanist and antihumanist theoretical frameworks has much to commend it. Instead of focusing, as so many recent discussions do, on the epistemological aspects of representation, it concentrates on the intrapsychic etiology and mechanisms of deception and the part they play in identity development and ethical conduct. In so doing, it productively complicates our sense of what apparently competing “paradigms” might offer lifewriting studies. It suggests, for instance, that postmodern “fragmentation” accounts of identity that impute overwhelming causative influence to ideology in shaping false engagements in the world may profit from a more agential account of self-deception such as Fingarette offers. Conversely, Fingarette’s position needs a thicker description of the ideological sources of the inauthentic self-imagery—the kind of description that

political criticism can provide. There is, however, no doubting the importance of his insistence that self-deception needs to be seen in the context of personal identity and the life narratives from which it springs.

Julia—Again

So, is “Julia” a lie, an elaborate act of self-deception and thus of reader-deception, or could it be some combination of the two? I am not a biographer and I do not claim finally to know. In what follows I will speculate, but in doing so, I will depend heavily upon already published accounts of Hellman’s life. My purpose is not to settle the matter of her deceit—that is for the biographers—but rather, to see it in terms of the theories of deception I have described.

The text begins with an admission of avoidance—hitherto Hellman “did not feel able to write about Julia” (1979, 401)—and moves quickly to an inaugurating moral portrait of the Hellman-protagonist. One of the story’s unadmitted undertakings is to temper our sense of moral disparity between the exemplary Julia and the more flawed Hellman. Throughout, there are many references to Lillian’s moral shortcomings, particularly to her lack of courage. Julia, who is sagacious as well as good, asks her emissary and friend Johann to tell Lillian that there would be no “dishonor” (1979, 405) in not undertaking the perilous journey and to remind her that “you are afraid of being afraid” (1979, 406). Lillian is no born heroine—“I knew I was never born for this kind of thing” (1979, 435)—but rather a naturally fearful soul. However, this apparently self-deprecatory claim actually creates the possibility, or at least the perception, of heroism in the face of profound fear and inner resistance—perhaps the highest form of heroism of all. The text’s complexities here are reminiscent of Sartre’s discussion of cowardice and bad faith (66).

As Hellman’s biographers have amply demonstrated, heroism was at the heart of her preferred self-image. In Mellen’s words, she was “addicted to romantic fantasy, with herself as heroine” (36). “Romantic” here includes fantasies of leftist political heroism like her early “Puritan Socialist” leanings (403), her later and scandalizing Stalinism, and so on. Hellman was a mass of contradictions, but it cannot be denied that her various political personae have much in common—a thread of existential consistency that betokens a sustained and indeed often courageous form of engagement in the world. Many of her attitudes and modes of personal presentation are strikingly consistent: her fiercely anti-bourgeois

disposition (notwithstanding her liking for the well-heeled celebrity life), a risky, hard-drinking libertine lifestyle, feistiness, and so on. In very general terms, we might say that her preferred self-image was fashioned from the repertoires of the American high-cultural left, her rampant individualism clashing hard with her anti-individualist Marxist sentiments. She lived self-indulgently but largely, so far as one can see, without serious introspection; the bohemian lifestyle was a calculated affront to sober, reflective individualism, the sort epitomized by other New York Jewish intellectuals like the Trillings; it also served the pragmatic function of blotting out inner contradictions and their associated pain. The place of her Jewishness in all of this is hard to summarize but, unlike most of the other New York Jewish intellectuals, she did not recant her totalitarian commitments after the Holocaust and Stalin's purges. This may have caused repressed guilty feelings, especially in one who staked her personal reputation on blunt, no-bullshit political commitment: a perceived lack of commitment would be devastating to her self-image in a culture addicted in equal measure to celebrity and moral censure. To be perceived as a libertine Puritan in this environment was asking for trouble.

Even an indicative sketch such as this shows that Lillian Hellman did not lack certain sorts of courage and integrity. We might speculate that her integrity and her deceits were complexly entwined. As Fingarette points out, self-deception often has roots in high principle: we are motivated to disavow some aspect of self, some engagement in the world, because it does not consort with our morally exacting preferred self-image (139). The same can presumably be true for lying: we might intentionally misrepresent ourselves to another because the truth is morally unbearable to us, and not simply out of "low" strategic motives. If Lillian Hellman was a disavower in this sense, what—what form of engagement—did she seek to disavow? Let's say for the moment, in Hellmanesque phrasing, that it was the identity of "being a lousy person," a cowardly and dishonest one. Let's further suppose that the many references to fear and narrative unreliability in "Julia" reflect this disavowal—or, more precisely—a deceiving pretence of avowal, borne of "impure reflection," in what is a strangely somnolent action tale.

Sartre says, "One *puts oneself* in bad faith as one goes to sleep and one is in bad faith as one dreams" (68). In some sense we (often) intend to do it, but once it is done, normal intentionality is becalmed. After her encounter with Johann, the angst of deciding between risky heroism and

fearful refusal quite literally sends Lillian to sleep in her Parisian hotel room. She adds, “decisions, particularly important ones, have always made me sleepy” (1979, 408). Is this slumber a narrative description of sleep or the sleep of narrative’s capacity for “spelling-out,” taking-responsibility-for? Does it suggest, or strategically seek to give the impression, that Hellman is writing from something like the unconscious, a place where literal truth-telling gives over to desire’s fabrications, fusions, indirections? Certainly there is something dreamlike about the story’s rapid chronological and situational shifts (“somewhere in the next hours,” [1979, 435]), its restless, often alarmed-but-sleepy moonlit oscillations between remembering and forgetting: “I have no memory of the trip to Vienna, no memory of the city I was never to see again, no memory of the name of the hospital, nor how I got to it or in what language. But I remember everything after that” (1979, 425). Then there are the dreamlike swings between panic and inappropriate indifference: “I laughed at that side of me that so often panics at a moment of no consequence, so often grows listless and sleepy near danger” (1979, 436). We might ask of this “danger” as we did of “sleep”: is it the narrated danger or danger incurred by penning a deceiving narrative that causes this somnolent defense against anxiety? Or perhaps a circuit of anxiety and creativity whereby the fear occasioned by the threat of exposure infuses the writing of fear that drives the espionage narrative?

The fear motif recedes in the last section of the story. A distraught Lillian receives news of Julia’s death. She brings the body home from London, has it cremated, and tries to discover what became of Julia’s infant daughter, who had been living with a family in Mulhouse. The “Puritan Socialist” in her is outraged by the lack of interest those “bastards” (1979, 447), Julia’s aristocratic family, show in the fate of the child. Hellman’s memory is particularly fuzzy in these closing pages, but the story concludes with a sharp vignette in which Lillian takes her leave from a conversation in a state of righteous indignation. Given that Hellman probably heard Muriel Gardiner’s story from a lawyer, it’s perhaps significant that the conversation, which occurs on a stone wall at a picnic in Long Island, is with the son of a lawyer whom she had supposedly asked to investigate the fate of the child in Mulhouse. The lawyer’s son, a banker, tells her that his father is dead but claims to be Julia’s third cousin. She asks him about the baby, to which he replies, “I never knew anything about a baby.”

I said, ‘I don’t believe you,’ got off the stone fence, left a note for [hostess] Ruthie saying I didn’t feel well, and drove home” (1979, 447).

The narrative ends here, in righteous suspicion and denunciation of a lie, Hellman now a fierce guardian of Julia's legacy, but also, it would seem, of truth-telling.

What then of this already quoted meditation on truth and dream, which we stumble upon about half way through the narrative, after high espionage drama and reflections on childhood?

I think I have always known about my memory: I know when it is to be trusted and when some dream or fantasy entered on the life, and the dream, the need of dream, led to distortion of what happened. And so I knew early that the rampage angers of an only child were distorted nightmares of reality. But I trust absolutely what I remember about Julia.

(1979, 412)

If much of the story feels like writing from the unconscious, this passage is more like a kind of ego-writing: as a voice of the conscious mind, it can place, assess, and correct unconscious "dream" and "fantasy," yet it can only do this because it is not wholly exterior to the unconscious. It is both of and beyond it. Hellman admits to unreliability and to the motivational states ("the need of dream") that cause it; indeed, the clustering of five terms that betoken unreliability ("dream" used three times, "fantasy," and "nightmare") pulls threateningly against the terms of epistemological guarantee: "distortion," "reality," "memory," "trust absolutely." Nonetheless, the passage finally lays claim to a process of ego-incorporation and its epistemological correlative, truth-telling, at least with respect to Julia. It is interesting and typical that the qualifier "but," which Hellman uses emphatically to contrast her faith in her memories of Julia with other, avowedly less reliable memories, is syntactically anomalous. Her belief in the veracity of the Julia memories follows logically from the sentences that precede her statement of that belief. There is no "but" about it. Knowing what we now know about "Julia," the qualifier may look a touch gratuitous, over-insistent. "I think I have always known" is typical of many Hellman locutions that syntactically meld uncertainty and certainty. In this case, certainty is rhetorically reinforced by the repetitions of the quintessential epistemological verb, "to know," but the tense shifts "known," "know," and "knew" produce stylistic élan that might deflect attention from, or disarm suspicion of, rhetorical overkill. To "think" is provisional and so

moderates the combative confidence of “always known.” It also powerfully reinforces the epistemological claim: this woman, who by her own admission has been prone to lifelong mood swings and spectacular vagaries of memory, now dismisses the possibility that her capacity to assess the impingements of “fantasy” and “dream” might be intermittent, might be itself unreliable.

At least in hindsight, this denial, this disavowal of “dream,” looks suspiciously like its contrary, an admission, albeit of some complicated kind, an avowal. At this moment Hellman in the narrative seems shrewd in her understanding of that which she is at the same time denying: the slide into “dream,” the impingements of “fantasy” on narrative reliability. If we take the guarantee at face value, we assume the position of a credulous reader. If on the other hand, we feel that the confidence we are being invited to share here is more complicated than this, we may begin to feel rather like a witness to a confession, albeit a deceiving, and perhaps self-deceiving, one.

It’s important to bear in mind that “Julia” purports to be autobiographical; because it therefore purports to be factually true, and also because this means that the narrative’s compositional chronology presented the author with several opportunities for reflection, revision, or retraction. In this sense, writing autobiography can never be like perpetrating a lie in conversation. “Julia” was first published in *Esquire* in July 1973 and appeared in *Pentimento* in the same year. If, as some believe, the title *Pentimento* constitutes an admission of narrative unreliability, then this admission was in place pretty much from the outset. Zinnemann’s movie of the story, starring Vanessa Redgrave, was released in 1977. The autobiographical compilation *Three*, containing “Julia,” appeared in 1979 and included an interesting prefatory essay by Hellman dated 1978. Muriel Gardiner’s autobiography, which played such a big part in sparking attacks on Hellman in the 1980s, was published in 1983. Gardiner made contact with Hellman; Lillian suggested, but probably did not intend, that they meet. They never did and Hellman died a year later.

Hellman’s prefatory essay is entitled “On Reading Again.” It contains the usual mish-mash of disclaimers (“I was somebody else, even yesterday,”), confessions of unreliability (“these three books are made up of memories—selective memories—I have no love for the past, written or remembered”), and claims to narrative integrity: she hasn’t revised the contents because “alteration seemed like a kind of cheating” (1979, 5).

Taken literally, this suggests that to refrain from correcting, say, earlier pieces of misinformation is ethically superior to leaving them uncorrected. Sagacious commonplaces are liberally sprinkled throughout: “resignation is not necessarily wise” (1979, 6). Another commonplace—“few people grow wiser with the years” (1979, 5)—is vintage Hellman in cutting several ways: if it is true, we might think this aging author not wise; but if it is indeed true, and we owe the insight to her, she must be wise after all. And of course, “few” leaves open the possibility that she is an exception to her own rule. The self-deprecation disarms, but perceived sagacity trumps self-deprecation. She purports to be puzzled by “the stubbornness of the fight I make against going back to anything I have written” (1979, 4), but having overcome that resistance, she finds that she “liked” (1979, 5) her autobiographical writings. Concern at what she might find proves unfounded—another tacit reassurance of reliability. Just as we are struggling with these paragraphs of florid and massively manipulative disingenuousness, the narrative lurches into one of Hellman’s signature, morally charged vignettes. The details, as she would say, don’t matter—there was something about a lesbian and a deep cut in Lillian’s knee, and another woman, the now deceased lesbian’s former lover, bending over awkwardly to put rubbers on her shoes. But the thing is that this woman, like the lawyer on the stone wall, lied to Lillian, whereupon the latter, in high dudgeon, proclaims to her (knowingly) deceiving interlocutor: “I think I am a wiser woman than I used to be. I don’t care that you lied, and I don’t want to know why” (1979, 7).

So she’s wise after all—wise enough to know that one must learn to live with the deceptions of others. But we look in vain for any hint of remorse at her own history of deception, and the same applies to the postscript. Indeed, this coda digs her deeper in, flinging up bridges to the “Julia” narrative (a pity that she hasn’t heard from “Ann-Marie,” that mutual friend of her and Julia, [1979, 450]), and announcing that, alas, Julia’s daughter was killed by the Germans. This last piece of information reaches her by means of a mysterious “Mr. Smith,” or rather via his son, the equally mysterious “Dr. Smith,” who must speak for his father—albeit by phone—because the latter has been rendered incoherent by a stroke. In “Julia,” Lillian remarks on Alan Campbell’s “remarkable nose for deception” (1979, 409). It seems that hers was pretty acute too, because she suspects that, courtesy of these Smith people, she was “probably told at least one lie” (1979, 452).

Conclusion: The Truth about Lilly?

We have been well served by Lillian Hellman's biographers in many ways. We know a lot about what she did, about her contexts, relationships, convictions, and conduct—not least her propensity to dishonesty. These scholars have offered valuable insights into her patterns of deception and have speculated suggestively on their causes. I have argued that a more precise understanding of her misrepresentations requires sharper attention to the varieties of deception: in particular, self-deception. I have suggested that deconstructive critique, which has challenged familiar understandings of factitious representations, cannot offer much assistance in elucidating such phenomena, but that humanist lifewriting scholars can assist positivistic biographers of Hellman and others to write with greater precision about unreliable biographical subjects. Fingarette's account of self-deception, which combines analytic philosophy with aspects of Sartrean Existentialism and Freud's late ego psychology, can be very helpful in this respect. Of course, no methodology can settle the issue if the necessary evidence is lacking, and anti-Cartesian theorists will deny that the evidence needed to sustain the imputation of self-deception, whether by biographers or others, can ever be forthcoming. But if we believe that such evidence is in principle possible, and if we sharpen our understandings of factitious phenomena, biographers will be best placed to negotiate the evidence they have.

As I have said, I am not a biographer and do not claim to know the "truth" about Lilly with any certainty. I incline to the view that the "Julia" saga is most plausibly explained as an instance of chronic and deep-seated self-deception. In arguing for this view, I do not mean to deny that in various other contexts Lillian Hellman told lies. The biographies show that she did.

In describing her as self-deceived, I mean that there was something knowing—strategic—about the "Julia" ruse. How are we to conceptualize this complex intentionality? I don't think that Deflationist readings can cope with a case like this: it is one thing to bias incoming information about, say, one's health, but another to fabricate a heroic narrative about oneself and one's relationship with an invented character. Traditionalist readings seem more compelling in Hellman's case insofar as they provide a strong sense of psychic division and of active intrapsychic deception. An Existential reading would plausibly see Hellman as in bad faith, captive to myths of the heroic that are complicit in her fabrication of

narratives of transcendence. Her denial of identity continuity—"I was somebody else, even yesterday"—may look existential, but it is not since it is implicated in a refusal to take responsibility. Fingarette's attempted synthesis of humanist, Freudian, and existential elements perhaps offers the most promising way of characterizing Hellman's self-deception, but even this, like any theory, can only provide a framework and suggestive hints. The particular must be seen in all its resistant particularity.

A Fingarette-style reading confirms the biographers' conclusion that Hellman's deceptions had deep roots in her early history and fragile temperament and were well entrenched by the time her adult identity crystallized. By that stage, she had internalized certain culture-specific ideals (for instance, images of heroism) into a specifically American (Jewish) self that was highly individualistic, craved laudation, and was thus deeply prone to self-dismay and to disavowal of moral deficiencies. Hellman's genuine political commitments put further strain on this shaky self-construct, heightening moral expectations of herself but also her loathing of her own manifestly bourgeois proclivities. Her deceptions were intrinsically tied to the heroic identity she avowed and to the moral deficiencies that her preferred self-image could not tolerate. She refused to spell out these deficiencies, even in her autobiographical writings, which provided many occasions for reflection, reconsideration, and recantation. Given the imaginative ambience of "Julia," so reminiscent of the unconscious, it is tempting to say that Hellman "repressed" certain uncongenial understandings of her moral self "into" the unconscious. Fingarette would presumably characterize these diverted understandings as "preconscious," rather than unconscious, and as the consequence of an intentional diversion of psychic attention, a refusal to "spell-out." It is hard—and perhaps not necessary—to adjudicate here. As we have seen, "Julia" is liberally strewn with what can be read as clues to its own narrative treacherousness. Such clues might be seen as unconscious "slips," but they are so frequent, and so systematic, that they might equally be seen as in some meaningful sense available to consciousness, including the consciousness of the revising autobiographer. We might suggest that the Julia figure is a kind of ego-ideal, a fictional idealization of Hellman's preferred self-image, and that disavowed aspects of identity (the fear of being "a lousy person") are "split-off," "counter-ego" materials possessed of strong purposiveness of their own that lands then with striking frequency on the pages of Hellman's autobiographical works.

The works might then be seen as extended narrative attempts at ego-incorporation, where delusional self-laudation tries to accommodate itself to countervailing self-deprecation through protestations of cowardice, unreliability, and so on. Were this accommodation to succeed, Hellman's autobiographies would constitute a remarkable act of identity "synthesis," of "self-inception." But in this respect they fail—even though, according to aesthetic criteria that are proper to fiction, they often succeed. We are not yet in a position usefully to assess the nature and extent of their moral failure, but it seems fair to say that the economy of these texts includes unassimilated, sub-narrative attempts to "spell out," in the form of the many admissions, to moral failure, narrative unreliability, cowardice, and other deficiencies. What are we to make of these?

Fingarette's account of self-deception was not designed for lifewriting and so does not address the complexities of the contracts that operate in lifewriting narrative situations, nor the role of the reader in such contracts. Our notion of "economy" needs to factor such considerations in. Unless otherwise directed, the reader of an autobiography participates in a contract or "pact" premised on the assumption that the narrative will be as "true" as the author can make it. If the narrative is intensely personal the reader also functions as a *de facto* witness—to a confession, and/or to something more like a therapeutic process of "working through." This process is active, and the nature of the reader's participation will heavily influence the "text" she "receives." In fact, it is not quite accurate to describe this reader as a "*de facto*" witness, because the writer has someone like such a reader in mind as she writes, thereby creating a triangular structure: me, the story I tell myself, the story as received by the Other. The more "confessional" the narrative, the more the Other is "invited in," thus becoming a figure around whom authorial expectations, be they positive or negative, converge. Hellman's bizarre amalgam of avowal and disavowal, guarantee (epistemological and moral), and self-indictment have to be understood as *addressed to a reader*. In terms of autobiographical genres, the author puts on the page a deceiving exemplaristic account of self, but also what can usefully be termed its "deconstructive other." The two are not, however, given equal textual weight, and these deconstructive dynamics are not typical of autobiographical textuality in general. They mark particular intensities of interior disharmony such as we find in Hellman's autobiographies. The narrative structure of "Julia," including the postscript and the prefatory essay to *Three* constructs Hellman as the one lied to, not the deceiver.

Her conscious intention is to affirm her veracity, but there is something eerily conscious—and intentional—too about her admissions of unreliability. Her psyche could not contain these massive fissures and contradictions in self-image, and so they are passed on to the reader, with a strangely inadvertent intentionality, for resolution—or perhaps just to defuse the pain that holding them in would occasion.

When challenged about “Julia,” Hellman always affirmed its veracity. This may suggest that she did not suffer from *Pseudologica fantastica*, since many who do are able and inclined to admit to the lies they have told. There is little evidence to suggest that Hellman suffered from delusional psychosis. Of the explanatory constructs I mentioned at the outset, two now remain—lying and self-deception, or some combination of the two. For instance, she might have lied at the outset, then been so humiliated at having done so, at having committed to such a fraudulent mode of engagement in the world, that she conjured herself into self-deception, as if into sleep, thereafter writing like a dreamer whose narratives are purposive but bereft of (fully) conscious intentionality. Scholarly demonstration that “Julia” was unreliable might have been expected to wake her from this dream. But perhaps not: after all, such demonstration, by making the fraudulent mode of engagement so excruciatingly obvious, could cause a hardening rather than a dissolution of the defensive carapace. Perhaps, on the other hand, she was self-deceived at the outset, was driven by the critics to *see herself* as a self-deceiver, and responded by lying to save face. There are many possible permutations.

Explanation is one thing; moral evaluation might be deemed another. But in fact, biographical practice needs to see them as closely entwined. If Lillian Hellman was (for argument’s sake) radically and chronically self-deceived, then she was not a liar. In this case, her deceptions, though damaging, were not immoral, if by that we mean morally assessable intentional acts. A biographer might conclude that the deceptions sprang from a self-deceived identity whose long history of refusing to take responsibility for engagements in the world would warrant the charge of moral and narrative unreliability, but not of immorality as such. Self-deception that runs this deep is perhaps more a matter for bemused dismay and regret than for condemnation. But if she lied about her part in the fight against Fascism, and if she knowingly thieved Muriel Gardiner’s life-story, good on Mary McCarthy for giving it to her with both barrels on national TV!

Perhaps Hellman's next biographer will find compelling evidence for the existence of Julia and the reliability of the narrative that carries her name. If so, good luck to her and to Hellman. Our theories, after all, must make peace with the evidence.²

Notes

1. The first three volumes were reprinted in Lillian Hellman, *Three* (1979). Page references in this essay to *Unfinished Woman*, *Pentimento*, and *Scoundrel Time* refer to *Three*.

2. Thanks to Peter Baehr, Andrew Goatly, Mette Hjort, and Paisley Livingston, valued Lingnan colleagues all, for their invaluable help with this essay.

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