From *The Cherry Orchard to The Autumm Garden*: Chekhovian overtones in Lillian Hellman, mimesis and innovation.

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According to Harold Bloom in his persuasive analysis of poetry, each writer since Milton is undoubtedly the heir of a literary tradition to which he cannot escape, a tradition so established that nothing substantially new or original can be created. Therefore he is painfully conscious of having arrived late in time and experiences a rebellion against his forefathers which resembles the Freudian Oedipus complex of the son towards the father. The only possible way to vent creativity is to work upon the previous poems and offer a new interpretation, a misreading:

> The suppression of their [the poets'] aggressive feelings gives rise to various defensive strategies. No poem stands on its own, but always in relation to another. In order to write belatedly, poets must enter a psychic struggle, to create an imaginative space. This involves 'misreading' their masters in order to produce a new interpretation. (Selden 1989, 95-96).

In a feminist interpretation of what Bloom names the 'anxiety of influence', Gilbert and Gubar argue that "Bloom's model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal" (290), and they propose an adaptation of such a theory to apply to women writers as well. They pinpoint an even deeper anxiety for the woman writer: she does not only feel the pressure of a long established tradition which conditions and dictates the mode of her writing, but she also lacks female precursors to take as models in order to depart from them. Because this second dimension is added to her situation, the female writer suffers the 'anxiety of authorship': "Her battle (...) however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*" (Gilbert and Gubar 1991, 292). In this article, both Bloom's and Gilbert and Gubar's theories will be taken as a key element to analyze two modern plays: Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Lillian Hellman's *The Autumn Garden*.

Lillian Hellman (1905-1984) belongs to a generation which came of age when the New Woman was becoming discredited[1] . Although she was

firmly established as a playwright in Broadway from her first play, *The Children's Hour*, in 1934, her success was subtly shadowed by the reception of 'serious' criticism because she was a woman. George Jean Nathan said in 1941, after the opening of *Watch on the Rhine*: "It proves again that Lillian Hellman is the best of our American woman playwrights and it proves that even the best of our American woman playwrights fall immeasurably short of the mark of our best masculine". Hellman herself renounces her classification as a woman writer: "I'm a playwright. I also happen to be a woman, but I am *not* a woman playwright" (Bryer 1986, 124). Being the most public of literary arts, playwriting has traditionally been especially aggressive towards women, and Hellman hints at this as the explanation for her retirement from the stage after the 1962 production of *My Mother, My Father and Me* in the Theatre piece of *Pentimento*:

> The playwright is almost always held accountable for failure and that is almost always a just verdict. But this time I told myself that justice doesn't have much to do with writing and that I didn't want to feel that way again. For most people in the theatre whatever happens is worth it for the fun, the excitement, the possible rewards. It was once that way for me and maybe it will be again. But I don't think so (209).

To complicate matters even further, some feminist critics have analysed her texts as non feminist, and therefore unworthy of critical attention[2]. Fortunately, some efforts have been carried out lately to recover her writings and to study them in a different light[3].

Given Hellman's own combative attitude against feminism[4], one might think that Gilbert and Gubar's anxiety of authorship does not apply in this case, where she clearly takes a solidly-established, male precursor as a starting-point of her 'misreading'. However, her contention that she is not to be judged on the basis of being a woman and her powerful stance denying any inferior position by not acknowledging it, can be seen as a strategy which betrays her anxiety. The paradox lies in the fact that her position is denied to her by applying opposite reasonings: according to some, she cannot write good plays because she is a woman; according to others, she cannot be considered a representative of women's literature because she writes like a man[5]. This frustrating catch-22 situation may have been the reason why she seems to have given in to the more private

and secure domain of fiction writing during the last period o f her literary career when she retired from the stage

Lillian Hellman has two clearly distinct phases in her dramaturgy: the first period is influenced by Ibsen and the second one by Chekhov[6]. Her last two plays - *The Autumn Garden* (1951) and *Toys in the Attic* (1960) – correspond to the latter period. The purpose of this article is to analyze which elements in her play *The Autumn Garden* are similar to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) and to what extent Hellman overcomes the anxiety of influence and authorship by introducing original aspects or elements which render her work original by adding or subverting the tradition of the modern realist play. From the writers' philosophy to their use of dialogue, from the title to the plot, from the pairings of characters to the theme of frustrated love, many elements in *The Autumn Garden* lead us to the conclusion that the Hellman text is a rightful offspring of the Russian play, whose features it so closely resembles.

The Cherry Orchard is an example of the new dramatic vision inaugurated by Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), who, together with Ibsen and Strindberg, can be considered the father of the new European theatre which appeared at the end of the XIX century. One of the contributions of this playwright was the depiction on stage of characters who appeared to be everyday, common people, and whose lives did not seem too dramatic. He was not well understood by his contemporaries, as Carlson explains:

> Suvorin [Chekhov's editor and critic] accused Chekhov of too general an objectivity in his writing, of an unwillingness to take sides, but Chekhov insisted that the artist's duty was not to solve problems, but only to state them clearly. 'The artist should be, not the judge of his characters and their conversations, but only an unbiased witness'; he places the evidence before the jury of readers and spectators and allows them to pronounce judgement (246).

Lillian Hellman's declaration for an interview in 1961 shows that her philosophy as a writer is strikingly similar to Chekhov's: "I don't think there is any such thing as a really good political play. Good writers have a look at the world around them and then they write it down. That's all"[7] . It was not until the production of *The Seagull* that Chekhov's drama became

successful[8]. Stanislavski himself explains that when the Moscow Art Theatre was rehearsing *The Three Sisters* in 1901, the whole crew was disappointed because the spirit of the play escaped them; they seemed to be unable to bring life to it. Suddenly, one night when all of them had stopped rehearsing out of disillusionment, Stanislavski claims to have seen the light:

> A spiritual spring was touched and I at last understood the nature of the something that was missing. I had known it before also, but I had known it with my mind and not my emotions.
> The men of Chekhov do not bathe, as we did at that time, in their own sorrow. Just the opposite; they, like Chekhov himself, seek life, joy, laughter, courage. The men and women of Chekhov want to live and not to die. They are active and surge to overcome the hard and unbearable impasses into which life has plunged them. It is not their fault that Russian life kills initiative and the best of beginnings and interferes with the free action and life of men and women (Nagler 1952, 589).

Anton Chekhov was a writer who greatly interested Hellman and who was even the subject of a tribute and responsible for her salvation in 1955, when she edited and wrote an introduction for a selection of his letters9 . Her insight into Chekhov's work brings forth two important issues which clarify her own work. First, she defied the traditional interpretation of the Russian master:

> Stanislavski, a great director, is probably most responsible for the frequent misinterpretations of the Chekhov plays. We have taken his prompt scripts for the Moscow Art Theatre productions and used them as our bible, adding our own misinterpretations, of course, until now we seldom see a Chekhov play that is pure Chekhov. Most of us, therefore, do not know the plays. We only know something that we call "Chekhovian", and by that we mean a stage filled with sweet, soupy, frustrated people, created by a man who wept for their fate. This interpretation holds very little of the truth: it is based on the common assumption that the

> writer shares the viewpoint of those he writes about (Hellman 1984, xxiv).

Secondly, Hellman insisted on the fact –so often overlooked by critics- that her plays, like Chekhov's, had been basically misunderstood by audiences and critics. For example, although Chekhov himself considered *The Cherry Orchard* to be a comedy, critics and playgoers alike failed to see it as such. Likewise, in Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, by overlooking the ironic elements, the audience saw a tragic drama where she had intended a comedy. Therefore her words on the reception of Chekhov's work could also be applied to her plays:

> Chekhov made it clear that the lovable fools in *The Cherry Orchard* are not even worth the trees that are the symbol of their end. But the play is usually presented as a drama of delicate, charming, improvident aristocrats pushed around by a vulgar, new-risen bourgeoisie (...) In real life it is possible to like a foolish woman, but this viewpoint is frowned upon in the theatre: it allows for no bravura, gets no sympathy for the actress, and is complex because foolishness is complex. It is thus easier, in such cases, to ignore the author's aim, or to change it. *The Cherry Orchard* is sharp comedy. Nowhere else does Chekhov say so clearly that the world these people made for themselves would have to end in a whimper (Hellman 1984, xxv-xxvi).

The plays here analyzed correspond to the maturity of both authors, not only in terms of biological age (Chekhov was 44, Hellman 46) but also in terms of career evolution. They are the result of careful observation of life; each seems to be a simple portrait of a group of people among whom not much is happening: under this simple appearance lies a complex statement on the nature of man and human relationships. The actions are almost non-events, or, at least, unimportant events and apparently irrelevant exchanges among leisurely characters. However, the absence of suspense or breath-taking action should not be interpreted as a flaw:

> Of course, the poetic qualities of great drama, of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Chekhov, have always provided the audience with a deeply complex pattern of poetic association and

> significance; however simple the motivations may appear to be on the surface, the profound intuition with which the characters are drawn, the multiple planes on which the action proceeds, the complex quality of truly poetic language combine in a pattern that transcends any attempt at a simple and rational apprehension of the action or its solution. The suspense in a play like *Hamlet* or *The Three Sisters* does not lie in an anxious expectation of how these plays will *end*. Their eternal freshness and power lie in the inexhaustible quality of the poetic and infinitely ambiguous image of the human condition they present (Esslin 1980, 417).

The love plot is central in both plays. *The Cherry Orchard* takes place in a Russian estate at the turn of the century, when the charming owner, Lyubov Ranevskaya, returns from Paris after a long absence to lick the wounds caused by her lover's rejection of her. She has a daughter, Anya, who falls in love with Trofimov, eternal student and former teacher to Lyubov's late son. Varya, Lyubov's adopted daughter, has remained at home and acts as housekeeper. She has no money but seems to be in love with Lopakhin, a rich merchant who also likes her. In the servants' quarters, the love plot is also central. Yepikhodov, young clerk, is madly in love with Dunyasha, the maid, who is in turn in love with Yasha, the valet returning from Paris. Yasha despises provincial life and rejects the maid.

We also have a group of four characters who are not motivated by love or attraction to the opposite sex. Two of them are old and the other two are extremely peculiar. Lyubov's brother, Gaev, is as obsessed with billiards as the old servant Firs is obsessed with his duty. Pishchik, a friend of the family, is incredibly optimistic, good-humoured and so insistent in asking for money to pay off the rent that he always gets it. Finally, Charlotta, Anya's governess, is peculiar because of her doubtful origin and her uncanny ability to perform card tricks.

The action of the play does not revolve around the possible loss of the estate because of large debts, but around the presence of Lyubov and the development of the different amorous subplots, especially that involving Lyubov. She is constantly receiving telegrams from her lover urging her to return to him. The reader's/audience's attention and

expectations lie on how the entangled sentimental relationships will eventually turn out. The play ends with Lyubov's departure as a result of her yielding to her former lover's requests.

Likewise, the plot of *The Autumn Garden* centres on a group of characters connected to each other by unfulfilled love bonds. The action takes place in a summer house near the Gulf of Mexico, some miles away from New Orleans. The owner of the house, Constance Tuckerman, is a middle-aged single woman who has been forced to earn a living by turning the house into a summer lodging-house. Sophie, her French niece, also works in the house and is engaged to Fred Ellis. Among the regular guests there are two childhood friends of Constance's: Edward Crossman, who has remained single, and Carrie Ellis, a widow and Fred's mother. Mrs Ellis, Carrie's mother-in-law, is a resolute woman who has inherited a lot of money from her late husband and who does not hesitate to enjoy the freedom that her social and financial position allows. General Griggs, a quiet, intellectual man and his wife Rose, empty-headed, frivolous and hysterically talkative and indiscreet, are discussing a divorce after many years of marriage. Their lives are all affected by the presence in the house of the famous painter Nick Denery and his rich wife, Nina. Nick is an old childhood friend who broke off his engagement with Constance twenty years ago, when he left for Europe and met Nina. Nick has not returned since then. As with Lyubov in *The Cherry Orchard*, in *The Autumn Garden*, Nick's stay in the house restricts the length of the play.

The presence of these two characters is not only functional in terms of plot development but also structural in terms of defining the length of the play. Hellman models her plot on the structure of the Russian play: the action opens with a few characters awaiting the impending arrival of the two main characters: Lyubov Ranevskaya (and her party) in *The Cherry Orchard*, and Nick Denery (with his wife and maid) in *The Autumn Garden*. The presence of these characters provokes the dénouement of the plays, which conclude with each of their departures.

Similarities in plot development and structure are even more pronounced when one analyzes the titles of the two works. The title *The Autumn Garden* clearly reflects *The Cherry Orchard*. Although a little gloomier with autumn imagery instead of the poetic and sexual fruit which qualifies the orchard in the Russian play, one might argue that Hellman's

title is more faithful to the content of her play. Whereas The Cherry Orchard functions as a structural element in the play, The Autumn Garden adds a metaphorical meaning. It has been elsewhere pointed out that Chekhov's title is misleading, since the trees are not at all the concern of any of the characters. Notwithstanding Lyubov's occasional references to the orchard and her final tears, all throughout the play there are several possible solutions to save the cherry orchard. Gaev himself lists them all: " I have so many schemes ... ideas ... it would be good if we ... (*pause*) if someone left us *money*. It would be good if *Anya* married a very wealthy man – it would be good to go to Yaroslavl once again, and try our luck with our rich aunt ... who is so *very* rich" (I, 30). Thus the conflict with the orchard is always present and its sale in auction also signals the end of the play.

Unlike the constant presence of the orchard in Chekhov's play, in Hellman's play the autumn garden is metaphorical. By suggesting that Hellman's title is 'truer' than Chekhov's, I intend this to mean that it does not distract the reader's attention from the main concern of the play: since there is no literal garden, one can forget about it and not be puzzled by it until the end, when the obvious autumnal nature of the love encounters we have witnessed becomes clear. It is interesting to note that Hellman considered other possibilities[10] for the title. Among the different options there were two which emphasized the subject matter of the play: "Four of five kinds of love" and "Four kinds of love"; and another one, "All on a Summer's Day", seemed to highlight a prospective unity of time discarded in the extant version of the play. However, by finally choosing the autumn garden, Hellman was true to her penchant for metaphorical titles, and surpassed the master by not giving her play a title which merely reflected structural elements. She manipulates the Russian title by creating a metaphorical presence of an autumn garden which adds a key to understand her play and she eliminates the element of deception present in Chekhov's play. The title in the orchard deceives the reader. The story is not about the orchard but about the feelings of a group of people with a tendency for unrequited love.

The deception, the veiling of truth is also present in the use of dialogue. In *The Cherry Orchard* most dialogic exchanges are really monologues, since characters do not really listen to each other and, therefore, do not interact. This innovative device is one of the greatest Chekhovian contributions to the development of drama:

> In his last four plays he evolved a dramatic form and idiom of dialogue which were highly original and had a great influence on twentieth century drama. His originality lay in his combination of faithfulness to the surface of life with poetic evocation of underlying experience. This he achieved partly by exploiting the character of human conversation when it seems to be engaged in communication, but is actually concerned with the incommunicable. This leads on to the non-communicating dialogue in the work of playwrights such as Beckett and Pinter, when the characters on the stage alternately baffle and enlighten the audience by the undercurrents implicit in their words (Wynne-Davis 1990,401).

This apparently non-dramatic use of dialogue is explored by Chekhov and applied in the play to convey of the basic solitude of the characters.To take just one example of the many scattered throughout the play, one can examine the dialogue-monologue which ensues after Lyubov Ranevskaya's arrival. She is surrounded by four male characters – Firs the valet, Gaev her brother and the two friends Lopakhin and Pischik- all of whom are talking but are not engaged in conversations. Each of them makes a comment directed to himself or to Lyubov, but never to the others present:

Lyubov	Now. Can I be sitting here? Can I be sitting in this room? Can I be home? And if home then why am I sitting her, and why did I sit in a *train* for four days – *weeping* all across this beautiful land; *weeping* while I ... (*Pause)* But what is it that one must *do* in life? ... One must drink one's coffee. (*Pause*) Which have you gotten and for which I thank you. My dear old man. I am so glad you are still alive.
Firs	Yesterday morning.
Gaev	Glad to hear it.
Lopakhin	Well. I'm off. I have to, five o'clock, I'm going to Kharkov – wanted to stop by – I simply wanted to pay my respects to a magnificent -.
Pischik	... And even prettier since her return from Paris – dressed in the latest... (I, 17-18).

Their spoken worlds seldom reflect what is really going on in their heads out of politeness, shyness, or even foolishness: "In Chekhov, real feelings are suppressed behind meaningless politeness" (Esslin 1980, 116). They seem unable to tackle their problems by first naming them. This is what happens with the cherry orchard all throughout the play: the impractical attitudes of the characters stop them from solving the problem. Just as the title seems to be separated from the content of the play, the characters' language is a sign of their separation from truth: they live in an illusory world, detached from reality and everyday common sense. Lyubov is the best example of this impractical attitude with her extravagant and silly tendency to give money to anybody who asks for it although she is completely broke. She gives money to Pishchik in the first act, to the stranger in the second act and finally, she gives her whole purse in the fourth act.

This separation from truth which is ever present in the characters' dialogues-monologues is enhanced by their inability to understand themselves and each other, which they themselves make reference to. Lyubov seems puzzled at Lopakhin's suggestion that they should break their land into lots in order to pay their debts and stop the impending auction: "Yermolay Alexeevich: I ... I ... don't ... I'm sure I don't understand you" (I, 19). Dunyasha claims not to understand her suitor Yepidkhodov: "He's a ... you know ... he's a, I suppose he's a nice enough man, but I don't understand a thing he ... a nice enough man. *Good* ... I suppose ... *sensitive* ... I (*pause*) I *like* him – but I don't understand him. And he worships me. And then he bumps into a chair" (I, 8). And we also have Lopakhin's explanation to Lyubov of why he does not propose to Varya: "I do not understand myself. And I admit it's strange. So strange. I ... There's nothing for it. Let's *do* it. Now, right now, while there's still – let's *finish* it ... as I feel ... I don't ... I feel when you've *left* I couldn't *do* it" (IV, 86). All these examples also show the characters' frustrating efforts to find the right words and their eloquent silences and hesitations. Language becomes a barrier which prevents communication.

This distance from reality through their obvious difficulty in listening and engaging in conversation emphasizes an entrapment in isolation which accounts for their ultimate incapacity to love. Language is the mirror of their frustrations and, paradoxically, both the obstacle and the bridge to overcome them. One of the most poignant and humorous moments in the play corresponds to Lopakhin's realization that his engagement to Varya

needs only to be put into words to become real. However, neither he nor she can ever say those words. As early in the play as the first act, Varya confesses to Anya that she does not believe it will happen:

> I ... you know ... I think ... I think it's not meant to be – that's what I think and God bless him – it's ... now I hate to *see* him – everyone talks of our wedding ... they're always *congratulating* us ... But – no one's said anything ... it's like a dream. Running uphi ... (I, 13).

The transformation of the basic dialogic nature of drama into a series of monologues juxtaposed and interwoven is an essential element of the craft of Chekhov as a playwright. Hellman adopts the same device and, as in Chekhov, we can see in her play that the dialogic or monologic nature of speech is an element of characterization. Rose Griggs' garrulous nature and infuriating habit of substituting the referent by the pronoun is a sign of her neurosis:

Rose (*Gets up from her chair. She finds silence uncomfortable and breaks into song: "We stroll the lane together")* Now where is it? Everything's been so topsy-turvy all evening. If I can't have it immediately after dinner then I just about don't want it. At home you can bet it's right waiting for us when we leave the dining room, isn't it, Ben? Too bad it's Thursday. I'd almost rather go and see him than go to the party. *(To Mrs Ellis)* I think it's what keeps you awake, Mrs Ellis. I mean a little is good for your heart, the doctor told me always to have a little, but my goodness the amount you have every night (I, 400).

Nick's speech contradicts his actions because, as the audience and the rest of the characters realize in the play, he is so intent on being liked by everybody that his art, and thus his life, have become a lie. As his wife puts it: "Your trouble is that you're an amateur, a gifted amateur. And like all amateurs you have very handsome reasons for what you do not finish – between trains and boats" (II, ii, 463). Like Nick, Constance also lives in an illusory world and that is why she cannot understand her niece's practical approach to life and love. It puzzles her that Sophie plans to marry Fred without being in love:

Constance If that's the way it is, then I am not willing. I thought it was two young people who- who- who loved each other. I didn't ever understand it, and I didn't ask questions, but – Willing to get married. What have you been thinking of, why – (*Sharply, hurt*) What kind of unpleasant thing has this been? (II, ii, 455-6).

Her essentially romantic nature makes her gullible to Nick's comment that Crossman is in love with her. She even entertains the idea of marrying him: "[...] And with you married, I'll be alone forever, unless – Well, Ned's loved me and it's been such a waste, such a waste. I know it now but – well- I don't know. (*Shyly, as a young girl would say it*) You understand, Sophie?' (II, ii, 464). As in *The Cherry Orchard*, one can find in *The Autumn Garden* a group of people whose speech emphasizes separation from truth. Rose Griggs, Nick Denery and Constance Tuckerman show by their language a distance from reality, a tendency to look at life through a distorted lens. There is a clear opposition between them and a second group of characters who make an effort, through language, to keep their grasp on reality no matter how harsh it is.

In contrast with Chekhov, where the speech of his characters, even those not fooled by love, always showed a tendency to inhabit an impractical world and to distort reality, the characters drawn by Hellman have a distinctly clear way of speaking and a recognisable common sense which rejects any pretence at improving reality. When compared to the first group, Mrs Ellis, Edward Crossman and Sophie seem very articulate. The three of them go beyond the limitations imposed by politeness and use language as a tool to represent a reality they face directly, with no rosy veil to blur it. Mrs Ellis is in a position of greater freedom because of her old age and her widowhood, together with her money. She always says what she thinks, even to the point of being disrespectful, but she is intelligent enough to understand human weaknesses. Her wisdom and sincerity is obvious in her last scene, when she realizes that Sophie and Fred will never get married, and she tells her so:

> Did *Carrie* ask you to leave with us? (*Sophie nods*) Ah. That's not good. When Carrie gets smart she gets very smart. Sophie, Frederick meant what he said to you. But I know them both and I would guess that in a week, or two or

> three, he will agree to go to Europe with his mother and he will tell you that it is only a postponement. And he will believe what he says. Time and decisions melt and merge for him and ten years from now he will be convinced that you refused to marry him. And he will always be a little sad about what could have been (III, 482).

Crossman's casual mention of a mandolin in the second act (II, ii, 462) is clearly Hellman's wink at the reader to establish a parallel between him and Yepikhodov, a mandolin player whose music is heard in the background of *The Cherry Orchard* during the love scenes. As was the case with Sophie, Edward Crossman shows his ability to see beyond language when he is not deceived by her pretension of anomie. He observes her attitude and expresses his opinion, showing his ability to see beyond the surface:

Sophie	Sometimes I understand.
Crossman	That's dangerous to admit, Sophie. You've been so busy cultivating a pseudo-stupidity. Not that you'd ever be a brilliant girl, but at least you used to be normal. Another five years and you won't be *pseudo*-stupid (I, 428).

His analysis is as penetrating when it comes to himself or to Constance. He is not beyond self-deception, but at least he is conscious of what time has done to them:

> I've kept myself busy looking into other people's hearts so I wouldn't have to look into my own. (*Softly*) If I made you think I was still in love, I'm sorry. Sorry I fooled you and sorry I fooled myself. And I've never liked liars – least of all those who lie to themselves (III, 494).

Sophie is defined through her conversations with Ned Crossman. She is twice an exile because she is a foreigner and comes from a lower social class. This difficult position proves to be a vantage point which adds perspective to her vision. Although she tries to keep a low profile, Ned does not allow her to go unnoticed: "I do the best I can, I do the best I can. And I thank you for worrying about me, but you are an educated man with ideas in English that I am not qualified to understand" (I, 429).

Her claim that she does not master the language is betrayed by her acute comments: "You take many words to say simple things. All of you. And you make the simple things – like going to sleep – so hard, and the hard things – like staying awake – so easy" (I, 429); and by her ability to switch to the linguistic register that best suits the situation:

Nina	(*Stops laughing*) Are you? Sophie, it is an unpleasant and foolish incident and I don't wish to minimize it. But don't you feel you're adding considerable drama to it?
Sophie	No, ma'am. I did not say that is the way I thought of it. But that is the way it will be considered in this place, in this life. Little is made into very much here (III, 484-485).

By being in a certain sense outsiders, Mrs Ellis, Sophie and Crossman can look directly into reality. They share this ability with the outcasts of the Chekhov play: Semionov-Pischik and Yepikhodov. Ironically, the former is 'mad', the latter 'madly in love'. One could consider madness in Chekhov's play to be a metaphor for the talent to be more in touch with reality, to display their feelings, to be closer to truth than the rest of the characters. Hellman, however, develops this aspect departing from her model: she creates characters whose vision is not clouded or underrated as madness. Chekhov's portrayal of the world is always distorted, he never gives a direct vision of reality, whereas Hellman twists that perception and overcomes the anxiety of influence through some of her characters' vision.

Another aspect which is worth considering when comparing both plays is the subject matter. Frustrated love is the thematic heart of both plays. If we consider the two young girls without a dowry, Varya and Sophie, as the personifications of the theme, we can easily establish a contrast which, in my opinion, is the sharpest innovation to the master Hellman introduces. The outcome for each of them is the opposite: whereas Varya remains single and frustrated, Sophie takes an active role in her life which frees her to fulfill her desire to go back home. Varya's confinement and passivity and the idea of reclusion is strengthened by her characterization as a nun. People talk about her as a 'convent girl', and there are several allusions to a 'retreat' or a 'pilgrimage'. She is most accurately defined by Lyubov: "she's like a fish out of water" (IV, 85). Lopakhin's inability to propose to her ultimately condemns her to silence

and seclusion. Varya is cloistered within the walls of silence, walls which will be broken down by Hellman.

In *The Autumn Garden*, language is used by Sophie in a way that empowers her to make decisions. As a foreigner, she claims to be unable to perceive the nuances of the English language. However she will prove more than able to use that language as a tool to obtain her freedom. Her active attitude is in sharp contrast to Varya's passivity in the Orchard. Hellman may claim to have created a female character who is not tied to marriage as her only solution. This ability to see beyond the traditional constraints of a woman's position is the element which radically transforms the cherry orchard into an autumn garden. Hellman's misreading is, in this sense, a transgression of the original text and a rebellion against it. Moreover, by siting the change in a woman's position, she is expanding the boundaries, creating new spaces, and avenging Varya who had been condemned to silence, passivity and dissolution by the male author's design.

In conclusion, similarities between Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Hellman's *The Autumn Garden* range from the title or the structure of the plot to the pairings of characters or the theme of frustrated love. Hellman's departure from the text she takes as a model is clearly seen in her exploration of the uses of dialogue as a means of characterization and in the presence of a group of highly articulate characters. Her misreading of Chekhov's play involves taking the master's tools and stretching them to the point of transgression. But she goes a step further because the most articulate of her characters, the one who masters language to the point of using it to take control of her life, is a woman who, in sharp contrast with Chekhov's Varya, has more than one choice in life. Thus, Sophie becomes Hellman's reaction and response to Chekhov's reading of her as a woman and as an author.

NOTES

1. " the new sexual ideology, which accompanied and probably contributed to the decline of feminism, transformed the New Woman from self-made heroine into old maid and 'invert'" (Titus 1991, 216).

2. Georgoudaki's comment reflects this attitude: " her plays of the period discussed [this analysis covers until *The Searching Wind*] contain no evidence of an affirmative vision that would transform these women from passive objects to active and creative participants in the shaping of human history" (85) ; whereas Mary Titus explains it: "Lillian Hellman's response to the cultural revision of gender in the 1920s and 1930s has seemed especially unappealing, which may explain in part why her work has received less attention than that of her cross-dressing contemporaries" (228).

3. See Barlow and Durán. The latter considers *Scoundrel Time* the most feminist of Hellman's memoirs because "ofrece una expresión intensa de la experiencia personal en un marco social" (193).

4. She defended that equality was based on economic independence, but refused to acknowledge any difference with male colleagues and demanded to be treated on the same basis and judged on the same standards.

5. Titus quotes the *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*: "I would exclude Hellman's plays and Mary McCarthy's fiction [from the chapter on Women's Literature] because these writers base their interpretations of women's needs and desires on standards that are essentially masculine even if they are not conventionally so" (Titus 1991, 345).

6. See Adler and Lederer for a detailed analysis of both stages.

7. This statement corresponds to the transcription of a 1961 interview for *Esquire*. The manuscript belongs to the Lillian Hellman Collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC from now on), reference B3 (3) F4.

8. Ironically, as Hellman herself notices, Stanislavski's interpretation influenced in a negative way both the criticism and the audience reception which followed.

9. I mean the term salvation here in an almost literal sense, since after Hellman's 1952 appearance in front of the Congress Committee for Anti-American Activities, she found it almost impossible to work. This edition, together with some money she inherited, was the end of a difficult economic situation. Her sentimental connections to Chekhov could probably have been strengthened by her personal interest in Russia, which she visited for the first time from November 1944 to January 1945.

10. HRHRC, reference B A (2) F3.

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