Forest, and *Toys in the Attic,* her triad of southern works, are Lillian Hellman at her best. The first play, produced in 1939, scintillates with an electric performance by Regina and struggles without it, actually more dependent on a touching Birdie and an obsequious Leo. The play is one of the best examples we have ever had on the American stage of the effective use of melodrama. *Another Part of the Forest,* fascinating because it came after, in 1947, and not before, is a much better play, brilliantly constructed, more subtly orchestrated, and, in this writer's guess, her finest work. *Toys in the Attic* is the best written, the only one in which poetry pre-empts prose at every turn, with the most provocative characters, best illustrating Lillian Hellman's foremost theme: the desire for flight and the inevitability of inertia.

In her world, Chicago and Paris play the same role as Moscow did in the works of Chekhov. In fact, although Tennessee Williams has often been cited as the spiritual inheritor of Chekhovian mood, it is actually Lillian Hellman who is most pervaded by his influence and his techniques: Her plays are a veritable Chekhovian echo chamber, not consciously, but rather in sympathetic vibration; the *Sehnsucht* and the melancholy of the dying world Chekhov portrayed were spiritually parallel to what Miss Hellman found in her southern miasma.

The Searching Wind, playing à la Dos Passos with history, as seen through personal tragedies juxtaposed with international ones, is quite relevant now. Although its love affair is so true that it seems almost too Hollywood truistic (the love of a couple who never had the courage to be together), its message is that of the young who are maimed by war and who would have wished that it was for a valid reason. History and politics, survival in a destructive world, all tempted Miss Hellman's talent. In *Watch on the Rhine,* antifascism is cloaked in nobility of spirit, and the European and American sensibilities are strongly contrasted to make a cogent point about the difficulty of living in compromise. With the characters portrayed with dignity and taste, the play was, and will always be, deeply touching.

The horrors of southern life and the rigors of political honesty gave way to a series of adaptations that, though concerned with far different milieus and times, emphasize even more deeply the concerns of the earlier plays. *Montserrat,* taut and thrilling in its formula of despair, may be less authentic than Sartre's *Death Without Burial,* but it is far more alarming. *The*

Lillian Hellman in 1968.

Lark, its ironic spiritual counterpart, celebrates the yea-saying of a Joan who understood the value of life. The other two adaptations fared less well: *Candide,* witty and lively and gloriously enhanced by Leonard Bernstein's flashing score and Richard Wilbur's delightful, prancing lyrics, still made of Voltaire's work something a good bit less stark than it was in the original. *Candide* without anti-Semitism and explicit syphilis was a little tame. *My Mother, My Father and Me* did not in 1963 get the production it merited, but it fitted well into the Jewish Gothic renaissance. *The Autumn Garden,* a consciously mature play, studied the dangers of aging and living up to one's reputation, and even more the awful unspoken suffering of those who cannot admit to what they love.

"Danger" seems to be one of the key words in Lillian Hellman's spiritual dictionary: In each play someone lives dangerously, lives a lie, comes to a turning in the road, and risks truth-telling. The evil is exposed, the boil is broken, the hurt is purged, the truth is revealed—"the knife of truth," as Lilly characterizes it in *Toys in the Attic.*

Finally, Miss Hellman's purpose in the theater seems to have been to ferret out truth in lives frittered away by aberrant lying obsessions: Her characters play dangerous games in dangerous situations until something occurs that makes it all come clear. As Izquierdo in *Montserrat* put it most eloquently: "Faced with danger we are ourselves, to our surprise."

A presiding and abiding intelligence lies beyond these plays, someone who has lived a lot, thought a lot, and seen and comprehended so very much. No single character in all her plays possesses either her wit, her wisdom, or her charm; only Albertine Prine of *Toys in the Attic* quite has the charisma. She has given up the theater, so we are told, as have so many other writers who finally couldn't abide the milieu. It would be fascinating to get the published screen versions of the plays that became films. The juxtaposition of the two forms would tell us a great amount about the workings of Hollywood versus the stage in the Forties and Fifties. Beyond that, perhaps —and the moving vignettes of her autobiography, *An Unfinished Woman,* would indicate it—there may yet be another play, one closer to her most mature heart. If not, we may content ourselves with new productions of her work. Mike Nichols only recently made *The Little Foxes* live again. Indeed, over the years Miss Hellman has been fortunate in her directors: Herman Shulman, herself, Harold Clurman, Joseph Anthony, Tyrone Guthrie, Arthur Penn, and Gower Champion. She had the best, certainly. It is, of course, anybody's guess, but I have no doubt that when the curtain comes down and a final list is made of the most important American plays of our time, several Hellman creations will be among them.

PIAF
A Biography by Simone Berteaut
Harper & Row, 488 pp., $10
AZNAVOUR BY AZNAVOUR
An Autobiography
translated by Ghislaine Boulanger
Cowles, 283 pp., $7.95

Reviewed by Richard Seaver

Edith Piaf and Charles Aznavour, two of France's most famous performers, had careers that overlapped and, in fact, were intertwined—Piaf is actually the most important character in Aznavour's autobiography—which is why these two books are being reviewed together. Both books have a Horatio Alger-like quality that even at its best is often embarrassing and at its saccharin worst is downright silly.

Simone Berteaut's loving memoir of her half-sister Edith's incredible life is marred by an inordinate number of clichés and banalities, and by conversations—some recollected "perfectly" after thirty or forty years—that even the most ardent Piaf fan will find difficult to believe.

Richard Seaver is an editor and critic who has translated some twenty books from French into English.

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"You can't live the same way at night as you do in the daytime," the author has young Edith say. "Nights are warm and full of lights. People aren't the same; they're easy to get along with. At night everybody's my pal, even if I don't know them. We don't look the same—we're all beautiful."

Or this description, again by Piaf-via-Berteaut, of one of Edith's early lovers, Paul Meurisse:

> Just listen to him, Momome. How well he talks! He talks like people write. It's beautiful! And never one word louder than the next, no temper tantrums, no vulgar words. A well-bred, refined man like him is restful. It was a good idea to come and live at L'Etoile. I guess what he calls class comes from having the right telephone number, a servant. . . .

True, part of the problem lies in the translation. Rendering French argot is almost as difficult as translating poetry: the flavor, the rhythm, the smell cannot be translated; they must be re-created. For some strange reason the title page of *Piaf* bears no translator's name; yet someone must have turned these 400-plus pages into English—unfortunately, whoever it was opted throughout for the literal. The results are generally accurate but rarely as lively as the original, as if a cook had faithfully followed some complex *Cordon Bleu* recipe but didn't feel the culinary subtleties implicit in every step. Thus: "God, my dogs are numb! Can't wait to get these clodhoppers off! Can't wait to get into my slippers!" renders the sense of a series of exclamations shrilled by a bevy of 1920s whores who have dressed in their Sunday best and gone to church to light candles and pray for the recovery of little six-year-old Edith's lost eyesight. But it completely misses the flavor of: *"J'sens plus mes panards dans mes ribouis, vivement que je les ôte, vivement mes savates."*

So much for carping. What matters is that, in spite of the defects in the writing and the shortcomings of an admittedly difficult translation, Piaf once again overcomes—as she so often did against all odds.

Edith Piaf was born Edith Gassion on December 19, 1915, literally on the street, "on a cop's cape under a lamppost in front of number 72 rue de Belleville." There's a certain poetic symbolism in that essential fact, for Edith forever remained a child of the streets, even when forty years later she was earning $7,000 a week at top nightclubs in Paris and New York.

Edith's mother wasted no time turning her child over to her parents—a time-honored custom in France in such circumstances—both of whom were "sponges soaked in red wine." In 1917, when Edith was two, Papa Gassion, to his credit, paid his waif a visit. (To his credit because, all told, he officially fathered nineteen children to almost as many mothers and thus could have been forgiven for paying little or no attention to any of them.) "She was all skin and bones, with a head like a balloon perched on four matchsticks. . . . So dirty you wouldn't have touched her without tongs." What was more, she was blind. He decided her lot had to be improved and contacted *his* mother, who was a cook in a Normandy brothel. Thus Edith spent her next four years in a whorehouse, which was a step up indeed. But when her sight was miraculously restored one day in 1921, the village priest exhorted Papa Gassion: "While she was blind, it was all right . . . but now she can see, what an example for a pure little soul!"

Edith Piaf and Charles Aznavour on French television in the Fifties.

Whereupon her father took young Edith under his own wing. In civilian life Papa was a street performer, an acrobat of sorts who unfolded his stringy carpet at likely intersections and performed for the passers-by For years Edith followed him day and night, a scrawny child whose pathetic appearance helped swell the collection after each performance. Sometimes, to earn extra sous, she sang.

When Edith was fifteen, she met her half-sister Simone Berteaut, who soon joined her working in the streets. From that fateful day in 1930 until Edith's death in 1963, Simone—or Momome, as Edith dubbed her—remained her inseparable companion. Thus what this biography—more modestly termed a *récit* in the French—lacks in objectivity, it more than makes up for in intimacy and day-to-day details.

It was the cabaret owner Louis Leplée who gave Edith her name—*"la môme Piaf"*—and her start, advertising her as "straight off the streets." He rightly recognized her as a natural, endowed with gifts and qualities that would prevail in spite of her birth and background, her lack of training and education. And the Piaf legend dates from that first night in the early Thirties at Gerny's on the rue Charron, when Edith conquered the hostile, bitchy, bourgeois public and, by the end of her act, had them in her pocket.

If the first part of *Piaf* sometimes reads like a sentimental, atmosphere-drenched *roman à quatre sous*, the later portions—which detail her struggle, not to remain on top, for she remained on top virtually to the end, but to remain operative against the pain and debilitating effects of alcohol and drugs, accidents and illness, depression and death—have an almost transcendental beauty. The image of this tiny woman, who in her waning years weighed hardly eighty pounds, refusing to give in to the myriad misfortunes besetting her—the greatest of which, no doubt, was the death of Marcel Cerdan, perhaps the only man she ever really loved—is indeed moving. It was a life full of setbacks, heartbreak, violence, but it also had the inevitable quality of a Greek tragedy.

Virgil Thomson, who by his perspicacious review of Piaf's first American performance, after the war, saved her from almost certain disaster on these shores, is quoted on the dust jacket of *Piaf* as saying: ". . . so grand, so moving, so tragic, one is inclined to salute the volume as a great book." *Piaf* is not a great book, but Piaf *is* great.

Among Piaf's qualities was that of generosity toward her fellow-performers—and I use the term "fellow" advisedly. She is responsible for the success of a number of French singer-actors, including Yves Montand and Charles Aznavour. She not only promoted them and forced impresarios to costar them with her; she worked long and hard with them. She was a tyrant in work as well as in love, and her rehearsals often went on until both Piaf and her trainee literally dropped. Charles Aznavour's autobiography gives Piaf her due, and it is interesting to read the contrasting versions of various incidents in both books.

Like Piaf, Aznavour—born Charles Aznavourian to Armenian parents who were refugees in France—knew poverty and countless setbacks before he finally made it. But unlike Piaf, he had a family always ready and waiting to

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take him in—feed and clothe and love him—after his calamities on the road. In Simone Berteaut's account Aznavour was the faithful retainer, the always available puppy dog ready and willing to carry out Piaf's orders, one of the few men whose career she helped shape who did not become her lover.

Aznavour, who probably is best known in America, not as a singer, but as the star of Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*, reveals himself to be a gentle, sensitive, decent man. His telling of his own struggle to the top is even more clichéd than Mme. Berteaut's account of the early Piaf career. One can understand why the book was published in France, where Aznavour's reputation is considerable, but it is more difficult to understand what interest it will hold for an American public, except insofar as it may shed some further light on that complex, enigmatic, elusive wraith, Edith Piaf.

REPORT TO THE COMMISSIONER
by James Mills
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 284 pp., $6.95

Reviewed by Irma Pascal Heldman

Report to the Commissioner is high-voltage suspense. It is also an incisive study of the individual out of step with the system—in this case, the New York City Police Department.

The author, James Mills, is a reporter with a fine eye for penetrating the policeman's world and an ability and a will to tell it like it is. He has probed both sides of law and order in magazine articles and in his two previous books, *The Panic in Needle Park*, an impassioned account of drug addiction, and *The Prosecutor*, a blunt, beautifully written account of big-city justice seen through the day-to-day activities of one weary DA.

Now Mills has turned his talents to fiction. A work of imagination, *Report to the Commissioner* nonetheless carries all the punch of a true-life documentary. It should be enormously popular, and a film, of course, is in the offing.

Bo Lockley, the youngest cop ever to make it into a detective division, is a hardhead. He's a twenty-two-year-old misfit as a cop, naïve and inept, always doing the wrong things for the right reasons. Assigned to a squad whose beat is the mid-Manhattan Times Square area, he finds he cannot adjust to the venal but very practical standards of his fellow officers. He's a sheep in wolf's clothing, and it is only a matter of time until he bungles a big one.

The big one involves a blonde knockout named Pat Butler who has found her métier and sense of purpose in police undercover work, and who responds to danger the way most people respond to love. Her success in the snakepit of the narcotics traffic has earned her a reputation as one of the best undercover agents around. She has just begun to fashion a special plan of her own unorthodox design, which has the worried approval of a couple of superiors who callously balance their visions of citations and promotions against the risk of stern censure from the top should Pat fail. The plan, a dangerous one, involves her becoming the mistress of Thomas "The Stick" Henderson, black drug pusher, pimp, and gun runner for the Panthers. But if the plan is to work, her cover will need support—a nosy cop who will ask the right questions to convince The Stick that she is what she says she is: a runaway kid.

In recognition of past blunders, and armed with no real information, Bo gets the assignment. His charge is explicit. He is to look for a runaway, but under no circumstances is he to pick her up. In fact, it is not expected that he will even find her—just that the word will get out to the right places. But the innocent Bo does find her, and when he sees her with The Stick, his emotional cool, never properly operative, snaps, and he hurls himself into action and thereby precipitates his own undoing. In an absolutely spellbinding series of scenes Bo manages to kill the wrong person, expose the department's undercover activities, get The Stick, blow the bigger game, and destroy himself. The chase culminates in a latter-day Roman circus in which the two gladiators, Bo and The Stick, are trapped in a department store elevator stalled between floors for almost twenty-four hours, while outside the massed might of the police force swarms impotently.

Report to the Commissioner is structured as a dossier of an official departmental investigation, presenting "copies" of file documents and transcriptions of taped interviews with various members of the police force to shed light on the ill-starred private and professional lives of Bo and his pretty but unknown colleague.

Mills orders these ingredients for a profusion of insights. Limiting the reader at first to the skeletal details of the episode, he forces one to approx-

Irma Pascal Heldman is a New York book club editor who does freelance book and theater reviews.

WIT TWISTER NO. 284
Edited by ARTHUR SWAN

The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.

Along the — — — — — —, the cattle slowly pass
And low their — — — — — — for the declining day.
The insects' — — — — — — comes keening from the grass
As twilight's final luster dies away.

A.S.

(Answer on page 68)

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S KINGSLEY DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 2000)

(HARRIET) VAN HORNE:
SEE HERE NORMAN MAILER

A lion among tabby-cats, Mailer is a jangled genius. He's also a monster at times, churlish, crude, erratic, and highly offensive. But he's Norman Mailer and criticism could no more banish his quirks than the love of a good woman could have reformed Lord Byron.

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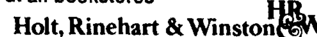

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