JOHN LEHMANN AND THE ACCLIMATISATION OF MODERNISM
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It is easy to see the cultural history of modernism in terms of key volumes, such as Auden's Poems of 1930, and to see their reception in the light of significant reviews by writers who themselves have come to have a regarded place in the history of twentieth-century literature. Yet this is deceptive and does not give an accurate impression of the reaction of most readers. W.B. Yeats, in a broadcast on "Modern Poetry" in 1936 could say of T.S. Eliot: "Tristam and Iseult were not a more suitable theme than Paddington Railway Station."1 Yeats was then an old man; but most of Yeats's listeners would have shared the hostility. Yet, in the coming years, acclimatisation had taken place. Eliot's Little Gidding, published separately as a pamphlet in December 1942, sold 16,775 copies – a remarkable number for poetry, even in those wartime years when poetry had such impact. John Lehmann had a good deal to do with the acclimatisation of modernist idiom, most notably through his editing of New Writing, New Writing & Daylight and The Penguin New Writing, the last of which had had at its most popular a readership of about 100,000.

The cultural impact of modernism came slowly in Britain, most notably through the work of Eliot and Virginia Woolf. The triumph of modernism came with its second generation, through the work of Auden, MacNeice and Dylan Thomas in poetry, and less markedly through the work of Isherwood and Henry Green in prose. Auden and his associates were the inheritors of the ironic-realist Anglo-American modernism, though Auden and Spender were influenced by European modernism through the work Rilke. Much briefer was the impact of what might be termed "visionary modernism". We see it

in the poetry of David Gascoyne, in the prose of Humphrey Jennings, and in Roger Roughton's periodical Contemporary Poetry and Prose and the little known London Gallery Bulletin. Its major public impact came through the Surrealist exhibition at the New Burlington Gallery in June 1936, which got a lot of notoriety in the press. Lehmann had little to do with the dissemination of what I have called "visionary modernism". With the coming of war the influence of both modernist impulses was muted; though that influence permeated the growing wartime public for serious reading.

Lehmann might seem an odd candidate for one who made modernism at home with British readers. His earliest editorial work was as an undergraduate at Cambridge at the end of the twenties. The poet James Reeve described two principal undergraduate literary periodicals there at the end of the twenties:

> The Venture, tastefully produced, adorned with woodcuts and filled with neo-Georgian poems and stories, was in reality an undergraduate heir to Sir John Squire's London Mercury; but Experiment contained articles on science as well as literature, stills from modernist films, photographs of surrealist paintings, much

> obscure poetry and experimental prose, of which latter our proudest example was a hitherto unpublished extract from Joyce's Work in Progress.2

Lehmann was associated with Venture, which he described as his "spiritual home". His great friend was Julian Bell, the nephew of Virginia Woolf. In 1931, Bell's Winter Movement was classed with Auden's Poems as a publishing event. Nobody would do that today: Winter Movement is decidedly Georgian. Lehmann's own first book of poems, A Garden Revisited , was also decidedly Georgian in tone.

For Lehmann, the Bloomsbury association that Bell represented remained important for him, artistically and in terms of his publishing activities. In 1931 he joined the Woolfs' Hogarth Press with a view to becoming manager. In September that year, Lehmann received a letter from someone he had never heard of, Michael Roberts. Roberts felt that the new young poets from Oxford and Cambridge "belonged together…in spite of wide apparent differences". 3 This led to the Hogarth Press publishing the influential collection, New Signatures in 1932. Contributors were W.H. Auden, C.Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, Lehmann, Julian Bell, William Empson , Richard Eberhart, William Plomer and A.S.J. Tessimond. Lehmann's association with modernism as a publisher and editor may be said to have begun with that publication The emphasis in the introduction by Michael Roberts, was on stylistic features of the new poetry: "imagery taken from contemporary life consistently appeared as the natural and spontaneous expression of the poet's thought and feeling."4 To this might be added the consistent use of the language of everyday speech, along with the rhythms of that speech, frequently in free verse, as in many of Spender's poems; though Auden was notable for the way in which he revitalised traditional forms in the modernist idiom. With New Country, the successor to New Signatures in 1933, the emphasis had changed. Some of the same writers are there, but their work is seen in a political focus rather than an artistic one. Lehmann himself was involved with this left-wing orientation, as can be seen in his second book of poems, The Noise of History in 1934.

By then Lehmann had left the Hogarth Press. He had often discussed with Christopher Isherwood the possibility of a journal. In spring 1936, New Writing appeared. The first number contained a "Manifesto":

NEW WRITING will appear twice yearly, and will be devoted to imaginative writing, mainly of young authors…

NEW WRITING aims at providing an outlet for those prose writers…whose work is too unorthodox in length or style to be suitable for the established monthly and quarterly magazines. While prose will form the main bulk of the contributions, poetry will also be included.

NEW WRITING…does not intend to open its pages to writers of reactionary or Fascist sentiments…

NEW WRITING…hopes to represent the work of writers from colonial and foreign countries.

This gives an accurate picture of what New Writing turned out to be. Along with Geoffrey Grigson's New Verse, which began in 1933, it was to be the leading periodical carrying the work of the second-generation inheritors of Anglo-American modernism. However, by the time New Writing appeared, the aesthetic ideas associated with this generation of modernists had been modified by their political orientation. It was still "realist", still drew linguistically on the language of everyday speech; but, if it reflected the sense of cultural fragmentation found in the work of Eliot and his generation, it was in terms of a Marxist sense of the historical decay of capitalist society. The view that literature should encompass the mundane events of everyday life had led to a favoured mode in prose, "reporting". "Reporting" went along with the modernist insistence on the invisibility of the author, on recreating rather than telling, with an emphasis on presentation through dialogue – features of work like Isherwood's Goodbye to Berlin or Henry Green's stories, both featured in New Writing.

Lehmann's friends and fellow contributors to New Signatures and New Country provided the backbone of contributions to New Writing. Except for the second number, which contained no poetry, all the issues contained poems by the second generation modernists who had been the contributors to the earlier anthologies; but it was the stories and the reporting that determined the character of New Writing, if only because they formed the bulk of each issue. Apart from fiction by writers of his own group - Christopher Isherwood, William Plomer, Edward Upward, Rex Warner , and George Orwell – Lehmann included work by E.M. Forster and V.S. Pritchett. Lehmann also had international contributions from Boris Pasternak, , Ignazio Silone, Rafael Alberti, Jean Giono, Bertold Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre and others, representing the heritage of modernism in his generation. Indeed, the excellence of some of its contributions was such that they have become and remain familiar, and the tendency is to overlook the editorial achievement of being the first to publish them: Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant"; V. S. Pritchett's Sense of Humour"; several sections of what became Isherwood's Goodbye to Berlin.

In autumn, 1938, with Lehmann's return to the Hogarth Press, a new series began. Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood now joined as advisory editors. The original series had run for five numbers: the new series ran for three, the last issue appearing in autumn, 1939, when war had already broken out. At that time, it seemed to Lehmann that New Writing, like the left-wing literary ideology with which it had been associated, was at an end. However, as things settled down, he felt that there might still be a place for the half-yearly miscellany New Writing had been, but reduced from its pre-war 150,000 words to half that length. In Spring

1940, Folios of New Writing appeared from the Hogarth Press, to be followed by three further issues at six-month intervals.

The original New Writing had had contributors whose work has remained amongst the most esteemed and modern from the period. Many of them were no longer available by the summer of 1940: Europe was cut off; and the list of those contributing to Folios did not have the earlier brilliance. Henry Green, William Plomer, Stephen Spender, David Gascoyne, and George Barker were there, and for the first number, so were Andre Samson and Pierre Jean Jouve New Writing's old international character seemed about to be lost. There were no European contributions to the second number of Folios. However, in 1941, Lehmann brought out a new miscellany, Daylight, in collaboration with Czech writers in exile in London, in which contributions by V.S. Pritchett, Stephen Spender, David Gascoyne and Rex Warner were featured alongside pieces by the Czeck writers Jiri Mucha, Egon Hostovsky, Vitezlav Nezval, as well as poems by the great Greek poet, George Seferis (then with the Greek government in exile). Daylight was successful, but ran for only one issue, after which it was combined with Folios under the title New Writing & Daylight, which ran through eight issues, until its close in 1946. Lehmann attempted to retain for New Writing & Daylight what he could of the pre-war European flavour by continuing to publish the work of exiled writers. In the first issue, the Czecks were again well featured. There were to be poems by George Seferis and his fellow Greek poet, Odysseus Elytis, both recognised internationally as modern masters. In Autumn 1944, following the liberation of Paris, there was once again opportunity for French contributions, with Antoine de Saint Exupery's "Letter to a Hostage" and Andre Gide's recollection "My Mother", neither of which was however outstanding.

The poetry included in New Writing & Daylight was more steadily impressive than the fiction, no doubt because wartime conditions left little time for writing. There were not many striking contribution by the poets of Lehmann's generation. Lehmann did much better with the younger poets of the forties, actively encouraging Roy Fuller, Laurie Lee, Terence Tiller, Henry Reed, Peter Yates and Alan Ross. His letters to them, in which he criticised and suggested direction for their work, have survived, showing his editorial guidance. New Writing & Daylight also included poems by other notable younger poets: Laurence Durrell, Hamish Henderson, Bernard Gutteridge, John Heath-Stubbs, Norman Hampson, Alun Lewis, Anne Ridler, Norman Nicholson and F.T. Prince.

The most important New Writing venture started when Allen Lane, who had published the original issues of New Writing when he was with Bodley Head, suggested that his recently launched Penguin Books might bring out a selection from the pre-war New Writing.. After twelve issues, it was decided that The Penguin New Writing should become a quarterly, reorganised to consist principally of new contributions. The first such issue appeared in June, 1942, and it quickly became the most notable forum for new writers of the decade and the instrument of widespread dissemination of modern writing. In the issues for April-June and July–

September, Lehmann included a "Poetry Supplement", with poems by Alun Lewis, Alex Comfort, Alan Ross, Anne Ridler, Norman Hampson, Keidrych Rhys, Hamish Henderson and John Heath-Stubbs and others. The stories by William Sansom, Denton Welch and Henry Green offered a recreation of experience rather than a structured story-line.

The immediate postwar years saw the emergence of an American fiction that was vital, new and original. Issue 33 of The Penguin New Writing in 1948, had two stories by American writers, J.F. Powers's "The Valiant Woman" and Lionel Trilling's "Of This Time, Of That Place", the latter one of the more memorable stories that Lehmann published over the years, appearing several months before Trilling's story, "The Lesson and the Secret" appeared in Horizon. Stories by Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow, Paul Bowles, William Goyen and Tennessee Williams followed, along with an article by James Aldridge, "The New Generation of American Writers", encouraging the growing awareness of contemporary American writing in post-war Britain The closing issue, number 50 in 1950, had an article by one of the new generation of British writers, who became known as one of the "Movement" poets, writing about one of the "Movement" admirations, William Empson: John Wain's "Ambiguous Gifts".

A volume of The Penguin New Writing was about 150 pages in length and sold for sixpence, up to its nineteenth issue, when the price rose to ninepence: the last issues sold for one-and-sixpence. At the height of its success, in the immediate post-war period, the first printing was 100,000, and it no doubt had many more readers. When it closed, with its fortieth number in 1950, circulation was below 40,000, and insufficient to support a mass circulation miscellany of its type (though still extraordinary for a modern literary periodical of high quality). Its cultural importance is not to be measured merely in terms of the new writers to whom it gave opportunity. It brought modern writing to an enormous number of readers, contributing importantly to the acceptance of what was new and forward looking, and modifying sensibility.

I have said nothing much about Lehmann's activities as a publisher: both his two periods with the Hogarth Press in the early thirties and then during the war; and his years as publisher under his own name. The Hogarth Press published the work of Christopher Isherwood, Henry Green, Cecil Day-Lewis and William Plomer, from Lehmann's generation; and of Roy Fuller, Terence Tiller, Laurie Lee and William Sansom from the succeeding generation, mainly at Lehmann's insistence. It also published several issues of NewWriting. However, Lehmann's record there would have been more impressive if it had not been for the objections of Leonard Woolf and of Dorothy Wellesley, who funded the Hogarth Living Poets series. Lehmann had wanted to take on Louis MacNeice before he went to Faber, but Wellesley and Woolf turned him down. Woolf also refused to take on David Gascoyne's Poems 1937-1942 – his best book – which was published by Tambimuttu in his Editions Poetry London. Leonard Woolf did not like Henry

Green. He declined to publish Saul Bellow's Dangling Man when it was offered to them.

In 1946, after further friction and an unsuccessful attempt to buy Leonard Woolf's half of the Hogarth Press, Lehmann started his own publishing house, John Lehmann. He published poetry, plays and novels by authors whom he had featured in his periodicals – George Barker, David Gascoyne, Roy Fuller, Laurie Lee, Alan Ross, Hamish Henderson, and Denton Welch. Most significantly he published new work by other important contemporary writers: Saul Bellow Dangling Man (1946) and The Victim (1948) ; J.F. Powers Prince of Darkness (1948); Tennessee Williams The Glass Menagerie (Nov. '48) and A Streecar Named Desire (Dec.'49); Gore Vidal The City and the Pillar (April '49); Theodore Roethke The Lost Son (Sep. '490; Paul Bowles The Sheltering Sky (Sep. '49); Delmore Schwarz The World as Wedding (Oct. '49); George Seferis The King of Asine (1948); Jean-Paul Sartre The Diary of Anton Roquentin (La Nausse) (Mar.'49); Cesare Pavese The Moon and the Bonfire (Mar. 52); Andre Malraux The Walnut Trees of Altenburg (April '52); and The New Italian Writers edited by Marguerite Caetani, editor of Bottegha Oscura (Jan. 1951). The editorial achievement in publishing so much that was new and innovative almost exceeds that of the New Writing publications; but the achievement was brought to a sudden halt. John Lehmann Limited worked under an agreement with a large printer; by 1952, the results were financially less rewarding than at the beginning, and the arrangement was terminated. It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if Leonard Woolf had agreed to sell his portion of the Hogarth Press to Lehmann.

The move into publishing coincided with the decline in the public for literary magazines; and Lehmann's own activity as editor was less influential than it had been. Under his own name he published an ambitious and expensively lavish symposium, Orpheus, which ran for only two numbers. Despite Lehmann's contention that it reflected a new symbolist trend, the contributors were those who had appeared in the New Writing periodicals. Those whom Lehmann had encouraged when they were new were now established; and there was little that was new and promising in those culturally disoriented post-war years.

In assessing Lehmann's achievement in encouraging what was new in British literature in his day, perhaps the obvious comparison is with Cyril Connolly and Horizon, which dominated the literary scene in the 1940s along with the New Writing publications. Horizon seemed to believe in frightening its readers, proselytising aggressively for what was modern in all the arts, for a breadth and cosmopolitanism of interest against provincialism, for the highbrow and the difficult against what was conventional, comfortable and easy to understand ; though there was always a veering towards the middle-brow, the slightly out of date or the conventional. Connolly published many of the best poems by Dylan Thomas –arguably, it might be said, because he paid well and promptly. Yet his feeling for new poetry was less reliable than that of Lehmann. He published hardly any stories in the later war years – a measure of how much the pressures of

war inhibited writing. Horizon became at times a periodical of articles that exhorted an interest in the modern.

In contrast, the achievement of the New Writing publications—and particularly of The Penguin New Writing—is perhaps greater in retrospect than it appeared at the time. It is not merely that a modern literary periodical of class attained enormous circulation and was seriously read by an even greater number of people than bought it. It is true that it did not bring together the work of an exciting and influential group of new writers, as did its predecessor: in the thirties, when Lehmann was a member of such a group: in the forties, one of the depressing things was that such a group did not seem to exist. Yet Lehmann consistently encouraged and published writing by younger writers whose work constituted a continuation of the modernist impulse as it had been transmitted in the work of Auden and other writers of Lehmann's generation. In this respect, both in his earlier ventures with New Lines, New Country and New Writing, and through the work he brought to a large public with The Penguin New Writing, Lehmann contributed to the acclimatisation of the modernist impulse in Britain. By the time The Penguin New Writing closed in 1950, its readers, in contradiction of Yeats, would certainly have found a poem about Paddington Railway Station more congenial that one about Tristam and Isolde.

Notes

1 Yeats, W.B. – "Modern Poetry: A Broadcast" in Essays and Introductions (New York: Macmillan, 1961) 499

2 Reeves, J. – "Cambridge Twenty Years Ago" in March, R. and Tambimuttu (eds.) T.S. Eliot: A Symposium (London: Editions Poetry London, 1948) 38.

3 Lehmann, J. The Whispering Gallery (London: Longmans, 1955)

4 Introduction to New Signatures (London: Hogarth, 1932) 15