

VICTORIAN LEGACY CONFERENCE
Organized by Professor Martin HEWITT
All Saints College, University of LEEDS, 11-13 July 2005

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(Session : The Victorians in the 20th century)

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Victorian Legacy: the Lehmanns' Instructions for Use.

(Tuesday, July 12th, 2005)

The Lehmann siblings, Rosamond (born in 1901) and John (born in 1907), have always boasted their illustrious Victorian literary and artistic ancestry as descendants of William and Robert Chambers. The Chambers brothers have left their hallmark in the history of publishing, not only for their companionship with Dickens or Wilkie Collins among others, but also for their own entrepreneurial achievements. They counted authors like Thackeray and Robert Browning among their closest friends, launched the *Edinburgh Journal* and became part and parcel of Victorian letters and intellectual life. In fact, their lives and careers display but faint resemblances with John Lehmann's beginnings as an editor. Unlike the self-made and self-taught Chambers, John was educated at Eton and Trinity College (Cambridge), and then worked for the Hogarth Press in 1931 and 1932 before he founded his own magazine *New Writing* in 1936. Rosamond, for her part, became famous almost overnight in April 1927, as the author of *Dusty Answer*¹. The novel triggered one of the most resounding literary scandals in the 1920s and came to be considered as an epitome of the *Zeitgeist*. Above all, John and Rosamond Lehmann had in common a profound interest in emerging artistic expression, which makes it all the more surprising to see them recalling their Victorian ancestors whenever they tackled the subject of their own commitment to the craft of letters.

We will see that the logic at work beneath these contrasting attitudes is in fact part of the *Zeitgeist* itself. And part of this logic lies in the reasons why the Lehmanns could feel a debt towards their Victorian ancestors rather than towards their father in the first place. Their father, Rudolph Lehmann, was an editor and literary figure. He was a member of the editorial board of *Punch* for decades, and an author of light verse. His Cambridge education and the two faces of his talent as an editor and an author could have roused his children's admiration more readily than his own 19th century

¹ Rosamond Lehmann, *Dusty Answer*, London, Virago Press, 2000, (first published : London, Chatto & Windus, 1927).

ancestry. And yet he was never revered in the same way. When John and Rosamond Lehmann evoke the Chambers in their respective autobiographical writings², they both seem to have benefited from a sort of family treasure received in serenity, whereas in fact they operated a meaningful selection among their ascendants. Both John's and Rosamond's professional ethics infer that parentage would never constitute any self-sufficient motive. They do refer to the Chambers on the grounds of family ties, but this must not obscure the strategy that lies behind an all too serene process of inheritance.

Both John and Rosamond acknowledge the overwhelming influence and weight of their Chambers ancestry upon no less than their destinies:

If one's destiny lies in one's heredity as well as in one's environment, then my interest in editing and publishing as well as my impulse to be a writer are clearly derived from the Chambers.³

The influence does not only shape John's choice for a career, it also inspires his sense of enterprise more than any contemporary icon:

Evidently the blood of my Scottish ancestor Robert Chambers, who with his brother William had founded the publishing firm of William and Robert Chambers a century before, as well as *Chambers' Journal* and *Chambers' Cyclopaedia*, was stirring in my veins, and playing a rather more important part in my hopes and visions than dreams of William Morris and the Kelmscot Press.⁴

Rosamond evokes the Chambers with similar praise in *The Swan in the Evening*, but also systematically in various testimonies⁵, insisting on the precedence of her Victorian ancestors over any contemporary relatives:

My great grandfather was Robert Chambers of Edinburgh – the one who started Chambers' Journal and Dictionary [...] I was always conscious, from as far back as I remember, that my grandparents had a tremendous musical and literary salon in mid-Victorian times. People like Robert Browning and Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens had been their close

² John Lehmann, *Ancestors and Friends*, London, Eyre and Spottiswood, 1962 ; *The Whispering Gallery*, London, Logmans, 1955 ; *I am my Brother*, London, Longmans, 1960 ; *The Ample Proposition*, London, Eyre and Spottiswood, 1966 ; *Thrown to the Woolfs*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978. Rosamond Lehmann, *The Swan in the Evening*, London, Virago Press, 1982.

³ *The Whispering Gallery*, *op. cit.*, p.6.

⁴ *Thrown to the Woolfs*, *op. cit.*, p.7.

⁵ See Mary Chamberlain (ed.) *Writing Lives*, London, Virago Press, 1988, (p.148-159) ; and Shusha Guppy, *Looking Back*, New York, Paris Review Editions, British American Publishing, 1991 (p.143-169).

friends, coming to dinner and taking holidays with them; and my great-uncle Rudolph Lehmann had painted their portraits. They hung in my father's library, and I sat under them and felt they were my ancestors and that I had inherited all that – yet it was such a grand inheritance, and I wondered how I could possibly live up to it.⁶

The weight and impact of Victorian models upon John and Rosamond Lehmann is easily measurable through John's five volumes of memoirs. He insists at length on the pride he derives from his family past, and goes as far as devoting a separate volume, *Ancestors and Friends* (1962), to the subject and giving it further development in the other four volumes published between 1955 and 1978.

Not only do John and Rosamond express similar admiration and gratitude, but they almost instinctively use a religious vocabulary to tackle the subject of their debt. John describes his father's library as if it were an oriented temple or cathedral, with what he calls “north wall and south wall”, a place full of “relics”:

Another much-treasured Browning relic stood in its frame on the mantelpiece: a piece of notepaper from my grandfather's house at 15 Berkeley Square, on which Browning had written a few lines in 1886 in the most diminutive handwriting imaginable, to prove to an assembled dinner-party that his eyesight was still perfect.

The special atmosphere of the library, which I can recall to mind with the utmost vividness at any time, wherever I may be, came partly from the high beam-striped roof without ceiling, but chiefly from the books in all the darkly glowing colours of their gold-printed leather bindings.⁷

Rosamond describes the same “adored Victorian-Gothic room” in equally religious terms:

The library is the unfailing heart of my security, and its portraits depict my indoor magic-makers. High up, commanding the room from an opulent gilt frame, hangs Robert Browning, bearded presiding Deity, painted by Great-uncle Rudolph Lehmann[...] There are several minor deities including Wilkie Collins in an overcoat with a rich brown fur collar. He

⁶ *Writing Lives, op. cit.*, pp.150-151.

⁷ *The Whispering Gallery, op. cit.*, p.5.

looks spectral, with a bald dome fringed by grey fluff, and mournful moonstone-coloured eyes behind round spectacles. [...]

But Robert Browning remains numinous and so does the library, in the heart of which I imagine him and my father to be perpetually, voicelessly, in communication, mediating poetry to one another, the one from his armchair, the other from his lofty frame; weaving me also into the sacred web. Robert Browning is a great poet, and I consider father a great poet, and I am going to be a great poetess. For now I am eight, and certain of my destiny..⁸

The religious vocabulary sounds rather overdone, and indeed intriguing in the Lehmanns' attitude. They always sound somewhat over-reverential, paying exaggerated homage to their family's Victorian past. In fact, they seem to have inherited some grandiose conception of authorship and to have unflinchingly followed models of grandeur until the last decades of the twentieth century: John published a number of photos of himself in *Thrown to the Woolfs* (1978) with rather old-fashioned captions, speaking about himself in the third person; and in *Rosamond Lehmann's Album*, published in 1985, Rosamond selected several photos of herself (p.75; 81; 86) sitting for a photographer in the same formal attitude as if she were sitting for a painter. John's and Rosamond's devotion to the Victorians seems to have ended up in self-devotion - not to mention this arch Victorian scheme detectable in their mutual mode of relation, consisting in the girl (despite her being the elder) doing essential job in the background while the boy stands in the sunlight.

The Austin archives of *New Writing*, together with the correspondence between John and Rosamond⁹ show a totally hidden side of *New Writing* and of Rosamond's literary activities. She really acted as a guide for her younger brother at the out-start of his career as a poet and even more when he became an editor and then a publisher. She was a salaried reader and gave a stamp of approval for every selected manuscript. John always trusted her steady judgement and sensibility for what she called 'genuine writing'. It is moreover extremely striking to realize, through the amount of reviews and essays that she wrote for the press in general, how early in her own evolution as an artist

⁸ *The Swan in the Evening*, *op. cit.*, p.52-53 & 55.

⁹ The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin detains the bulk of John Lehmann's *New Writing* personal archives.

she was in possession of firm criteria to evaluate contemporary writing. And in the dozens of articles she wrote in the “new books” section of *The Listener* and *The Spectator*, through the 1930s and 1940s, she constantly refers to the influence of 19th literary icons in the constitution of these criteria. When John founded his own publishing firm in 1947, “John Lehmann Limited”, one of the first volumes to bear the imprint was Mrs Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*, with a twenty-page introduction by Rosamond Lehmann.

It is clear then that the Lehmanns followed models of the past in the way they edited and promoted their own generation. Even the scandal that triggered Rosamond’s career in 1927 should not be misinterpreted as a break from the past. The author, again, when she could speak and recover from the shock¹⁰, displayed actual 19th century modesty as it were:

The shock of it overwhelmed me. I floundered, in dread, hope, gratification, among the letters and the notices, telling myself the praise was sweet but dangerous if not deadly; or insincere; or else absurd. My publicity seemed to me malicious persecution. I went on accusing myself and justifying myself with scarcely a moment of pleasure or peace of mind. What had I done and why? Had I really written my naked life history unawares? Been paid large sums for appearing on the platform of the Albert Hall without my clothes on? Must I after all thank heaven that my father, who was to have been so proud of me, was now ill and unable to read what I had perpetrated? ¹¹.

While critics explained that *Dusty Answer* exacerbated the spirit of the age, the author for her part was following in the footsteps of eminent women novelists of the previous century. But interestingly, she was not imitating models: she was rather taking inspiration from their conception of writing. This is what John Lehmann tries to explain in a BBC literary programme of the late 1940s in which he evokes his sister’s first novel:

There were several factors which made *Dusty Answer* an event of the first importance for the younger generation of the time. The atmosphere of frustration and disillusionment which pervaded it exactly suited the mood

¹⁰ It was only in 1953, decades later, that R. Lehmann expressed herself about her experience of the scandal in an article entitled « My First Novel » which appeared in *The Listener* on 26 March, (p.513-514). She resumed the subject in 1983 in « My First Book » published in the yearly *Journal of The Society of Authors : The Author*, (p.42).

¹¹ « My first Novel », *op. cit.*, p.514.

of the period; and yet it was unlike so many novels which were fashionable in the twenties, because the disillusionment was not accompanied by cynicism or a cold display of intellectual brilliance. The book was warm and sensitive and sensuous; it had a richness of human feeling flowing through it that had become very rare in the imaginative literature of those post-war years.¹²

Rosamond Lehmann borrowed elements from the Victorians that are not easily detected in her writing, but her articles can provide some guidance in the matter. This is what she says about her conception of the novel in an article of 1946 ironically entitled “The Future of the Novel?”:

Novelists must be able to love men and women. Their greatness depends on this. Appreciation, compassion for humanity is what the great nineteenth century novelists felt: look at Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray, Mrs Gaskell, Trollope, Hardy—at the great Russians, the great French, and the truth of this is evident. They criticized human beings, they laughed at them, they condemned their wicked ways, but they loved and believed in them enough to endow their heroes and heroines with a moral stature which time cannot affect.¹³:

It took the author several decades before she was able to speak about the experience and the way she went through it. She explained how unexpected the scandal was to her and how faithful she had been to her Victorian models for truth and genuineness. The hundreds of letters of insults from middle-aged readers were received by the least provocative author. The scandal of *Dusty Answer* opposed shocked morals to shocked innocence, and the complexity of the situation seems to reveal the very essence of the Lehmanns’ interpretation and use of the Victorian legacy.

In her essay "On Re-reading Novels", Virginia Woolf writes:

The Georgians, it seems, are in the odd predicament of turning for solace and guidance not to their parents who are alive but to their grandparents

¹² This is from a series of scripts which belong to the « John Lehmann fund » of the HRHC at Austin. They correspond John Lehmann’s introductions to a series of ten weekly programmes (undated), entitled « Turning Over a New Leaf » and devoted to contemporary authors in the late 1940s or early 1950s. N° 7 is about Rosamond Lehmann.

¹³ Rosamond Lehmann, « The Future of the Novel ? », *Britain Today*, N°122, June 1946, (p.5-11).

who are dead. And so, as likely as not, we shall be faced one of these days by a young man reading Meredith for the first time.¹⁴

Well, the young man turned out to be neither a poet nor a man, but a young woman and a novelist, since the title *Dusty Answer* comes from the poem by Meredith entitled *Modern Love*. If Virginia Woolf chooses Meredith to express anticipated surprise, this is due to Meredith's reputation as the most old-fashioned author at the time. *Dusty Answer* very precisely enlightens the younger generation's recourse to their grandparents who were dead. The narrative is fairly clear.

The novel starts with the death of Charlie in the first weeks of the First World War. Charlie is closer to the Pre-Raphaelite canon of beauty than to anything contemporary to the publication of the novel. The type of beauty inherited from the past is lost. Charlie is, most emblematically his grandmother's favourite, and he is also an orphan. His Edwardian parents mysteriously fail to fulfil their mission as parents. There is a strange silence, in the novel, on parents' absence or defective presence, generally speaking. Judith, the central character, is left in solitude after her father's illness and death. Her mother is busy travelling and taking waters in France. Judith's alleged immorality, (the source of the scandal), is in fact a by-effect of the war: Judith tries to love Charlie's brother and cousins, one after the other, in vain, because she loved Charlie in the first place. Rosamond Lehmann depicts disenchantment and betrayed innocence,- which eventually explains her choice of Meredith for the title of her novel, *Modern Love* being an unflinching, uncompromising inspection of the human heart. So that *Dusty Answer* displays a real strategy of judgement. Judith and Charlie's grandmother are left to mourn alone, and it is as if the author were saying to parents: 'you have sent your children to death and tolerated the massacre of what your own parents considered as beauty. You are not so much guilty parents as guilty children yourselves!' And the strategy turned out to be rather effective. The missing generation, in *Dusty Answer*, is not the sacrificed one but rather the one who is impotent to stop the sacrifice.

Cross evidence to the hidden accusation against the author's parents' generation comes from the way Rosamond Lehmann precisely evokes an epitome of Victorian female characters, Molly, in Mrs Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*.

She sleeps in her Victorian tomb, flower-planted.; we linger to read her touching epitaph, and wish her back; but she cannot come again. It is partly the Women's Revolution, partly the Freudian revolution with its consequent profound alteration in the position of the younger *vis à vis* the

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, vol.2/4, London, The Hogarth Press, 1966, (p.122).

parent generation: she could not breathe a moment in a state of society where elders are no longer betters; where so far from being praised for filial merit, she would be roundly condemned by her contemporaries, not to speak of her psychiatrist, for her weak submission to shocking exploitation by father, stepmother, stepsister and elderly neighbours. One can hear the deafening chorus: “emotional blackmail,” “infantilism,” “atavism” “father-fixation”; and poor Molly going down defenceless, drowned, beneath it.¹⁵

Rosamond Lehmann calls the Victorians for support to meet the requirements of the present. Considering the taboo that affected the sacrifice of the younger generation in the Great War, considering the impotence of the older generation to stop the massacre, then it is clear that Judith’s innocent dismay is a particularly efficient means to summon her parents’ generation to trial in the face of history. The strategy has worked so well that middle-aged readers were forced to resort to strict morality and condemn Judith in order to spare their dignity and self-esteem.

In one chapter, Judith is described as a young, pure Madonna sitting in her father’s library and, the text says, “knit by a heart-pulling bond” (p.80) to the portraits in the room. Rosamond Lehmann herself, in her autobiographical book *The Swan in the Evening*, describes her father’s library as “the unfailing heart of [her] security” (pp.52-53). Through her first character Judith, she explains the kind of moral support that her generation found among the Victorians in order to face what they interpreted as the indifference or lack of moral support of their parents.

These considerations are an encouragement to give second thoughts to the Lehmanns’ style of self-devotion previously evoked: their curious narcissism as authors and literary figures, which could after all be understood as another way of asserting Victorian virtues, a way of living up to the Victorian models that they chose to face their parents’ petty silence on the horror of the war. Both John and Rosamond agree, for instance, to praise Robert Chambers as the anonymous author of a book entitled *Vestiges of Creation*, a book which gives him the stature of a precursor of Darwin, since it was published a few years before *The Origin of Species* (1859). For the two Lehmanns, the Chambers ancestors were then models of courage defending the freedom of thought and taking liberty against religious dogma. And for Robert Chambers, publishing his book anonymously also meant exposing his eleven children to social banishment. The Chambers legacy contained a conception of authorship and publishing quite undistinguishable from intellectual bravery.

¹⁵ Rosamond Lehmann, « A Neglected Victorian Classic », *The Penguin New Writing* N°32, 1947.

Therefore, there might well be some collective dimension to the Lehmanns' old-fashioned narcissism. Through their own respective images they might have been defending a grand heritage and the public face of authorship that was attached to it. The portraits they published in their autobiographical works often seem to belong to the past and should certainly be related to their common concern for what John called "the craft of letters". The broad notion encompasses the various professions he considered as one and equally estimated: creative writing, essay writing, editing and publishing. Neither John nor Rosamond could ever acknowledge any hierarchy between writing, editing and publishing or even specialize in one of them, in the wake of the Chambers' exemplary, respectful intimacy with writers, artists and intellectuals. *New Writing's* specificity among late modernist magazines, and modernist magazines in general, certainly rests on its being, in many ways, a sequel to the Victorian rise of the magazine as an educational instrument addressing an ever increasing readership¹⁶.

John Lehmann launched *New Writing* in 1936, then the *London Magazine* in 1954, not to mention in between, in the late 1940s, his own publishing firm "John Lehmann Limited", with the financial support of the Lehmann family at large, and the help of Rosamond, again, as literary counsellor and contributor. It was in the same spirit that Rosamond herself joined the editing board of *Orion*, in 1943, a magazine in book form which she created together with Cecil Day-Lewis, Edwin Muir and Denys Kilham Roberts¹⁷. Her commitment to the Society of Authors, her action as President of PEN in Britain and Vice –President of PEN International (in the 1960s), and even before that her participation in the great meeting of 1938 "Writers Declare Against Fascism", or her various speeches on the BBC during the Second World War (addressing her readers in occupied France): all these aspects of a career bear testimony to her conception of 'the craft of letters'. John Lehmann selected the expression to serve as the title of a symposium in 1957: *The Craft of Letters in England*¹⁸, in which he invited many former *New Writing* contributors to participate. In his introduction, he delineates the territory of literature, beyond the current debate opposing high brow and low brow cultures. He denounces two ways in which the 20th

¹⁶ The impending outcome of the *Modernist Magazines Project*, edited by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, should here be signalled as a new perspective on the subject. The project combines synthetic articles and monographs on magazines in three volumes (Britain and Ireland, North America and Europe), an anthology and an online site providing access to primary materials. Volume one is due by the end of 2007 : *Modernist Magazines : A Critical and Cultural History, Britain and Ireland, 1880-1945*, Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ The magazine had a very short lifespan. Three issues (entitled « volumes ») were published in 1945 and 1946 by Nocholson & Watson, London ; a fourth (and last) volume edited by Kilham Roberts alone, appeared in 1947. For further reading, see : F. Bort, « Orion », in *Cahiers Charles V : Histoire de Livre(s)*, N°32, déc. 2002, volume dirigé par Marie-Françoise Cachin et Claire Parfait, préfacé par Roger Chartier, (p.63-81).

¹⁸ John Lehmann (ed.), *The Craft of Letters in England, A Symposium*, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 1957.

century has deprived the author of the aura inherited from the Victorian age: first, through a transformation of literature into an object for analysis, carried out with sophisticated tools; and then through a transformation of books into trivial products targeting mere consumers of fiction:

The new channels of popularization are in fact one of the revolutionary features of mid-century. [...] the middle-class is now under increasing pressure from two sides, from those whose livelihood is bound up with the academic aspect of literature on the one side, and those who are occupied with the exploitation of all that can appeal in literature to a mass, and mainly non-intellectual audience.¹⁹

This vision sounds like a far cry of the stance taken by the Lehmanns as early as the Thirties in defence of the eminent responsibility of authors as guardians of the ethics of literature, of the authors' accountability to readers in the field of humanistic ideals. It was the vision that presided over John Lehmann's managerial decisions and editorial line for *New Writing*. It is clear that he considered his magazine in the line of what the *Chambers Miscellany* (also a magazine in book form) meant for the Chambers: both an incentive for readers to buy new authors, and a showcase for new talents.

The reference to Victorian icons and sensibility is certainly a way for the Lehmanns to give a trans-historical touch to their conception of the author's sovereignty. John, for instance, does not hesitate to look backward and refer to 19th century aesthetic forms as a stepping-stone to introduce essential contemporary currents in literature. His response to his sister's wartime novel *The Ballad and the Source* (1944) can exemplify this particular use of the past:

The distinguished craftsmanship that characterizes the book is a remarkable proof of the resistance of English writers to that deeply-working wartime strain which constitutes such a danger to the standards of art.

The Ballad And The Source is the story of a social world which, for people over forty in this country, seems already infinitely remote, the world of the leisured middle classes in England in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of this century.²⁰

The novel, written during the Second World War, shows a radicalized attachment to Victorian standards and atmosphere. With the return of chaos, the haunting Victorian models are not only resumed, they are given full prominence.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

²⁰ John Lehmann, « Some Recent English Novels », 6 March 1945, part of the John Lehmann Fund, HRHRC, Austin.

The Lehmanns' approach to the Victorian legacy enlightens one of the most neglected pages of the history of modernism. Their approach has nothing in common with the previous generation's conflicting or ambivalent attachment to 'eminent Victorians'²¹. The Lehmanns probably exemplify a purely late modernist approach to the Victorian legacy whose specificity has not yet been defined or has at least been under-estimated.

A first source of reflection concerns this particular neglect. References to the Victorians, in the Lehmanns' autobiographies or elsewhere in the 1940s and later, can sound anecdotal or purely sentimental if they are not related to a wider range of documents and testimonies that have been little examined by critics and scholars until now. A growing interest for magazines should lead to a better insight into the last decades of modernism.

Then, the Lehmanns' approach to the Victorian legacy shows a particularly complex, paradoxical aspect of late modernism. Their attachment to the Chambers turns out to be one of the most unsuspected expressions of the *Zeitgeist*: part of a subtle scheme to express their generation's solitude.

But perhaps the role of the Lehmanns as promoters of their own generation has been remarkably ignored in the first place. A great deal of work is certainly awaiting scholars, to draw a more accurate profile of the Lehmanns' generation and eventually give their own legacy fairer evaluation.

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²¹ The quotation marks are in reference to Lytton Strachey's pivotal work : *Eminent Victorians*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1918.

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