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Life Writing and Intimate Publics

“This is my last testament”: writing from the world of shades.
***“This is my last testament”**: writing from the world of shades.

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Abstract

Rosamond Lehmann’s autobiographical writing entitled *The Swan in the Evening*², (1967) features as an outsider in the context of the author’s works and also in the context of the author’s generation. Lehmann resented the idea of ever writing any kind of autobiographical work until she found herself forced to tackle the genre under the pressure of bereavement. Her project therefore was not to produce an account of her life but to explore the notion and reality of death in her own culture through her own experience. The project resulted in a complete revision of the current separation between fiction and reality, facts and fantasy, remembrance and imagination. It casts a particularly vivid light on the crisis of language and generational torments that the second generation of modernists went through.

Keywords: autobiography, life writing, letter writing, 20th century British literature, Interwar period, late modernism

Rosamond Lehmann’s autobiographical writing entitled *The Swan in the Evening*³, published in 1967, has never drawn much critical attention in spite of all the originalities it contains, and the reason probably lies in its very originality. This slim volume was the result of Lehmann’s inner struggle to overcome her profound reluctance against the treacherous essence of the genre. *The Swan in the Evening* is an autobiography which should never have been written. It owes its existence to some profound necessity, both unexpected and unforeseen by the author herself – a necessity which proved strong enough to dissolve the author’s staunchest

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² Hereafter referred to as *SE*. All page numbers will correspond to the Virago 1982 revised edition.

³ Hereafter referred to as *SE*. All page numbers will correspond to the Virago 1982 revised edition.

defiance of the genre she mistrusted most. Lehmann not only trespassed a number of self-imposed principles, but she never spoke of this volume in terms that could appeal to readers of what she calls “autobiograph[ies] proper” (*SE*, 65), readers of authors’ life stories, or self-portraits and other literary testimonies. She expected a small number of readers and indeed managed to tackle the autobiographical genre without any concession being made to her writing ethics and commitment to what she conceived as truth.

1. A book beyond classification.

If *The Swan in the Evening* stands as an exception in Lehmann’s works, this should not obscure the fact that it is above all an exception in the context of Lehmann’s generation. If one remembers Virginia Woolf’s vitriolic remark about this particular generation and their collective precocious urge to produce autobiographies, then Rosamond Lehmann’s abstinence will gain a fairer, almost heroic status. When V. Woolf was writing the lines just below, in 1939, Rosamond Lehmann was 38 years old and already determined never to divert from fiction:

No other ten years can have produced so much autobiography as the ten years between 1930 and 1940. No one, whatever his class or his obscurity, seems to have reached the age of thirty without writing his autobiography.⁴

Indeed, among Lehmann’s circle of friends and relations, many had already succumbed to the temptation of autobiography. Rose Macaulay’s *The Minor Pleasures of Life* (1933), and Christopher Isherwood’s *Lions and Shadows* (1938) started a list which lengthened after Virginia Woolf’s death, transforming her remark into prophecy. William Plomer’s *Double Lives* appeared in 1943, Osbert Sitwell’s autobiography in five volumes was published through the 1940s and early 1950s, Elizabeth Bowen’s *Bowen’s Court* and *Seven Winters* came out in 1942. Rosamond Lehmann’s own brother, John Lehmann, wrote no less than five autobiographical volumes between 1955 and 1978⁵, in the wake of Stephen Spender’s *World Within World* published in 1951. Then in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, Stephen Spender and Frances Partridge, to name but a few, began to publish their diaries while others, like Laurens

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Essays*, vol. 2, London, The Hogarth Press, 1972, p. 177.

⁵ John Lehmann wrote a three-volume autobiography: *The Whispering Gallery*, 1955; *I Am my Brother*, 1960; *The Ample Proposition*, 1966. And two separate volumes of memoirs: *Ancestors and Friends*, 1962; and *Thrown to the Wolves*, 1978.

Van Der Post and James Lees-Milne, made memoirs feature as central elements in the construct of their works. Infectious autobiography affected almost everybody around Rosamond Lehmann, and it was in such context, through as many decades, that she resisted the seemingly inexorable trend – sometimes indulging in a form of irony strangely comparable to Virginia Woolf's. The egotism stressed by the latter in her denunciation of the autobiographical obsession that characterized the younger generation was something Rosamond Lehmann always excluded from her own conception of writing.

Lehmann even rejected the influence that autobiography exerted on the kind of fiction produced by her generation in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1930s, an autobiographical turn of mind started colonizing the world of fiction, due to a new conception of the role of the artist. John Lehmann started a career as an editor to promote young authors through what he called "fictionalized reportage". His magazine *New Writing*, launched in 1936, was dedicated to the new generation of writers born at the turn of the century. *New Writing* invented the new persona of the writer as a semi journalist, reporting about the sufferings of his contemporaries like a journalist and, at the same time, using all the resources and power of poetry to give these sufferings a more genuine expression than the descriptions one could find in the press. The author's own experience as a witness, his own life events, were thus transformed into stories about the situation in Germany or the Spanish Civil War, the Far East or the suburbs of London. *New Writing* published such autobiographical fragments as a favourite genre and the essential mode of expression of a generation. Rosamond Lehmann also rejected such direct, factual porosity between life and fiction.

It is therefore particularly disconcerting to see Rosamond Lehmann not only change her attitude towards autobiography, but also declare that *The Swan in the Evening* was the only book she wished to be remembered by – eventually making it an exception in her conception of her own literary output. After having claimed, at various moments in her career, that she did not expect any kind of posthumous fame, she declared and insisted that *The Swan in the Evening* ought to be saved from oblivion.

[...]; [*The Swan in the Evening*] is the only one of my books I would like to be remembered by, and I think it possible I shall be because it contains an account of a direct experience of reality, mere glimpse though it was, that changed my life, and can never be formulated or atomized or tampered with by those whose habit of mind produces "contempt prior to investigation". In any case, apart

from the vast, unshakable consolation, the extension of intellectual and spiritual knowledge, it helped to bring some of the most precious friendships of my life.⁶

Indeed the book received exceptional treatment from its author. *The Swan in the Evening* is also the only book Lehmann ever altered for reprint, adding an epilogue to the 1982 Virago Press edition, together with some photos⁷.

One of these photos displays a few lines in longhand of the added epilogue – not the beginning of the epilogue but obviously the most significant, momentous paragraph starting “This is my last testament—”. The photo is a very surprising choice, considering Lehmann’s life-long neglect of her own manuscripts. And a very intriguing expression as well, though a common one, as “last” testament suggests the existence of preceding ones. In the present case, the word “last” seems to change the status of all previous writings, transforming Lehmann’s parsimonious works of fiction into earlier, implicit testaments.

But in fact, these lines themselves eventually turned out to be part of a budding series of valedictions, a chain of last words. In 1985, Lehmann addressed her reader (always in the singular), in what she saw as “probably [her] last appearance in print” (*RLA*, 9). The new volume was an album of black and white photographs chosen from her own private collection. The author’s introduction to the selection of photos finishes with the words: “Reader, farewell” (*RLA*, 12). Placed at the end of the introduction, the words paradoxically play an opening part, while the last pages of the volume are devoted to the synopsis of a last novel Lehmann sounds determined to leave unfinished. The album thus finishes with a call to the reader’s own imaginings, and remains caught in an indefinite process of creation. Such accumulation of surmounted reservations and discarded reluctance forces one to ponder the reasons why neither *The Swan in the Evening* nor *Rosamond Lehmann’s Album* have elicited much critical response despite the fact that they encompass a period of almost two decades, from 1967 to 1985.

The interest of *The Swan in the Evening* certainly lies in its tormented origin and what these dragging farewells can say about

⁶ Rosamond Lehmann, *Rosamond Lehmann’s Album*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1985, page 11. (Hereafter referred to as *RLA*)

⁷ Rosamond Lehmann systematically revised all the first editions of her novels for the 1980s Virago reprints but she never suggested heavy alterations. Her revisions concerned minute stylistic details. *The Swan in the Evening* definitely features as an exception.

Rosamond Lehmann, but it lies far more importantly in what Lehmann says there, in this particular book, about writing and the craft of letters in her own generation.

2. A novelist's poetic creed expressed through autobiography.

In *The Swan in the Evening* as well as in *Rosamond Lehmann's Album*, the dramatized dimension of a "last address", is fully exploited and almost innocently exploited to intensify the property of words to survive the author. The capacity of words to establish contact between the living and the dead, as well as between the author and the reader is clearly evoked to give the moment of the reading, of the actual contact with the reader, the living reader or the reader to come, a solemn turn. In the epilogue to the 1982 reprint of *The Swan*, Lehmann writes:

This is my last testament. What else is left that I might say? I am in my eighty-first year, so it seems more than likely that this particular stage of my journey is drawing to a close. [...]

Time past, time present, time future are beginning to coalesce. I know that eternity is not to come: that we are in it here and now. (SE, 167)

What Lehmann is trying to deliver in *The Swan in the Evening* is not "an autobiography proper" but indeed a testamentary account of her experience. She is still refusing to make a story of her life. Through self-examination, she is trying to grasp one of the most mysterious recesses of the human mind, namely the way the mind produces a representation of death through decisive moments at various stages of one's development. And she takes her own experience as one source of collective knowledge, considering subjectivity itself as collective property. She considers writing in general, and poetry in particular, as major instruments to produce and take possession of such common wealth. Hence the title of this so-called autobiographical volume. The title is not only borrowed from a collective, anonymous patrimony – *The Swan in the Evening* is the title of an Irish traditional song –, but also the title of her daughter's favourite song, that is to say someone else's favourite song. Therefore, her autobiography is meant to be both the most and least personal writing of all.

Lehmann selects the only moments in her life that can prove of interest to fuel a meditation on the idea and reality of death – already a central concern in her works of fiction. The volume is divided into four parts, four "fragments of an inner life" as the sub-title specifies. But the most important word in the subtitle, one is tempted to say, seems to be the disquieting indefinite article, "*an* inner life", which clearly challenges the frontiers of subjectivity. Lehmann first describes the way she conceived a

first representation of death in childhood; then the way this conception changed when she became a mother; in the third part she describes the experience that served as an incentive to write the book: her experience as a bereaved mother, facing Sally's death in 1958, nine years before the first edition; and the last part is a letter to her grand daughter Anna, who was too young to read it in 1967. But as a child, and a child too young to understand, *i.e.* as an innocent, unprejudiced reader, Anna enables Lehmann to give shape to an ideal reader of the future, an open-minded reader, the virgin mind that she hardly expects to find among her contemporaries. The central argument of the book is clearly subversive. Lehmann reveals and justifies her faith in life after death independently from all religions, she mentions her experience of psychic communication with Sally, and asserts her belief that science will, in the near future, prove the reality of such possible channels of communication with the dead, channels already known to her.

From a purely literary standpoint, leaving aside the nature of Lehmann's beliefs, and only taking into account Lehmann's attitude to the relation between personal experience and writing, *The Swan in the Evening* corresponds in every way to Lehmann's ethics as a writer. The text she produces is the result of nine years of mourning and a monument to Sally. The expression "Sally's book" is not infrequent in Lehmann's considerations about *The Swan*, but the self-effacing attitude is the same as the one displayed by Lehmann in her works of fiction. In the 1982 Virago edition, Lehmann explains that the plan itself – the four sections listed above – was prompted to her by a friend in the course of fortuitous conversation. A few words uttered by Laurens Van Der Post triggered the achievement of a nine year-old, haunting project. "Something he suggested [...] triggered off one of those unaccountable inner flashes: presently, the words began almost to write themselves" (*SE*, 160). The author's mind seems to be literally "worked upon" by hardly identified currents and forces – a mental disposition described, some twenty-seven years earlier in a work of fiction, as the hallmark of true writing, the distinctive capacity of a creative mind:

Perhaps an approximation to the truth might be reached by stating that leisure employs me—weak aimless unsystematic unresisting instrument—as a kind of screen upon which are projected the images of persons—known well, a little, not at all, seen once, or long ago, or every day; or as a kind of preserving jar in which float fragments of people and landscapes, snatches of sound.

[...]

Yet there is not one of these fragile shapes and aerial sounds but bears within it an explosive seed of life. For most of us they will flit and waver by, and be gone again; but for a few, the shadowy and tranquil region which harbours their play is a working place, stocked with material to be selected and employed. Suddenly, arbitrarily one day, a spark catches, and the principle of rebirth contained in this cold residue of experience begins to operate. [...]

Perhaps this is a wordy, unscientific way of describing the origins and processes of creative writing; yet it seems to me that nowadays this essential storing-house is often discounted, and that that is the reason for so much exact painstaking efficient writing, so well documented, on themes of such social interest and moral value, and so unutterably dull, boring and worthless. The central area has not been explored, and therefore all is dead. There is not a false word, nor one of truth.

I am surprised when authors have perfectly clear plans about the novels they are going to write; and I find it dismaying, for more reasons than one, to have the projected contents related to me, at length and in rational sequence.

[...]

Writers should stay more patiently at the centre and suffer themselves to be worked upon. Later on, when they finally emerge towards the circumference they may have written a good novel about love or war or the class struggle. Or they may not have written a good novel at all⁸.

Far from being invalidated or discarded by the evident commonly accepted requirements of autobiographical writing, this creed is radicalized in *The Swan in the Evening* as well as in *Rosamond Lehmann's Album*. The passage quoted above was written in 1940, and all it says about fiction writing applies to Lehmann's attitude towards autobiography: the fragmentary material that is at the origin of the two genres, the author's attention to the mysterious coalescence of fragments which remains unchanged whatever she should write, the same risky bare-handed exploration and, above all, the author's representation of her own mind as a mere instrument, the way she discards her *self* as negligible entity.

In 1985, Lehmann writes: "I feel a strange sense of freedom: of being – almost transparent [...]" (*Album*, 10). Her last unfinished novel playing the part of an epilogue to the *Album* then appears as a series of

⁸ Rosamond Lehmann, "The Red-Haired Miss Daintreys", *The Gipsy's Baby*, Virago Press, 1982, p. 57-58.

mental images whereas the photos gain, in retrospect, the status of subterranean fragments of the only reality that matters: that of the imagination conceived as a capacity to form mental images. There is only one mode of writing for Lehmann, one that implies the most perilous exploration of the mysteries of the mind. Fiction always seemed to her more appropriate to such exploration, but Sally's death seems to have revealed new possibilities of self-investigation.

3. Lehmann's relation to the reader.

The *incipit* of *The Swan in the Evening* ironically conforms to the most commonplace pattern of the genre the author has always resented: "I was born during a violent thunderstorm..." (*SE*, 9) But the ready-made opening is instantly warped. It is there only to signal two conspicuous differences. First the author omits to give the date of her birth, and therefore makes it clear that, for her, facts are a very inferior form of autobiography as well as it is "a very inferior form of fiction"⁹; and then she introduces the image of the thunderstorm, a recurring image all through the four parts of the book and the only piece of information that really counts in the opening sentence.

Therefore, despite Lehmann's hope in the reader of the future, whose support will be encouraged by scientific evidence, the reader of flesh and bones that she addresses in *The Swan* is not so different as one might think from the reader she addresses in her novels and short stories. Her attitude to writing being the same, whatever the genre arbitrarily attributed by critics and editors or publishers, Lehmann expects the same kind of involvement from the reader. When she writes, "I have tried to eliminate all the words and forms that seem to lack resonance, or the essential gesture" (*SE*, 71), what gives these lines their full weight is the disconcerting experience Lehmann had just been going through as first reader of her brother's autobiography. John Lehmann's autobiography was probably what she had in mind as the epitome of an "autobiography proper". He had requested her help to check dates and facts before publishing *The Whispering Gallery* (1955). Her correspondence bears witness to her surprise when she realized that she did not recognize her brother in the young boy John was portraying. Every fact sounded objectively exact to her and was in fact profoundly jarring with her own images of John. What she expressed in her correspondence about John's

⁹ One will recognize Virginia Woolf's creed in her essay "How should One Read a Book?", *Essays*, vol. 2, London, The Hogarth Press, 1972, p. 6: "[...] facts are a very inferior form of fiction."