The ‘Recurring Dream’ of Romance: Rosamond Lehmann

The youngest of these five writers, Rosamond Lehmann at first sight seems the most conservative, her work a flight back into the world of the private, the intimate and the subjective which has traditionally been the territory of the ‘woman’s novelist’. Her focus on the romantic desires of women initially seems out of step with the political commitment and social realism which marks the writing we have come to think of as characterising the 1930s. However, the erotic triangle recurs repeatedly in Lehmann’s fiction and is used, precisely as Sedgwick suggests, to explore ‘the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment’ (1985, 27). Specifically, Lehmann uses the triangle romance to explore the male economic and social power which frustrates women’s attempts to negotiate the fulfilment of their desire within historically shifting relationships of gender, class and sexuality.

The post-war sense of gender roles in flux is especially pronounced in her work. Dinah’s comment in The Echoing Grove indicates that this is a profound change in consciousness: ‘the difference between our grandmothers and us is far deeper than we realise – much more fundamental than the obvious social economic one’ (EG 311–12). The alienation and sexual ambiguity of Lehmann’s characters reflects their inability to reconcile their desirous inner selves with the social roles offered to them. In the case of the female characters the new post-war opportunities which promise so much, particularly university education and greater sexual freedom, lead nowhere because of the lack of new alternatives to the wife/mistress/spinster roles.

Lehmann’s texts engage with precisely the problem which Brittain never confronts – the question of why the inter-war woman, despite her increased educational and career opportunities, remained in thrall
to romance in both fiction and life. What Lehmann explores is the gap between what women desire and what men give them. Her unhappy endings articulate a nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian romance – a dream of love as it could have existed before the war, had a generation of young men not been slaughtered. This idealised romance is recognised as an illusion, something which had never, in fact, existed, but the internalised desire for it is no less determining.

Lehmann acknowledged the autobiographical element in her writing (Lehmann, 1982c, 65) but where this differs from Brittain or Holtby is that with Lehmann the fiction frequently anticipates her life. *The Weather in the Streets*, with its account of an affair with a married man, was published in 1936, before her affair with the married poet, Cecil Day Lewis, which began in 1941. This suggests the powerful nature of pre-determined scripts, especially the romance plot. Despite her university education, Lehmann records in her autobiography, *The Swan in the Evening* (1967), that she was brought up to believe her life would follow the romance script:

Girls should be pretty, modest, cultivated, home-loving, spirited but also docile; they should chastely await the coming of the right man, and then return his love and marry him and live as faithful, happy wives and mothers, ever after. All this I knew and was by temperament and upbringing fervently disposed towards.

(1982c, 68)

Lehmann’s own life – two marriages, and a nine-year affair with Day Lewis – suggests a continually frustrated quest for the ‘right man’. She shared with Brittain a sense that the best of a generation of young men had been destroyed:

I had it lodged in my subconscious mind [as a young woman] that the wonderful unknown young man whom I should have married had been killed in France, along with all the other wonderful young men; so that any suitor – and quite a few uprose – would be a secondary substitute, a kind of simulacrum.

(quoted in Tindall, 1985, 32)

Her work is haunted by the ‘wonderful young men’ – Charlie in *Dusty Answer*, Rollo’s brother, Guy, in *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) – who were lost in the war. Their absent presence is marked in the shortage of male partners in *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932). In this buyers’ market