

John Lehmann's *New Writing*: the Duty to be Tormented

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Summary: *John Lehmann's magazine New Writing, launched in 1936, may be said to give literary historians a slow-motion image of the evolution of artistic consciousness in one of the most turbulent periods of the twentieth century. Throughout the fourteen years of its existence, encompassing the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, the magazine covers a neglected period of transition in the evolution of modernism. Through his editorial policy and a susceptible interpretation of the Zeitgeist, Lehmann voices the particular torments of his generation, too young to have participated in the First World War, but deeply affected by it. The magazine constitutes an attempt to change the role and social representation of authors and artists, to help them find new modes of commitment to collective sufferings, and create a community of readers involved in the defence of art and literature as part and parcel of the political experience.*

Keywords: *Modernist magazines, engagement, literary history, history of publishing, Late Modernism, authorship*

Résumé : *New Writing, la revue de John Lehmann publiée pour la première fois en 1936, donne en quelque sorte aux historiens de la littérature une image au ralenti de l'évolution de la conscience artistique durant l'une des périodes les plus turbulentes du XX^e siècle. La revue fut publiée pendant quatorze années, comprenant la Guerre d'Espagne et la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, et documenta ainsi une période de transition dans l'évolution du modernisme qui n'a pas reçu l'attention qu'elle mérite. A travers sa politique éditoriale et une interprétation influencée par le Zeitgeist, Lehmann exprime les tourments particuliers à sa génération - une génération qui, trop jeune, n'a pas pris part à la Grande Guerre, mais qui reste néanmoins profondément troublée par les événements. New Writing tenta de changer le rôle et la représentation sociale des auteurs et artistes, de les aider à trouver de nouveaux modes d'engagement dans la souffrance collective, et de créer une communauté de lecteurs se préoccupant de la défense de l'art et de la littérature comme partie intégrante de l'expérience politique.*

Mots-clés : *revues modernistes, engagement, histoire de la littérature, histoire de l'édition, fin de l'époque du modernisme, profession d'auteur*

John Lehmann's magazine *New Writing* had a life of fourteen years, including the whole of the Second World War. In the context of modernist magazines, such exceptional longevity deserves more attention than has so far been allotted to it. *New Writing* was a landmark in the evolution of the British literary press and should undoubtedly figure as an essential element in John Lehmann's *œuvre*. The magazine was launched in 1936 by the twenty-nine-year-old poet as an imprint of The Bodley Head for its first two issues. It was then published by Lawrence and Wishart for the ensuing three issues, before the Hogarth Press eventually hosted it from 1938 until its last issue in book form in 1946; a cheaper Penguin version, *The Penguin New Writing*, launched in 1939, prolonged the life of the magazine until 1950.

The project started with early literary echoes and reports of the Spanish Civil War, went through debates about totalitarianism, and eventually faced the social and cultural changes of the post-war period. Lehmann's models and sources of inspiration for his magazine were many, but the closest of all was the French weekly *Vendredi*, launched in 1935, which gathered the political reflections of outstanding left-wing intellectuals. What he admired in *Vendredi* was the courage of artists who decided to observe the political reality through their conscience shaped by a humanistic commitment to art. Lehmann felt the urge for artists to respond to the social reality of the 1930s - a social reality in which his generation, too young to have fought in the Great War, was profoundly ignored or misunderstood.

In his memoirs, Lehmann provides extensive testimony to the sense of isolation that led him to conceive the project of a magazine. At the age of twenty, he had seen his sister Rosamond inundated with hundreds of letters sent by readers denouncing the immorality of most characters in her first novel *Dusty Answer*, while an equivalent number of generally younger readers raved about Rosamond's consonance with the *Zeitgeist*. Lehmann was then made aware of what he called:

[...] the experience and feelings of our own generation, our sense of being cut off from the past by the war and endowed with unique sensibility and revolutionized values we did not expect our parents' generation to understand; and everything else seemed cold, artificial or sententious after I had read *Dusty Answer*. (Lehmann, 1955: 131)

The entirely unexpected scandal roused by the novel not only traumatised its author; it also revealed a chasm between generations. Among the older generation, those who seemed most sympathetic to the young did not understand them any better than others who charged Rosamond with immorality. Lytton Strachey, for instance, defended *Dusty Answer* on the grounds of the aesthetic quality of the style, and not for the specific experience and sensibility that it expressed (Holroyd, 1994: 569). The novel depicted the young generation's specific form of disenchantment, their lack of words to voice their experience of the war. The under-thirties had witnessed the politician's impotence to stop the slaughter, and they had heard their parents speak about dislocated bodies engulfed in the mud of battlefields in terms of heroism and sacrifice, which sounded most inadequate to them. The novel described an aphasic generation trying to reinvent reasons to create, to gain confidence in words in the midst of a society busy with the dead. They had nothing but sorrow to express, sorrow for themselves, in a society that considered them lucky to have been spared the reality of the battlefields.

The experience of the scandal caused by *Dusty Answer* nine years before the launch of *New Writing* shaped Lehmann's project more profoundly than one might suspect. Instead of following the guidelines of *Vendredi* literally, through ideological debates and opinionated comments, Lehmann clearly restricted his magazine to "imaginative writing" (Lehmann, 1936). The essential inspiration that he took from André Chamson, chief editor of *Vendredi*, rested on an expression heard by Stephen Spender in Madrid during the International Congress of Writers in the summer of 1937. André Chamson had defined the writers' mission as "the duty to be tormented" (Spender, 1937: 245-51). And an article by Chamson entitled "The Power of Words" appeared in the same issue of *New Writing* as Spender's report of the Madrid Congress. Lehmann's guideline as an editor derived from his certainty that the writer's engagement, which had become a necessity dictated by history, could realise itself and prove most effective only inside the sphere of art. The magazine, to him, was to become a major instrument to detect and herald the work of art of the future, which he conceived as "the modern tragedy", "the cathedral for an age that has broken up all the old settled shapes of belief that must turn to art or die" (Lehmann, 1942a: 153-60). He intended to invite contributors and readers alike to form one community considering art as an essential aspect of the political experience, and he castigated French Surrealists for their lack of involvement in the defence of humanistic ideals.

The importance accorded by Lehmann's generation to the issue of engagement in those years may be perceived precisely through the attitude of such an author as his sister, who was particularly reluctant to countenance any kind of outward political commitment. Yet Rosamond Lehmann participated as a speaker in the great meeting organised in London in 1938, known as "Writers Declare against Fascism". The title of the meeting posed the act of speaking as a response to the rise of totalitarianism. The young generation of writers then found an expected historical opportunity to assert a new definition of the figure of the artist in consonance with the image that *New Writing* had recently begun to establish and promote.

The sense of movement and mobility, namely the combination of a permanently travelling gaze allied to an ever-evolving spirit, gradually sketched the new persona of the artist as a social figure. *New Writing* thereby participated actively in a remodelling of the artist's role, public image and mode of communication. The magazine did not only serve as a "bridge"¹ between artists and readers or between cultural identities, and did more than simply promote new authors and new writing. The First World War had brought about a far more concrete and tangible understanding of the notion of "world" than Virginia Woolf's comparatively metaphysical broodings had conceived. Indeed, despite the genuine friendship between them, to Virginia Woolf's conception of the world as a work of art that the poet or novelist perceives and reveals, Lehmann opposes his generation's conception of the world as the setting or background of History. The title of his first book of poems, *The Noise of History*, published in 1934, sounds totally foreign to the vision of the world which Woolf summarises in her personal writings as the vision underlying her novels:

It is the rapture I get when I am writing, I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right, making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are part of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven;

certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (Woolf, 1978: 72)

These posthumously published notes were written in 1939 or 1940, at a time when she was also writing her essay "The Leaning Tower", in which she castigates Lehmann and the close circle of his *New Writing* collaborators, in spite of the fact that the magazine was published by the Hogarth Press, and in spite of Lehmann's financial partnership in the Hogarth Press.

John Lehmann had worked as Leonard Woolf's closest collaborator and manager of the Press as early as January 1931 and he had left almost immediately, in 1932, due to conflicts over the talents and merits of his generation, whom he was supposed to bring into the Press. After years of travelling through Europe and with his new stature as the editor of a successful magazine, he agreed to resume his position as a manager of the Hogarth Press in 1938, the year Leonard Woolf accepted to publish *New Writing*. Lehmann bought part of Virginia Woolf's personal share, and thus acquired the guarantees for increased power of decision. But the title of the volume of memoirs that he devoted to this particular experience in 1978, *Thrown to the Woolfs*, is key to the general mood of his participation in the business.

The two generations stood poles apart in terms of their conceptions of the world and consequently in terms of their almost incompatible conceptions of the craft of writing. *New Writing* meant to emphasise that the literary magazine, as a medium, was becoming part and parcel of the artist's commitment to reality. In the context of modernism, *New Writing* opened a new era in which the magazine ceased to be devoted to aesthetic experimentation or assertion. What Lehmann had in mind was a far more secularised conception of the craft of letters.²

The magazine seems to have transformed Lehmann's aura appreciably, through what one might call the author's "hyper-presence", with the editor himself featuring as master of ceremonies. Lehmann's 1936 "Manifesto" introduces a break with earlier manifestos, up to the point of appearing as an anti-manifesto. Instead of defining specific orientations or discarding earlier aesthetic trends, Lehmann casts the widest net to make sure to gather the largest number of manuscripts from the younger generation. Besides, Lehmann's inaugurating lines proved to be his first address in a long, almost uninterrupted series of editor's forewords, evolving towards a form of actual conversation and partnership with potential authors and readers. Sales figures and extracts from readers' letters are occasionally mentioned and used as stepping stones to resume the dialogue. Lehmann's frequent appearances - through his forewords and a number of occasional (sometimes even serialised) essays - were soon reinforced, in the first pocket-size issues of 1940, by his photographed portrait and an even larger biographical notice. In *The Penguin New Writing* no.1 (December 1940) and in the single issue entitled *New Writing in Europe* (January 1941), the editor featured as guide to new cultural territories, in a self-portrait condensing his ideal vision of an author:

THE AUTHOR, as founder and editor of *New Writing* has travelled all over Europe in search of material and is in touch with young authors from India to America. Was for many years in Vienna previous to the Anschluss and probably knows that city better than many Viennese themselves. Is an authority on the international control of the Danube and author of *Down the River*, a study

of Austrian and Danubian problems; *Evil Was Abroad*, a novel; *Prometheus and the Bolsheviks*, a travel book about the Caucasus; two volumes of poetry; and is the editor of *The Penguin New Writing*. Has contributed many travel guides illustrated with his own photographs to the *Geographical Magazine* (London), *Travel* (New York) and other publications, and has worked as a literary critic for a number of periodicals. In 1938, John Lehmann became General Manager and Director of the Hogarth Press, the London publishing firm founded by Leonard and Virginia Woolf. (*New Writing in Europe*, January 1941: 1)

Lehmann, like Spender and Isherwood, who participated actively in the launching of *New Writing*, saw their generation as actors of history in the making, and their form of action took shape in their editorial collaboration. From 1938 onwards, *New Writing* informed its readers about stage productions in Peking, Moscow, Paris, Budapest and Prague, using photography as a way of showing art in the making and artists at work. Authors' portraits often accompanied their texts as complementary expressions of their personalities. The names of André Malraux, Vladimir Mayakovski, William Plomer, Graham Greene, George Orwell, George Barker, V. S. Pritchett, Dylan Thomas, Ignazio Silone, André Chamson, William Chappell, Alun Lewis, Jiri Mucha, Cecil Day Lewis, Wystan Auden, Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood were soon transformed into familiar faces through snapshots rather than portraits.

After having favoured what Lehmann called "fictionalized reportage" in its first issues - the canon of which is illustrated by Christopher Isherwood's short story "The Nowaks" (1936), set in contemporary Berlin - *New Writing* gradually offered a window on European artistic life at large. New talents were less and less confined to the printed pages of the magazine. Photos and illustrations fulfilled a significant part of Lehmann's objective, placing artistic life on an equal footing with ordinary life. Ballet dancers, actors and actresses mingled with Mexican popular marionettes or dance-floor crowds in Brighton. Social behaviours gradually came into focus through a few tolerated sociological essays complemented by photos. And there one may identify a blurring of social barriers derived from the experience of the Great War.

Photography clearly became a prominent vehicle to bring art and remote artistic productions to every reader, transforming artists into familiar company. Snapshots taken in workshops and studios, during theatre and ballet rehearsals, photos taken on film sets, photos of paintings and sketches by Derek Hill, Mary Kessel and Robert Buhler, of mural paintings by Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, or recent works by Pablo Picasso, Lucian Freud and Oskar Kokoshka, combined with excerpts of unfinished novels, essays in progress, sociological approaches to jazz and Russian theatre, travel diaries and reflective accounts of major cultural events. Theatre productions were by far the most recurrent subject in photograph insets as well as among essays, the reason being that it was considered "the most socially dependent of all arts" (Brusak, 1941: 78). Among the first photos to appear in 1938, there were, as one possible emblematic example, snapshots of street scenes taken in London, illustrating an essay on "Literature and the East End", by Willy Goldman. The author was presented as born in Stepney twenty-eight years earlier, and was said to have "left school at the age of fourteen to earn his living in the Docks, in the engineering and clothing industries" (Goldman, 1938: 77-86). The "man in the street" was thus being hauled on to the literary scene, both as a subject and as a prominent object of interest. Photography was there to provide evidence and convince him of his active participation in history both in the making and in the process of being written.

Enlightened journalism became an ideal, clearly beckoning to all, and spreading a flavour of adventure - an editorial tendency which sounds profoundly consonant with recurring references to the English Romantics. Byron's involvement in Greece is treated by Lehmann in his 'Foreword' to the winter 1942-3 issue of *New Writing and Daylight* (p. 6), while Wordsworth's reflections on the French Revolution are referred to as models of commitment in an article on André Malraux entitled "The Path to Humanism" (Rickworth, 1938: 147). Louis MacNeice even compares Shelley reading Rousseau to Stephen Spender reading Marx, so that this generation's *wanderlust* appears as a worldwide amplification of the Grand Tour, also seen in a more socially-oriented guise (MacNeice, 1941: 39-41). In his memoirs, Lehmann evokes his first trip to the birthplace of modernism and communism, in the early 1930s, as a "pilgrimage to Moscow", making political and aesthetic concerns inseparable (Lehmann, 1955: 231).

Far from having discarded all sense of aura, the new talents seemed to display a revised definition of the artist: no longer physically remote or irretrievably erratic, but morally accountable to the masses. Lehmann clearly considered art in general as the essence of humanism and a catalyst of political consciousness. His magazine accepted all modes of writing likely to stimulate the reader's conscience and collective responsibility. Anonymous articles, for instance, and articles signed with pseudonyms, exemplified a remarkable form of renunciation of artistic fame. Under the names of "Jack Marlowe" for John Lehmann, and "Robert Pagan" for William Plomer, the "Author" apparently downgraded himself to the rank of an occasional contributor. Lehmann and Plomer were thus drawing nearer to contributors like Wogan Philipps, for example, who signed a unique lifetime contribution and personal testimony: "An Ambulance Man In Spain". Yet this diminution of the "Author" did not simply aim at promoting the ordinary standpoint as the most worthy of interest. It was, above all, the expression of a new aura that depended on the faculty of authors and artists to dissolve in the masses, share struggles and pains, and stand out to bear witness, using their art and powers of expression to inscribe the present into history. The presence of occasional contributors like Wogan Philipps was meant to confirm that art and life were sharing the common ground of real experience.

Judging by his essays and forewords, Lehmann does not seem to have considered himself as an author versed in editing, but rather to have viewed editing as a higher form of authorship, which gives his magazine the status of a master work, a chronicle of present times, carried out through instalments, as it were, in a kind of saga whose characters and heroes were fellow authors and defenders of a particular conception of humanism. Some of these heroes were mourned in the pages of the magazine. Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes, notably, were evoked by Lehmann in a significantly serialised essay entitled "The Armoured Writer", which ran to five instalments (Lehmann, 1944a: 165). In the opening one, Lehmann prophesied the coming of what he called "the modern tragedy", as if he were himself playing the part of a "Chorus":

The modern tragedy will be filled, like every great tragedy in every epoch, with the recognition of imperfection; it will see the evil springing from a capitalist society at a time when its internal struggle is at its most ferocious; but it will see also the errors of the other side, of those who wish to bring the new society to birth, where men by seeking good, and by trying to force others into their dream, do worse evil; it will see the innocent guilty also by laziness and blindness; it will point to the distributed guilt and the fatal necessity which impels the whole process of modern war and peace; it will uncover the general dissatisfaction with the conditions of our artificial

civilization which lies below the surface manifestations of revolution and international war; above all it will look for the human in every action and every process. Only by refusing to grind the axe of any political or religious or scientific group can it fulfil the highest function of art, and be itself, as it were, the cathedral for an age that has broken up all the old settled shapes of belief, that must turn to art or die. (Lehmann, 1942a: 156)

The question of belief, a haunting one for Lehmann in all his essays, is traceable throughout his work as an editor. *New Writing* represented his most practical form of humanism, in its attempt to stimulate and develop new modes of conscience among artists and readers: "When I launched *New Writing*, I believed prose to be much more important for my purpose than poetry. It was in prose that the idea of 'an effective brotherhood born between victims of oppression' and the 'sense of broader comradeships' was most clearly to be traced." (Lehmann, 1955: 253) These words, partly borrowed from friends as the quotation marks indicate, signal a remarkable divide between generations. Both John Lehmann and his sister Rosamond used the word "web" as opposed to "coterie" or "group". Lehmann never referred to mutually elected or selected members, nor did he ever wish to address an elite among his readers. He seemed to conceive contributors and readers as members of a brotherhood of opinions, a web of consciences that he kept trying to expand, ignoring notions of "inside" or "outside".

In the final reckoning, Lehmann's conception of the reader may very well stand as the cornerstone of his success as an editor. None of his competitors or imitators could ever match his talent to anticipate the individual reader's expectations. The success of *New Writing* inspired Cyril Connolly, the editor of *Horizon*, launched the same year as *The Penguin New Writing*. Towards the end of the Second World War, it was again copied by a group of four who formed the editorial board of *Orion*: Edwin Muir, Denys Kilham Roberts, Cecil Day Lewis and Rosamond Lehmann.³ Cyril Connolly glorified the 1920s, which he baptised "the heroic era", as opposed to the "disastrous decade" of the 1930s, proclaiming that he saw "nothing so positively sickening in a title" as the adjective "new", and lamenting "the infiltration of literature by the destructive influences of Surrealism and politics".⁴ *Horizon* and *Orion* both had recourse to the same authors as *New Writing*, making the comparison with the latter particularly fruitful. What precisely distinguished Lehmann's enterprise was the exceptional importance he accorded to readers as essential partners. Connolly yielded to the temptation of artistic egotism and seemed preoccupied with the necessity of building a sanctuary for good authors. Quality was his chief concern. As for the editors of *Orion*, they clearly gathered to fight their own depressed mood and to support artistic creation after years of despair, but the board never quite coalesced.

Unlike all these, John Lehmann never shared the leadership of the magazine's policy, but took advice from many. Unlike his imitators, he saw the war as one more reason to tighten bonds between readers and writers, not only among authors, and to turn towards a form of practical humanism. His wartime forewords were tormented by a single, permanent obsession: the future of literature. But to him, the future of literature did not mean the mere preservation of what Connolly considered "good" literature. It rested, rather, on his awareness of the artist's responsibility "to make a world of true symbols, and to find a new myth for mankind to inhabit", despite "the collapse of traditional religion" and "the silence of the creative religious impulse" (Lehmann, 1947: 145-6). The future of literature depended on the artist's faculty to speak for everybody, to meet the expectations of his or her contemporaries.

Lehmann never ceased to ponder social ties, spiritual survival or the ability of artists to bear testimony to the contemporary pains of humanity. In his postscript to “The Leaning Tower: Replies”,⁵ which happened to be published a few weeks after Virginia Woolf’s death, he tried hard to soothe the riotous arguments and bruised sensibilities of Edward Upward, Bertie Lewis Coombes and Louis MacNeice, calmly accepting Virginia Woolf’s misjudgements on the question of the readers’ expectations. Lehmann’s way of selecting texts for readers stood in pure contradiction to Virginia Woolf’s attitude, which he characterised as the attitude of “a sympathetic observer” (Lehmann, 1941a: 42-6). The problem of quality, therefore, as far as *New Writing*’s achievements as a literary magazine are concerned, should not be tackled without taking into account the quality of Lehmann’s ambition itself. Lehmann always preferred texts “to be looked through rather than to be looked at”.⁶ When he published anthologies of *New Writing*, years after the end of the magazine, he did not propose a selection of first-class literary texts but rather a nostalgic reminder of what the magazine had meant to a whole community of authors and readers, recalling momentous experiences shared in times of anxiety.⁷ He often evoked these years of shared expectation, when a new generation of young authors emerged from the experience of a new war and appeared to be in a comparable search for some prophetic anticipation of their fates. But Lehmann’s torments hardly found any echo among the next new crop of talents that sprouted in the 1950s.

After the Second World War, Lehmann realised that poets and novelists had failed to “bridge” the passage to the new era and had proved unable to produce a master-key to the riddle of history, to what he called “the orgy of Satanism” (Lehmann, 1945: 10). He remained attentive to the evolution of literature and denounced the emergence of “a multiplying race of anti-cultural publicists” and mourned the extinction of an “interest in literature that was due to the war” (Lehmann, 1944b: 6). What Lehmann’s nostalgic vision of the 1930s eventually brings to the subject of “War in the Interwar” is the emergence of a notion that was still nameless then, a notion that Maurice Blanchot later called “*l’espace littéraire*” (Blanchot, 1955): a fragile space of liberty, the value of which became more perceptible precisely after the experience of the Great War and through the rise of totalitarianism; a fragile space which Lehmann perhaps hardly enriched as a poet, but which he safeguarded with particular insight as an editor, making editing one of the fine arts. *New Writing* indeed appears as the collective masterpiece of a whole generation.

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Notes

¹ "The Bridge" was Lehmann's first idea for a title for his magazine.

² John Lehmann's concern with the social role of authors remains traceable throughout all his own contributions to the magazine and, still later, in his work *The Craft of Letters in England. A Symposium* (1957), a volume of thirteen essays that he edited - eight of which were by former *New Writing* contributors.

³ *Orion. A Miscellany* (London: Nicholson and Watson) was a very short-lived magazine, which counted only four issues: vol. I, 1945; vol. II, 1945; vol. III, 1946; and vol. IV, 1947 (edited by Denys Kilham Roberts alone).

⁴ See Connolly (1965: 45 and 67) and Stephen Spender's account of Connolly's opinion in *Journals 1939-1983* (1985: 51).

⁵ 'The Leaning Tower: Replies' is a series of four essays published in *Folios of New Writing* (spring, 1941: 24-46). The essays, by John Lehmann, Louis MacNeice, Edward Upward and B. L. Coombes, were addressed to Virginia Woolf after the publication of her essay 'The Leaning Tower' in an earlier issue, *Folios of New Writing* (autumn 1940: 11-33). The controversy concerns the issue of political engagement and literary creation. Virginia Woolf never read the replies. She died just a few days before they appeared in print.

⁶ The formula, which suits *New Writing's* general policy so well, was worded by one of its contributors, Lehmann's close friend Roy Fuller, in "Poetry: Tradition and Belief", in *The Craft of Letters in England* (Houghton Mifflin, 1957: 87).

⁷ Lehmann edited seven anthologies of *New Writing* between 1946 and 1985: *Poems from New Writing 1936-1946*, with Roy Fuller as co-editor (London: John Lehmann Ltd, 1946); *French Stories from New Writing* (London: John Lehmann Ltd, 1947); *English Stories from New Writing* (London: John Lehmann Ltd, 1951); *Best Stories from New Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951); *The Pleasures of New Writing: An Anthology of Poems, Stories and Other Prose Pieces from the Pages of New Writing* (London: John Lehmann Ltd, 1952); *The Penguin New Writing 1940-1950: An Anthology* (London: Penguin Books, 1985); *Celebration: Anthology of New Zealand Writing from The Penguin New Writing Series* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).