CHAPTER 7

Genre at the Hogarth Press

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As the literary editor of the Nation & Athenaeum (N&A) between 1923 and 1929, Leonard Woolf was well acquainted with the book market's practices of categorisation. The “Pick of the Publishing Season” lists appeared twice annually in the intellectual periodical, and Woolf’s own weekly column, “The World of Books,” commented on the state of the book trade as it manifested itself in the pages of the N&A. Remarking on genre categories in the “Pick of the Publishing Season” for the fall of 1927, Woolf suggested that despite their prevalence, “[l]abels alone, with their flavour of the arbitrary, are unenlightening. By a consideration of the books placed under these headings, the typicalities of each group become more easily apparent, as do also their specific differences.”¹

Woolf’s comment points to the early twentieth-century book trade’s reliance on labels, lists, and categories that were often insufficient in describing literary content and form. Despite their “arbitrariness,” genre categorisations were the primary way of organising books in modernist magazines and publishing documents, including advertisements, critical analyses, and publishers’ business records. Genre headings were also the shorthand means by which the different participants in the trade communicated with one another. Bookshops and libraries organized and recommended books by genre, as they do today, but books were categorized not just after publication but also beforehand.² Penguin’s practice, for instance, of colour-coding its paperbacks of the 1930s along genre lines (dark blue for biography, orange for fiction, green for crime novels, yellow for travel, and so on) is perhaps the most overt example of genre classification as a marketing strategy for attracting readers to groups of books, rather than to individual titles.

² The Dewey decimal system, originating from the United States in 1873 and published in 1876, was “devised for cataloguing and indexing purposes,” and Dewey was eventually considered “equally valuable for numbering and arranging books and pamphlets on the shelves.” For Dewey as for most classification systems, usefulness for the reader was the main goal in developing a system of categorisation, and consequently such systems value “short, familiar titles for the headings” over the communication of a book’s subtleties. Melville Dewey, ‘Preface’ in A Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library (Amherst, Mass, 1876), p. 1.
Leonard Woolf was also, as a publisher himself, an active participant in the formation of the trade on which he commented in his “World of Books” articles. Looking from the perspective of the book trade invites an approach to genre not strictly (or even primarily) as a series of literary conventions, but as a practical tool by which publishers and periodicals communicate with readers. As Sean Latham has recently argued in relation to the roman à clef, modernist genre “can operate both as a set of deliberately created markers as well as pragmatic codes invoked in the act of reception” and these practical categories serve as “a link between creation and consumption, a way of attending to the way literary forms traffic between readers and authors.”

This double view of genre as both an intrinsic and an extrinsic feature of literature creates an interface between the different participants in the book trade, but it can also result in a rupture between literary and pragmatic understandings of classification.

Leonard Woolf’s remarks on the insufficiency of labels come from the expectation that genre is more complex than the Dewey system seems to indicate. What happens, in a category-oriented book world, to unclassifiable, experimental works? In this chapter I consider the headings, categories, and price points that communicate genre in the book world, and suggest that in the case of Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press, the practices of categorisation that Woolf found “unenlightening,” reveal a great deal about the values of the publisher that assigned them. The tensions between the surface categorisation of works – as novels, biographies, or travel writing – and the literary understandings of genres were particularly significant for modernist writers and publishers who were testing the boundaries of genre by experimenting with literary and narrative forms.

I focus here on the methods of organisation that they applied to the diverse list of works that appeared under the “Woolf’s head” imprint between 1917 and 1946. The Woolfs “considered” (to use Leonard Woolf’s word) books of all kinds and attended to their aesthetic and intellectual complexities. However, the Hogarth Press also used recognizable book-trade genre categories to market the works they produced and to organize its own company accounts (now housed in the Hogarth Press Business Archives at the University of Reading). That the Press attended carefully to market considerations dispels the notion that this modernist small press was unconcerned with readers or with a larger market. Far from being an isolated small operation, the Hogarth Press found

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