

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE POETRY OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

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Katherine Mansfield is known as an expert in writing short stories but, because of our usual focus on Mansfield the short story writer, it is perhaps not generally realized how important the writing of poetry was to her as a means of self-expression. One volume of her collected poems was published posthumously in 1923, with another edition in 1930, but this has long been out of print. Even this, however, comprises only about half of the verse that she wrote and which has survived.

In her *Journal*, Mansfield often revealed her strong desire to write poems. "I have many ideas," she writes in December 1906, "but no grip of my subject. I want to write verses - but they won't come..."¹⁾ Sometimes poetry appears to be as important as, perhaps more important than, prose. On January 22, 1916, Mansfield writes in the *Journal*, "The people who lived or whom I wished to bring into my stories don't interest me any more. The plots of my stories leave me perfectly cold." With her dead brother in mind, she continues:

Then I want to write poetry. I feel always trembling on the brink of poetry. The almond tree, the birds, the little wood where you are, the flowers you do not see, the open window out of which I

lean and dream that you are against my shoulder, and the times that your photograph 'looks sad'. But especially I want to write a kind of long elegy to you...perhaps not in poetry. No, perhaps in Prose. Almost certainly in a kind of *special prose*.²⁾

Here poetry seems to be a more emotional, direct method to meet her desire to write. Sometimes she regarded poetry as something to save her. In October, 1921, she writes, "Oh God! I am divided still. I am bad. I fail in my personal life. I lapse into impatience, temper, vanity, and so I fail as thy priest. Perhaps poetry will help."³⁾ Whether she is here referring to her own or others' work, the message is clear. Poetry could perhaps be her only hope of salvation.

It appears that poetry was often central in Mansfield's own self-concept and desires as a writer. For this reason alone, her poetry is worthy of study. No one seems to have tried systematically to evaluate her poetry to date. What characteristics do Mansfield's poems have? It is a challenge to define her poems and to try to place them in the framework of the work of her contemporaries. When did Mansfield choose to express herself in verse and when in prose? Can the poetry and prose, in fact, be considered separately, or are there as many similarities as differences? A study of her poetry may indeed help us to reach a fuller and more balanced understanding of Katherine Mansfield, the writer.

When we look at the circumstances under which Mansfield wrote poetry, certain tendencies begin to emerge. In 1908, four poems, "In the Church," "On the Sea Shore," "The Lilac Tree," and "A Sad

Truth,” were composed in one night after she received a love letter from Garnet Trowell.⁴⁾ In this case, the ecstasy of her complete emotional satisfaction released in her a burst of almost superhuman creativity. “The Lilac Tree” begins:

The branches of the lilac tree
Are bent with blossom - in the air
They sway and languish dreamily,
And we, pressed close, are kissing there
The blossoms falling on her hair...
Oh, lilac tree, Oh, lilac tree,
Shelter us, cover us, secretly.⁵⁾

Later, in 1916, Mansfield wrote a series of poems collectively titled “Poems at the Villa Pauline.” According to John Middleton Murry, these, “were written in curious circumstances.” In Murry’s words:

Villa Pauline was a four-roomed cottage on the shore of the Mediterranean where we lived in 1916. For the whole of one week we made a practice of sitting together after supper at a very small table in the kitchen and writing verses on a single theme which we had chosen. It seems to me now almost miraculous that so exquisite a poem as, for instance, “Voices of the Air” should have been thus composed.⁶⁾

But perhaps we shouldn’t be as surprised as Murry at the “miraculous” creativity of those evenings. Though she was constantly car-

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rying the sorrow of her brother's death, the peaceful mood between Mansfield and Murry gave her the security and feeling of love and acceptance that she craved. Such fulfilment was rare in her emotionally tumultuous life, and it was enough to unlock the high inspiration which culminated in these poems.

Everything from outside
Of sun and flower and loveliness
Comes in to hide,
To play, to laugh on the stairs,
To catch unawares
Our childish happiness...⁷⁾

Poetry was also a therapy for Mansfield when she felt disappointment, despair and depression. In her emotional peace of 1916, she wrote a carefully controlled sonnet to her dead brother:

Last night for the first time since you were dead
I walked with you, my brother, in a dream.
We were at home again beside the stream
Fringed with tall berry bushes, white and red...⁸⁾

Another poem, "The New Husband," was included in a letter of December 4, 1919. At this time, Mansfield was possessed with melancholy. Perhaps it was to get rid of this state that she expressed it in verse. The poem begins:

Someone came to me and said
Forget, forget that you've been wed.
Who's your man to leave you be
Ill and cold in a far country?
Who's the husband - who's the stone
Could leave a child like you alone?⁹⁾

Apart from two sonnets and some rhymed child verse, most of Mansfield's poems are freely styled verses of all lengths. Her genres included poems to be set to, or to accompany music (such as "The Lilac Tree" quoted earlier), poems for recitation, poems of 'realism' and symbolism, and descriptive poems of the outer and inner world. An example of the genre of realism is "The Winter Fire"¹⁰⁾ from 1908. At this time, ugly, realistic ways of expression were in fashion. Mansfield wrote to Garnet Trowell, "And here is another poem... realism - you know - it's a little cruel -." "The Winter Fire" tells of a woman in desperate circumstances who stares into a fire and is lost in memories of her warm childhood. The poem unfolds in a series of contrasts. As the title implies, it is a world of contradictions, of the "Winter" and the "Fire." There is "the ugly street" outside, and the comfortable warm room where the woman sits. She is searching "for that which will not come." The smell of "pot pourri" which she recalls in her childhood home is in direct contrast to the steaming "boots" and other "sodden" things in her present bedroom. Her "recollections of the dim grey day" she has just had only further serve to illuminate her recollections of childhood. Indeed, she is no longer the young girl of her memory, but is a "woman." Finally, the comfortable, con-

tented state of mind she achieves in dreaming is suddenly shattered by “a barrel organ” which symbolizes the discord of the real world. The poem ends with three remarkable lines:

Suddenly, from the street, a burst of sound
A barrel organ, turned and jarred and wheezed
The drunken, bestial, hiccougging voice of London.

It seems that the whole of the ugliness of modern life is encapsuled in that barrel organ. And nothing has changed in the three-quarters of a century since the poem was written. The constant disagreeable sounds of present-day traffic, new construction, demolition and loud-speakers continue to plague us. What Mansfield wrote in her poem was a warning to our ‘advanced’ world full of contradictions. A year before writing “The Winter Fire,” Mansfield stated that anything she wrote “must be ultra-modern.”¹¹⁾ “The Winter Fire,” with its vivid images achieving an effect close to cinema, is certainly still “ultra-modern” in content.

In attempting to define Mansfield’s poetry, we see how different in feeling it is from much of what we usually consider as verse. Her poems are usually simple, natural, lyrical and a little unreal. While similar to German romantic poems such as those of Heine, Müller and others, they are not so purely lyrical or passionate or symbolic as German songs. Mansfield’s verses have a more prose-like lyricism. They often contain the feeling of some mysterious happening or movement of the mind and they express our collective and universal emotions. In 1906, Mansfield wrote, “I want to write verses...I should

like to write something just a trifle mysterious — but really very beautiful and original.”¹²⁾ A year later, she wrote a poem, “Youth” in her notebook. In it, she remembers the falling blossom of the *manuka* tree and associates this with the sadness of departing youth:

Seeing it die
In the dawn flush of life
Never to know the terror and the strife
Which fill all summer blossoms when they blow
Ah ! better better so¹³⁾

In her poetry and prose, Mansfield often tried to re-create the beauty of natural things such as trees, plants, flowers, rain, sunshine and wind. She catches the elements of nature and gives them “mysterious” life by entwining them with the lives of humans. Where the two sides meet, there is a poem, and there is prose and there are stories. It is this “mysterious” poetic quality that is the common thread running through all of her writings.

The desire to write poems continued as long as Mansfield lived. “Perhaps poetry will help,” she said. Writing poetry must have been one way to reconcile herself with the universe, to overcome discord in her life, to approach an ideal bliss and to liberate herself from earthly limits. Just as her prose stories are usually concerned with the banalities of everyday common life, much of the verse that she created looks on the surface light and unimportant. But the genius of Mansfield as a writer of stories was to show the common in such a way as

to reveal the universal. A closer study of her verse will perhaps reveal similar doors to the universe. But, apart from all else, it will surely enable us to see more clearly the elements which underlie her entire writing. In this way we may add to our total understanding of Katherine Mansfield, the writer.

(This essay is based on a paper read at The Hopkins Society, Tokyo, on February 4th, 1984.)

Notes

- 1) *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. J. Middleton Murry (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1954), p.8. (Referred to below as *Journal*)
- 2) *Ibid.*, p.93-4.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p.269.
- 4) Mansfield describes her emotional state in an unpublished letter of the 2nd of November, 1908. Manuscript in the Windsor Collection, Canada.
- 5) *Adam International Review*, Nos. 370-375 (1972-1973), p.72.
- 6) *Poems: by Katherine Mansfield*, ed. J. Middleton Murry (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1923), p.xii.
- 7) From "Villa Pauline." *Poems*, p. 39.
- 8) From "To L.H.B. (1894-1915)" *Poems*, p. 47.
- 9) *Katherine Mansfield's Letters to John Middleton Murry 1913-1922* ed. John Middleton Murry (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1951), pp.427-428.
- 10) An unpublished poem from a letter to Garnet Trowell (2

November, 1908). Manuscript in the Newberry Library, Chicago.

11) *Journal*, p.17.

12) *Ibid.*, p.8.

13) Katherine Mansfield, *The Urewera Notebook*, ed. Ian A. Gordon(Oxford University Press, 1978), pp.88-89. (The last line has an alternative reading, "Far better so.") The original manuscript of this poem is in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. The published version appears to have several mistakes in transcription, and these have been corrected in the version printed here.