

The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield

Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott (eds.), Oxford University Press, June 2008. 376 pp. ISBN: 978-0198183990

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“Forgive this handwriting, dearest Father. My constant plea! But as usual my letter case is balanced on my knee and at a rather groggy angle” (345). This apology, which concludes Katherine Mansfield's last letter to her father, is just one version of many apologies that appear often in the letters written to her friends and family. Any sample of her handwriting clearly shows that the necessity of such apologies was not a matter of mere courtesy. Her lines appear practically illegible to an untrained eye and one wonders how much the receivers were able to decipher of what the writer was addressing to them. The work of transcribing and annotating such a great number of these letters must indeed have been immense; no wonder that, from the date of publication of the first volume until the fifth and last, fourteen years elapsed. The final volume, covering the period of 1922 and a few days of January 1923, has a very symbolic publication year: 2008 was both the 120th anniversary of Mansfield's birth and a centenary of her second arrival in London when she came with the purpose of starting her literary career.

This volume is a worthy anniversary gift for all Katherine Mansfield scholars and admirers. It concludes the long work of bringing to the public unabridged versions of all the traceable letters now in the possession of a number of organizations and individuals all around the world. Although some letters are still missing and some exist only in imperfectly transcribed typescripts, there can hardly be much that is essential yet to discover. It is well evident that this work will for many years be the basic point of reference for all those who wish to study and understand the life and work of Katherine Mansfield.

The editors, Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, have done a wonderful job, since many particularities specific to this case added to the usual hard work that any such collection requires. Apart from the already mentioned impossible handwriting, they had to deal with the legacy of the previous editing done by John Middleton Murry. Murry, both a renowned literary critic and husband of Katherine Mansfield, dedicated much of his energy to promoting his wife and her work after she died. Although his contribution to her fame and recognition cannot be denied, and although his devotion deserves admiration, he is nevertheless known to all Mansfield scholars as the one who made it impossible to fully and objectively study her work while he was alive. His editions of his wife's letters or diaries were skilful selections, purged of all the material which he considered as unimportant or harmful either to her friends who were still alive or to the image of her he was so bent on creating. What is more, his transcriptions are not always reliable, due to the fact that he sometimes read what suited him rather than tried to be objective. As a result of this, readers were offered a distorted image of Katherine Mansfield, of her ideas, motivations and actions.

Readers will find no such approach in this edition. For the first time, the letters are presented in their entirety, including all the letters and extracts omitted by Murry. The transcription was done by Margaret Scott, who spent most of her career deciphering the personal papers of Katherine Mansfield, first those in the possession of the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, where she worked as a librarian, and later those that are

scattered all over the world. It is admirable that in spite of the difficulties in the original texts there remain very few occasions where a word or two resisted all attempts at deciphering, and the editors had to excuse themselves by finally entering the word “illegible.”

The introductory texts by Vincent O’Sullivan are absorbing. Volume notes to the text are abundant, detailed and very useful for both Mansfield scholars and those who have only started discovering her. Almost nothing is taken for granted, not even Mansfield’s allusions to her own short stories, which are also annotated, and thus even a reader unfamiliar with them will not lose the thread. Apart from the general introduction, there are also short paragraphs preceding each of the five sections the book is divided into, according to the five different stays Mansfield made in her last year (Switzerland, Paris, Switzerland, London, Paris/Fontainebleau). These brief explications give concise information about the most important events in Mansfield’s life during that period, the reason for the change of residence, and other necessary information, putting the letters which follow into their contexts.

The standard of all previous volumes, and this one is no exception, was to provide as much background information as possible and thus enable the reader to capture the atmosphere of the period in which these letters were written. The notes to the text serve almost as a cultural dictionary of the Europe of 1922. In addition to the brief entries concerning the names mentioned in the letters, there are also explanations of the importance and roles of places, department stores, kinds and uses of fabrics, and food, as well as contemporary medical and hygienic products which, no matter how familiar they were to Mansfield and her society, would, if not explained, mean nothing to a contemporary reader. There are also telling comparisons of letters with Mansfield’s diaries, showing how different she sometimes thought as opposed to what she expressed; extracts from other people’s letters and diaries elucidating the situations appearing in the letters; and, quite interestingly, also further developments of relationships or conflicts ending long after Mansfield herself was dead. The fruit of all this effort is a professional, informative and fascinating edition of the highest standards, an edition which the present reviewer can only warmly recommend.

In this last volume, readers can once again observe Mansfield as they have grown to know her from the previous ones. As usual, she is impatient and peevish with the indispensable Ida Baker and her spelling (“Im glad my book has turned up. Please note the little b. Otherwise I feel youre [*sic*] talking about the Bible,” 121); sweet and affectionate to some friends and family members (“My darling father, [...]. You have been—you are—the soul of generosity to us all,” 113), though not always when writing about them to others (“My family would not give me a penny [for her treatment for TB]” 9). Her attitude to her husband John Middleton Murry is loving, yet she is often clearly annoyed with his ways, his impractical personality tending to pessimism—what O’Sullivan refers to as his “high intellectualism and wilful gloom” (x)—and some of his reactions in the manner of a bull in a china shop. All this is skilfully represented in a letter to Dorothy Brett, in which Mansfield describes how Murry lost his pocketbook:

[F]or M. it is really the deepest most terrifying tragedy. He goes white as paper. He is hopeless at once. He drifted out of my room back into his, turned over everything, pulled everything out of the waste paper basket, made my writing table a haystack, banged the doors, smiled like a person on the stage, pulled the bed about, just didn’t shake me by the heels. And his gloom is so dreadful that really one feels deadly sick – its as though one were hanging over a cliff. (137)

When Mansfield finally gets up from her bed and finds the pocketbook within a moment: “He looked like an angel as he clasped it or some saint visited by the Lord” (137). Mansfield half-jokingly attributes this ridiculous behaviour and tendency to take everything tragically to the effect of heredity, and thanks “Heaven there were a few rascals in my family. Its [*sic*] the rascals who save one from the peculiar tortures that M. suffers from” (137). This is the typical Mansfield at her best, playfully speaking about serious things, yet inviting her reader to think more carefully, make connections between things said and unsaid, and thus create the whole picture for which she only gives outlines. It is Murry who is distressed by a trifle, while his wife, fatally ill, gets up, helps him and laughs at the whole situation.

Yet for all its familiarity, the letters in this volume are slightly different from those in previous volumes in many respects. The bustle of the old life is slowly dying away; the echo of London literary society and its struggles is becoming less and less present, appearing only like the very distant clatter of swords in a long forgotten battle, no longer central, no longer important. The number and variety of addressees is considerably smaller, and towards the end there is a very distinct change: Mansfield’s typical restlessness and discontent are gone; the last weeks of her life, spent in the Gurdjieff Institute, reveal a Katherine Mansfield so far unknown—happy and satisfied, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the awareness of the closeness of death.

In this final year of her life Mansfield is hardly able to concentrate on creative writing. Compared to the previous years, she writes very little, but keeps promising her publishers to send more stories. She is too ill, however, trying to save her life; and, reading her letters, one sees that much of this time was spent hoping for, waiting for and writing letters, which were often her only connection with friends and family.

Mansfield had lived almost half of 1921 in the mountains in Switzerland, which were recommended to her as beneficial for her constantly deteriorating health. She and Murry were still there in January 1922, when this collection begins, but the isolation, the very severe winter and no positive change of health made Mansfield restless. In consequence, when she heard about a new treatment for tuberculosis invented by the Russian émigré doctor Manoukhin, she could not wait to go to Paris, and give it a try. Mansfield’s first infatuation with Manoukhin might have been supported by her almost life-long admiration and respect for everything Russian, but it was definitely triggered by her great and desperate desire to recover, to finally find a method which would save her when all the other, more traditional, treatments failed: “But anything, anything to be out of the trap—to escape, to be free. Nobody understands that depression who has not known it” (88). This extract clearly shows why Mansfield chose to believe Manoukhin, who was claiming to have “discovered a cure for tuberculosis” (56) consisting of repeated exposures of the patient’s spleen to large doses of X-rays and who advertised his experience and results in a manner nobody could possibly verify and challenge. In a letter to Murry, Mansfield describes her first appointment in his office at the beginning of February 1922: “His secretary told me he had treated 8000 cases in Moscow, that here in Paris patients in the 3rd and 4th degree – far worse than I – were now as well as possible” (35).

When the treatment goes on, one can hardly stay unmoved by her suffering, which is not so much expressed as leaked out in hints and metaphors: “After five doses of X-rays one is hotted up inside like a furnace and one’s very bones seem to be melting” (90). In May 1922, in one of the most moving letters of this collection, she sends hopeful, but totally mistaken, lines to Ida Baker: “As far as I can tell this treatment has been (I hesitate to use this big word) completely successful” (171). Yet her error could not last long and her acute senses

and intelligence soon clear-sightedly recognized the reality, although in the first moment she was not willing to admit it to herself: “Do you [Murry] really believe all this? There is something that pulls me back the whole time and which wont [*sic*] let me believe. I hear, I see. I feel a great confidence in Manoukhin—very great—and yet, I am absolutely divided [...]. A dark secret unbelief holds me back” (39).

Among the most admirable parts of Mansfield’s letters from this period are those which show that her wonderful sense of humour does not fade, even in situations which are hardly funny. With her tongue in her cheek she shrewdly observes that she couldn’t help feeling that Manoukhin and his partner had probably no other patients, that “they are both living on my 300 [francs] a week in the meantime” (137). She assesses the feelings caused by the painful and disagreeable treatment: “It’s the moment when if I were a proper martyr I should begin to have that awful smile that martyrs in the flames put on when they begin to sizzle” (117).

After the first course of X-rays and a temporary improvement in her condition she spends the summer back in Switzerland; but as her health deteriorates, she makes a trip to London to visit some of her old friends. She soon leaves for France again, ostensibly to continue Manoukhin’s treatment, and in October 1922 writes to Murry that Manoukhin and his partner Donat “promise me complete and absolute health by Christmas” (285), and paints an idyllic picture by reporting that at their clinic the “sparks, the dark room, the clock, the cigarettes, Donat’s halting step all were so familiar one didnt [*sic*] know how to greet them with enough love!” (286). Yet, this time she is not in earnest. She no longer believes in Manoukhin, or in any other medical solution to her health problems, for that matter. She is only trying to disguise the fact that she is already preparing to move to the Institute of Harmonious Development of Man in Fontainebleau-Avon, where she finishes her life in a society very different from everything she had experienced in her life so far. The concealment is necessary, since Murry is in strong opposition: “But to give up Manoukhin, as you evidently are doing, though you don’t say so, seems to me criminal. I really mean wrong, utterly wrong” (296n). However, in spite of his disagreement and the further distance that this solution creates between the couple, in Fontainebleau she seems to have found her place; she is happy, full of wonder and praise:

I burned what boats I had and came here where I am living with about fifty to sixty people, mainly Russians. It is a fantastic existence, impossible to describe. One might be anywhere—in Bokhara and Tiflis or Afghanistan (except alas! for the climate!). But even the climate does not seem to matter so much when one is whirled along at such a rate. For we do most decidedly whirl. But I cannot tell you what a joy it is to me to be in contact with living people who are strange and quick and not ashamed to be themselves. It’s a kind of supreme airing to be among them. (346)

In the first moment, one has to fight the temptation to conjecture that, as was the case for most of Mansfield’s discoveries, had she recovered or lived longer, she might have once again changed her mind and experienced transition from absolute admiration to disgust, and sneered at her companions and the new residence. Yet, such contemplations are useless. She did not recover and did not live longer; and had she been healthy, she would in all probability never have thought of entering such a community. But in those circumstances this was a blessing for her, and much in her last letters suggests that this time, at the very end, she did find the genuine peace and satisfaction she was chasing all her life.

While reading these letters one cannot help feeling a little bit awkward. One has the unfair advantage of knowing what Katherine Mansfield did not know and clearly seeing all the little duplicities and inconsistencies, repeated descriptions and jokes, and vain hopes and dreams that could not come true. One sneaks into her privacy to the point of knowing her problem with upper lip depilation and the kind and size of her knickers. Yet, the reader soon forgets the uneasiness and relishes in Mansfield's skill as a writer, which makes even little details of everyday life interesting; and the reader is drawn in and forgets everything else almost immediately. These letters read like a detective story, albeit one whose conclusion is long known to everybody; yet there are moments when one is so captivated by the text that one forgets all that is known and hopes against hope that things were different and not so fatal.

Mansfield left many stories and some letters unfinished because she refused to give up and start "dying." She kept on planning and working, making only the most necessary arrangements, including her official and unofficial wills addressed to Murry. Her letters are about life and its beauty and show no sign of having been written so close to the end. Laughing death in the face and defying it till the last moment, Mansfield once again bewitched her readers with her skill. Her admirers can only rue that this is the end of the adventure all of us were so keen on continuing.

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In *SKASE Journal of Literary Studies* [online]. 2009, vol. 1, no. 1 [cit. 2009-06-23]. Available on web page <http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/JLS01/pdf_doc/08.pdf>.