

‘That Direct Flick at the Thing Seen’: Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf as Short Story Writers

The important, complicated literary friendship between KM and VW between c. 1917 to c.1920 occurred at a formative stage of both writers’ development. It was famously marked by literary rivalry, genuine admiration and the sense of a shared pursuit: as Mansfield wrote in June 1917: ‘We have got the same job Virginia & it is really very curious & thrilling that we should both [...] be after so very nearly the same thing’.¹ Each was then working on short stories from new angles (stories were then preferable to Woolf than the novel as she tried to work through her ideas about the novel) and their friendship was based round their pleasure in discussing their art although it often became fraught and hostile due to class differences and professional rivalry: Mansfield reviewed Woolf’s second novel *Night and Day* (1919) critically in the *Athenaeum* - Woolf was outspoken in her dislike of ‘Bliss’ as ‘so hard so shallow & so sentimental’.² When they met, Mansfield had published *In a German Pension* in 1911, and then under the mentorship of A. R. Orage, begun publishing in the *New Age* and later, *Rhythm*. Woolf – six years older -- had published her first novel, *The Voyage Out* in 1915. Two stories with the Hogarth Press which she and Leonard had founded in 1915, followed: ‘A Mark in the

¹ Katherine Mansfield, *Letters*, ed. by Margaret Scott and Vincent O’Sullivan, vol. 1, p. 327.

² Woolf, *Letters* 2, p. 514. (Lee 393)

Wall' in 1917 and *Kew Gardens* in 1919, the same year as her next novel, *Night and Day*. Mansfield 's high point during this period was her extended story about her childhood 'The Aloe,' begun in 1915 and revised and published as 'Prelude' with the Hogarth Press, its second publication, in 1918.

They first met in February 1917 after Mansfield had read *The Voyage Out* following a visit to Garsington, and expressed an interest in meeting its author; although Woolf was at first suspicious and spoke of her as 'being like a civet cat that had taken to street walking'. She also noted that she was 'so intelligent and inscrutable that she repays friendship'.³ Literary rivalry and personal attack yielded to intermittent friendliness and respect on both sides although there was always a risk of favourable opinion being undermined by the gossip of the Bloomsbury set, people like Clive Bell and even KM's friend Koteliansky ; and in the words of Woolf's biographer, Hermione Lee, Woolf was 'snobbish and unkind'; Mansfield was 'ambivalent and inconsistent'.⁴ When it came to talking about their modernist preoccupations in writing. however they found grounds for trust, according to Woolf who called their conversations 'priceless'-- 'priceless in the sense that to no one else can I talk in the same disembodied way about writing;

³ Woolf, *Diary*, I, p. 58. 22 Oct. 1917.

⁴ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London; Vintage, 1997), p. 386.

without altering my thought more than I alter it in writing here'.⁵ Their exchange of insights may have led to mutual inspiration and influence, although it is more likely that Mansfield extended Woolf's understanding of modernist practices rather than the other way round.⁶

At the time of their friendship Woolf was writing experimental short fiction as a way of breaking through the constraints of Georgian literary form, the subject of her essays, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' and 'The Modern Novel'. She was tunnelling her vision of language in order to find a new form for the novel (eventually realised in radical experiments like *Jacob's Room* and *The Waves*), seeking depth of feeling while also representing the fragmentary, fleeting qualities of modernity through the breaking up of narrative form. Stories published in the volume, *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), like 'A Nail in the Wall' and 'An Unwritten Novel' are revisionary versions of the quest motif, being interrogative in orientation and containing metafictional comments on the art of writing, as she continued to challenge the realism of John Galsworthy, H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, as part of her more general critique of patriarchal ideologies. Perhaps her most accomplished story, certainly one of which she was proud, is 'Kew Gardens' which was admired for its innovativeness by Bloomsberries like

⁵ Woolf, *Diary*, 2, p. 45. 5 June 1920.

⁶ Gerardo Rodriguez-Salas and Isabel Maria Andres-Cuevas, *The Aesthetic Construction of the Female Grotesque in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Interplay of Life and Literature* (Lampeter, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), p. 2.

Bertrand Russell, E. M. Forster (Smith 129) and Mansfield herself. Mansfield by contrast had extended her precocious writing talents in experimental stories like 'The Woman at the Store', but writing a novel remained beyond her reach. Nevertheless she had moved away from the social satire of stories of *In a German Pension* (1911) and showed new control over her subject matter in the innovative design of 'Prelude' -- as close an achievement to the novel form that she came.

What the two had in common then, was their quarrel with patriarchy, and its ideology- which they saw as dominating conventional structure in art -- in terms of hierarchy, linearity, a privileging of order, unity and the rational-- their search for new form that would celebrate the fleeting, transient nature of modern life in ways that can be read gendered feminine. They shared excitement over the discoveries in visual art evident in the PostImpressionist exhibition of 1912 which suggested new ways of rendering perception, and which informed their literary impressionism, and stimulated an interest in representing voice and subjectivity and alternative states like dream and reflection in fluid narrative forms such as Free Indirect Discourse and stream of consciousness.

In this paper I will comment on some of the differences and similarities in their short fiction as informed by their trajectories

as writers, looking briefly at two stories set in public gardens, 'Kew Gardens' and 'Miss Brill'. To contextualise this: for Woolf the short story represented an important interim stage in her development as a novelist, when she was finding new ways to handle the form required for longer fiction –(and to introduce a familiar distinction made by Mark Schorer, Head p. 18) her inclinations were marked by an emphasis on telling and hence evolution (of character). For Mansfield responding to the demands of the short story to present revelation- determined by showing, and aiming for immediacy of effect. So for one the move was towards expansion whereas for the other it was toward contraction, economy of detail and powers of suggestion. Both stories, 'Kew Gardens' and 'Miss Brill', demonstrate self-consciousness about their artifice, a defining aesthetic feature of the modernist short story. At the end of this paper I point to the possibility of a more nuanced, textual counterpoint between the writers, suggested by their contrastive handling of themes and tropes of gender.

In her early stories Woolf experiments in prose, writing highly self-conscious narratives in which she plays with monotone and polyphonic voices, making subtle transitions using the stream of consciousness technique. The narrative voice usually functions as a frame for story telling by opening up the inner space of the text, introducing an intersubjective dimension by creating

different discourses and moving between plural voices. The narrator's investigation (in line with the tunnelling vision) into the narrative space of invention is marked by disintegration of the boundaries between reality and the fictional world, sometimes through manifestations of linguistic instability as in 'The Mark on the Wall'. Here the mysterious mark and the narrator's puzzlement about what it represents allow her to move further into fiction and to inhabit other voices, [e In 'Kew Gardens' the opening narrative frame description of the flowers has a more exacting formal structure in introducing the narrative content which it opens up to than in the other stories, with controlled shifts of perspective and an aesthetic proportionality- traces of the opening description recur in the concluding section. Here, description is juxtaposed to the polyphony of voices and disparate points of view by which the four different couples who stroll among the flower beds are represented in a series of transitions whereby they seem to 'dissolve' in the air (as Mansfield put it).

'Kew Gardens' may have originated in a suggestion Mansfield made to Woolf (and in letter to Ottoline Morrell) inspired after her first trip to Garsington for a composition in which several pairs of people would walk and converse in the gardens which would resemble 'A conversation *set* to flowers'.⁷ In Woolf's

⁷ Mansfield, *Letters*, 1, p. 325. 10 April 1919 (Smith136)

mind it was comparable to *Prelude*: as she said to Vanessa, ‘Tell me what you think of [*Prelude*] and should you say you don’t like it as much as ‘Kew Gardens’, I shan’t think less highly of you.’⁸ The narrator’s opening description shows the impact of Expressionist art (as Angela Smith has shown) in its emphasis upon drenching colour and light:

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip **red, or blue or yellow petals** marked with **spots of colour** raised upon the surface; and from the **red, blue or yellow gloom** of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the **red, blue and yellow lights** passed over one another, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with **a spot of the most intricate colour**. The light fell either upon the smooth grey back of pebble, **or the shell of a snail with its brown circular veins**, or falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity **of red, blue and yellow** the thin walls of water that one expected them to burst and disappear.

This close-up, observed as if under a microscope and influenced by the art of the Post-Impressionists – offers kaleidoscopic colour effects – gauzy rainbow colours of red, blue, yellow, mixed with water – creating the effect of sensory overload, to where filmy light creates a spot of prismatic colour. There is a seemingly arbitrary, glancing illumination as the light strikes

⁸ Woolf, *Letters* 2, p. 259. 15 July 1918 (Lee 393)

disparate objects—raindrop, pebble or shell. This visually arresting, pointillist technique in tracing the movement of light includes the lesser glories of nature, a passing snail, which in the conversation sections of the story, temporarily moves between the different scenes as the narrator's alter ego. Woolf's signal that this is a female-authored text here consists of a brilliant rewriting of the concept of the largely masculine-defined panoramic narrator; the bird's eye view is now, in a vertiginous shift, attributed to the most lowly and humble creature—whose movement effects the transitions between each group as a narrative thread:

... in the oval flower-bed the snail, whose shell had been stained **red, blue and yellow** for the space of two minutes or so, now appeared to be moving very slightly in its shell, and next began to labour over the crumbs of loose earth which broke away and rolled down as it passed over them,]...]

The snail had now considered every possible method of reaching his goal without going round the dead leaf or climbing over it. (87)

By contrast is 'Miss Brill', set in Wellington's Botanical Gardens, which exemplifies Mansfield's impersonal approach: the narrative or authorial point of view is nowhere to be found: the informing consciousness of the opening sentence is represented in free indirect discourse,. Miss Brill's character,

landscape, weather and setting are all skilfully evoked in a few words (Mansfield's 'direct flick of the thing seen') with a deliberate refusal to choose one seeing perspective

Although it was so brilliantly fine—the blue sky powdered with gold and the great spots of light like white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques—Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur.

Like Woolf's snail which has human motivation in 'Kew Gardens', Mansfield uses anthropomorphism but goes further than Woolf in attributing language to the fox-fur with its beady eye. It is another version of its owner's voice, as on taking the fox fur out of its box Miss Brill says; 'Dear little thing. It was nice to feel it again', ventriloquizing its reply: "'What has been happening to me?'" said the sad little eyes.' The technique of *prosopopeia*, of giving voice to the inanimate, underlines Miss Brill's fetishisation of her fox-fur as representing some part of herself. The turning point of this story is her shock at overhearing herself being described as 'that stupid old thing' with a 'silly old mug' and the fox-fur as 'exactly like a fried whiting', so in the conclusion, her reactions at putting fox fur back into its box show her inner feelings as expressed through empathy with the fox fur : 'But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying' This gesture captures the fractured subjectivity of Miss Brill a middle aged spinster who

resorts to this strategy to deal with her loneliness, of animating an object to access her distress.

Mansfield's exacting demands in respect of her art were such that she laboured to capture the exact cadences of Miss Brill's voice as she wrote to her brother-in-law, Richard Murray: 'I chose not only the length of every sentence, but even the sound of every sentence—I chose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her - and to fit her on that day at that very moment.'⁹ And a self-consciousness about performativity adds to the story's impression of unity, linking the character of Miss Brill to the band music she listens to in the park, to her conversation with her fox-fur, and intensifying the ironic moment of revelation. The perception that her visit to the park is a performance, and that she is acting a part, creates an awakening in Miss Brill as she sits listening to the band:

They were all on the stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of a performance, after all.

Mansfield does not write metafictionally, but her interest in how art functions and projects its own life force (as her letter shows) is built into her characterisation: like a puppeteer in taking the fox fur out of its box and then returning it, Miss Brill registers

⁹ *Letters*, 4, p. 165.

this routine enactment as a kind of public performance, but with the added irony that after being insulted by the young couple, she closes down the performance, although the pain at what has happened, at the words used of her remains.

The differences in representational mode between Mansfield's writing which Woolf acclaimed 'as clear as glass,' and Woolf's primarily interrogative, reflective style, can be further explicated with reference to the philosophical and artistic views they held of the self/other relationship. 'Miss Brill' illustrates how Mansfield borders on the fantastic in an act of ventriloquism whereby the fox fur's voice represents the lonely Miss Brill's suppressed longing for love, or intimacy. Mansfield constantly plays on the boundaries between human and non-human in delineating reciprocal relations, showing the individual as rooted in the natural world through connections to flowers, birds, animals, insects in relationships of heightened transitivity: for example, Laura's nascent burgeoning sexuality in 'The Garden Party' where she sees the canna lilies as 'frighteningly alive... they were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast'. The perception of heightened transference between subject and object underpins the guiding aesthetic principle of her literary modernism, namely that art and life are inseparable.¹⁰ It also informs her ideas about the artist's impersonality: 'The artist

¹⁰ Julia Van Gunsteren, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Impressionism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), p. 68.

must give himself so utterly to life that no self qua personal self remains'.¹¹ In interpreting modernist ideas of perception, that the artist is implicated in the object perceived, Mansfield goes further than Woolf. The merging of self and object – taking direction away from the self – is a moment of increased inwardness as the artist reaffirms the object's unique existence as part of her own:¹²

When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck with a round eye, floating in a pond fringed with yellow blobs and taking an occasional dart at the other duck with the round eye, which floats upside down beneath me [...]. There follows the moment when you are more *duck*, more *apple* or *more* Natasha than any of these objects could ever possibly be, and so you *create* them anew.¹³

Woolf also represents intensified transformations between the human and non-human realms: not only is the snail humanised in 'Kew Gardens', but people in last paragraph of the story seem like the flowers because they are illuminated by the same colours and dissolve in the same way:

Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men, women and children, were spotted for a second upon the horizon, and then, seeing the **breadth of yellow** that lay upon the grass, they wavered and sought shade beneath the trees, dissolving like drops of water in the **yellow** and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with **red and blue**.

¹¹ *Letters*, 4, pp. 180-181.

¹² Sydney Janet Kaplan in *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca and London; Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 182, discusses this in terms of Bergson's intuition: 'the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible', quoting Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. T. E. Hulme (New York; G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), p. 7.

¹³ *Letters* 1, p. 330.

But such human immersion and participation in the natural world is registered through the perspective of the individual being subordinated to life, itself seen as a work of art, rather than through Mansfield's self/other fusion due to the artist's necessary dedication to life.¹⁴ By contrast to Mansfield's belief that art goes through 'the process of trying to become these things before recreating them' in order 'to make that divine *spring* into the bounded outlines of things',¹⁵ Woolf finds difficulty in approaching or knowing the 'real' or the object of one's gaze: the ebb and flow of experience makes recognition of any definitive moment impossible, and objects remain caught in the flux of time rather than acquiring a distinctive life force. As she famously says, 'life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end',¹⁶ and the larger pattern eludes definition because of our participation in the flow: for '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'.¹⁷ For Woolf, even the role of life is uncertain-- as she says: 'Now is life very solid or very

¹⁴ Melinda Harvey points out that Mansfield underscores this creative principle by always capitalising Life, in 'Katherine Mansfield's Menagerie', *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, p. 205.

¹⁵ *Letters* 1, p. 330. Mansfield attributes the phrase 'the bounding outline' to Blake. See Katherine Mansfield, *Novels and Novelists* (New York, 1930), pp. 44-45 (cited by Clare Hanson, *The Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp.14-15). Rebecca Bowler, "'The beauty of your line—the life behind it'", notes that the beautiful 'line' is how Mansfield reaches 'life' (p. 85).

¹⁶ Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, Vol. 4 (London: Hogarth Press, 1994 CHECK), pp. 157-65 (PAGE? NOT 150?)

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt, Brace Janovitch, 1985), p. 72.

shifting. I am haunted by the two contradictions'.¹⁸ The distinctive moment – that springs out like a shock or revelation, is what the short story with its emphasis on slices of life and moments in time, focuses on; but Woolf's difficulty in fixing such a moment suggests an approach perhaps more suited to the novel which conveys the flux of time from which such a moment can then emerge, rather than to the short story.¹⁹

Having shown some of their differences of technique I now want to briefly touch on the possible literary influence between Woolf and Mansfield discernible in reading their texts in dialogue. Overlap and parallels appear in connection with several themes or contemporary issues; in particular is their quarrel with patriarchy/ gendered power politics and the male-oriented literary conventions which they are rewriting takes different forms: Woolf's frustration with gender inequality and the dominant ideology of patriarchy takes the form a public discourse in 'The Mark on the Wall', so demonstrating, 'some collision with reality'. The mark becomes a provocation to challenge the masculine hierarchy of society that is symbolised by 'Whitaker's Table of Precedency' (i.e. 'the Archbishop of Canterbury is followed by the Lord High Chancellor; the Lord High Chancellor is followed by the Archbishop of York. Everybody follows somebody.. and the great thing is to know

¹⁸ Woolf, *Diary*, 3, p. 218. [cited Head, 89]

¹⁹ Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, p. 63.

who follows whom' (Dick, 46) . For Mansfield female negativity or resistance is a source of drama: e.g. in the collective sigh of relief from the women in the Burnell household in 'Prelude' after Stanley Burnell has gone to work.. On at least one occasion, I suggest, Mansfield may be responding to Woolf's frustration with patriarchy, I yet a representation of gendered relations as heteronormative and stable, by radically revising and rewriting this ideology. In 'Kew Gardens', the last of the four couples, a young couple, together push the woman's parasol into the earth, so symbolising their relationship as hopeful, although the narrator hints at deeper meaning behind this gesture:

The couple stood still on the edge of the flower-bed, and together pressed the end of the parasol deep down into the soft earth. The action and the fact that his hand rested on the top of hers expressed their feeling in a strange way, as these short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far and thus alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them and were to their inexperienced touch so massive.

Woolf here suggests that solid objects like parasols are needed to confirm unexpressed feelings, and hence stave off the slipperiness of words whose meanings young lovers are unable to articulate, so becoming symbols of trust, and a protection against potential disruption through misunderstanding.

Mansfield in 'The Escape' written c. July 1920^t, reverses Woolf's sentiments by introducing the parasol as a sign of domestic discord between a middle-aged married couple in a story where in the words of one critic 'language blazes'.²⁰ It begins with the wife's blaming her husband for missing the train: 'It was his fault, wholly and solely his fault, that they had missed the train'; but in her reconstruction of events, her anger at her husband's ineffectuality takes the extreme form of rejecting her parasol and by implication the traditional female role of using one for protection. Her husband's suggestion that she raise the parasol to protect her face from the dust swirling up from the road as they speed along in a horse-drawn carriage to catch another train, provokes an explosion of rage:

'Why don't you put up your parasol?' he suggested. It was on the front seat, and he leaned forward to hand it to her. At that she suddenly sat upright and blazed again. 'Please leave my parasol alone. I don't want my parasol! Anyone who was not utterly insensitive would know that I'm far, far too exhausted to hold up a parasol. And with a wind tugging at it.... Put it down at once,' she flashed, and then snatched the parasol from him, tossed it into the crumpled hood behind and subsided panting.

The solidity of Woolf's lovers in planting the parasol like a tree is here overturned by the image of the airborne parasol – it later flies out of the hood into the road forcing the driver to stop - a sign of marital discord. [parasol is thematic, pointer /escape;

²⁰ W.H. New, 'Reading "The Escape"' in *Katherine Mansfield: In From the Margin*, ed. Roger Robinson (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), pp. 90-11 (p.99)

narrative ploy/ ostensible cause of quarrel; agent of cinematic separation) If one reads these two passages in counterpoint, Mansfield is clearly replacing Woolf's idealism with a far more sceptical and cynical view of human relations. In her realm of sexual politics, of unstable power relations marked by the wife's vituperative retaliation against her husband, forcing her to an extreme, the parasol is used as a cause of discord, a vehicle for her anger; in this image of a collapse in marital relations, the woman's irrational, hysterical outburst closes down any attempt at reason or civil communication, in sharp contradiction to Woolf's message in 'Kew Gardens'.

In conclusion - both writers were acutely conscious of the short story as fictional artefact, and introduced structural fragmentation, while also gaining a more fluid expression of subjectivity as they rewrote literary conventions into a feminist modernism. Woolf shows dissonance from the earlier tradition in her subversion of fictional convention in her search for new form. But Mansfield is more at home in the genre – not only does she rewrite conventions, she adds a theatrical and dramatic dimension, uses props, the telling gesture, techniques of animation and impersonation, cinematic devices like montage, cutting and flashback to shape and make the story come to life. By 1920 Mansfield's illness and disaffection were such that she refused to see Woolf any more. Yet there was an

acknowledgement of what she was capable of, as Woolf wrote in her Diary after her death: 'though I can do this better than she could, where's she who could do what I can't';²¹ and as she confessed: 'I was jealous of her writing, the only writing I have been jealous of'.²²

²¹ Woolf, *Diary*, 2, p. 226.

²² Woolf, *Diary*, 2, p. 227, 16 January 1923.

