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Mansfield, France and Childhood

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In her stories written after those collected in *In a German Pension* (published in 1911) and before the first draft of 'The Aloe' written in March-May 1915, Mansfield attempts to refine and consolidate her style through literary experimentation,¹ (Kaplan 1991: 204). This is particularly true of her themes of female vulnerability and transgression, in stories that focus on the child's confusions inaugurated by adult turmoil; as for example in 'The Child Who Was Tired' (1910), and 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' (1910—published in 1912), and even the grotesque child in 'The Woman at the Store' (1912). In two stories published in *Rhythm* in 1912 (but written earlier probably in 1910) that reflect the family dynamics of her own childhood, 'New Dresses', 'The Little Girl', she represents the girl in relation to her family members, as both victim of parental power or indifference and transgressor of family protocols. These stories are usually seen as emotional forerunners of 'The Aloe' (and later *Prelude*), which she worked on in Paris in March 1915, although the posthumously published story, 'Something Childish But Very Natural' (written January 1914 in Rue des Tournes in Paris), might also be claimed as a thematic and structural precursor.

¹ Antony Alpers (ed.) *The Stories of Katherine Mansfield: The Definitive Edition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), says, p. 552. that 'there was much uncertainty of style over the next three years (after 1911) as she tried to attain a natural voice resolving the pull between satire and art and the pull between New Zealand and Europe.'

Mansfield's journeys to Paris, from her first 'honeymoon' visit with Middleton Murry in May and again in December 1912, when she first met the circle of writers, artists and intellectuals associated with *Rhythm*, and then a third visit from December 1913 to February 1914, seem to have inaugurated a new freedom artistically. (See Kimber, 'Mansfield, Rhythm and the Émigré Connection', *KM The View from France*, pp. 59-61). This is more than what she claimed in a letter to Koteliensky in November 1915 saying: 'all my observation is so *detailed*, as it always is when I get to France', for it includes experimentation in form and technique, and some change in subject matter.² By late 1913 and early 1914, when her relationship with Middleton Murry was being threatened by the decline in his affairs (Stephen Swift's bankruptcy which left Murry responsible for *Rhythm's* debts and he had to return to England) -- the discovery of Paris as an alternative place in which to write, encouraged her to reflect on this relationship and her own life. The December visit, I suggest, coincides with a transition from the subject matter of the girl-child as in the *Rhythm* stories of 1911-12, to explorations of the subject at a later stage of maturation, at adolescence, a time between childhood and adulthood, when awakening sexual desire is enmeshed with fantasy, yet the pull towards childhood remains. This is an age which is closer to the female protagonists of earlier sketches and stories like 'Summer Idylle', her unfinished novel of 1906, 'Juliet', and 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' (1908), all written before she left New Zealand.³ -- 'Something Childish But

² Letter to S.S. Koteliensky, 19 November 1915, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott. 5 vols. Vol 1. 1903-1917 (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1984), pp. 199-200.

³Alpers, *Katherine Mansfield: A Biography*, p, 108, makes the point that Mansfield only recovers the gift that produced 'The Tiredness of Rosabel', after a seven year ordeal (1909-16), and claims 'The same disorientation and want of emotional security which was betraying her into equivocation in her personal relationships, was betraying her into cynicism, self-consciousness, unoriginality and private emotionalism in her writing. Write as she might, so long as she was living this sort of life she

Very Natural', I believe, represents a new departure in that it explores adolescent love and disappointment with reference to a model of sexuality based on likeness not difference. Mansfield shows the movements of the psyches of the youthful couple, Edna and Henry, who act without the constraining influence of adults, yet whose unconscious drives begin to conflict with their conscious wishes. **The story anticipates two others:** The lone female traveller who in a chance encounter meets and rejects the advances of a man, reappears in the 'The Little Governess', also written in Paris in 1915; while its portraits of the young couple anticipate Stanley and Linda Burnell of 'The Aloe' and 'Prelude' (Edna is 16, the age that Linda marries Stanley), and its length and use of numbered episodes to represent different sequences of their relationship anticipates the episodic structure of these later works.

The story was written in January 1914, and belongs to a lean period in Mansfield's artistic life. In 1913 and 1914 she wrote very little, apart from a chapter her incomplete bildungsroman *Maata* (August –November 1913), although notably she published (in the *Blue Review*) three sketches named 'Epilogues' (to one of which it shows affinities), written in London but set in Geneva. It departs from the mood of 'New Dresses' and 'The Little Girl', which vindicate the girl child who is disobedient and suffers her parents disapproval, to address (according to Pamela Dunbar) 'the failure to make the transition from childhood into adulthood, seen as a failure within the individual psyche, not external pressures'.⁴ The nearly 18-year-old Henry falls passionately in love with 16-year-old Edna whom he meets in a railway carriage; she at first reciprocates

could not hope to recover the clarity and truthfulness she had achieved when she wrote *The Tiredness of Rosabel* (180).

⁴ Pamela Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 94-98.

verbally, but remains unresponsive to his physical overtures; she agrees to share a cottage with him, then suddenly changes her mind as he waits for her, filled with sexual anticipation, so rejecting their fantasy of a life together. The story is often read in the light of Mansfield's relationship with Murry, particularly in the delivery of Edna's telegram at the conclusion which tells Henry of her change of heart, seemingly a fictional reenactment (through gender transposition) of Mansfield's disappointment at Murry's telegrams to her in February(?) saying that due to the bankruptcy charges he cannot return to France: 'Im afraid I am rather childish about people coming & going—and, just now, at this moment when the little boy handed me your telegram –the disappointment is hard to bear'.⁵ On the other hand it can also be seen in the light of her frustration with expectations of being the housekeeper as noted in a letter to Murry written in Spring 1913, -- as creating an alternative scenario

Am I such a tyrant Jack dear—or do you say it mainly to tease me? I suppose I am a bad manager and the house seems to take up so much time if it isn't looked after with some sort of method I mean... when I have to clear up twice over or wash unnecessary things, I get frightfully impatient and want to be working. So often this week I've heard you and Gordon talking while I washed dishes, Well someone's got to wash dishes and get food. (Fulbrook 22-23; Kaplan, 97)

As with 'The Little Governess' and 'Something Childish', the earlier, unpublished 'His Sisters' Keeper' (1909), and 'An Indiscreet Journey', written in Paris in May 1915, all of which are based on train journeys, metropolitan modes of travel and the technologies of urban modernity were providing Mansfield with a new dimension for her exploration of psychological interiority (as bus travel did in 'The Tiredness of Rosabel'). The realistic setting of urban travel contrasts with the protagonists' untenable dreams;

⁵ To J.M. Murray [10 February 1914], *The collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, I, p. 136. Mary Burgan, *Illness, Gender and Writing: The Case of Katherine Mansfield* (Baltimore: MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 95-98 (96).

and provides an objective correlative for the disordered psyche, the disorientation of the youthful, inexperienced couple.

Mansfield's technique is partly satiric, but also introduces symbol, image and techniques of fairy tale into this parable about the dangers of holding on to childhood. Henry's hyperbolic effusions such as 'Isn't life wonderful' (p. 600) are undermined by imagery of darkness and nightfall: e.g. the tunnel through which the train dashes at that moment that Edna replies, saying "I have been a fatalist for a long time"—a pause—"many months"—symbolizes a crucial failure of communication because when he asked for an explanation she 'could not speak against the noise' (600); this is reinforced by her physically moving away from him on a second occasion when the train enters a tunnel (602). Henry's youthful folly is also imaged by his reliance on appearances, including names, titles, labels—e.g. he examines the covers of books but never reads them. Henry does not understand the title of the Coleridge poem—'Something Childish But Very Natural' which catapults him into his romance with Edna (for stopping to read it at a bookstall in that transient space of the railway platform, makes him run for the train, and enter the wrong carriage). He uses it to sum up his philosophy of life, but misquotes the title and mistakenly aligns childish with nature as if they are the same thing—saying

'Just look at you and me. Here we are—that's all there is to be said. I know about you and you know about me—we've just found each other—quite simply—just by being natural. That's all life is—Something childish **and** very natural. Isn't it?' (157) : (604)

Childish is defined by the OED as 'belonging to childhood' but has pejorative meanings of 'not befitting a mature age, infantile, juvenile, silly', and contrasts to 'childlike' meaning 'belonging to a child, filial, characteristic of a child, innocence,

meekness used in a good sense.⁶ Coleridge's title introduces 'natural' as an exception or qualification, with the adverbial 'but'-- to see these states as equivalent symptomizes Henry's willing delusion. Later, Henry separates names from reality they refer to, when in keeping with the growing the fantasy of their relationships they find 'their own village, where they will live, because of the name "There's white geese in that name," said Henry... "And a river and little low houses with old men sitting outside them"' The word 'natural' is then used, as a non sequitur when Edna explains to Henry that she hates her life as a secretary: 'My mother is a Hungarian—I believe that makes me hate it even more'. That seemed to Henry **quite natural**. 'It would' he said. (Alpers, 156). _

Mansfield draws on a Wildean model of sexuality based on male desire to overturn assumptions about beauty and the state of being in love as natural attributes. Edna's fragile appearance evokes a natural grace in Henry's eye, but this produces an unnatural physiological reaction: "'How beautiful she is! How simply beautiful she is!" Sang Henry's heart, and swelled with the words, bigger and bigger and trembling like a marvellous bubble—so that he was afraid to breathe for fear of breaking it' (599)—and the unnaturalness of his reaction is symbolized by other mechanistic images, such as when his heart 'began to thump and beat to the beat of the train' (595). Edna mirrors Henry's excitement at being in love but, unable to articulate desire on her own terms, passively allows him to assume an intimacy based on his concept of the 'natural': 'They could not be utter strangers to each other if she spoke so simply and naturally' (600). Henry's erasure of difference by 'naturalising' them, and constructing a fantasy of exclusive likeness and similarity, undermines the romance:

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols

‘It’s people that make things so –silly. As long as you can keep away from them you’re safe and happy.’

‘Oh, I’ve thought that for a long time.’

‘Then you’re just like me,’ said Henry, ... ‘I believe that we’re the only two people alive who think as we do. In fact I’m sure of it.’ (604)

Later, as dream overtakes reality, ‘he saw himself and Edna as two very small children, walking through the streets’ (612).

[CUT? This relationship can be read with reference to that at the end of ‘The Little Girl’, when the child is finally reconciled to her father, and there is an allusion to Little Red Riding Hood: ‘What a big heart you have got father dear’ (571), As Kate Fulbrook says, pointing to the suppressed sexuality in this remark, this is a model of female sexuality that goes beyond those that Freud and Jung suggest, the basis of which is reflective, referring to similarity rather than difference, for sexual difference is not the main factor’ (Fulbrook 51).⁷ Mansfield first introduces this in her earlier stories of female desire like ‘Summer Idylle’ (about two young women one Maori one Pakeha) The focus on similarity, overlaps with stories which are less about sexual attraction than the relationships between two sides of the self, --self and alter ego-- in uncanny appearances of strangers who turn out to be similar to the narrator as in stories about doubles/doppelgänger like ‘His Sisters’ Keeper’ and finally in stories about relationships of identity between siblings, When the Wind Blows (the two children)] All of these also recalls Mansfield’s bond with Murry, dominated, as their correspondence from 1913 reveals, by the pathological sense of an ‘exclusive conspiracy’, imaging themselves as ‘two fond children in a cottage’, united against the rest of the world in a ‘childish secret

⁷ Kate Fulbrook, p. 51

society of two', so avoiding entrapment in the traditional roles of husband and wife.⁸ As Mansfield wrote later in her journal (125—Bardolph 163). 'Being children gave us the chance to play at life ... not to live'.

Edna justifies her desire for a platonic relationship by appealing to the safety of childhood: 'we wouldn't be children any more'. The predisposition for childhood purity and innocence which the story critiques [through Henry's misunderstanding of natural and childish], is also implicitly questioned in the lovers' impasse of the conclusion. Edna rejects adulthood, defined according to the biological, generative metaphors by which the female was stereotypically depicted then, but she is no longer a child either, and so is not 'natural' any more in this sense than Henry is by virtue of his folly in love and opinion of 'childishness' as a natural or normative state. Again I point to two possible readings: Edna prefers this state of artificiality and stasis, because to accept Henry's proposal would be to concede to patriarchal control. On the other hand this preference for an infantile, childlike state makes her comparable to the protagonist of 'The Little Governess'. Both women lack the restless energies and potential for new forms of female self definition exhibited by Mansfield's adventurous protagonists in 'An Indiscreet Journey', and 'His Sisters' Keeper', whose train travel is associated with taking sexual risks.⁹

Mansfield uses 'childish' of female protagonists in other stories (often in chance encounters—and of herself) to imply ambiguity and the unpredictability of appearances, how they partly reflect, partly camouflage what lies beneath. In the enigmatic 'His Sisters' Keeper' (1909), the dangerous world of sexuality that Edna refuses to enter is

⁸ Mary Burgen, *Illness, Gender and Writing*, 96; Cherry Hankin, n Roger Robinson 31.

⁹ Sydney Janet Kaplan, p. 60

embodied in the Fellow Passenger, apparently the narrator's alter ego, who sits opposite her in the train. The duplicity of the sexually experienced woman who lacks virtue yet appears youthful, is symbolised by the artifice of her appearance. 'The Fellow Passenger was a woman, obviously young still, but over dressed, her childish face covered with rouge and powder, her pretty brown hair curled and puffed against her hat' (Dunbar, 178). As Angela Smith notes her name, Lily, develops further the contradiction between purity/ innocence and vice /experience, in this portrayal of doubles [that comes out in the contrasting stories the two women tell about their relationships with their brothers one seemingly innocent, the other sinister and hinting at incest].¹⁰ In another story whose female characters also appear to be doubles—Epilogue I, 'Pension Seguin' (written in Spring 1913 and set in Geneva), the words 'childish' and 'natural' are again used ironically. The sketch hinges on the narrator's shock of finding that the apparently tranquil pension is not what it appears to be. Struck by the white surfaces and decor of the psalon in the pension, and especially of the white mats which dot its floor, the narrator, like Henry in 'Something Childish But Quite Natural', mistakenly links 'childish' with virtue and the 'virginal' saying: 'You would have thought that all the long years of Madame's virginity had been devoted to the making of white mats—that the childish voice had lisped its numbers in work crochet stitches' (Alpers 138).... The narrator decides to take a room in the pension, because 'mats are essentially the fruits of pious solitude'. (578), Mme Seguin, however, contradicts the impression of innocence and purity; for the room she wants to let to the narrator has been haunted by the ghost of the previous occupant's father, which has forced him to return to Buenos Ayres. This, Mme Seguin says ironically, is 'Quite natural'. This anomalous statement, (assuming a

¹⁰ Angela Smith

belief that what is not visible is 'natural') leads to the narrator's attack on the sentimental Edwardian belief that children are superior to adults due to their greater intuition or instinct such as through contact with unseen forces, in the environment whether mystical or supernatural;¹¹ the narrator confessing both 'respect and abhorrence' for 'those penetrating spirits who are not susceptible to appearances', offers 'to an innocent child who might beg for the truth of the matter' a mock homily: 'What is there to believe in except appearances?'... and she concludes 'be content with appearances'. Yet Mansfield characteristically razes to the ground the world of her own observations, the story comically undermines the narrator's inferences (showing how fallacious this reasoning is), for Mme Seguin's pension is in fact a nightmare of chaos, largely caused by a baby out of tune with its own nature that bangs its head against the wall and floor, while Mme Seguin announces that the mats were not made by her, as everyone thinks, but 'by my friend, Madame Kummer, who has the pension on the first floor'. So I see that in this story Mansfield using the concept of the double, or doppelganger to work through the same themes of delusion and self deception that she tackles with reference to the couple in 'Something Childish and Very Natural'

CONCLUSION: The stories I have examined, written during these years, show Mansfield moving towards the technical and thematic advances of 'The Aloe'. Natural phenomena –the fragile beauty of Edna, the white mats which apparently symbolize virginity and purity, -- are only tenuous evidence of reality, the status quo—to the observer's eye. Mansfield shift the emphasis to the problems of subjectivity for the individual who is undermined by these disconnections, and lacking assurance that

¹¹ Cherry Hankin, 'Katherine Mansfield and the Cult of Childhood', *Katherine Mansfield: In From the Margins*, ed. Roger Robinson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994), pp. 25-35 (28)

appearances do correspond to reality, experiences a heightened sense of solitude. Antony Alpers has noted with reference to Mansfield's travel pieces written in 1911, 'Journey to Bruges' and 'A Truthful Adventure', the beginning of a 'new concern, the delineation of spaces between people which she later captured as the Impressionists had captured light — the viewpoint had to float.[...] Katherine Mansfield achieved this most readily in a context of travel and movement among other deracinees'.¹² In 'Something Childish But Quite Natural', this extends to a perception of psychological loneliness with the defeat of the dream, as stated in the Coleridge poem quoted in the story: 'But then one awakes and where am I/All, all alone', and emphasized in the fall of night in its conclusion: 'The garden became full of shadows—they spun a web of darkness over the cottage and the trees and Henry and the telegram. But Henry did not make a move' (616). Finally, if this perception of individual isolation allows Mansfield to delineate spaces between people, then this anticipates her connecting techniques in 'The Aloe', in which the narrative viewpoint moves between the four women linking them in 'gliding shifts' (Ruth Parklin-Gounelas, *KM Reading Other women*, 4), building the life cycle from youth to old age through the figure of Kezia.¹³ As Pamela Dunbar states

the adolescent Beryl, and the wife and mother Linda, and indeed the grandmother Mrs Fairfield, are all presented as **future aspects of the young girl**; and the intimate one to one encounters Kezia has with each of them subtly underlines the point. This conception of a single, fourfold personality enables Mansfield to set up a network of relationships that foretell her heroine's future development.¹⁴

¹² Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 127.

¹³ Ruth Parkin Gounelas, 'Katherine Mansfield: Reading Other Women', in

¹⁴ Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield*, 148-49. See also Parkin Gounelas, 50 (Robinson ed) 'Three and a half generations of Fairfield women are presented in subtle nuances of interrelatedness whereby each is present in the others as echo'.—offered resistance and submission to feminine but modernist in self consciousness (52)

As a story of the female's failure at a liminal stage of development to reach adulthood, 'Something Childish but Quite Natural' represents a further stage in Mansfield's study of femininity as constructed under patriarchy (Parkin-Gounelas, 45) -- from the tremulous heroines of her earlier stories written in New Zealand. Edna's fluctuations in identity and desire, her preference for a virginal state might be read in terms of Mansfield's ongoing exploration of the theme of female sexual identity. In particular, she anticipates the constraints on maturity and adulthood developed in 'The Aloe' found in the individual forms of domestic entrapment in the patriarchal household that the different women experience: the adolescent virginal aunt Beryl, the immature mother, Linda, the role-bound grandmother, Mrs Fairfield.

