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Mansfield as traveller writer: space, identity, home

Mansfield's travels in Europe after 1909, make her resemble the figure of the postcolonial woman writer who, in Elleke Boehmer's terms, is 'more likely to be a cultural traveler, or an "extra-territorial" than a national. Ex colonial by birth [...] cosmopolitan in almost every other way, [she] works within the Western metropolis, while at the same time retaining thematic and /or political connections with a national, ethnic or regional background' (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, OUP, 2005, p. 227) .

This paper examines Mansfield as a post/colonial, mobile writer, who in travelling and writing, occupies different spaces which demand new points of identification and referencing, because they lie outside culturally coded norms. Referring to the types of journey she made I will identify her as both an obsessional and a melancholic traveller (with reference to Stephen M. Levin, *The Contemporary Anglophone Travel Novel* (Routledge 2008)), drawing a comparison between first person travel narratives set in Europe, and stories with female travellers as in 'The Little Governess', and the later New Zealand stories, like 'Prelude' and 'The Garden Party' where journeys are represented in symbolic and mythological terms.

The paper will suggest that journeys and travel are potent metaphors by which to read Mansfield's work, because they offer ways of articulating the self, and show how restlessness and movement enabled her to adopt many guises, yet also to shape her search for and eventual articulation of 'home'.

Mansfield as Traveller–Writer: Place, Space and Home

‘That undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller ever returns’

Tennyson

Katherine Mansfield, both in her life and work, was in many ways the paradigmatic colonial woman writer-traveller similar to other New Zealanders like Robin Hyde, Janet Frame and Fleur Adcock, and Australians such as Miles Franklin, and Christina Stead. In her youthful rebellion against the colony and departure to the metropolitan homeland of England she anticipated those who would follow. But she alone would address the subject of her homelessness and homecoming in terms that would require a new modernist art practice to give it form. In this talk I refer to Mansfield’s journeys and travel in order to show how they resonate in her work because of the possibilities for the articulation and refashioning of selfhood (or in her case of the multiple versions of the self). Furthermore, tropes of journeying and movement when associated with writing, give a particular shape to her preoccupations with doubleness and division, transience and mutability, and most significantly mortality and death, so directly affecting her modernist practice.

Mansfield’s own journeys can be grouped into two categories. First, her double exile from New Zealand before the age of 20 meant making the longest journey then possible, from one side of the world to another, from New Zealand to the UK; first in 1903 when 15, back again in 1906, returning permanently to London in 1908 at the age of 19. But the journey in 1908 meant transplantation without return and it introduced another dimension to travel. Only through writing,

drawing from memory and imagination, and inspired by her intense longing for reunion with family and country, would Mansfield be able to effect a homecoming. Secondly, after she arrived in England there were multiple short journeys as Mansfield became increasingly nomadic, moving constantly from one apartment or boarding house to another both before and during her relationship with Middleton Murry. She also moved around different parts of Europe but usually for practical reasons rather than to seek her destiny as she did in travelling from New Zealand: she travelled to Bad Worishofen in Bavaria in 1909 with her mother in order to complete the term of her unwanted pregnancy; then after TB was diagnosed in 1917 to the warmer climates of France and Switzerland. Yet she also travelled for personal, private reasons, to escape Murry as in her clandestine journey to visit Francis Carco within the war zone in France in February 1915, or to seek freedom and anonymity in foreign lands.

Mansfield records these forays into strange places, exulting at the liberation they offered, and abruptly dismissing her current circumstances -- e.g. in the mysterious journey she made on the spur of the moment to Brussels in April 1909 (just after her abortive marriage to George Bowden in March and before her mother arrived from New Zealand in May), on the coach to Harwich, she writes, 'The carriage is full but I feel I am going home. To escape England it is my great desire. I loathe England' (Letter to Garnet Trowell; *Letters*, I, 90). This startling contradiction – equating escape to an unknown destination with homecoming – shows the complexity of the notion of home to Mansfield (at this time of personal disaster). It points to her unstated reliance on the imagination's

ability to discover the homely within the new and strange, in keeping with her Wildean aesthetic of defamiliarisation. It may also reflect her radical dispossession as a colonial when travelling in diasporic space, a reflex of her multiple cultural and national identities. In the words of V.S. Naipaul, she may have been seeking to find through the impression of homelessness a 'way in this world' (Cited in Levin, 35). Yet travel is intimately associated with her creativity as Gerri Kimber notes, saying 'she required this constant journeying and instability in order to bring her creative temperament to the surface' (*European Connections*, 95), and as Laura Marcus said yesterday noting the connection between movement and narrative. On at least one occasion (her trip to Gray in 1915 to visit Francis Carco), it released her from writer's block. Finally, Mansfield's rejection of England in this comment is prescient because all her great stories about New Zealand would be written on the continent, which became the 'home' for her creative forces, rather than England about which she frequently asserted her dislike.

In comparing her European journeys -- short trips as compared to the long haul-- Mansfield's intense mobility has parallels with what Stephen Levin in his typology of modern travel narratives calls the obsessional traveller, that is, someone who seeks separation from the symbolic, paternal order and traverses cultural boundaries (e.g. in order to escape the overtly restrictive expectations of gender roles which produce the syndrome of an inauthentic self), to articulate a 'nomadic idiom of selfhood'. The goal of such a traveller is to seek reality and to formulate a truer version of the self through exerting control over an imagined geography (Levin, 60, 76). The first type of journey from which

there was no return, and which marked her as a colonial in Europe, by contrast, makes her closer to what Levin describes as the melancholic traveller. Unlike the obsessional traveller who submits the alien territory they encounter to a representational scheme of their own making (Levin 36, 52, 107), the melancholic traveller's journey gestures towards a commitment to loss (106): he/she treats objects as tainted by the shadow of future separation, and experiences displacement predicated on rejection. The traveller refuses to surrender the 'lost' object and longs instead for the idealised object as an insufficient replacement (112-3). In applying this model to Mansfield (and to simplify the Levin's psychoanalytic theorisations), I suggest that it points to her extreme grief for her brother, Leslie Heron, after his accidental death in Belgium in 1915; and her idealisation of him as the symbolic centre of her childhood, of which they had shared memories when they were together in London in the months before he died. [ADD note on M's psychology plus ref to Burgan here] These responses, her determination to create a symbolic home in writing, were compounded by the progression of her illness after 1917.

Mansfield resembles the melancholy traveller, then, in her pervasive nostalgia for what has been lost, and in her desire to travel to the past and recapture it through writing. Mourning, loss and longing extend to a new appreciation of country as homeland:

Yes, I want to write about my country until I simply exhaust my store. Not only because it is a 'sacred debt' that I pay to my country because my brother and I were born there, but also because in my thoughts I range with him over all the remembered places, I am never far away from them, I long to renew them in writing. [*Notebooks II*, 32 (entry, 22 Jan 1916)]

The desire to write a tribute to her country of origin—the ‘sacred debt’-- is suggestive of later melancholic writers noted by Levin who also left their homelands for foreign shores and had to make a reckoning with this severance as V.S. Naipaul does in *An Enigma of Arrival*. Significantly, however, unlike postcolonial writers who are obsessed with movement back and forth between the colony and the metropolitan centre, Mansfield never represents this journey in her fictions although it is arguably a source of her most metaphoric and figurative mode (that is, it is never thematised or a topic other than in dream, fantasy, or imaginative recreation).

In examining Mansfield’s self representation as woman writer traveller in several stories, and of the female traveller in others, I compare them with the New Zealand stories which mark her out as the melancholic traveller, because their subject matter is mediated through memory and loss. The stories comprise her exploration in the imagination of a figurative return, evidence of the melancholic subject’s renewed engagement with the state before the loss occurred, and an acceptance of the fragmentation of selfhood (Levin 52; 107-8); by contrast to the voyage out with its hopes and expectations, this is a journey through time that is marked by finality and death.

First person travel narratives

Mansfield’s first person travel narratives, most of which were written soon after her arrival in England, and so are relatively early stories, are a form of travel writing. They contain elements of reportage, as her narrator observes new, foreign places, her eye constantly registering differences imposed by the exotic. A surrogate for herself, her narrator often travels in disguise, or at least

is reticent about her identity, particularly her New Zealand one, here resembling what Elleke Boehmer calls a cultural traveler, or an “extra-territorial” rather than a national (*Colonial/Postcolonial Literature* 227). [In the case of New Zealand, however, as Mark Williams and Jane Stafford point out, it was at that time difficult to talk about a distinctive New Zealand national identity, as the cultural nationalist tradition did not emerge until the 1930s (REF)]. In ‘The Luft Bad’, for example, a story written in Bavaria and published in *In a German Pension* in 1911), when she is asked whether she is American or English, she is non-committal about her true identity (Mansfield, *Stories* 732). On her trip to Brussels in 1909 she passed herself off as Mrs K. Bendall (after her New Zealand friend Edie Bendall). by taking a suitcase with these initials inscribed (Tomalin, 66; Alpers p. 93); and when in another story about the same trip, ‘A Truthful Adventure’, an acquaintance from her school in New Zealand, recognises her and addresses her as, Katherine --she is disconcerted by being exposed and by the colonial, and national affiliations this implies (535). The narrator has upon arrival fantasies about herself as a tourist whereby ‘I shall dream away whole days’ while her rejection at the story’s end is reinforced by the sight of ‘the familiar guide-book’ (536) emerging from the pocket of her friend’s husband. The narrator’s disguise is laid bare in ‘An Indiscreet Journey’ about the visit to Carco in France in 1915. She dresses up in a borrowed old Burberry, ‘as sign and token of the undisputed venerable traveller’ (617) (which the story explicitly contradicts)_ and adopts the familiar ploy of a false letter to get past the French border guards in order to pass into the town of Grey, forbidden to women, where Carco was stationed. Expediency might dictate these disguises as in this case, but donning different masks while on the move no

doubt concealed her colonialism which in her view often clashed with metropolitan imaging of the subject/artist. It also fulfilled the artistic purpose which her love of impersonation served, of living out the artifice which she projected in her art.

In these early stories told by the narrator traveller, therefore, travel took Mansfield into a transnational, translational space outside national boundaries, and through its mutational modes she continued to travesty/parody the authenticity of her origins as she had done since her arrival in London. Travel also enabled her to exploit in her writings the unspecific, and indistinct qualities of space which make it the place of the 'other', by contrast to the defining features of place as a location of being, and a site of community and culturally inflected codes (Michelucci 3). Mansfield's traveller narrators, as Laetitia Rech pointed out yesterday, are liminal, interstitial figures, because they lack cultural coordinates; they occupy spaces outside cultural 'norms' and are subject to the destabilisation of the fixed reference points of time and place. In writing about being on the move in 'The Journey to Bruges' she says [elsewhere associated the push off in writing with travel

In the shortest sea voyage there is no sense of time. You have been down in the cabin for hours or days or years. Nobody knows or cares. You know all the people to the point of indifference. You do not believe in dry land any more—you are caught in the pendulum itself and left there, idly swinging. (528)

In keeping with the model of the obsessive traveller, Mansfield's surrogate narrators 'saturate empty space with their subjectivity' (Levin 36) as they gesture towards restoration to compensate for their separation from the symbolic sphere, and to explore alternative versions of themselves. In other

stories Mansfield constructs female travellers who, when removed from their customary cultural reference points, become vulnerable to fantasy and delusion, and to the encroachment of predatory male figures.

European Travel and Gender in Mansfield's stories

According to Sara Mills, a greater variety of spatial roles for women was constructed in late colonialism, and moving between or beyond their normal domestic or vocational places allowed women to test out the expectations of class and gender, and individualise themselves against commonplace expectations (*Gender and Colonial Space* 3). Mansfield's heroines who undertake journeys in such stories told by third person narrators, illustrate the pressure on women/heroines who wish to identify themselves as individuals by challenging the codes concerning their conduct within the public sphere, and negotiate meaning within the predominantly masculinised discursive fields. Mansfield's female travellers inhabit the new space created by women's mobilisation demonstrating increased subjectivity in the form of dream, fantasy, and fairy tale romance, although they usually end in a return to reality often involving disappointment or deflation. This is a familiar scenario in three bicameral stories according to David Trotter's identification: e.g. the working class girl, in 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' who journeys across London in a bus daydreams, while recoiling from her surroundings: 'the sickening smell of warm humanity [...] everybody had the same expression, sitting so still, staring in front of them' (513). The story's reworking of motifs from Cinderella, noted by Pamela Dunbar (*Radical Mansfield* 7), continue when she reaches her 4th floor room, she embarks on an extravagant alternative journey, in a fantasy in which

she becomes an upper class girl, meets her handsome prince and enjoys a fairy tale romance/ending which is at odds with the realities of her impoverished and reduced circumstances (Lopez Perez PAGE) . The wealthy Rosemary Fell in 'A Cup of Tea', does the opposite; in travelling round London in her chaffeur-driven car, sees herself as like Dostoevsky, she has a chance meeting with an impoverished waif, ' a little battered creature' (400). Inspired by the thought that such a scene could come out of Dostoyevsky, she brings the girl home for a cup of tea , only to come down to earth when she realises that her husband is attracted by the waif's beauty.

The fluctuating boundaries between the self and not self, between the subject and the external world which come with the focus on the female consciousness shows space with its lack of differentiation and indefiniteness, overlapping with place with and its cultural codings, tempting some subjects to transgress and luring others into victimhood (Michelucci 3). In 'The Little Governess', a story about an unworldly young lady, whose first journey abroad to take up a new post in Germany ends disastrously as she misses her appointment with her employer because she is ignorant of the protocols of tipping, oblivious to the vindictiveness of the porter on the railway station and the waiter in the hotel in Germany, and worst of all misjudges the predatory behaviour of the apparently benign but predatory old man who transgresses the 'femmes seules' restriction of her carriage, after the porter removes the notice - and romanticizes him as a Father Christmas.. Mansfield undoubtedly draws on her own experience, for the deceiving porter is reminiscent of the porter at the station at Ostend in 'The Journey to Bruges' who watches her run up and down the platform alongside

the wrong train, thinking it will depart without her, then says 'I knew you'd be doin' that' [...] 'I nearly come and stop you, I seen you from 'ere'. (524)

New Zealand Stories: Mansfield as Melancholy Traveller

Mansfield's late stories about her childhood show the orientation of the melancholic traveller who is resigned to alienation, whose nostalgia is a source of artistic inspiration, and who renews an affiliation with the order that she sought to escape (Levin 107-08). According to Pamela Dunbar they are reconstructed through 'nostalgic idealisation' (131) and can be read as an attempt to compensate for her estrangement from her family after leaving New Zealand. The family microcosm is brought to life through an intense relatedness: place is inhabited in multiple ways through representing the thoughts and impressions of the different characters, although the informing consciousness is usually that of a child. These differ from the travel stories where place is associated with the new and exotic, but they resemble them in that the uncanny or strange emerges from what is already known or familiar (e.g. Laura Marcus's description of the subject misrecognition of herself when catching sight of her face in a railway carriage window, and the blurring of the borders between inside and outside), as if in a twist of perception. Tensions appear between family members--e.g. Linda Burnell's silent recoil from Stanley's overbearing masculinity--yet Mansfield's manipulation of point of view from one to another conveys a sense of mobility, of life in motion (like a journey) and a negotiated interconnectedness. And further to the travel stories where the narrator is represented through disguise, Mansfield develops her mode of impersonation, to obscure the narrator, as Andrew Bennett points out, so that in passages of

description such as at the beginning of 'Prelude', the eye witnessing the scene is invisible, neutral (67). This impersonality extends to much of the details of setting and landscape, which are not conspicuously local to New Zealand.

Mansfield's artistic innovation was to make the characters merge into themselves and as author to merge into them, as she explains in a letter to Dorothy Brett in October 1917 about the writing of 'The Aloe', with her famous duck analogy (Bennett 59):

When I write about a duck I swear I am a duck with a round eye floating in a pond fringed with yellow blobs....For although that is as far as most people can get it is really only the 'prelude'. There follows the moment when you are more duck, more apple more Natasha than any of these objects could ever possibly be, and so you recreate them anew. (Mansfield, *Collected Letters* I, 330)

The journeys in these stories are represented in ways that enable Mansfield to symbolise loss, through metaphor or myth. They are shorter than her continental train journeys (in keeping with the microcosm and the child's point of view), from one location or social sphere to another, and they often function as markers between different levels of awareness or recognition, often beyond the character's bounds of comprehension. In 'The Garden Party', Laura's journey to the family of the dead carter takes her down the hill, across a broad road, along the lane, and when she reaches the house, down a passage and into the bedroom where he is laid out. This alternative social realm from the upper class sphere of the Sheridan's glittering party, embodies a new level of experience. Her new hat with its black ribbons now becomes a potent symbol of the death she encounters,

and it prefigures her own mortality. Her uncertainty about what has happened is registered in her comment to Laurie, her brother and alter ego:

But Laurie—‘ She stopped, she looked at her brother. ‘Isn’t life,’ she stammered, ‘isn’t life—‘ But what life was she couldn’t explain. No matter. He quite understood.
‘Isn’t it, darling?’ said Laurie (261).

In ‘The Dolls House’, the passage of the outcast children, the little Kelveys, down the road is registered through the eyes of Kezia, swinging on the gate.

Presently, looking along the road, she saw two little dots [...] Now she could see that they were the Kelveys [...] The Kelveys came nearer, and beside them walked their shadows, very long, stretching right across the road with their heads in the buttercups. Kezia clambered back on the gate; she had made up her mind; she swung out. (389)

Kate Fulbrook has drawn attention to the way that the Kelveys’ shadows cross the road and become absorbed into the buttercups beyond, at the same moment as Kezia makes up her mind to invite them in. The man-made road is transformed from a boundary into a space of transition, effecting movement from one social class to another; the symbolism is transcendent with intimations of mortality in the ‘shadows’ (115-6). Finally is the opening of ‘Prelude’ in which the entire family moves from their house in downtown Wellington in Tinakori Road, to the country, to what is now the outer suburb of Karori. This journey has the promise of a new life, but it too can be read back through Mansfield’s preoccupations. Kezia’s return to the old house on her own, before she begins the journey, and discovery of the relics of the family who have left, suggestively parallels Mansfield own search and gathering of remnants of family habitation through memory, in the work of fictional recreation.

In conclusion, Levin's psychoanalytical categories -- the obsessional and the melancholic traveller-- might be seen to correspond to the different generic formats of the stories. Mansfield writes a form of travel narrative in her stories about travel in Europe, but her late stories, written as a traveller through time and space, are modernist experimentations. 'Prelude' and 'At the Bay' comprise 12 part structures which are now seen as important for modernism and as evidence of a colonial inflection of the European modernist narrative. Yet I would argue that the emblems of travel and journey are equally, if not more useful than generic classification, in reading Mansfield. Travel and the making of journeys with the implications of restlessness, rootlessness, unknown destinations and then the cessation of movement with the full stop of arrival, might be more than metaphors or analogues for her modernist practice. The to and fro of travel, and Mansfield's artistic quest to find a way home, her determination to complete the colonial journey by overcoming the expanses of time and space, can be seen as the crucible for the fragmented form, abrupt transitions, and contrapuntal narrative structure of her literary modernism.

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