

POETICALLY SPEAKING

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TWO POEMS BY KATHERINE MANSFIELD

COMMENTS AND ANALYSES

BY

FERRICK GRAY

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

There are few who have heard of Katherine Mansfield (Mansfield from here on) and even fewer knowing of her poetry. She was better known for her short stories, but sadly today these too do not receive the attention they should.

Mansfield was the wife of John Middleton Murry, and it was he who published a collection of her poetry after her sudden death. It is believed that she likely would not have taken well to their publication, and unfortunately Murry had edited a lot of her poetry in his attempt to make her poetry more welcome and known to the general public.

Mansfield never considered herself a poet and was quite content to write casual verses and did not intend to have her poetry published, apart from those that appeared in journals by her own choice.

Nevertheless, her poetry is quite startling and refreshing and deserves to be recognized. Many of her poems were merely rough sketches and drafts that she never revised as she did not wish to be bothered with it. It was Murry who attempted to edit and change her poems. For better or worse? Many say for the worse.

The two poems Very Early Spring and The Awakening River are not necessarily outstanding or important pieces of work, but then Mansfield held her poetry as secondary to her short stories.

Although there may be a certain plainness to them, they do have a style which evokes striking imagery. Both poems deal with Nature and in some ways, they are a conversational piece with respect to whom they were supposed to have been written by. The language is simple, allowing the reader to enjoy the images rather than trying to determine what the poem is about. Intellectually, it is the construction of the images, and pleurably, it is the realization of the image.

We can safely assume that both poems were complete because he had them published long before her death in a literary review edited by Murry called Rhythm. They appeared in the 1912 Volume 1, Number 4 (p30) under Mansfield's name but calling them translations of Boris Petrovsky. This however, was one of a number of pseudonyms Mansfield used throughout her short but productive life.

It was the second poem, The Awakening River that provoked a blistering attack on Rhythm from Alfred Orage in his The New Age on April 18, 1912 (p589). We rarely, if ever see such things today. (Why is that?)

THE POEMS (AS THEY APPEARED IN “RHYTHM”)

VERY EARLY SPRING

The fields are snowbound no longer
 There are little blue lakes and flags of tenderest green.
 The snow has been caught up into the sky
 So many white clouds—and the blue of the sky is cold.
 Now the sun walks in the forest
 He touches the boughs and stems with his golden fingers
 They shiver, and wake from slumber.
 Over the barren branches he shakes his yellow curls.
 . . . Yet is the forest full of the sound of tears . . .
 A wind dances over the fields.
 Shrill and clear the sound of her waking laughter,
 Yet the little blue lakes tremble
 And the flags of tenderest green bend and quiver.

THE AWAKENING RIVER

The gulls are mad-in-love with the river
 And the river unveils her face and smiles.
 In her sleep—brooding eyes they mirror their shining wings.
 She lies on silver pillows: the sun leans over her.
 He warms and warms her, he kisses and kisses her.
 There are sparks in her hair and she stirs in laughter.
 Be careful, my beautiful waking one! you will catch on fire. .
 Wheeling and flying with the foam of the sea on their breasts
 The ineffable mists of the sea clinging to their wild wings
 Crying the rapture of the boundless ocean.
 The gulls are mad-in-love with the river.
 Wake! we are the dream thoughts flying from your heart.
 Wake! we are the songs of desire flowing from your bosom.
 O, I think the sun will lend her his great wings
 And the river will fly away to the sea with the mad-in-love birds.

(Translated from the Russian of Boris Petrovsky).

KATHERINE MANSFIELD.

METRICS

Due to the style of poetry, a full metrical analysis will not show anything more than analyzing a few verses. So, we shall look at four verses from each poem to see if we can discover anything interesting about them.

VERY EARLY SPRING (vs 1-4)

Thě fīelds | āre snōwbōund | nō lōngĕr
 Thĕre āre līt | tlĕ blūe lākes | ānd flāgs ōf | tĕndĕr | ěst grĕen
 Thĕ snōw | hās bĕĕn cāught | ūp ĩntō | thĕ skĕ
 Sō māny | whĭte clōuds | ānd thĕ blūe | ōf thĕ skĕ | ĩs cōld

We note the presence of the anapest which accounts for the pleasant rhythm along with the amphibrachs. This flow Mansfield has created is very much in line with the content of the poem.

THE AWAKENING RIVER (vs 8-11)

Whĕelĭng | ānd flĕyĭng | wĭth thĕ fōam | ōf thĕ sĕas | ōn thĕir brĕāsts
 Thĕ ĩnĕff | āblĕ mĭsts | ōf thĕ sĕa | clĭngĭng tō | thĕir wĭld wĭngs
 Crĕyĭng | thĕ rāptŭre | ōf thĕ bōund | lĕss ōcĕān
 Thĕ gŭlls āre | mād-ĭn-lōve | wĭth thĕ | rĭvĕr

Once again we find the anapest and amphibrach coming into play along with the occasional dactyl. The combination of these three in particular create a unique rhythm, and in this case sits extremely well the content it is reflecting. We can easily imagine the waves, their breaking and the excitement of the gulls caught in these four verses.

Both poems are written using much the same construct, being a rather relaxed anapestic meter. Although one may be inclined to label this as the (fictitious) vers libre, we can see and feel that there is something more structured in Mansfield's writing.¹

PSEUDONYMS AND THE NEW AGE RESPONSE

Mansfield used a number of variations of her name with family and friends, but with respect to her poetry apart from Katherine Mansfield, she used Elizabeth Stanley, Lili Heron and Boris Petrovsky. It was Boris Petrovsky that inspired the rather cruel attack regarding the poem The Awakening River.

Alfred Orage savaged Rhythm mid-April in 1912. Much of the comment, and there is a lot, was aimed at the editor Murry.

¹ Do remember that the poet is rarely, if ever concerned with what metrical feet occur in their verses. The poet has a form of melody in mind that they write to which imparts the rhythm into their poem using the best words and placement to create the desired effect. The analysis here is merely to see and explain why it is happening.

In criticising “Rhythm” we did not depart from this basis; and so judging, we were brought to conclude that “Rhythm” was the production of persons who were not living the life of art, but were running after sensationalism; dancing with seals in delirium, dreaming of murderous hags and degenerate children, playing with sadism and devil-worship, gazing at drunken tramps amid daffodils until themselves lost all sense of æsthetic so it were stark naked, **pampering pretty feelings until the very rivers seemed to lie in a sexual ecstasy**. Is anything in all that a subject for art? They are things for effeminate only!

The emphasized part (my emphasis) was aimed at The Awakening River. Orage certainly did not mix words.² The article Present-Day Criticism is included at the end of this essay.

It is unclear whether Murry or Mansfield responded to this criticism, although an article About Rhythm signed off by both appeared in the next number. This may have been their response to Orage without being provocative. The article had a very calm appeal to it, was well worded albeit somewhat dismissive.

What was the reason to be so critical? Apart from the pretense of being poems apparently translated by Mansfield, not a great deal. These poems were quite new. A brightness, an uninhibited willingness of expression. Something that was not commonly accepted at the time.

Both poems do have a distinct femininity about them which may indeed cast some disbelief as coming from a male writer. However, on the other side, it is a woman who has completed the apparent translation and some of her characteristics will necessarily carry over. Her poetry and vignettes have similar characteristics as in evocative imagery for that instant in time.

Admittedly The Awakening River does have a more sexual arousal to it. This fact was more the reason for the criticism from Orage who seemed to imply something not natural with Petrovsky by his (Orage) use of effeminate. We have to realize that there was an effort to reform poetry and break out of the rather dull meters many had adopted as the norm. Not that it was wrong, but there was never any change. Due to this effort, many of the diehards would not accept this push and were extremely critical of those who made the attempt.

OPINION

It is a shame, that today poets like Mansfield are not appreciated by the broader public. Their work has been drowned by the thousands, if not millions of wannabes who all write in the same mediocre manner and live the lie of this vers libre. Sure, there are some good poets out there, some excellent poets, but these too are slowly washed away. There are societies that preserve the work of past poets like Mansfield, but unfortunately they cannot compete with the likes of the social media poets. That is, if we are foolish enough to call them poets.

² Orage’s name did not appear at the end of the article, but at many times, even in other journals, the editor’s name was not mentioned. However, it was very clear who the writer was in this instance due to the content.

APRIL 18, 1912.

THE NEW AGE

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Present-Day Criticism.

ALAS! how often must one not submit to being humbled in order to perceive truth. Nothing can be clearer to an unprepossessed mind than the mortifying fact that our criticism of "Rhythm" has in no degree influenced the Editor of that magazine. We have not in the least helped him to recognise his errors, let alone to repent of them. He replies that he has "no concern with" our criticism. It is nothing to him that in our opinion his volume is stupid, crazy and exceedingly vulgar. Presumably, the next number will be as poor as the last. What a pity! He is only interested to refute our suggestion that he even remotely imitated ourselves. But that was not a charge! Positively, we began by apologising for severe criticism of a journal that was professedly a mass of good intention. Positively, we declare that a dozen papers run on the lines of THE NEW AGE would benefit us no less than they would serve the interest of ideas. Only after examination of the contents of "Rhythm" did we regretfully decide that here was something we could never be proud to have inspired. With still a hope of sparing literary England yet another magazine of illiterate decadence, we, in our way, which is to boycott nothing, but to bring the fallacious into the light, showed where "Rhythm" failed to carry out its title, hoping that the person responsible for editing might be brought to see that no rhythmical arrangement could possibly be made of such material. But we reduce him to a tu quoque! He replies that he has "long been endeavouring in vain to discover if 'Present-Day Criticism' had any basis at all." Well, we should all try to amend our own faults, remembering Hooker's admonition to yield to reason, though we may not have a very high estimate of the "person that doth allege it."

Anyone who chooses rather to make an art of life than to exist as in an idiot's dream, must be set on making firm his basis. There is no finding a new basis. Only those ignorant of the world's history would suppose any single thing to be brand new. But we may discover, if we are really bent on discovery, and do not madly refuse to be helped, some old and indispensable stone lacking in our foundations. And in an age like ours, when we have all been led over so many swamps and jungles of novelties, we much too contentedly assume that we have come to a sure footing when we arrive at a bedded stone or two. In the matter of criticism, precaution against over assurance is especially precious at the present day. And with some intuition of danger, the writer of this column has repeatedly warned readers that these paragraphs are nothing but notes, and, by giving chapter and verse for their basis, has confessed perpetual diffidence, advising all who were interested to examine for themselves. In rejecting Shakespeare's concession to the vulgar of his day of sanguinary scenes, we had with us the canon of the best Greek and Roman artists: we had the best of his own work: we had the experience of Time that has said Nay to Shakespeare's Yea, and has turned the English mind away from desire to see bloodshed. In advising young writers to value virtue as they value health, we spoke a very old truth, but one almost forgotten in our time. The word virtue, like some others that belong to men, has been vulgarised by women's misappropriation: but its true meaning is still preserved from all botchers and sensation seekers. The young artist who is virtuous will live for his art so that it may rank with the excellent. He will practise the duties of artists, cutting himself off from distracting influences, building up his power by practising in large and severe forms, fortifying his resolution by familiarity with the lives and works of great men. He will thus ensure the permanent health of his work by cultivating his own character. There is nothing new, unfounded, or unauthorised in such advice, but it is only useful to those

who have already a firm character, while to such as run after novelty it must seem nothing but dull preaching. But all great men have modelled themselves on great men. From Greece to England the tradition is unbroken. Nor has the temporary fin de siècle decadence done more than obscure it. We are emerging. Our danger now is of naughty pride, lest we imagine our saved selves to be as authoritative in matters of artistic virtue as the artists who never fell. Let us then be ever so careful to profess ourselves humbly earnest, and if even a person deep in sin doth allege anything against us, not slight it altogether, for Scripture is still Scripture, even when the devil quotes it.

Let us then recall a few of the dicta we have repeated from time to time, and, on another occasion, declare, as of small authority, such as prove to be our own invention.

One secret cause of feebleness among young artists is their neglect of solitude and meditation.

Not the least of literary plagues is the mania for originality. None of the great Greeks invented the stories they have handed on. They demanded of themselves only originality of treatment, their own style in presenting a story.

The artist must record in the spirit of his own times, but that spirit has never anything to do with detail of manners and conversation. These are things of convention, and a single decade may make them unintelligible.

Never imagine that a man who claims to have fathomed a soul, and is prepared to publish all he knows, knows very much. Extremity is occult and not to be known at all.

Every generation of literary men should leave works of beauty, models which should help the after-comers to perceive, and to perpetuate in their turn, the things that redeem the soul amid circumstances of unfathomable enmity.

Definite form, reserved force distinguish the artist. To attain and control these he must avoid all that does not confirm his strength, since with strength comes recognition of responsibility, impulse to ever bolder self-criticism, and power to change many things that are inimical to the soul.

To be seen dining with a bad writer should ruin a critic's reputation.

Mediocrity is not a product to treat with indifference, but to destroy wherever possible.

Persons who maintain that the seat of art is above morality are windbags.

No artist would deign to embrace "freedom." The artist must limit his choice of subjects. All that is aesthetic in life has been glorified by the great dead in common.

There has never been a renaissance of "realistic" art.

One who has, however ineffectively, reviewed present-day works from the above standpoints, may very well have supposed that his basis of criticism was equally clear to the world as to himself. It seems so simple a basis, the basis that art must be life to the artist. In criticising "Rhythm" we did not depart from this basis; and so judging, we were brought to conclude that "Rhythm" was the production of persons who were not living the life of art, but were running after sensationalism; dancing with seals in delirium, dreaming of murderous hags and degenerate children, playing with sadism and devil-worship, gazing at drunken tramps amid daffodils until themselves lost all sense of decency, studying the nude until any gross figure seemed æsthetic so it were stark naked, pampering pretty feelings until the very rivers seemed to lie in a sexual ecstasy. Is anything in all that a subject for art? They are things for effemines only! They are the things that ruin the mind. Germany, that for twenty years has been paddling in these dirty waters, is now bathing in them. We do not want the refuse of Germany brought over here even in pailfuls. And though the persons responsible for sousing us with Continental wash have no concern with us, we must, for our own sakes, continue to concern ourselves with them.