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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

Warner reviews the *Letters of Katherine Mansfield to John Middleton Murry*, edited by Murry and published in 1951.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Katherine Mansfield; John Middleton Murry; letters.

Letters of Katherine Mansfield to John Middleton Murry. Edited by J. M. Murry. Constable. 45s.

A letter, whether it is to be read by posterity or by the person to whom it is addressed, must retain its particle if it is to keep the birthright of being read with concurrence; it must convey a wish to be writing *to*, not merely a wish to be writing. Indeed, of the two classes of readers, posterity, who is not directly addressed by the letter-writer, is the more sensitive to this distinction, and more resentful if it be overlooked. It is not that de-particled letters bore us; they do something worse, they embarrass us. Forgetting that to an author his powers of writing may be the only thing that he is sincerely interested in, we are abashed when we find authors putting into envelopes passages of writing that should have been kept for the notebook, the public, or the wastepaper-basket.

In the 1928 publication of Katherine Mansfield's Collected Letters[1] this infection of letter-writing by writing was uncomfortably evident. The brilliance, the sensibility, the 'effects' had a feuilleton quality; the personality of the writer was so often presented rather than conveyed that one felt teased by apparitions of a pseudonymous columnist with an irresistibly recognizable style. The absence of the particle was notably

embarrassing in the letters which she wrote to her husband, J. M. Murry, during the months when the threat of tuberculosis sent her to winter abroad. To keep up day by day an intimate correspondence can be a pleasure, a tax, a matter of conscience, a habit; but it is disconcerting to find it done as though in answer to a challenge – a daily demonstration that one is always at concert pitch. 'It is impossible not to feel' so I wrote at the time, 'that in her letters she is constructing, almost with coquetry, a self-portrait that shall by its look of life annihilate the space between her and their reader, the time that will soon have carried her out of the kingdom of the living.'[2]

One does the best one can with the material that is given one. The 1928 Letters were a selection and edited. Now Mr. Murry has given us a complete text of Katherine Mansfield's letters to himself. In the words of the Publisher's Note, 'the present volume is virtually a new book.' It is also a new Katherine Mansfield; before this full-length presentation I withdraw my former hypothesis. The word coquetry will not do: it is too slight, and too urbane; the self-portrait fragments into a gallery of self-portraits, and the person for whose assurance they were primarily designed is the writer herself, a tormented Narcissus.

In this sense, the absence of the particle ceases to be embarrassing. In their full context the 'literary passages' seem tranquil and unforced by comparison with the rest. Writing of the sea, a rose, a maidservant, she is at ease, for she sees them, and not herself reflected in them, and for the time being she is released from the obligation to make herself real to herself. A sentence later, the obligation reasserts itself, and she returns to the desperate business of being Katherine Mansfield. It would be idle to debate which is the best likeness: the dedicated writer; the wife in exile, talking the Little Language of married lovers, sending messages to her Japanese doll, dreaming of a cottage in the country; the wife of the editor of *The Athenaeum*; the lover of solitude, the victim of loneliness, the artless, the disillusioned, the termagant in a hot fury, the termagant in a cold fury. For none of these selves can appease her, she does not trust them, and she cannot trust herself to face the fulfilment of any wish. When at last the longed-for cottage is bought, she scarcely refers to it again. The victim of loneliness and the lover of solitude is in fact companioned by the lumbering devoted L.M. – a woman friend whom she scorns, finds intolerable, and will not relinquish. The likeness does not matter, the essential is that there must be a portrait, whether it be appealing, arresting or intimidating. Letter follows letter, from Bandol,

from Looe, from Ospedaletti, from Menton. Each group follows a pattern: the place is beautiful, she is beginning to feel better, she is busy, she is lonely, the climate is detestable, the people are brutes, she has suffered and been very ill and not mentioned it till now.

And it is true. 'Katherine arrived in London on April 11th, 1918. She was haggard and frightened.' Her husband's brief statement dispels all the self-portraits. The real woman appears, and is haggard and frightened.

This is an appalling book; and Mr. Murry deserves unqualified thanks and respect for his integrity in publishing it. It is appalling, not so much for the intensity with which Katherine Mansfield suffered and inflicted suffering as for the disproportion between the container and the contained. The height of her emotions has no downward corroboration. Nothing has time to root. The quickness of her sensibility is frustrated by the speed with which she snatches at every experience. Her self-credulity is outmatched by self-mistrust, and everything fails her except words, and words only keep faith with her when she is not expressing herself. Even her virtues turn against her. Her truthfulness, voicing her constant changes of mood, appears as total lack of consideration. When the fortitude with which she has concealed an illness breaks down, the disclosure sounds vindictive.

Mr. Murry, in one of the brief sober annotations which so tragically afford the only points of repose in this headlong tragedy, speaks of 'the fearful alternations between confidence and despair which are characteristic of the phthisic patient.' Other phthisics have believed, as Katherine Mansfield did, that with a little happiness, peace of mind, kinder circumstances, recovery would follow. She, however, went further; and in her last year came to think that the cure must come with a change of heart. With that intention, she went to the Gurjieff [sic] Institute at Fontainebleau in October, 1922. There, in the following January, aged thirty-four, she died. In the course of her last-but-one letter to her husband, she wrote: 'You see, Bogey, if I were allowed one single cry to God, that cry would be: *I want to be* REAL.' A posthumous reality, at any rate, has been given her by the magnanimous publication of these letters. But fate may be nursing another irony. It seems possible that she will be remembered for her letters instead of for her books, as Haydon the artist is remembered as the man who wrote the autobiography.

Britain Today 188 (December 1951), pp. 40–1

Notes

1 *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. J. Middleton Murry (London: Constable & Co., 1928), 2 vols. Warner reviewed the book for the *New York Herald* in 1929; her article, titled 'Death and the Lady', is reprinted in Sylvia Townsend Warner, *With the Hunted: Selected writings*, ed. Peter Tolhurst (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), pp. 276–81.

2 See Warner's 1929 review, in *With the Hunted*, p. 279. The review reads 'in her letters of 1918–1921'.

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