DECONSTRUCTING KATHERINE MANSFIELD: AN INTERVIEW WITH VINCENT O'SULLIVAN[*]

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Resumen: La presente entrevista[1] con Vincent O'Sullivan, uno de los críticos más distinguidos en estudios sobre Katherine Mansfield y escritor reconocido, tuvo lugar en Wellington, Nueva Zealand, durante el verano de 2002, con posteriores modificaciones por e-mail. El editor de *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* discute aspectos centrales en la narrativa de esta autora, tales como su alcance literario, su relación con el relato corto, su ambigüedad sexual, el distanciamiento entre ella como autora y los personajes que crea, su peculiar modernismo distinto del canónico masculino, el papel de los niños y la autobiografía en su narrativa y sus principales logros y defectos como escritora. El resultado es una imagen subversiva de Mansfield que contrasta con el mito purificador cuidadosamente elaborado por su esposo John Middleton Murry tras la muerte de Mansfield en 1923.
Palabras clave: Nueva Zelanda, relato corto, novela, feminidad, modernismo, Woolf, Joyce, autobiografía, figura infantil.

Abstract: Held in Wellington, New Zealand, during the summer of 2002 and subsequently upgraded via email, this is an interview with one of the most reputable scholars in Katherine Mansfield studies, Prof. Vincent O'Sullivan, a prolific and respectable writer himself. The editor of Mansfield's *Collected Letters* discusses key issues in Mansfield's fiction, such as her literary status, her connection with the short story genre, her sexual ambiguity, the breach between herself and the fictional characters that she creates, her distinctive modernism as detached from the male canon, the role of children and autobiography in her narrative, and her main achievements and flaws as a writer. The result is a subversive image of Mansfield, opposed to the purifying myth craftily designed by her husband John Middleton Murry after her death in 1923.
Key words: New Zealand, short story, novel, femininity, modernism, Woolf, Joyce, autobiography, the child.

Surrounded by shelves of Mansfield books and a couple of her portraits, I sit with Prof. O'Sullivan in his office at Victoria University, Wellington, where he teaches

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Date of acceptance and final version: abril 2006
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[1] With minimal editing, the present article is a faithful rendering of the original interview.

Literature.[2] *On his desk, I have placed the tape recorder and a copy of an early version of Mansfield's Journal that he has given me as a present. As if immersed in a kind of romantic pathetic fallacy, the day seems propitious for our conversation on Katherine Mansfield, as it is windy and grey, her typical atmosphere in stories like "The Wind Blows" or "Revelations".*

As a New Zealander, how do you perceive Katherine Mansfield within the canon of New Zealand literature? Do you consider her as a real icon or more as an outsider?

No, I would consider her as a New Zealand writer, but once I've said that, I often forget about the fact that she *is* a New Zealander, because clearly most of her major stories are set in this country. I would also say that the motifs of her stories are partly determined by her experience as a woman in Europe, looking back on New Zealand. She reviewed, for example, a New Zealand novel, *The Story of a New Zealand River*, by Jane Mander, for *The Athenaeum*. Although generally ignored, you get in this review what she regards as limitations that can be imposed on New Zealand writers. She says that it's not by describing the geography or using Maori names for trees that you are going to suggest anything about New Zealand. It is by presenting the way people are and their lives. In other words, she's never interested in local colour for its own sake. She comes at the New Zealand stories, it seems to me, as a writer first and a New Zealander as ancillary to that. Primarily, unlike some New Zealand writers about her own time and later, she's not there in order to present a pictorial snap of this country. She's far more interested in other aspects of story-telling.

What is her connection with the short story form? Do you think she chose this genre for a particular reason or simply because it suited her?

It just suited her as an extremely congenial form. In her letters at the end of 1921, when she's writing from Switzerland and has been reading Jane Austen, she talks about writing

[2] Prof. Vincent O'Sullivan is a New Zealand poet, short story writer, novelist, playwright, critic and editor. A graduate from the universities of Auckland and Oxford, he lectured in the English department of the Victoria University of Wellington and the University of Waikato, before committing himself to full-time writing. As a poet, his verse is collected in *Our Burning Time* (1965), *Revenants* (1969), *Bearings* (1973), *From the Indian Funeral* (1976), *Butcher & Co.* (1977), *Brother Jonathan, Brother Kafka* (1979), *The Rose Ballroom and Other Poems* (1982), *The Butcher Papers* (1982), *The Pilate Tapes* (1986), *Seeing You Asked* (1998), *I'll Tell You This Much* (2000), *Lucky Table* (2001), and *Nice Morning for It, Adam* (2004). It was only after he had established a solid reputation as a poet that O'Sullivan turned in the 1970s to the writing of short fiction. His stories have been gathered in *The Boy, The Bridge, The River* (1978), *Dandy Edison for Lunch and Other Stories* (1981), *Survivals* (1985), *The Snow in Spain: Short Stories* (1990) and *Palms and Minarets: Selected Stories* (1992). Among his novels, the most significant ones are *Miracle* (1976) and *Let the River Stand* (1993). In the 1980s O'Sullivan the dramatist emerged: *Shuriken* (1985), *Jones & Jones* (1988), which draws on Mansfield's relationship with Ida Baker, and *Billy* (1989). As an editor, his work focuses on Mansfield: he has edited (together with Margaret Scott) four volumes of *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield* (1984-), as well as Mansfield's *'The Aloe' with 'Prelude'* (1982), *Poems of Katherine Mansfield* (1988), and *Selected Letters* (1989). His *Anthology of Twentieth-Century New Zealand Poetry* (1970) was a standard text for a quarter of a century. He is also editor of (among other volumes) *New Zealand Short Stories: Third Series* (1975), *New Zealand Writing Since 1945* (1983, with MacDonald P. Jackson) and *The Oxford Book of New Zealand Short Stories* (1992). He has openly stated the influence of Mansfield in his own writing.

a novel, but she realises it is *not* her forte. She occasionally talked about wanting to write a novel, which she does in that period, but she didn't make much of it. She didn't believe in herself in any sense as using a longer fictional form.

Why do you think she never completed a whole novel?

I think the short story happened to be what she wanted to do, and what she did extremely well. She explained that it's possible to say all you have to say in a short campus. I don't think there was ever a choice in Mansfield between writing a novel or short stories. When she started writing *The Aloe*, for example, she wrote to Murry, "I have fallen into the arms of my first novel" (1984 [v. 1]: 167-8, 244). But she quickly realised that it wasn't going to be long enough to become a novel, and cut it back as a short story.

In connection with that, what sort of writer do you think she would have become had she not died so young: someone like Virginia Woolf, or a more regional writer?

No, I don't think that she would have become more regional. However, it's outstanding that there is a letter she writes in 1922 to a young South African writer, who she had reviewed. This woman was desperate to get to London, as Mansfield had done, and she writes this letter warning her against that and not to be seduced by the "glitter" of the metropolis. Looking back, what happens, she says, is that you go to the centre of the world, as you think, and "rip the glittering top of the fields but there are no sheaves to bind". It's very sad and probably the strongest admission she has said to herself: perhaps it wasn't the best thing for her as a writer to go to England after all, since what interested her was what happened in Tinakori Road, in Wellington, during her childhood. But she was very ill when she wrote that statement, near the end of her life; she was depressed, thinking of New Zealand, and so it can't be given too much weight, but it's interesting that at least there was this other possibility in her mind. So, if she had lived more, I am sure she'd have come back for a trip, as she was thinking to do – her father was going to pay for her come-back. And if she had returned, you can speculate, this would have stimulated her to do something different, but we just can't say.

Do you think she would have written a novel?

I don't believe there's any reason to think so. A couple of times after writing her last story, "The Canary" (in Paris in the middle of 1922), she mentions how dissatisfied she is with her own short stories, and she actually describes them once as little singing birds in cages, which is exactly the motif that she uses in "The Canary". So, I think she had gone as far as she could with the form as she was using it then, and yet, because she was such a creative person, no doubt she would have gone on to some sort of other writing. But what? It will always remain a mystery.

Would you qualify Katherine Mansfield's style as "delicate and feminine"?

It *is* delicate. I suppose we are all a bit cautious about using words like "feminine" or "masculine". You can talk about her style without having to use those words, because part

of the whole image of this is artificially built up by her husband John Middleton Murry. According to him, she was a delicate burning flame, but, in fact, she was a very tough woman. There's a little sketch where she said that she had a very dirty tongue on her, and she used to swear like a fishwife. And yet this is never the image you get of her through Murry. We tend to forget things like, for instance, the fact that she smoked marihuana (with Aleister Crowly) when she was a young woman, and what a very sharp, sardonic, witty person she was in real life. If we keep these images in mind, the delicate flower image will *not* stick. But you have to be careful you don't go the other extreme either. She was enormously sensitive in many ways, but to call that "feminine" is ludicrous, because you can think of all sorts of male writers who are enormously sensitive. I think it's a good idea to keep away from that word. But there is no doubt that, because of her real life experience as a solitary, sick, alone, and travelling woman in strange countries, there's naturally an emphasis on the impressions of such women, because she knows that at first hand and can write about it with such perception. It's interesting that she is quite dismissive of feminine writers.

Yes, she was and she didn't appreciate the women writers of her time, as when she compares their repetitive work with the indistinguishable crowing of hens (1954: 124). At the same time, some of the women in her fiction are highly traditional and conservative in frustrated positions, whereas she was very rebellious for her time: she came from New Zealand all the way alone, she had sexual intercourse outside marriage, etc. Do you think there is such a gap between her and her characters?

Well, I don't know if there is. You can take Mouse, for example, in "Je Ne Parle Pas Français", where she seems to be a retiring, delicate woman, obviously based on Mansfield herself. Mouse is a nickname that she used with Murry, but in that story she gives the temperament of adventure and immorality to the sexually ambiguous Raoul. I am not saying that she's writing a portrait of herself in Raoul, but she has a deep understanding. Murry, very astutely, compared that story to Dostoevsky's "Notes from the Underground". Then he wrote to her and said that was a sudden leap in her writing. This is not a portrait of Mansfield, but she knew what went on in a man like that, plus the fact that her sexual ambiguity made it even more possible for her to understand Raoul's position. Then we have "The Little Governess", where the girl is looking for adventure and runs into a nasty old man. But the situation itself transcends the innocence of the girl. In other words, Mansfield knew a lot about rather difficult, awkward, or aggressive sexual situations with men and, because the women are rather timid in some stories, the situation itself goes beyond the timidity and that is the mind of Mansfield, not just the female character's.

So, after all, there is not such a gap.

No, I don't think there is. Look at "A Married Man's Story". When she deals with retiring, limited female sensibilities like "The Daughters of the Late Colonel", there is such knowingness beyond them as well as a great sympathy.

Yes, and after all she was very rebellious at some points, but she became also very conservative: she married Murry and turned into a stereotypical woman of her time.

However, Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group regarded her as a bit wild and an extremist. Woolf herself said that Mansfield had gone every sort of hogs since she was sixteen, and this is because Mansfield used to exaggerate stories when she told Woolf about her wild youth. She would make things up. D. H. Lawrence very astutely said about her that she expected the privileges of a banker's daughter and wanted to be a rebel at the same time. Also the fact that she went off to the Gurdjeff Institute struck her friends as mad: Murry didn't approve of it and Ida Baker, her close friend, didn't understand it. It was quite an extraordinary thing to decide when she was dying, and going off to this person was perceived by most as mad. That was a strong and rebellious thing to do in view of the perceptions of the time.

I remember talking to her brother-in-law, Middleton Murry's younger brother Richard, and he said (a long time ago, in the 1980s), not long before he died, that he always thought of Mansfield when he saw the punk girls in the road, because she used to dress in a quite startling way. D.H. Lawrence takes this up in *Women in Love*. Mansfield virtually invented colour stockings, and so she'd dye her stockings orange or red, and people would turn around looking at her in the street, because they'd never seen anyone dressed like that, the same as people turn around and look at punk girls with the hair spiked up. In that sense, with all the delicacy created around her figure by Murry, we tend to forget that she was fairly tough in terms of experience as well.

Would you find a difference between her modernism and the canonical male modernism of, for example, James Joyce?

Yes, in that she does tend to emphasise female characters. Apart from Raoul Duquette and one or two others, it is women characters who have either the most interesting or the most open and illuminating experiences. Think of the male figures in her stories: patriarchal men like the father in the New Zealand stories are often quite weak characters. In the stories that are about relationships between men and women, the men are likely to be the weaker, although she has people like "The Little Governess", "the frail flower" sort of thing. In general, as soon as there's a relationship going on in a Mansfield story, it's the man who tends to be the weaker one.

Besides, she wasn't interested in theorising anything, and in this sense very seldom you get something in Mansfield that will tell you much about her perception of the short story genre. Sometimes in her criticism, for example, she gives us a very clever description and it sounds like a description of her own stories: closely observed, detailed, the sense of glimpsing the shimmer and glitter of life. But, of course, this will not do; you need more than this in a story, and I'm sure she was aware of that. She doesn't even say a theoretical statement like: "I think the short story should do this or that", but her reservations about other stories can give you some indications of what ideally she was after.

What about the role of autobiography in her fiction? Did she aim at using autobiography for some ulterior purpose, or was it just the material she could resort to?

Yes, she obviously drew on what she knew: the solidity of life in New Zealand (childhood) or the drifting difficulties of a single woman in Europe, and then some of the stories about what it was like to be an ill or isolated woman in a place. She's clearly drawing on the world she knows. But that is not the same as saying the stories are autobiographical. Does she see herself as Kezia in the stories? I don't believe it's meant to be a self-portrait. Often she's very ironical about aspects. When she speaks about sick women, for example, it can be a sharp and almost cruel portrait of the way these women behave, or when a woman is on the point of deceiving a man. She is quite aware of the unattractiveness of certain female behaviour, and never tries to disguise that. But again, that is *not* autobiographical. She is just trying to create her thoroughly convincing, rounded characters. But she's certainly not saying, "yes, this is Mansfield's picture".

What about the role of the child in her fiction? Why do you think it is so predominant?

She had a very astute understanding of fiction. She isn't the only great writer to show such tendency for children. Think of Faulkner. Even Patrick White was interested in Mansfield because of her children depictions. She's totally unsentimental about children. She doesn't condescend to them in her stories, and she observes the adult world very convincingly from the point of view of children.

But at the same time, by using consistently this figure of the child, sometimes she has been accused by critics of being immature and childish.

I don't feel that. If you are talking about "Prelude" or "At the Bay", you can say that the views of children and their representation are vivid, but to say that in any way they are child*ish* stories is too far-fetched. She can also use children as Henry James uses Maisy in *What Maisy Knew*: the innocence of children, their unknowingness, or even their ignorance can become a very useful mirror for reflecting. It is not distorting adult behaviour, but it is a particular kind of adult distortion that adults themselves aren't aware of. For example, there's the sexual relationship between Linda and Stanley in "Prelude" and Linda's rejection of the whole idea of sex and pregnancy. None of that is seen by the children or centred by the eyes of a child. That is narrative going on entirely on the non-child level. So, if you take "Prelude" or "At the Bay", you think these are stories about children, but there's a lot in them where the childish perspective or even the childish presence is quite absent. This is part of the depth of the stories.

If you had to select one achievement of Mansfield, what would that be?

If I had to pick five stories, the first one would be "The Wind Blows" (1915). It's the first time she actually writes with utter originality, and that's something you cannot imagine coming from anywhere except Mansfield. Then, "An Indiscreet Journey", which she

did not publish in her lifetime, but it's a very sophisticated and clever story about the war. Then, "Prelude", "At the Bay", and "A Married Man's Story".

What is the most outstanding quality of this author?

The originality in Mansfield is the perspective, the point of view she has which enables her to indulge that gift she had for catching things on the spur of the moment, those vivid glimpses in an impressionist canvas. You find that sense of fleetingness combined with a very steady gaze that goes beyond that which you get in the fullness of characters. We have the sense of a mind not ruminating on itself, but a mind being aware of depicting and being interested in this shimmer of the peacock's tail. But at the same time, because it is aware of that, it's a much broader sensibility that you are getting.

And if you had to choose a flaw in her writing?

At times, this is an aspect that Leonard Woolf didn't like in her (but he didn't like Murry and said he was responsible for the bad things in Mansfield's writing) is her sentimentality. It's unfair to blame Murry for that, because poor Murry is blamed for everything *[he laughs]*. But, on occasions, there is sentimentality in her. Sometimes she'd write stories to achieve a quick effect, as she did with some of her last stories for the magazine *The Sphere*, like "Mr. and Mrs. Dove" or "Six Pence", which aren't very good. But she was writing against the clock. She knew they didn't have a high quality, but she was writing them to get the money to pay for the medical treatment in Paris. It is such a pity that her last stories are really her second-rate ones, but she wasn't writing that with the freedom she needed; she had an exact span she had to write to. She knew the sort of story that they'd like and she knew she could use tricks which aren't tricks in her best stories, but they are when she is almost writing a parody of herself, as if someone were trying to write a Mansfield story and they got all her tricks, and this is what it would look like. They aren't good stories, and they are clever, but you can *see* their cleverness. On the contrary, in the great ones, like "At the Bay", of course they are clever, but that's the last word you'd ever use about them. They are so much more than clever. It would be as pointless as to say about a good Picasso: "That is a clever painting". It's not worth saying it. So, those are the two things: when you feel that she's in second gear and, at times, her sentimentality, which isn't her nature at all.

Speaking about sentimentality, sometimes in her letters there's sentimentality, but then there are times when she's sick on the other side of Europe, there's a war going on between, and she's worried about her health. Anybody would be overemotional at times. But even there, it strikes me working on the letters that even in the most emotional ones (for example, during her time in Menton), there are still some intellectual corners where she's writing to manipulate Murry's responses and feelings, and always you feel that in the relationship she's the one deciding the terms. She would encourage him to be frank about going to a party and kissing a woman there, and in the minute he's frank, she then turns and accuses him of all sorts of things. The point is that she was simply emotionally much more adroit and much shrewder than he was. She can be cruel at times because, after all, the

person who's writing to is going to live a lot longer and is healthy, while she's isolated and sick.

That is another aspect of Mansfield that is very important: the effect of her health on her writing. She did draw a parallel between the war and her health, the same as many other writers like Eliot did, seeing the war not just as an external conflict, but as a disease of civilisation. Mansfield then metaphorically took the sense of disease of the war into herself, as we can infer from the way she would talk about her lungs as a battlefield. In that sense, when she went to Fontanebleau, she didn't talk about curing her body or her consumption; it was as if it was a spiritual corruption that she had to deal with. *[The wind blows. We both laugh].* It's just the wind. You are in Wellington. It's very appropriate to talk about Mansfield with the wind outside.

Yes, "The Wind Blows" [I make reference to one of Mansfield's famous stories]. Finally, Peter Alcock states that all her stories can be reduced to "Prelude" and "At the Bay" (1977: 63). What do you think?

That's a brilliant essay of his. He really doesn't like her, and yet he cannot help admiring those two stories. But I can see how you could argue that. By choosing those two stories, yes, you could say that you can see the best of Mansfield. But you'd need to add one or two others, like "Je Ne Parle Pas Français", to show that her scope was wider.

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