

FOREWORD

“... and the top of the cream jar flew through the air and rolled like a penny in a round on the linoleum and did not break. But for Kezia it had broken the moment it flew through the air and she picked it up, hot all over, put it on the dressing table and walked away, *far* too quickly – and airily.”

So ends *The Aloe*, New Zealand-born writer Katherine Mansfield’s brightly finished picture of domestic life at the turn of the last century as seen through the clarifying lens of memory... And something has been broken. Just as for Kezia the lid of the jar has come apart “the moment it flew through the air”, so what is caught here, in words, is a thing of fragments, held together as though by chance but never really whole. For the past from which this story is made, Katherine Mansfield’s past, her New Zealand past, her Wellington past, has been broken with long ago. They are the shattered pieces of it you are now holding in your hand.

Of course, for Mansfield, the great practitioner of the sliver, the “slice of life”, the European short story, the idea of pieces comes as no surprise. Her narratives were always made as parts and scenes and tiny, cleanly cut-out unremarkable dramas. But nowhere else in her work is the sense of fracture more apparent than in *The Aloe*, nowhere else does she so accommodate such broken-up content. Here is a kind of fiction that, more than the other stories, celebrates, delights in and puts forward for our notice, a different way of reading – a way of seeing, actually – that means one can only regard the piece in separate incidents in order to have it at all. The vivid, disparate scenes seem to be set down randomly, just as they occur to the author, like life happening on the page, with memory and sudden thought converging and no sense of dramatic intent or overbearing structure to hold any of it artificially in place. The reader simply

looks on, as witness and participant, as the story moves us in and out of rooms and conversations, stopping here for a cup of tea, there to look at a flower. We come up too close, sometimes, to recollection, moments of family history, and we meet new characters only to leave them again and return to what is familiar, going back out into the garden with the little sisters and cousins to get some fresh air...

“What form is it? you ask...” Katherine Mansfield wrote in letters referring to her new literary project. “As far as I know it’s more or less my own invention.”¹

It is easy to see how that “invention” caught Virginia Woolf’s eye, reflecting as it does in bright fragments her own “moments of being” and resulting in the publication by Woolf’s Hogarth Press in 1917 of the edited and cut-back *Aloe*, the story that we know today as *Prelude*.² Both versions are profound, highly wrought examples of a still emerging Modernist English tradition that placed aesthetics and the arrangement of images and ideas over traditional narrative methods, and *Prelude*, Mansfield’s shorter and more precise version of the original, is without doubt the greater artistic achievement.

But in *The Aloe* we see more intensely than in that second more polished work the very processes of an artist discovering her aesthetic through necessity; by making good something that is no longer whole, no longer available to her, that she may have it back, somehow, all the scattered bits returned in one piece. “Oh, I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the Old World,” she wrote in her journal, while getting the beginnings of her new story down. “It must be mysterious, as though floating. It must take the breath... But all must be told with a sense of mystery...”³ And, she wrote later, “in a special kind of prose”.

It is what I might call “psychic imperative”, this need to find a new method, a new literary style that can cope with the sheer complexities of a work’s emotional and psychological content –

and we see it present in all examples of great literature, from *To the Lighthouse* to *War and Peace*, like a deeply humming engine sitting within the brand new design that has been created to fit perfectly around it. So Mansfield wrote this book far, far away from the house and garden in which it is set, on the other side of the world, with the recent death of her beloved brother Leslie, who'd been killed in the War, fresh in her mind – another break there, another fracture – but all the memories of the time they'd had together when they were children “at home” come back to her to energise and breathe life into her project. And far from it being an incomplete version, a mere first draft, *The Aloe* fully defines how Mansfield finds in the fragment not something broken off, deranged and unfinished, but the very beginning of the story, the start of everything she needs.

Her own life, ever since leaving New Zealand for the first time, as a schoolgirl, was a restless, interrupted affair – going from place to place, back to New Zealand, then to London again, from London to Germany to France to Italy and back to France... She was never settled. She lived in hotel rooms and short-rent apartments, shuttling between cities and the country, staying with friends, and finally, her body spent and wrecked by tuberculosis, finishing up in a quasi-religious institute that was only half-built and where, even then, in the last weeks of her life, she was moved from one room to another as though to be in one place ever for any length of time was to be denied her.

Yet *The Aloe* gives us a very different kind of story. It is assured, comfortable, and deeply comforting – as though the author has never left home, as though her brother and sisters are with her, as though she is safe. And we as readers are plunged into the family life of the Fairfields as though we too have always belonged there. So we move with them from town to the country – and though there may be some uncertainties about the new life they have chosen, with the mother Linda's dreamy melancholy unable to find expression in the sunlit garden and rooms full of the sounds

of people calling, and though Linda's younger sister Beryl confides to a friend in a letter that she think she may "rot" there away from society and its diversions, still there is nothing uncertain about the solidity of the home, of its seductions and claustrophobia, its horrors and longueurs.

In Kezia, the young girl who appears throughout Mansfield's work, whose character seems to guide us through the story, there is nothing fractured either. Only the deliciousness instead of waking with her in the morning to hear the birds singing and to see the light creeping across the wall... Of going into the kitchen after hanging paintings on new walls to have a cup of tea and a slice of gingerbread with the Grandmother who has laid it all out there nicely on a linen cloth...

This is Katherine Mansfield making a "home for herself in words", to paraphrase a line taken from the cultural and literary critic Edward Said when he's describing what it is to be a writer.⁴ She is bringing together her broken life that is spread in bits about the world, the memories of her dead brother and her estranged family, all gathered into one house, one place, one time. It's as though the pieces of her past are allowed to make a pattern then, one vivid part laid next to another, background and foreground in one. Here at one corner is the bright garden, at another the mysterious horse-and-cart ride through the streets at night as the little girls leave their city home for the house in the hills. Here is Pat the handyman coming along with his axe to take the head off a white duck, here is the Grandmother sleeping softly next to her favourite grandchild. One scene after another falling into place as the writer takes each moment and sets it next to another, creating in that "special prose" a story of fragments and scenes – one would not even call them "chapters" – as a sort of mosaic, or better, re-conjoined in much the same way as a cleanly fractured ceramic may have all its shards fitted together and presented again as a whole. So we are meant to see the cracks, I think, and to find them just as lovely.

For those who admire Mansfield's work, the avid reader or student of writing, this Capuchin volume, taken from Vincent O'Sullivan's edition of the comparative texts of the two stories first published in 1982 and then singly as *The Aloe* in 1985,⁵ allows us full access to Mansfield's creative mind. For one can compare this earlier version with the later, shorter *Prelude* and get a real sense of how she went to work on her story, of those scenes that were first scribbled down in bits in a child's exercise book in London and in France. To see that writing, the pen moving so fast one can barely make out the letters of the words, is to see how the structure came together quite clearly for this writer as something made in fragments, how the fragments bore her away...One might barely conceive at times that they would ever become any kind of joined together book or novella. A vision of that way of making a story, a kind of piece-work, remains in the published form of *The Aloe*, with all the words in it given over to considering the life that Katherine Mansfield had once known so well, those detailed scenes crammed with remembered New Zealand details, its bush and plants and native birds...And how rich and rewarding it is to read the two stories side by side, to see what was taken and what was left, to regard first hand the burgeoning writing imagination before the editing mind comes in to prune and clear and cut away.

There is an "abandonment to the leisurely rhythm of her own imagination" wrote Rebecca West of Mansfield's New Zealand stories, of which *The Aloe* is the most concentrated as well as the most extensive example. It's as though the ideas have lived so long in her mind that she can "ransack them for the difficult, rare, essential points".⁶ And indeed in the scenes that remain here, that are gone from *Prelude*, it is as though Mansfield, in her writing, has built her house of words with as many rooms as she can to move around in, so she can discover later where best to stand to hold the light, the shadow... Only then will she find out that she doesn't need to use all of her initial construction – but somehow it must be there at her back for now, as she starts out in her

enterprise, to give ballast, the balance and sense of reality upon which to base her art.

Towards the end of her short life Mansfield turned repeatedly to the subject of what was “real”⁷, in her search for wholeness, unity, a melding of the spiritual and practical, her personality and her literary sensibility – a drive that Vincent O’Sullivan has described as existential in nature, and one that had her seeking the elemental, the necessary, as she sought to make peace with her past and present, to reconcile the self she represented to the world with her inner secret being, the one still inevitably connected with her home, her birthplace and her beginning and whom, he shows us, she came to inhabit in her best work and at the end of her life.⁸

In this book, her first committed attempt to begin that reconciliation as she starts to gather up these aspects of her past and get it all down in words, we find her claiming the thing she sought so desperately in those last months of her life – and in it shines the singularity of her art. Her broken world is made whole again. In the shattered parts of *The Aloe* we find the “real”.

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Notes and Further Reading

1. Katherine Mansfield's letters and journals give us vivid insights to her literary and creative processes. The "invention" that is the form of *The Aloe* is taken from the following passage:

"What form is it? you ask...As far as I know it's more or less my own invention. And how have I shaped it? This is about as much as I can say about it. You know, if the truth were known I have a perfect passion for the island where I was born...Well in the early morning there I always remember feeling that this little island had dipped back into the dark blue sea during the night only to rise again at beam of day, all hung with bright spangles and glittering drops... I tried to catch that moment – with something of that sparkle and its flavour. And just as on those mornings white milky mists rise and uncover some beauty, then smother it again and then again disclose it. I tried to lift that mist from my people and let them be seen and then to hide them again."

From *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield, 1903-1917*, ed Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, Oxford University Press 1984, p. 331

2. A comparative edition of *The Aloe and Prelude* was published by The Port Nicholson Press, Wellington, New Zealand in 1982 and Carcanet New Press, Manchester in 1983, showing clearly where cuts were made in the text, paragraphs eliminated, words changed and so on – and so describing, page by page, how Mansfield created a lighter, less obviously autobiographical *Prelude* from her more definitively "colonial" New Zealand original.

For a deft and important account of the literary relationship between Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, about whom Woolf wrote "I was jealous of her writing – the only writing I have ever been jealous of", see Angela Smith's *Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf: A Public of Two* (1999) which sets the writers side by side and uses their letters and journals (both were keen on both) to delineate similarities and differences.

3. When Mansfield's beloved younger brother Leslie was killed in the First World War, Mansfield's grief turned her back to the past. She vowed in her journal to create a kind of memorial to the dead boy in her writing – "the only

possible value that anything can have for me is that it should put me in mind of something that happened when we were alive,” she wrote. This creative desire, to make life out of death was the impulse that generated *The Aloe* and Mansfield is addressing Leslie directly when she ends the passage quoted in the introduction “But all must be told with a sense of mystery, a radiance, and afterglow, because you, my little sun, are set.”

From *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed John Middleton Murray, 1962, pp 89, 94

4. Edward Said has written in his memoir that a writer is most always “an outsider, nomadic, somehow, in temperament – and that no matter where he or she lives or for how long it is only in writing, in each attempt at a story, at a poem or a piece of text, that he or she can make something fixed in the midst of uncertainty, create a place of safety, be at home”.

Taken from the Introduction to *Out of Place* by Edward Said, Granta, 2000

5. Rebecca West was a great admirer of Katherine Mansfield’s work and wrote with keen perception about Mansfield’s “poetic temperament” as it applied to her creation of characters and setting in a review of *The Garden Party*.

“Abandonment to the leisurely rhythm of her own imagination, and refusal to conform to the current custom and finish her book in a year’s session, has enabled her to bring her inventions right over the threshold of art. They are extraordinarily solid; they have lived so long in her mind that she knows all about them and can ransack them for the difficult, rare, essential points.”

From the *New Statesman* 18 March 1922: 678. Reprinted in *Katherine Mansfield’s Selected Stories*, ed Vincent O’Sullivan, Norton, 2006

6. Katherine Mansfield died of tuberculosis in 1923 when she was 35. As her illness worsened, her need to find a place for herself in the world that might be safe and give her comfort, that might allow her to feel somehow authentic and honest and true... This instinct crystallised in her use of the word “real” – “If I were allowed one single cry to God that cry would be: *I want to be REAL*,” she wrote in December 1922, a month before her death.

From *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott, Oxford, 2008, p. 341

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7. For a poignant and finely tuned account of Mansfield's last years, describing the writer's sense of herself as an artist in search of an honest account of herself and her work before her death, see Vincent O'Sullivan's introduction to the above volume – the last broken lines of which, taken from a list of Mansfield's notes of Russian phrases and words, is itself testament to the keen beauty, emotional truth and wholeness of a fragmented literary sensibility: "I was late because my fire did not burn... The sky was blue as in summer... The trees still have apples. Apple... I fed the goats... I go for a walk... What is the time. Time."