• DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2003.04

# DEATH AND THE LADY: THE LETTERS OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

*Sylvia Townsend Warner*

(First published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, 1929)

Lonely, unhappy people write the best letters; Dorothy Osborne with her spleen, Madame de Sevigne walking alone in the russet park and seeing black hunting dogs leap out of the bushes, William Cowper sitting behind his myrtles, a damned soul. The shadow of a bird flies over the page, and he looks up to the portion of air where the flight had been; the deliberate pen pauses; for a moment consciousness has expanded, tremblingly still, to a realization of what it is to be William Cowper, alive this summer afternoon, damned to all eternity; and then he falls to the business of letter-writing again. He writes of his tame hares, of his new wig, of silkworms, or a picnic under a beech-tree with the provisions carried in a wheel-barrow, of the village constable, of the bird that has just flown by. 'William has nothing much to say; but he writes an entertaining letter,' says the recipient. 'He writes as though he were talking,' says another; and we, two centuries after, still read those letters, still hear that gentle voice.

What is it, this especial quality that makes of a letter (ordinarily an affair of information or requests or an untidy scrambling of the emotions on to paper) something that can be read for generations as a work of art is read? Cowper and Katherine Mansfield were literary artists; but Cowper's letters are read while Cowper's books are almost forgotten, and maybe the same measure will be meted to her, one day. It is not a matter

of literary artistry, of knowing how to write. There are great writers whose letters have been since the ink dried on them, dead as a doornail. I do not think we should fly to read the letters of Milton, I know we do not fly to read the letters of Wordsworth, it does not require an especial spirit of prophesy to foresee that, although W. H. Hudson had the qualification of being a lonely and unhappy person, '*Green Mansions*' will outlast his correspondence with Edward Garnett. Dorothy Osborne and Madame de Sevigne are, in their letters, literary artists of the first rank; but it is to be doubted whether, if the one had not had a lover, the other a daughter, they would have written at all. If unhappiness is the qualification for writing good letters, love is the motive. *Take, read. This is my spirit*: that is the device of the great letter writers. Look, they say. These black signs on white paper, they are me. My blood ran with this ink; here, where I turned the page, it was pain to stem the flow, even for an instant, so strongly the current ran toward you. This is me, here I am. This is what I feel, what I think, what I do. This is the lizard I am seeing, this is the lunch I ate. The sun is shining on me, now it has gone in and I feel the cold. I have put on the painted shawl. To-night what is left of me after I have finished this letter will be unhappy and alone; but I am happy with you, and what I am now is here, is in your hand as you read.

This projection of a self across time and space is in all fine letter writing a curious poignant element; in the letters of Katherine Mansfield it is peculiarly so. In December 1917, she wrote to a friend: 'When I heard the medicine man say: "You ought to go to some place like Teneriffe or Madeira but as you can't go there, Spain or the South of France *will do*!" I would not have swopped my lung with any man alive.' London in the winter of 1917 was not a pleasant place for anyone endowed with unusual sensibilities and little money, who, moreover, was subject to rheumatism and had just had pleurisy. But France was no better; indeed, people with unusual sensibilities must give up hope of being at home anywhere in war time. The journey from Paris to Bandol took thirty-six hours and was a superb example of nightmare, and Bandol was wintry with a fuel shortage, and she had caught 'the most plaguey chill, stiff neck, sore throat, streaming cold that I ever had'. A

month later she was reading Keats, and coughing, and looking to see if there was blood still on her handkerchief.

After her first haemorrhage she wrote thus to her husband: 'Since this little attack I've had, a queer thing has happened. I feel that my love and longing for the eternal world - I mean the world of *nature* - has suddenly increased a million times. When I think of the little flowers that grow in grass, and the little streams and places where we can lie and look up at clouds - Oh, I simply ache for them, for them with you. Take you away and the answer to the sum is 0. I feel so awfully like a tiny girl whom someone has locked in a dark cupboard, even though its daytime . . . You mustn't think, as I write this, that I'm dreadfully sad. Yes, I am, but you know, at the back of it is *absolute faith* and *hope* and *love*. I've only, to be frank, had a bit of a fright. See? And I'm still "trembling". That just describes it.

'Tomorrow I shall write a gayer letter.'

*Tomorrow I shall write a gayer letter.* Already the obligation had begun. Cowper, weighed down by God's wrath among his myrtles, sent himself abroad in his letters as he would have wished to be remembered by his friends - whimsical, philosophical, affectionate, idly witty, a pleasant being to remember - he spares them the long misery, the blackening conviction which fate had not spared him. Katherine Mansfield, sitting in her shadow of death, set herself to shine in that shadow's despite. In the letters that follow, the gayer letters that she promised, one feels that an unnaturally vivid light beats and flashes from the page. The seen, the heard thing stabs into her sensibilities, and with a stabbing phrase she transmits it. 'It's a blue and white day, very fair and warm and calm. The sort of day that *fowls* enjoy, keeping up a soft, faraway cackle,' she writes. Or: 'There's such a sad widower here with four little boys, all in black - all the family in black - as though they were flies that had dropped into the milk.' She hears the piano in the house opposite 'braiding its hair in swift, intricate braids.' A woman visiting her 'has left a rather faded taste of white suede gloves in my mouth.' Nothing, it seems, not a transient polite bore, a noise opposite, a change in the weather, the hotel dietary- 'I

hate haricot beans. They have no imagination' - can leave her unmoved, can escape the pounce of her sensibilities. She hurls herself hither and thither after the aspects of life, this maenad, whose days are spent for the most part alone, in hotels or in furnished villas, lying in bed, or sitting by the fire (for cold, her adversary - 'I do wish it were not so cold. Cold frightens me; it is ominous, I breathe it, and deep down it's as though a knife softly, softly pressed in my bosom and said "Don't be too sure" '- pursues her), whose adventures are to go for a little walk, to exchange a few words with a laundress or a gardener, to get a letter from England.

Part of this excitement may be due to the poison of her disease; some measure of her astonishing receptivity to her surroundings may be the mind's response to the menace of death, the keen-sightedness of the drowning man; but it is impossible not to feel that in her letters of 1918-1921 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. Just as a child, suspecting itself to be in disgrace, puts on supernatural airs and graces of goodness, she sheathes herself in vitality and parries every thrust of death with an assertion of how alive she is. She will not be thought of as a dying woman, she cannot bear to forego one moment of the love that we give to the living; she knows, though not a word is said of this, this is one risk which for all her courage she cannot take, how strongly the human heart is moved to animal repugnance by death, how at the sight of disease we grow cold-hearted with fear, how much we dislike it when someone who has been part of our life becomes an intimation of our mortality.

These letters are filled with colours, shapes, lights, noises, people passing the window, fragments of conversation, happenings of all sorts. She breaks off in the middle of one to remark that a fly has just flown into the fire. She tells but little of her thoughts, and those thoughts which she tells are mostly sudden thoughts, impulses of the mind: such reticence, coupled with the vivacity with which she relates every thing that is of the moment, gives to her letters the fascination of a

play of light over some reflecting surface. The pool shows everything, every touch of the wind, every chance spangle of the sun, but withholds what lies beneath the surface; it shows us every colour but its own. In her loneliness she had time to polish that reflecting surface. Her writing is spontaneous, but with a deliberate, an achieved, spontaneity, it is never casual. For one does not casually pour out one's heart; such passages as these do not flow from a pen held anyhow.

'I walked to a little valley yesterday that I longed to show you. I sat on a warm stone there. All the almond flowers were gone, but the trees were in new leaf and they were full of loving, mating birds - quarreling, you know, about whether to turn the stair-carpet under or cut it off straight. And the trees were playing ball with a little breeze, tossing it to each other.

'I sat a long while on my stone, then scratched your initials with a pin and came away.'

In 1921 Katherine Mansfield left the Riviera for Switzerland. She arrived in May and immediately it began to rain.

'The mountains disappeared very beautifully, one by one. The lake became grave, and one felt the silence. This, instead of being depressing as it is in the South, had a sober charm. I don't know how it is with you; but I feel the South is not made *pour le grand travail*. There is *too much light*.'

It is as if this letter set the key for those that follow it. One feels in this admission that there can be too much light, an implicit renunciation; not of life - she worships that still; but of her former passionate gesture of living. Henceforward, she is, not resigned, but a little inattentive. She will admit now to past misery, to present hope; formerly hope wore the face of confidence. The thoughts she tells are no longer sudden thoughts; they are long and rather stumbling questionings.

'As I was lying here today I suddenly remembered that: "0 ye of little faith!" Not faith in a God. No, that's impossible. But do I live as though I believe in anything? Don't I live in *glimpses* only? There is something wrong, there is something small in such a life.'

But she was not a person for theories of existence, opinions bored her. There must be something more real than opinions,

more germane to living; so, she complains that all her new friends are known to her only as writers, 'whether they care personally for the smell of tangerines or not I haven't the slightest idea'. She writes, she lives more and more in her stories, for there she can escape from the half-life of the intellect, she can be with the simple people that she likes and with the small complete existences of birds and flowers and tea-spoons. 'I think my story for you will be called *Canaries*. The large cage opposite has fascinated me completely. I think and think about them - their feelings, their *dreams*, the life they led before they were caught, the difference between the two little fluffy ones who were born in captivity and their grandfather and grandmother who knew the South American forests and have seen the immense perfumed sea . . . Words cannot express the beauty of that high, shrill little song rising out of the very stones . . . It seems one cannot escape beauty. It is everywhere.'

When Katherine Mansfield died of consumption in 1922 it was a natural impulse to think of what English literature had lost by her fate. These letters turn the mind toward a contrary speculation: it may be that her fate has enriched us. It was from her first exile at Bandol that she wrote saying how her stories now came crowding in on her, pursuing her, plaguing her until they were finished, 'and as good as I can do.' From then on she speaks constantly of the things she wants to write about, the way in which she wishes to write. To the life she saw so glitteringly about her from within her personal shadow there was no response that she could make but creation; had it not been for her sickness she might have created less, or less sincerely, in living more. Whether this is so or not there can be no doubt that her manner of writing, her peculiar style, that shifting, shining, reflecting surface, was in large measure due to the circumstances in which she learned her art. For in a fellow-consumptive she recognizes and describes the quality.

'He has the same disease himself. I *recognized* his smile - just the least shade too bright and his strange joyousness as he came to meet one - just the least shade too pronounced, his air of being more alive than other people - the gleam - the faint glitter on the plant that the frost has laid a finger on.'