

Foreword

Ali Smith

Let us be honest. How much do we know of Tchekhov from his letters. Was that all? Of course not. Don't you suppose he had a whole longing life of which there is hardly a word? Then read the final letters. He has given up hope. If you desentimentalize those final letters they are terrible. There is no more Tchekhov. Illness has swallowed him. (CW4, p. 434)

How much do we know of Katherine Mansfield from her letters? Quite a lot, if we read attentively, because her letters – whether they're written to those close to her, or to people she knew only tangentially, only knew by correspondence, or to whom she wrote hardly at all – are all at once personal gifts and layered literary constructs, crafted pieces of rhetorical performance, concerned like pretty much everything she wrote with getting to the core of the relationship between language, exchange, expression and honesty.

We can gauge from them her generosity, her seductiveness, her charm, her charming and abrasive slipperiness, her skill in terms of voice and tonal modulation, and her imperative faith and trust in the literary work that sustained her and the aesthetic disciplines on which she never compromised. We know her social and psychological imperatives. We know her courage. We know the life in the life of her. 'A storm rages while I write this dull letter. It sounds so splendid, I wish I were out in it' (see Mansfield's letter to Violet Schiff, 9 August 1922).

She wrote this last line when she was extremely unwell, hadn't long left before illness would swallow her too, but the very idea of the word dull near any typical letter from Mansfield is laughable, since a typical letter from Mansfield is written – by force of the fierceness of her commitment to her literary impetus – at a level of complex psychological construction, performance and resonance, and deceptive too in that its surface will glitter with social seduction, throwaway trivia, innocent-looking phrases.

She knew the world's distances; she'd crossed by ship from New Zealand to the UK twice, and subsequently travelled far more in Europe in her short life than she'd ever stayed settled in one place. She knew how a letter could cross distances. Perhaps because of this – in combination

with a decade of failing health which paradoxically didn't stop her travelling though it massively curtailed her physical energy – she lived viscerally from postal delivery to postal delivery, went into regular letter-fret, even into a sort of end-of-the-world despair when letters meant to arrive didn't arrive. She knew the life in letters, the way they embody the writer, the risk they run, the sign and performance of self they are and the often erotic intimacy and energy with which they resonate. That she knew perfectly well how much of her self (and of her talent for combining many selves in the one self, a talent often mistaken by her social milieu and her critics for a kind of hypocrisy in her) she gifted to her correspondents is borne out by how sedulously she bought, burnt, chased up and worried about so many of the letters she'd sent to people over the years.

Yet she knew, too, as she suggests in that note on Chekhov, how little of the real 'life' of its sender the literary letter represents.

It's to be hugely celebrated, then, that this first volume of this new definitive collection of Mansfield's correspondence, ordered alphabetically by correspondent and accompanied by in-depth introductions for each correspondent, returns the life threefold to the old artefact of the letter: the life of the writer, the life of the person to whom she's writing, and finally the life of the times both people inhabited. This new project invaluable returns each time to that original artefact to make a wealth of corrections, returning missed or misrecorded words from Mansfield's originals, replacing misprints and punctuation changes lost in the original transcriptions.

Such tiny adjustments are often tonal. With Mansfield tonality was all important; in this writer's output a difference so small as that between a dash and a full stop has echoing implication. More: several crucial texts plus drafts of lost or unsent letters among her papers are included here for the first time.

The new alphabetical structuring of the correspondents means this first volume opens with the only extant letter, and a seemingly rather slight one at first glance, between Mansfield and the American writer Conrad Aiken. But this demonstrates well how this newly structured reading of the correspondence will recontextualise Mansfield by making clear the immense effect of her presence in her social, literary and family circle and the fast changing contemporaneity she and her correspondents inhabited. A short letter to Aiken displays her warm social playfulness alongside a seriousness when it comes to self-critique, and ends with a moment of unexpected intimacy – all of which the accompanying introduction to Aiken then fleshes out to astonishing effect with references to points of contact both personal and literary and the longtime resonance across Aiken's life arising from the admittedly slight contact Aiken and Mansfield had in Aiken's time visiting the UK in 1920. So this thin slip of a letter opens, via contextualisation, into a rush of understanding of people and era, and into a world movingly and fragilely human; and again and again these volumes, with their accompanying details throughout of the lives of the

correspondents before and beyond Mansfield's own life, will dimension-alise humanly and historically Mansfield's whole correspondence.

For example, George Bowden, long seen as a casualty of Mansfield's resoluteness / waywardness steps dimensionally out of the shadows and comes alive; the tangential contact Mansfield had with the translator and Russophile Constance Garnett gives way via Claire Davison's introduction to an understanding of Garnett's own literary roots and the shape her own life took. The chronological arrangement of letters to each correspondent also showcases Mansfield's acute understanding of social register, how she tailors tone to recipient, an act of generosity which has a kind of winking vitality even when Mansfield is in her last months of life, fading physically while her letter-writing voices stay strong, only altering to focus with even more strength of command in the very last months of her life when her visit to Gurdjieff's institute near Fontainebleau grants her new context and space and sharpens her letters away from this habitual tonal generosity towards something more urgent, untrammelled by social performativity – differently generous, you might say.

Reading one after the other the letters to a single correspondent over time is richly revealing. The letters the young romantic adolescent Mansfield sends to her sister Vera give way to letters revealing her palpable consciousness of the outcast she becomes to her family; and when, in the summer of 1922, after a flurry of constant contact, there's suddenly an absence of letters between Mansfield and her friend and lifelong companion Ida Baker, the silence, huge and impactful, speaks presence.

'If I am your friend you have the right to expect the truth from me' (p. 403). The letters the painter Dorothy Brett received make a body of thought which is practically a powerful work in its own right, featuring some of Mansfield's best art writing. These letters to Brett were also so loving, so affectionate and full of attentiveness, that after Mansfield's death when she discovered Mansfield's less flattering version of her in letters sent to others, Brett was devastated. But truth is multiple, versatile, via the multiple-selfed Mansfield, who knew exactly how to please Brett and went out of her way to do so while also remaining uncompromising in her aesthetic critique of Brett's work – and being very frank, much more so than she is to most others, about how ill she is and what it feels like. Then again, this volume lets it readers compare the different note of frankness when, for instance, Mansfield is writing to the painter J. D. Fergusson, the tone of which correspondence reveals the sentimentalising, gentle ameliorating voice Mansfield has tailored, bespoke, for Brett's letters.

The recontextualisation of the correspondence also sends us to other sources: Conrad Aiken's short story based on his meeting Mansfield, 'Your Obituary, Well Written', Beatrice Campbell's memoir *Today We Will Only Gossip*, Mansfield's soldier lover Francis Carco's written texts, and more. One stray letter to Walter de la Mare opens question upon question about lost letters and surviving letters between the friends; the

accompanying introduction sends readers off to find the poem he dedicated to her – and when you do, the poem becomes an act of correspondence, a gesture towards the shared meeting of minds.

A reconstruction of people and their world; a communal act via one person's correspondence: you sense, reading this volume, that Mansfield, who was fiercely private about her letters and never wanted anyone after her death to read her correspondence, might even have approved of what this edition is making of her private literature. The readers of this volume are held throughout by an open time structure in which, as you read from beginning to end, time moves backwards as well as forwards, starts again, leaves off in the middle, sends you to the end then back from the end to the early life, or the middle of the life again – so that you find yourself living repeatedly through time as an ever-widening cycle. Since this allows time not to be about the sequential movement towards the early death of Katherine Mansfield, or not to be just about it, there's a liberation from and a recontextualising of a sequence of events that have always tended to lead to (even to bind Mansfield into) the story of her short-livedness, her final tragic demise. But here time becomes spatial, dimensional. The context shifts, becomes less about Mansfield's life chronology, more about her specific personal interactions and what happens to these over time with each person in a widening circle of connectedness.

'Marie I love domestic details in a letter. After all one tells the other items of news to the outside world. But when you say you've just made your second batch of marmalade I feel as though I had run in & were watching you hold the bottle up to the light' (p. 219).

In her letters, time opens. Round them a community opens, takes shape around her. A century opens, becomes vivid beyond belief. The last letter in this volume, a single, one-off slight-seeming letter, like the one to Aiken we began with, tells when contextualised the full story of the century, and the ways lives connect, the life in that connecting. All this, from a one-off greeting from Katherine Mansfield to a five-year-old boy, a note full of generosity for his being in touch with her at all, one full of the promise of gifts exchanged, story exchanged, and in the writing of which she doesn't just inhabit the imaginative space of a child but attends to that child – to the letter.