

Talks with Katherine Mansfield at Fontainebleau

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Everybody knows that Katherine Mansfield spent her last days in the Gurdjieff Institute at Fontainebleau, and the letters and diaries which Mr. Middleton Murry has now published bear ample testimony to the value she attached both to the institute and to the system of training employed there. Many questions have been asked concerning the particular advantage other than health which Katherine Mansfield hoped to derive from it all. Had she come to the end of her writing impulse? But she was still full of sketches and plans for future stories, and even a novel or two. Was she dissatisfied with her craftsmanship, and did she hope to improve it under a special method of training? But she was always dissatisfied and always improving herself. From the age of twenty-one, when she showed me her first sketch, and I published it in the *New Age*, to her death at thirty-three, at the moment when she was planning to write again after some months' rest, she worked, as few writers work, to develop and perfect her style in the agony of conviction that so far it was only embryonic.

Some months before she went into the institute at Fontainebleau she told me that she could not read any of the stories she had written without feeling self-contempt. 'There is not one', she said 'that I dare show to God.' It therefore did not need the institute to intensify her wish to excel in her craftsmanship; and, indeed, the institute was not a school of literary art, nor was she under any illusion that writing could be taught there. The real reason, and the only reason that led Katherine Mansfield to the Gurdjieff Institute was less dissatisfaction with her craftsmanship than dissatisfaction with herself; less dissatisfaction with her stories than with the attitude toward life implied in them; less dissatisfaction with her own and contemporary literature than with literature.

I had many conversations with her on this topic during the years of our acquaintance, and particularly during the months preceding her death. She was even more explicit on these occasions than in her letters and diaries. 'Suppose' she used to say, 'that I could succeed in writing as well as Shakespeare. It would be lovely, but what then? There is something wanting in literary art even at its highest. Literature is not enough.'

'The greatest literature', she said, 'is still only mere literature if it has not a purpose commensurate with its art. Presence or absence of purpose distinguishes literature from mere literature, and the elevation of purpose distinguishes literature within literature. That is merely literary that has no other object than to please. Minor literature has a didactic object. But the greatest literature of all—the literature that scarcely exists—has not merely an aesthetic object, not merely a didactic object, but, in addition, a creative object: that of subjecting its readers to a real and at the same time illuminating experience. Major literature, in short, is an initiation into truth.'

'But where do we stand in relation to that?' I asked. 'Where is the writer with the keys of initiation upon him?'

This was Katherine Mansfield's introduction to the Gurdjieff Institute, and the object of her travel there. For she realised that it is not writing as writing that needs criticism, correction, and perfection, so much as the mind, character, and personality of the writer. One must become more to write better. Certainly this does not exclude the possibility of great improvement in technique without the aid of any system of personal training. On the other hand, when, as in Katherine Mansfield's case, the improvement of one's technique by the ordinary means has ceased to be possible, or has fallen under the law of diminishing returns (yielding too small a result for the effort expended), then the adoption of an entirely new means, such as special self-training, becomes imperative if the will to perfection is still as active as it was in her.

I saw Katherine Mansfield almost every day in the institute, and we had many long talks together. For months she was quite content not to be writing or even reading. We had a common surprise in contrasting our current attitude towards literature with the craze we had both experienced for many years. What has come over us? she would ask whimsically. Are we dead? Or was our love of literature an affectation, which had now dropped off like a mask? Every now and then, on the other hand, a return of the old enthusiasm would be experienced. She would begin a story and confide to me that she was rather enjoying the thrill of writing again. The following day she had torn it up, quite cheerfully, and with a grimace of humour. Premature delivery! She was under contract, I believe, to write a number of stories for one publisher or another and

many times she spoke of it as an obligation. But greater even than her wish to keep her engagement with her publishers was her resolution not to write stories in the old style. Her new stories were to be different. How different only she had any real conception; and, moreover, she kept it to herself, not even confiding it to her diaries or her most intimate letters. It was, in fact, a conception to be brooded upon and not written about—a conception that slowly arose within a new state of being and understanding; a conception, therefore, inexpressible in words until its inner metamorphoses has been completed. I read her diaries in vain for a real trace of the new idea that had begun to dawn in Katherine Mansfield. She writes in them repeatedly of new stories, but never of the new attitude to be implied and manifested in them. She would write, as before, with all her old qualities vivified and illuminated; she would continue to employ her marvellously microscopic observation of men and women. But her attitude was to have undergone a change. In a word, she would have a new purpose in writing—a purpose not only to gratify and instruct, but to initiate and create.

One day, shortly before her death, she sent for me to come to her room; she had something very important to tell me. When I arrived, she was in high spirits. Her face shone as if she had been on Sinai.

‘What is it, Katherine?’ I asked. ‘What makes you so happy?’

‘I have found my idea’, she said. ‘I’ve got it at last. It arose, of course, out of personal experience. Katya has felt something that she never felt in her life before, and Katya understands something she never understood before.’

I cannot recall the exact words in which she proceeded to expound her new idea, or, rather, new attitude toward life and literature. It was, moreover, adumbrated with the aid of silences during which I thought as intensely as she on the subject; and from these she would emerge with a fresh suggestion or an improved formulation of a previous opinion. I can only record fragments, and the final impression in her mind. Briefly, the conclusion was this: to make the commonplace virtues as attractive as ordinarily the vices are made: to present the good as the witty, the adventurous, the romantic, the gay, the alluring; and the evil as the platitudinous, the dull, the conventional, the solemn, and the unattractive.

‘I have not been able to think’, she said, ‘that I should not have made such observations as I *have* made of people, however cruel they may seem. After all, I *did* observe those things, and I had to set them down. I’ve been a camera. But that’s just the point. I’ve been a selective camera, and it has been my attitude that has determined

the selection; with the result that my slices of life (thank you, Mr. Phillpotts!) have been partial, misleading, and a little malicious. Further, they have had no other purpose than to record my attitude, which in itself stood in need of change if it was to become active instead of passive. Altogether, I've been not only a mere camera, but I've been a selective camera, and a selective camera without a creative principle. And, like everything unconscious, the result has been evil.'

'Well, what is your new plan?'

'To widen first the scope of my camera, and then to employ it for a conscious purpose—that of representing life not merely as it appears to a certain attitude, but as it appears to another and different attitude, a creative attitude.'

'What do you mean by a creative attitude?' I asked.

'You must help me out, Orage,' she replied, 'if I miss the words. But I mean something like this. Life can be made to appear anything by presenting only one aspect of it; and every attitude in us—every mood, I mean to say—sees only one aspect. Assuming that this attitude is more or less permanent in any given writer, and unsusceptible of being changed by his own will, he is bound to present only the correspondent aspect of life, and, at the same time, to do no more than present it. He is passively victimised by the partial vision imposed on him, and this, in its turn, is without dynamic quality. Such reflections of life have the effect of reflections in a looking-glass of real objects; that is, none whatever.'

'Your idea is, then, to affect life and no longer to reflect it?'

'Oh, that is too big,' she said. 'You must not laugh at me. Help me to express myself.'

She continued with occasional suggestions of words, and finally completed the sketch of her new attitude.

'There are in life as many aspects as attitudes toward it; and aspects change with attitudes. At present we see life, generally speaking, in only a passive aspect because we bring only a passive attitude to bear upon it. Could we change our attitude, we should not only see life differently, but life itself would come to *be* different. Life would undergo a change of appearance because we ourselves had undergone a change in attitude. I'm aware, for example, of a recent change of attitude in myself: and at once not only my old stories have come to look different to me, but life itself looks different. I could not write my old stories again, or any more like them: and not because I do not

see the same detail as before, but because somehow or other the pattern is different. The old details now make another pattern; and this perception of a new pattern is what I call a creative attitude toward life.'

'You mean,' I said, 'that while the details of life—the forms, colours, sounds, etc.—remain the same, the pattern under which you arrange them is now different, owing to your change of attitude? Formerly, for example, being yourself in a mood, say, of resentment, you have selected and presented your observations of life in a pattern of, say, a cross of amused suffering? Your present attitude, being creative, and not, like resentment, simply reactive, arranges the same details, but in a different pattern; in a pattern to present, say, the descent from the cross?'

'I wish I dare mean half as much as that', Katherine Mansfield said, 'but really my idea is much smaller. Perhaps not, though, if I come to think about it. Do you think it is very presumptuous of me?'

I reassured her, and she continued:

'An artist communicates not his vision of the world, but the attitude which results in his vision; not his dream, but his dream-state; and as his attitude is passive, negative, or indifferent, so he reinforces in his readers the corresponding state of mind. Now, most writers are merely passive; in fact, they aim only at representing life, as they say, with the consequence that their readers for the most part become even more passive, even more spectatorial, and we have a world of Peeping Toms with fewer and fewer Lady Godivas to ride by. What I am trying to say is that a new attitude to life on the part of writers would first see life different and then make it different.'

'Have you come to any practical conclusion as regards the writing of stories?' I asked. 'Do you see the possibility of a new kind of story? How will your new idea work out in practice?'

Katherine Mansfield showed me some fragments of beginnings of stories, all of which she tore up.

'I have begun many times,' she said, 'but I am not yet ready, it seems. However, the idea is clear enough, and I shall carry it out one day. Here is an example. I won't say it is one I shall ever write, but it will serve as an illustration. Two people fall in love and marry. One, or perhaps both of them have had previous affairs, the remains of which still linger like ghosts in a new home. Both wish to forget, but the ghosts still walk. How can this situation be presented? Ordinarily a writer, such as the late lamented Katherine Mansfield, would bring her passive, selective, and resentful

attitude to bear upon it, and the result would be one of her famous satiric sketches reinforcing in her readers the attitude in herself. Or, peradventure, some didacticist would treat of the situation, and present us with a homily on the importance of sacrifice. Others would treat it pathetically or solemnly or psychologically, or melodramatically or humorously, each according to his own passive attitude or normal mood.

‘But I should represent it as my present attitude sees it, as a common adventure in ghost laying. Thanks to some change in me since I have been here, I see any such situation as an opportunity for the exercise and employment of all the intelligence, invention, imagination, bravery, endurance, and, in fact, all the virtues of the most attractive hero and heroine. Think of the subtlety necessary on both sides to maintain a mutual state of love which both naturally and sincerely wish to maintain, as, of course, everybody does. Think of how they would try to lay the ghosts in each other and in themselves. Suppose them to be jointly competing for the divine laurel and living and loving as an art. I can see such a scope for subtlety of observation that Henry James might appear myopic. At the same time, no quality need necessarily remain unemployed; but every power of the artist might be brought into play.’

‘You would not necessarily have a happy ending?’ I asked.

‘Not by any means. The problem might prove to be too big. Heroes and heroines are not measured either by what they passively endure or by what they actually achieve, but by the quantity and quality of the effort they put forth. The reader’s sympathy would be maintained by the continuity and variety of the effort of one or both of the characters, by their indomitable renewal of the struggle with ever fresh invention. Usually our “heroes” flag in their resources; they sulk after their first failure, or simply repeat the tactics which have already failed. And we are asked to admire their endurance or sympathise with their suffering or laugh at their ineptitude. I wish the laugh to be with the heroes. Let them anticipate the passive spectator and act as if the problem were theirs only to solve. That, roughly, is my new idea.’

‘And you really see your way to writing stories with it?’

‘I see the way, but I still have to go it.’

Only a few weeks later Katherine Mansfield was dead. I saw her a few hours before her death, and she was still radiant in her new attitude.