

Poetry, Ellipsis, and Katherine Mansfield's "Special *Prose*"

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In this essay, the author proposes to explore Mansfield's "special *prose*" by examining the two issues raised in her journal entries: First, the phrase "perhaps not in poetry. No, perhaps in *Prose*" in her journal entry of 22 January 1916 shows that Mansfield plans to experiment with a kind of poetic prose, or in her own words—"special *prose*". The profound affinity between the "special *prose*" and the notion of elegy, "a mournful poem for the dead" (*OED*, "elegy", n. sense 1), calls attention to her work's decisive but still insufficiently examined relationship to poetry and her preoccupation with mortality. Second, the words "scraps", "bits", and "nothing real finished" in her journal entry of 19 February 1918 indicate that the mortal fragility she writes about in her "special *prose*" is closely bound up with verbal fragility, as embodied, for example, in the form of an ellipsis mark that she uses extensively elsewhere in her short stories. Her connection to poetry and her use of ellipsis marks will be discussed by looking at the impact of John Keats's poems on her own work and "The Canary" (1922), the last story she completed before her death.

Keywords: Mansfield, Keats, poetry, "special *prose*", ellipsis, mortal fragility

Introduction

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) was born in 1888 and brought up in colonial Wellington, New Zealand. She was sent to London in 1903 for the latter part of her education, and could not settle back into Wellington society. In 1908 she headed again to London to develop her career as a professional writer of short story. She died of tuberculosis in Fontainebleau, France, aged only 34.¹ When she heard of Mansfield's death, Virginia Woolf felt that the only literary rival she valued was gone, famously confessing in her diary: "I was jealous of her writing—the only writing I have ever been jealous of" (Woolf, 1978, p. 227). Compared to Virginia Woolf, however, less critical attention has been devoted to Mansfield. This essay explores how Mansfield distinguishes herself from her contemporary modernist writers by her singular practice of "special *prose*" and frequent use of ellipsis marks.

Katherine Mansfield and Her Idea of "Special *Prose*"

In her Journal entry of 22 January 1916, Mansfield tells her plans as a writer to her dead brother, Leslie Heron Beauchamp (1894-1915), who was killed in the Great War.² She wants to write recollections of her own country, New Zealand, where she and her brother were born. Furthermore, she whispers to her brother:

Then I want to write poetry. I feel always trembling on the brink of poetry. The almond tree, the birds, the little wood

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¹ For more information about Katherine Mansfield's life and career, see Alpers (1987).

² On 7 October 1915, "at Ploegsteert Wood, near Armentières, he (Leslie Beauchamp) was showing his men how to lob the hand-grenade. The one he used was faulty; it blew up in his hand, and killed his sergeant also" (Alpers, 1987, p. 183).

where you are, the flowers you do not see, the open window out of which I lean & dream that you are against my shoulder, & the times that your photograph "looks sad". But especially I want to write a kind of long elegy to you—perhaps not in poetry. No, perhaps in Prose—almost certainly in a kind of special *prose*. (Mansfield, 1997, pp. 32-3)

Later in 1917 she fulfilled her wish by completing a short story based on her early years in Wellington, "Prelude", to be published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press in 1918.

While establishing her distinctive voice as a writer of short story, however, she was diagnosed with possible tuberculosis. In her journal entry of 19 February 1918, Mansfield records her sadness triggered by her first experience of spitting "bright red blood":

I woke up early this morning and when I opened the shutters the full round sun was just risen. I began to repeat that verse of Shakespeare's: "Lo here the gentle lark weary of rest" and bounded back into bed. The bound made me cough. I spat—it tasted strange—it was bright red blood. Since then I've [*sic*] gone on spitting each time I cough a little more. Oh, yes, of course I am frightened. But for two reasons only. I don't want to be ill, I mean "seriously" away from Jack [John Middleton Murry, Mansfield's husband]. Jack is the 1st thought. 2nd I don't want to find this is real consumption, perhaps its [*sic*] going to gallop—who knows?—and I shan't have my work written. Thats [*sic*] what matters. How unbearable it would be to die, leave "scraps", "bits", nothing real finished. (Mansfield, 1997, p. 125)

Around the same time she suffered from her first haemorrhage, she had been reading Keats, who also died of tuberculosis, and "she knew that Keats", as Angela Smith points out, "in the same situation, recognized it as his death warrant" (Smith, 2010, p. 195). She died of tuberculosis on 9 January 1923 in Fontainebleau, France, aged only 34.

In this essay, the author proposes to explore Mansfield's "special *prose*" by examining the two issues raised in her journal entries quoted above: First, the phrase "perhaps not in poetry. No, perhaps in Prose" in her Journal entry of 22 January 1916 shows that Mansfield plans to experiment with a kind of poetic prose, or in her own words—"special *prose*". The profound affinity between the "special *prose*" and the notion of elegy, "a mournful poem for the dead" (*OED*, "elegy", n. sense 1),³ calls attention to her work's decisive but still insufficiently examined relationship to poetry and her preoccupation with mortality. Second, the words "scraps", "bits", and "nothing real finished" in her journal entry of 19 February 1918 indicate that the mortal fragility she writes about in her "special *prose*" is closely bound up with verbal fragility, as embodied, for example, in the form of an ellipsis mark that she uses extensively in her short stories. Her connection to poetry and her use of ellipsis marks will be discussed by looking at the impact of John Keats's poems on her own work and "The Canary" (1922), the last story she completed before her death.

Unheard Melodies and Ellipsis Marks

Before becoming successful as a short story writer, Mansfield had already written several "vignettes"; prose poems characterized by symbolic descriptions of sound, colour and atmosphere rather than event. They were published in the Australian *Native Companion* on 1 October 1907. Mansfield's use of the rhetoric of English decadence—illustrated by such words as "strange", "exquisite", and "passionate" (Dawson, 1997, p. 84)—made the editor E. J. Brady remark that they owed rather too much to the fin-de-siècle miniatures of Oscar Wilde. Mansfield, however, denied that she had "cribbed" from her precursor: "This style of work absorbs me, at present—but—well—it *cannot* be said that anything you have of mine is 'cribbed'" (Mansfield,

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all dictionary definitions are from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) (hereafter *OED*), 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. In its latest online version at <http://www.oed.com>.

1984, p. 26). In his introduction to *Poems of Katherine Mansfield*, Vincent O'Sullivan places her poetry in relation to her prose writing:

They [the vignettes] first proposed to her a freedom that already moved towards the stories she would later write, easing emotion away from the need to account for it fully, allowing an adjectival assault on the notion that one needed to be either consistent or explanatory. They were excursions into that dimly defined territory between the expectations of prose and the freer emotional contours of verse. (O'Sullivan, 1988, pp. 10-11)

O'Sullivan's statement provides a good way of clarifying Mansfield's notion of "special prose"—an attempt to explore "that dimly defined territory between the expectations of prose and the freer emotional contours of the verse". Considering prose "a hidden country still" (Mansfield, 1987, p. 343) in her letter of 26 July 1919 to Lady Ottoline Morrelland "an almost undiscovered medium" (Mansfield, 1930, p. 92) in her review of F. Brett Young's *The Young Physicians* published later in the same year, Mansfield was aware of the potential that lay in the fusion of poetry and prose. Having confessed that she finds T.S. Eliot's poems "unspeakably dreary" in her letter of 12 May 1919 to Virginia Woolf, however, she also notices a link between poetry and the short story, commenting on Eliot's poem, "Prufrock is, after all, a short story" (Mansfield, 1987, p. 318). Indeed, the elements of a narrative can be discerned in lines 30-36 of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking about Michelangelo. (Eliot, 1974, p. 14)

The "you" and "me" of line 30 are divided parts of Prufrock's own nature, for he is experiencing internal conflict: Does he or does he not make a declaration of love to some lady in the afternoon tearoom?

Having been labelled as a modernist writer, however, Mansfield tells Virginia Woolf in a letter dated 12 May 1919 that she has "no patience" with her contemporary modernist poets (Mansfield, 1987, p. 318). As O'Sullivan points out, "Mansfield's own preferences in poetry were firmly traditional. For years she carried about with her Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*" (O'Sullivan, 1988, p. 13). Her letters, journals and short stories allude particularly to Shakespeare, but also to the early Romantic poets, as she writes from Bandol to Murry in a letter dated 20 and 21 February 1918: "Shelley and Keats I get more and more *attached* to. Nay, to all 'poetry'. I have such a passion for it and I feel such an understanding of it. Its [*sic*] a great part of my life" (Mansfield, 1987, p. 83). In a notebook entry from 1921, she remarks on the difficulty of "the defeat of the personal": "One must learn, one must practise to *forget* oneself. I can't tell the truth about Aunt Anne unless I am free to enter into her life without self-consciousness [*sic*]. [...] Perhaps poetry will help" (Mansfield, 1997, p. 296). Stead compares Mansfield's "chameleon quality" in impersonating different characters to Keats's notion of the "chameleon poet" (Stead, 1977, p. 17). The author suggests that Mansfield's poetics of "special prose" can also be helpfully illuminated by considering Keats's concept of "Negative Capability", as outlined in Keats's letter of 21, 27 (?) December 1817 to his brothers, George and John Keats: "that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats, 1970, p. 43).

Keats's poetics of "Negative Capability" is well illustrated in lines 41-45 from his "Ode to a Nightingale" (May 1819):

I *cannot* see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, *guess* each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild.⁴ (Keats, 1978, pp. 370-1)

Consider, also, lines 11-12 from his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (May 1819): "Heard melodies are sweet, but those *unheard*/Are sweeter" (Keats, 1978, p. 372).⁵ The Keatsian rhetoric of "uncertainties" and "doubts" finds a kindred spirit 100 years later in Mansfield's writing. Here the author may consider, for example, her letter dated 24 June 1922 to an aspiring novelist Arnold Gibbons, advising him on the five stories that he has sent her for her advice. She tells Gibbons that "the idea in all the five stories is awfully good" but that they do not "quite come off" because she writes "you used more words than were necessary. [...] I realise its [*sic*] all very easy to say these things—", she continues,

but how are we going to convey these overtones, half tones, quarter tones, these hesitations, doubts, beginnings, if we go at them *directly*? It is mostly devilishly difficult, but I do believe that there is a way of doing it and that's [*sic*] by trying to get as near to the *exact truth* as possible. (Mansfield, 2008, pp. 213-4)

In her poem "The Gulf" (1916), Mansfield demonstrates an awareness of the possibility of bridging the gulf between people by what we might call—in Virginia Woolf's phrase—"inarticulate words".⁶

A gulf of silence separates us from each other
I stand at one side of the gulf—you at the other
I cannot see you or hear you—yet know that you are there—
Often I call you by your childish name
And pretend that the echo to my crying is your voice.
How can we bridge the gulf—never by speech or touch
Once I thought we might fill it quite up with our tears
Now I want to shatter it with our laughter. (Mansfield, 1988, p. 59)

The subject, tone, and the phrase, "your childish name", place this poem as an elegy for her brother after his death, as suggested by Vincent O'Sullivan.⁷ But the author would like to suggest that the "you" might extend to a character in Mansfield's story, or a reader, considering this poem as an allegory of a character or an author searching for a way of expressing "the truth" of "hesitations, doubts, beginnings".

Seen in this light, no device is better able to express "laughter" and "tears", in other words, bliss and sadness, than the typographical ellipsis, which is extensively used throughout Mansfield's work. As Sarah Sandley puts it: "Mansfield's use of punctuation, particularly of three- and four-dot suspensions, is frequently acknowledged as a skillful style marker; it conveys characters' strategies of mental evasion and deferral" (Sandley, 1994, p. 79). In other words, Mansfield's distinctive or singular (in Derrida's phrase)⁸ practice of

⁴ Italicisations mine.

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⁶ "I begin to long for some little languages such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement" (Woolf, 1963, p. 169).

⁷ See O'Sullivan's notes on "The Gulf" in *Poems of Katherine Mansfield* (p. 90).

⁸ For the discussion of the notion of the singular in Derrida's work, see Royle (2008), pp. 119-26; Clark (2005), chapter 5.

"special *prose*" is characterized by her frequent use of ellipsis mark, which is an example of what Raymond Carver calls "the writer's particular and unmistakable signature on everything he [or she] writes".⁹ In Mansfield's stories, the ellipsis mark plays the role of inviting the reader to "acknowledge" "the secret self"¹⁰ of a character. The second paragraph of her most praised and anthologized story, "Bliss" (1918), for example, goes like this:

What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss—absolutely bliss!—as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe? (Mansfield, 2012, p. 142)¹¹

The ellipsis mark at the end of this passage hints at two things: First, like Keats in "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), Bertha is "too happy"¹² to put her "feeling of bliss" into words. On the other hand, as Bennett and Royle (2009) comment, "there is a suggestion that pleasure can be painful at the same time: the burning bosom here might be compared with the 'aching Pleasure' evoked in Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy'" (Bennett & Royle, 2009, p. 291). Another conjunction of this kind of "aching Pleasure" with ellipsis can be found in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" when Constantia looks at a statue of Buddha:

And the stone and gilt image, whose smile always gave her such a queer feeling, almost a pain and yet a pleasant pain, seemed to-day to be more smiling. He knew something; he had a secret. "I know something that you don't know", said her Buddha. Oh, what was it, what could it be? And yet she had always felt there was... something. (Mansfield, 2012, pp. 280-1)

Angela Smith suggests that "the ellipsis indicates [Constantia's] tentative groping for something beyond her experience", that is, "something close to sexual arousal", as implied by the phrase "a pleasant pain" (Smith, 1999, p. 221). In "Bliss", the "aching Pleasure" or the "pleasant pain" is entangled with Bertha's sexual awakening, too. In the middle of the story, she is disconcerted by a grey cat and a black cat which is evidently intent on sexual activity.

[...] A grey cat, dragging its belly, crept across the lawn, and a black one, its shadow, trailed after. The sight of them, so intent and so quick, gave Bertha a curious shiver.

"What creepy things cats are!" she stammered, and she turned away from the window and began walking up and down... (Mansfield, 2012, p. 145)

The four dots imply that Bertha is unconsciously worried about her sexual frigidity in her marriage to Harry. Towards the end of the story, her secret self whispers: "Soon these people will go. The house will be

9 "Every great or even every very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications. It's akin to style, what I'm talking about, but it isn't style alone. It is the writer's particular and unmistakable signature on everything he writes. It is his world and no other. This is one of the things that distinguishes one writer from another. Not talent. There's plenty of that around. But a writer who has some special way of looking at things and who gives artistic expression to that way of looking: that writer may be around for a time" (Carver, 1989, p. 22).

10 Mansfield describes her writing in terms of wandering about "all sorts of places" in a letter to Dorothy Brett dated 12 September 1921: "[...] And then the place where it all happens. I have tried to make it as familiar to 'you' as it is to me. [...] And, too, one tries to go deep—to speak to the secret self we all have—to acknowledge that" (Mansfield, 1996, p. 278).

11 In this essay, I use Gerri Kimber & Vincent O'Sullivan (Eds.) (2012), *The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield*, vol. 2: *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield, 1916-1922*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Mansfield's short stories are from this edition and only page references will be given parenthetically in the main body of the text.

12 "But being too happy in thine happiness". Line 6 of "Ode to a Nightingale" (Keats, 1978, p. 369). "'I am too happy—too happy!' she murmured". From "Bliss" (p. 145).

quiet—quiet. The lights will be out. And you and he will be alone together in the dark room—the warm bed...” (Mansfield, 2012 p. 150). The ellipsis mark here gestures towards Bertha’s awakened desire towards her husband. In light of these observations, the use of ellipsis mark epitomizes what Mansfield’s “special prose” aims for—a kind of prose which is free from the need to account for feelings fully and “the notion that one needed to be either consistent or explanatory” (in O’Sullivan’s phrase).

Mortal and Verbal Fragilities in *The Canary*

If bliss is inexpressible, so is fear of mortality. In a letter dated 3 and 4 February 1918, Mansfield tells her husband John Middleton Murry that she is excited by her work (“Je ne parle pas français”) and copies a great deal of it in the letter “in case any misfortune should happen to me. Cheerful! But there is a great black bird flying over me and I am so frightened he’ll settle” (Mansfield, 1987, p. 55).

In addition to the black bird, the canary’s function as an animal sentinel to detect gas in a coal mine¹³ makes it a perfect medium to register Mansfield’s meditation on mortal fragility. The narrator of her last story, “*The Canary*” (July 1922), is a boarding house keeper who lacks human companionship and is socially disregarded by her lodgers as “the Scarecrow”. Before the arrival of the canary the objects of her affections were the flowers in her garden (“Flowers respond wonderfully, but they don’t sympathise”) and “the evening star” (“it seemed to be shining for me alone”) (Mansfield, 2012, p. 512).

Once the canary enters her life, however, it is he who becomes the centre of the narrator’s life. She finds in the canary not only a “professional singer” but also “perfect company”, who can understand and even interact with her:

... It surprises even me now to remember how he and I shared each other’s lives. The moment I came down in the morning and took the cloth off his cage he greeted me with a drowsy little note. I knew it meant ‘Missus! Missus!’ [...] I spread a newspaper over a corner of the table and when I put the cage on it he used to beat with his wings, despairingly, as if he didn’t know what was coming. “You’re a regular little actor” I used to scold him. I scraped the tray, dusted it with fresh sand, filled his seed and water tins, tucked a piece of chickweed and half a chilli between the bars. And I am perfectly certain he understood and appreciated every item of this little performance. (Mansfield, 2012, p. 512)

In her *Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Stories*, Pamela Dunbar calls readers’ attention to “the subversive” which is often masked by the “surface lyricism”¹⁴ of Mansfield’s short stories. Using “*The Canary*” as an example, Dunbar identifies the irony of the narrator’s representation: “Romantic in her emotional reach and in her association with a songbird, the Narrator is disqualified by her sex and lack of social status from the exalted status of the Romantic poet” (Dunbar, 1997, p. 72). Indeed, “the drowsy little note” in the passage quoted above harks back to lines from Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale”.¹⁵ The

13 “There are countless examples of environmental effects on animals that later manifested in humans. The classic example is the “canary in the coal mine”. Well into the 20th century, coal miners brought canaries into coal mines as an early-warning signal for toxic gases, primarily carbon monoxide. The birds, being more sensitive, would become sick before the miners, who would then have a chance to escape or put on protective respirators”. Retrieved from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_sentinels.

14 See Pamela Dunbar’s preface to *Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Stories*, p. ix: “These two aspects of Mansfield’s writing, the lyrical and the subversive, are in some of the best-known stories presented in a layered or contrapuntal manner, with the surface lyricism serving as a cloak for more subversive themes and attitudes. Mansfield adopts this method, in part because of the dangerous nature of the material—much of it autobiographical—with which she was dealing; in part in order to reflect the doubleness of the way in which according to her, society and indeed the human mind itself are organized”.

15 “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains/My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk”. Lines 1-2 from Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale” (Keats, 1978, p. 370).

words of the theatre such as "actor" and "performance", however, intimate that both the canary and the narrator are masquerading as something they are not.

The author argues that the narrator shares more in common with Félicité, the heroine of "A Simple Heart" (1877), a story penned by another writer Mansfield greatly admires, Gustave Flaubert.¹⁶ The evidence of Mansfield's familiarity with the story can be found in a letter dated 12 November 1922, in which she writes to Murry about the dancing she saw at Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man:

I must say the dancing here has given me quite a different approach to writing. I mean some of the very ancient Oriental dance. There is one which takes about 7 minutes & it contains the whole life of woman—but everything! Nothing is left out. It taught me, it gave me more of woman's life than any book or poem. There was even room for Flaubert's [Un] Cœur Simple ["A Simple Heart"] in it [...]. (Mansfield, 2008, p. 322)

Félicité in "A Simple Heart" (Flaubert, 2005, pp. 3-40) finds great fulfilment in meaningless babble with her parrot. They would hold conversations with each other, the parrot endlessly repeating the three stock phrases from his repertory and Félicité replying with words that made very little sense but which all came straight from the heart. Likewise, the narrator in "The Canary" tells readers that the little "Sweet! Sweet!" sound made by her canary "was so beautiful comforting" that she "nearly cried".

After the canary has died, the narrator tells readers that her "heart felt hollow, as if it was his cage", and she puzzles about what the bird's song may have meant in the last paragraph:

...All the same, without being morbid, or giving way to—to memories and so on, I must confess that there does seem to me something sad in life. It is hard to say what it is. I don't mean the sorrow that we all know, like illness and poverty and death. No, it is something different. It is there, deep down, deep down, part of one, like one's breathing. However hard I work and tire myself I have only to stop to know it is there, waiting. I often wonder if everybody feels the same. One can never know. But isn't it extraordinary that under his sweet, joyful little singing it was just this—sadness?—Ah, what is it?—that I heard. (Mansfield, 2012, p. 514)

As Jonathan Culler puts it in *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, the parrot's repeated, meaningless set phrases in Flaubert's "A Simple Heart" can be seen as "arbitrary signs" which "make no pretence of accurately conveying human feelings", and yet, "seem to be, for that very reason, the forms which contain the greatest depths" (Culler, 1974, pp. 208-9). This also provides a way to consider the canary's singing in Mansfield's story. The "Negative Capability" of the canary's singing, nicely inscribed in the ellipsis mark that opens each paragraph of the story (except the third) and points to the inarticulate origins of "special prose" in poetry. Hence, to adapt the Keatsian formulation, heard melodies are sad, but those unheard are sadder.

Conclusion

To conclude, Mansfield distinguishes herself from her contemporary modernist writers by her connection to the Romantic poet Keats and her singular practice of "special prose". Her extensive use of ellipsis mark indicates that the mortal fragility is deeply associated with verbal fragility in her stories. That "The Canary" is Mansfield's last completed story invites us to consider it as more than a lament for the death of the canary. As Dunbar argues, "The Canary" is Mansfield's own literary epitaph" (Dunbar, 1997, p. 72). In a letter dated December 31, 1922, less than a month before she died, Mansfield tells her cousin Elizabeth Russell that "I am

¹⁶ In a letter (May or June 1908) to her elder sister Vera Beauchamp, Mansfield tells her that she admires Flaubert's work: "I have had too, quite a mania for Walter Pater—and Nathaniel Hawthorne—and also Robert Browning—and Flaubert—Oh, many others—I have been spending days at the Library reading and writing a novel—" (Mansfield, 1984, p. 46).

tired of my little stories like birds bred in cages" (Mansfield, 2008, p. 346). Seen in this light, *The canary* is the mask for Mansfield as a writer. The ellipses in the story not only express the uncertainty of the bird singing but also the difficulty of Mansfield's breathing as well as writing.

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