1920

(Harvey, M., 2015: 123)

Katherine Mansfield and Literary Influence

Edited by Sarah Ailwood and Melinda Harvey

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> The critic [. . .] speedily becomes aware of the fact that there are two kinds of literature: there is the kind that, with considerable plausibility, he can account for on his methods, and there is another kind whose essence seems to be quite unanalysable. It is, of course, this latter kind for which the critic has the most respect: he refers to its 'genius', a word indicating the complete breakdown of his critical apparatus. The essence of a good Tchehov story has this kind of elusiveness, and so has this story by Miss Katherine Mansfield.[20]

Sullivan's claim here is that a writer's worth can be measured by the difficulty a critic has to account for his or her work. The good Chekhov story is elusive, and 'Je ne parle pas français' is too. Mansfield had not attracted significant attention by April 1920 – that came with the publication of *Bliss and Other Stories* in December that same year. Sullivan manages to turn the critical neglect of Mansfield's writing into evidence of her greatness, and Chekhov's own example supports his case.

Sullivan is likely to have known that making the Mansfield-Chekhov connection would please his boss, mainly because it was one he was apt to employ himself. In a letter to Mansfield dated 19 January 1920 Murry mentions a visit to H. G. Wells' house during which Jane Wells 'warmed [his] heart' by 'speaking enthusiastically' of her and Chekhov in the same breath: 'The association of the two, as you know, will always seem to me to show real insight.'[21] Just under three weeks later Murry wrote to her again: 'You are a big writer. You are a classic as Tchehov in your way.'[22] Murry appears to have hit upon the Mansfield-Chekhov connection as early as March 1918. In a letter to Mansfield he counsels her against using the name 'Eddie *Wangle*' for Bertha's husband in the story 'Bliss': 'It is a Dickens touch & you're not Dickens – you're Tchehov – more than Tchehov.'[23] Sullivan's review of 'Je ne parle pas français' may have irked some more eagle-eyed literary insiders – Virginia Woolf, for one, cried nepotism in her diary[24] – but to everybody else the Mansfield-Chekhov comparison must have looked like one made at arm's length. Critics read and are influenced by other critics; Chekhov was invoked for comparison with Mansfield eight months later by Desmond MacCarthy in the *New Statesman and Nation*, Conrad Aiken in the *Freeman* and Malcolm Cowley in *The Dial* when *Bliss and Other Stories* appeared.[25]

A seed sown soon became too much pollen on the wind; it became a critical reflex to associate Mansfield with Chekhov so quickly that Richard Church began his 1927 review of Murry's posthumous edition of Mansfield's *Journal* by noting that '[i]t is usual to compare her with Tchekov, and indeed the likeness is obvious'.[26] It was enough to make Murry – the very man who had, according to S. S. Koteliansky, turned Mansfield into an 'English Tchehov'[27] – attempt to check its spread. In the 'Introduction' to the *Journal* Murry recalibrates the