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“I TRY TO PRAY AND I THINK OF SOMETHING CLEVER”: KATHERINE MANSFIELD AND MODERNIST PRAYER

Abstract: Katherine Mansfield was raised in a culture that instilled prayer as central to daily life. She recorded her first extant diary entry in her *Book of Common Prayer*; those penciled notes started a lifelong dialogue with religion. However, Mansfield's emphasis on individuality and art over tradition resulted in her ambivalence towards religion; she was critical of a piety learned by rote and of a dogma to which one blindly adhered. This paper contends, however, that she exploited the complexity of prayer in her private and published work. Forging her writing style, Mansfield consistently used prayer as both a subject and form in her stories, journals, and poetry. In her fiction, she records an extended narrative of the conflicted petitioner. Most importantly, she used prayer to examine the spiritual nature of the writer. Mansfield's religious sensibility, both reactive and participatory, was part of her search for the miraculous. While T.S. Eliot in his praise of the “Light Invisible” eventually reclaimed prayer for modernism, Mansfield focused, instead, on an individual's struggle in using prayer. In assessing Mansfield in relation to Eliot, this paper examines “Prelude,” “At the Bay,” “Daughters of the Late Colonel,” “Taking the Veil,” as well as some of her unpublished sketches. In addition, there is particular emphasis on her poems that take the form of prayer. While Mansfield's fictional characters expect an immediate response to prayer, privately Mansfield recognized her ongoing effort required for meaningful meditation.

Key words: prayer, modernism, the penitent in literature, modernist reactions to religion, Katherine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot

Katherine Mansfield's parents fostered her early relationship with prayer: they gave her *The Book of Common Prayer* which would have encouraged recitations of the collects in the Anglican service. Her copy also documents her writing life: it contains her penciled notes, part of her first known diary entry, “I am going to be a Mauri [sic] missionary.”¹ Mansfield's notes indicate that this was not a book simply to be used during services; instead, it was a book with which she felt an intimacy and freedom by inserting her thoughts and experience. That act appears to contradict Antony Alpers' impressions that overshadow Mansfield's complicated relationship with orthodoxy: in his biography, he stated that “the Church of England played scarcely more part in [...Mansfield's] life than it had in her father's.”² Recently Redmer Yska points with greater clarity to the Beauchamps' religious foundations when he writes, “religion [...] shaped the family's

1 Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The Early Years* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 90.

2 Antony Alpers, *Life of Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Viking, 1980), 19.

life in Karori.”³ Ken Arvidson accurately assesses the influence of these early experiences on Mansfield: “It was habitual for her to think religiously.”⁴ This essay looks at that relationship of religious practice to the self in some of Mansfield’s characters, analyzes her use of prayer in her poetry, and advances a reading of her modernist approach to prayer as a path to be a better writer.

Just as T.S. Eliot would later reject his Unitarian upbringing, Mansfield would reject Anglican orthodoxy, a reaction that resulted from familiarity with the tradition: Sir Harold Beauchamp was on the vestry at St. Mary’s; the maid Rose Ridler “taught Sunday school at the Karori Parochial Hall which the Beauchamp girls attended [...] accompanied by their grandmother.”⁵ Both in Karori and later in Wellington, there were “regulation church attendances on Sundays” with the children present at both morning Sunday school and evening services.⁶ Her uncle Valentine Waters was the choirmaster. The Beauchamp family’s religious involvement is clearly illustrated with her brother Leslie’s Christening at St. Mary’s Church in Karori.⁷ At the same ceremony, Annie Beauchamp and her sister, Belle, were also baptized.⁸ This information forces a reevaluation of claims that “Mansfield had no such [religious] conditioning in her early years. She appears remarkably free and untormented.”⁹ Mansfield freed herself from the organized church, but she was knowledgeable of Anglican traditions; she inserts reactions to religious conditioning, just as she annotated her prayer book, throughout her stories, journals, and poetry. As readily as Eliot would include allusions to Dante, Mansfield made effective use of religious texts: when assessing herself as a writer, she references the *King James Bible* with lines that would have come from her deep memory: “Why do ye tarry . . . ! Ah, why indeed?”¹⁰

Mansfield’s Running Commentary on Prayer

If Mansfield’s early years in Wellington included a life that nurtured participation in the Anglican community, she continued to be exposed to and reacted against those

3 Redmer Yska, *A Strange Beautiful Excitement: Katherine Mansfield’s Wellington 1888—1903* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press, 2017), 111.

4 Ken Arvidson, “Dancing on the Hand of God: Katherine Mansfield’s Religious Sensibility,” in *The Critical Response to Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Jan Pilditch. 211-218 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 212.

5 Kimber, *Early Years*, 53.

6 Yska, *Strange Beautiful Excitement*, 176.

7 Kimber, *Early Years*, 44.

8 Yska, *Strange Beautiful Excitement*, 111.

9 C. K. Stead, “Katherine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot,” in *Answering to the Language*, 149-161, (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989), 151.

10 Barbara Lounsberry, *Virginia Woolf’s Modernist Path* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016), 200. The quotation is from the KJB, Acts 22:16.

traditions when she was studying in London. At Queens College, Walter Rippmann, her influential teacher, shared a two-page quotation by Samuel Augustus Tipple in Mansfield's autograph book. Tipple was "a favourite of Ruskin," and his ideas could only have fed the youthful Mansfield's reimagining of spirituality with her growing interest in aestheticism.¹¹ That quotation emphasizes personal experience over dogma: "Has not God drawn nearer to us [...] at times and spoken with us more intimately or healingly in a wonderful sunset than in any words of the preacher?"¹² One of Mansfield's diary entries from that period records the New Year's Eve church service that ushered in 1904. She was staying with her uncle Henry Herron Beauchamp:¹³

I have just returned from a Midnight Service. It was very very beautiful & solemn. The air outside was cold and bracing and the Night was a beautiful thing. Over all the woods & the meadows Nature had tenderly flung a veil to protect from the frost, but the trees stood out, dark and beautiful, against the clear starry sky. The church looked truly very fit to be God's House, tonight. It looked so strong, so invincible, so hospitable.

It was only during the Silent Prayer that I made up my mind to write this. I mean this year to try and be a different person, and I want, at the end of this year, to see how I have kept all the vows that I have made tonight.

So much happens in a year. One may mean so much good and do so little.

I am writing this by the light of a wee peep of gas, and I have only got on a dressing gown -- so *decollete* [sic]. I am so tired, I think I must go to bed. Tomorrow will be the 1st of January. What a wonderful and what a lovely world this is. I thank God tonight that I am.¹⁴

Mansfield balances her youthful optimism with the sobering thought that one can expect to "do so little." The entry explores an unusually mature reflection: Mansfield connects the silence of prayer and writing. Not only does Mansfield sense a serenity through prayer, she observes that those impressions give the writer the groundwork for assessing herself, to "try and be a different person."

Furthermore, the thoughtful earnestness of Mansfield's observation along with the image of "Nature" supplying its "cold and bracing" control over the Night approaches a poetic moment. Her diction and intentional use of the upper case carry the same impact of her later style. Mansfield embraces a revelation of the self through nature, and while the romantic ideal is not new, one aspect of her writing predicts her modernistic style: the revelation is hinged to the inclusion of a single word, "tonight." Her meditation is not an endorsement that at a future time the church would impress her as open and strong. In the privacy of her room, with a gas light that flickers in imitation

¹¹ Kimber, *KM Early Years*, 114.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Henry Beauchamp was the father of Mary who authored *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898).

¹⁴ *The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield: Vol 4 – The Diaries*, eds. Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 13-14.

of the night sky, she offers her most transcendent observation, “I thank God tonight that I am.” The statement has an understated simplicity: Mansfield writes on the verge of sleep while she assesses her sincerity. Readers here are invited into an intimate, prayerful reflection rather than an authoritative doctrine that she knew and would have heard in church that night.

Mansfield’s commentary on spiritual uncertainty is a distinctive contribution to modernism. Unlike Eliot, Mansfield does not position prayer in the foreground. Instead, she integrates it for the reader to assess a character’s earnestness. In “Prelude” (1918), for example, Mansfield returns to the image of the nighttime landscape. When Kezia, like Mansfield the young diarist, is on the eve of change, she looks to the heavens: “Everything looked different—the [...] gardens far bigger and wilder. Bright stars speckled the sky and the moon hung over the harbour dabbling the waves with gold.”¹⁵ Kezia is filled with wonder: she “could not open her eyes wide enough. ‘Do stars ever blow about?’”¹⁶ Her awe is coupled with exhaustion: despite the fact that she asserts, “I’m not an atom bit sleepy,” she adds, “‘But my eyes keep curling up in such a funny sort of way.’ She gave a long sigh, and to stop her eyes from curling she shut them...”¹⁷ Here is a crafted Mansfieldian passage that illustrates her earlier prayerful observation that nature elicits a sense of being: “tonight [...] I am.” Upon arriving at the new home, unlike Lottie who sleepily asks where they are, Kezia exclaims with pure emotion, “‘Ooh!’”¹⁸ Mansfield contrasts the experience of the two sisters: compared with the younger Lottie’s sleepy disorientation, Kezia’s awareness is influenced by a Wordsworthian spot of time; however, Mansfield used romantic ideas similarly to the influence of such ideas on Virginia Woolf; in a letter to Lytton Strachey she explained, “romanticism. How do I catch it? [...] I think, [it] comes from the effort of breaking with complete representation. One flies into the air.”¹⁹

One such flight takes place later in the story; Mansfield humorously accentuates Lottie’s naïve demonstration of rote religious practice:

Gentle Jesus meek anmile,
 Look pon a little child.
 Pity me, simple Lizzie
 Suffer me to come to thee.²⁰

15 *The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield: Vol 2*, eds. Gerri Kimber and Vincent O’Sullivan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 60.

16 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 61.

17 *Ibidem*.

18 *Ibidem*.

19 Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Vol. II*, eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, eds. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 568-9.

20 Lottie misspeaks the second half of the first, and the second and third lines of Wesley’s hymn: “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,/Look upon a little child;/Pity my simplicity,/Suffer me to come to Thee.”

Lottie's recitation lacks a clear understanding of Charles Wesley's words, but the humor of her childish parroting is directly linked to the words that she has learned correctly: "Gentle Jesus [...] suffer me to come to thee." The lesson is mixed with confusion. Mansfield had previously considered this hymn in an early, unpublished poem, "The Last Thing" (1907):

You, all ready for your bed,
First kneel down by Mummy's chair
Fold your hands upon her lap
Learn to say a little prayer.

First, just 'thank you, God' -- and then
'Gentle Jesus meek and mild'
Last 'I lay me down to sleep
Make me please a better child.'²¹

The last stanza exposes the child's real motivation:

Very solemn, very grave.
Then you get up from your knees
And you rush to Daddy kins
'Now the Barley-sugar -- please.'²²

The speaker addresses the younger self who expected immediate reward. The child seeks something tangible; prayer is memorized, less motivated by Godliness than by sweets. Mansfield wrote the poem in a period of teenage disaffection. At the time she identified more with the wit of Oscar Wilde than the devotion of a spiritual seeker; she might have, like St. Oscar, believed in his proclamation that "When the gods wish to punish us they answer our prayers."²³

When Mansfield integrates her commentaries about prayer into her episodic stories, she adds a modernist perspective and style, alluding to prayer with a simple reference or the rhythm in her language. In "At the Bay" (1921), for example, when Kezia asks about Uncle William, whose death occurs before the story takes place, her grandmother, Mrs. Fairfield, states events with the cadence of the Nicene Creed: "He went to the mines, and he got sunstroke there and died."²⁴ There is, however, no soothing platitude or promise of heavenly afterlife in the face of Kezia's childishly stubborn demand for reassurance that death will never affect her. Even though Mrs. Fairfield speaks with

²¹ *The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield: Vol 3 – The Poetry and Critical Writings*, eds. Gerri Kimber and Angela Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 53.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Oscar Wilde, "An Ideal Husband," *The Complete Works*, vol. 8, (New York: Doubleday, 1923), 260.

²⁴ *KM Edinburgh Edition*, vol. 2, 357

the rhythm of prayer, her words depict a scarred landscape with a “little man fallen over like a tin soldier by the side of a big black hole.”²⁵ This explanation is as much about the dead of the Great War, a topic that haunted Mansfield and was fresh in the minds of her readers when the story was written; for them there was no rite of burial nor real consolation.

Mansfield was staring at her own mortality when writing “At the Bay,” and Kezia’s questions about the certainty of death anticipate the photo of Mrs. Stubbs’ dead husband in the following section. Mansfield juxtaposes Mrs. Fairfield, who does not offer consolation with platitude, with Mrs. Stubbs. On an oversized photo of her deceased husband, there is a biblical quotation: “Be not afraid, it is I.”²⁶ The garish silver lettering on the red cardboard ground conveys a conviction of eternal life: she speaks of her husband’s death as an event of divine decree, “a judgment.”²⁷ Along with these hints at Mrs. Stubbs’ comfort in Christian teaching, she also corrects her visitor. Alice comments about the dropsy that caused Mr. Stubbs’ death: “I suppose it was water.”²⁸ Mrs. Stubbs is a stickler for language: that word, so often in biblical verse refers to the waters of salvation, and she corrects Alice. Afterwards, Alice’s reaction is skillfully ambiguous, but her desire to return home is rooted in the comfort of the physical world. She finds freedom in the present.

The character in “At the Bay” who comes closest to being moved to prayer is the reflective Jonathan Trout. He spends his Sundays “in church—he was the leader of the choir—with such fearful dramatic intensity that the meanest hymn put on an unholy splendor.”²⁹ Trout is someone who fills common prayer with such intensity that others are left both shaken and awed. In that regard, the portrait of Trout is also Mansfield’s portrait of the modernist writer who embraces simultaneously transcendent splendor and earthly terror. Mansfield shares a similar sentiment about her own creative process in a letter to Dorothy Brett. After completing *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1921), she writes, I “Laid down the pen after writing ‘Thanks be to God.’ I wish there was a god, I am longing to (1) praise him (2) thank him.”³⁰ Mansfield connects the grandeur of creativity with being moved to prayer while simultaneously dismissing belief in a divinity.

25 *Ibidem*.

26 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 361. In quoting from the King James Bible, Matt. 14:27, Mansfield changes the word order: “It is I; be not afraid.”

27 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 360.

28 See, for example, KJB, John 7:38.

29 *KM Edinburgh Edition*, vol. 2, 365.

30 *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, 5 Vols. eds. Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984-2008), vol. 4, 278.

Elizabeth Bowen best expresses Mansfield's understanding of the modernist's rejection of orthodoxy and an unexamined dependence on prayer: "There are no signs that she was casting about to find a formula: a formula would, in fact, have been what she fled from."³¹ It wasn't just with Mrs. Stubbs that Mansfield examined a blind faith. The unpublished sketch "R's first husband was a pawnbroker" (1919) has a fairy tale quality: a woman's life is shaken by death, impoverishment, and abuse. It remained a sketch, but there are qualities to the story that indicate Mansfield's careful artistry. The first husband profits from the misfortune of his clients. This causes no discomfort, but he finds out that he has been cheated: this "preyed on her husband's mind, went on preying."³² While the pawnbroker worries, the wife prays, a practice that infuriates her second husband and aggravates her situation. When her second husband abuses her, she relates,

Well I went to see a clergyman and told him everything and he said, 'My child [...] I am very sorry for you, but with God's help [...] it's your duty to make him a better man. You say your first husband was so good. Well, perhaps God has kept this trial for you until now.'³³

Prayer, however, offers her no safety:

I went home—and that very night he tore my crucifix off and hit me on the head when I knelt down. He said he wouldn't have me say my prayers; it made him wild. I had a little dog at the time I was very fond of, and he used to pick it up and shout 'I'll teach it to say its prayers,' and beat it before my eyes—until—well, such was the man he was.³⁴

It is impossible to predict how Mansfield would have refined the sketch; however, it has all the necessary elements of one of her crafted stories, both thematically and structurally. Once again Mansfield questions reliance on prescribed prayer in the face of terror.

Mansfield raised the same question in one of her most important stories, "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" (1920). When "Mr Farolles of St John's" pays a call on the sisters Josephine and Constantia, they are sitting in their drawing-room, kept dark like a side chapel.³⁵ The sisters react to his presence with the posture of prayer: "They both hung their heads."³⁶ Mr. Farolles, however, leaves the sisters disquieted rather than comforted with his offer to console them. The patriarchal church, after all, is not as powerful as their deceased father:

'If either of you would like a little Communion, either or both of you, here *and* now, you have only to tell me. A little Communion is often very help—a great comfort,' he added tenderly. But the idea of a little Communion terrified them.³⁷

31 Elizabeth Bowen, "Introduction," to *Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Vintage, 1956), ix.

32 *KM Edinburgh Edition*, vol. 2, 185.

33 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 187.

34 *Ibidem*.

35 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 269.

36 *Ibidem*.

37 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 270.

The sisters' reaction reveals the formality of their upbringing in the Church.³⁸ Their internalized objections to the inappropriateness of the offer of the "little communion" take the form of litany:

What! In their drawing-room by themselves—with no—no altar or anything! The piano would be much too high, thought Constantia, and Mr Farolles could not possibly lean over it with the chalice. And Katie would be sure to come bursting in and interrupt them, thought Josephine. And supposing the bell rang in the middle? It might be somebody important—about their mourning. Would they get up reverently and go out, or would they have to wait ... in torture?³⁹

Sensing their hesitancy, Mr. Farolles offers to accommodate them at a later time, and Josephine and Constantia maintain another aspect of Church ritual; they respond in unison as a congregation would: "Oh yes, thank you very much!" they both said.⁴⁰

Unlike the staid sisters who are indoctrinated in church ritual, Edna in "Taking the Veil" romanticizes prayer and believes it leads to her conversion following her infatuation with a stage actor. She describes a scene that is, for her, divine, lit in the style of a baroque painting with the actor under "one beam of light, just one beam, [... shining] full on his raised sightless face."⁴¹ Edna retreats to the "gardens of the Convent of the Sacred Heart," a tranquil setting with the voices of the devout in the background obediently repeating the instruction of Sister Agnes.⁴² There, Edna "bowed her head [and ... at] that moment the future was revealed"; Edna wants to enter a convent—not "this convent" right in front of her but, instead, a sentimentalized daydream of one.⁴³ It is a fantasy, similar to Mansfield's own of becoming a missionary.

Mansfield again invokes the mannerism of prayer having Edna in a sacred place and bowing her head. Instead of a spiritual meditation, Edna envisions a melodrama: like a saint she imagines giving away her jewelry while clasping a "black [library] book . . . as though it were her missal."⁴⁴ She even writes her own hagiography: she is Sister Angela, a saint whose gentle smile attracts "the little children who run to her"; her ecstasy, when the "big bee [...] crept into a freezia, and the delicate flower leaned over, swung, [and] shook," recalls the sexualized image of Bernini's St. Theresa.⁴⁵ Mansfield exposes a moment that is not transcendent but, rather, a fantasy: "now at last for the first time in her life—she had never imagined any feeling like it before—she knew

38 Scripture would allow Mr. Farolles' offer: see KJB, Matt 18: 20.

39 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 270.

40 *Ibidem*.

41 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 468.

42 *Ibidem*.

43 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 470.

44 *Ibidem*.

45 *Ibidem*.

what it was to be in love, but—in—love!"⁴⁶ The outward mechanics of prayer do not guarantee spiritual awareness. Most importantly, if Edna is unaware of her foolishness, the reader is not.

Mansfield's Prayer Poems

Readers might think with such a critical view of prayer that Mansfield might have avoided writing in the form. She was, however, familiar with the rhetoric of devotion and made effective use of it in a number of her poems. Her first major poem, "To Stanislaw Wyspianski" (1909), most often categorized simply as elegy, is organized as a public prayer. Although it was not published in English during her lifetime, Florian Sobieniowski translated it into Polish for publication.⁴⁷ Kathleen Jones and others correctly note that the poem uses "a form borrowed from Walt Whitman."⁴⁸ In 1907, when Mansfield returned to Wellington, she read the American poet and embraced a "Whitman phase."⁴⁹ The fact that Oscar Wilde had visited Whitman at his home in New Jersey could only have intensified her interest in his work. Two years later, she and Sobieniowski still discussed Whitman's poetry.⁵⁰ Mansfield would have noticed Whitman's free verse and use of litany that exploit the rhetoric from the Psalms to celebrate the individual spirit and "to erect a new faith, a post-Christian paganism worthy of the age."⁵¹

Mansfield's use of parallelism echoes liturgical litany and acknowledges the influence of both Whitman and the Psalms. In Mansfield's poem the humbled petitioner speaks in the voice of the outsider:

From the other side of the world,
From a little island cradled in the giant sea bosom,
From a little land with no history.⁵²

Mansfield shifts her parallelism in the second incantatory sequence: she uses an internal repetition reflecting an internal voice. The speaker ponders about "Piecing together, this and that, finding the pattern, solving the problem."⁵³ The sophisticated parallelism, alliteration, and assonance contrasts with a child's simple diction, "this and that."

46 *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 471.

47 *Poems of Katherine Mansfield*, ed Vincent O'Sullivan (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1988), 87. Sobieniowski, with whom she was romantically linked, published the translation in 1910.

48 Kathleen Jones, *Katherine Mansfield: The Story-Teller* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 118

49 Alpers, *Life of Katherine Mansfield*, 76.

50 Claire Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 74.

51 Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *Prayer, A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 282.

52 *KM Edinburgh Edition*, vol. 3, 74.

53 *Ibidem*.

The speaker, however, in her litany recognizes the strength of the adult: “Oh Master, we belong to you there; / Oh Master, there we are children and awed by the strength of a giant.”⁵⁴ Mansfield’s apostrophe to the warrior-hero echoes military metaphors in both the bible and hymns: “I sing your praises, magnificent warrior: / I proclaim your triumphant battle.”⁵⁵ Mansfield addresses Wyspianski whose godlike strength outperforms Christ’s gentleness: “Yours a more personal labour than the Nazarene’s miracles, / Yours a more forceful encounter than the Nazarene’s gentle commands.”⁵⁶ Unlike Christ who died, was buried, and returned to the living, Wyspianski “is lying there, wakeful; / The blood in his giant heart pulls red through his veins.”⁵⁷ It is difficult to dismiss this work, as one critic has, as an “idealistic but rather poor poem.”⁵⁸ Mansfield commands not just the conventions of prayer—the initial gesture of humility, the direct address to the powerful, and the litany of worship—but she uses them to subvert the form in applying a religious rhetoric to praise an earthly hero.

Most of Mansfield’s poetry is part of the large body of private writing, unpublished during her lifetime. One such example is “Verses writ in a Foreign Bed” (1918) in which she writes of her illness with the conventions of prayer and also illustrates her ironic wit. While the poem may not demonstrate a modernist poetic, she writes of a lingering disquietude that readers find in the modernist text.

Almighty Father of all and Most Celestial Giver
Who hast granted to us thy children a Heart and Lungs and Liver;
If upon me should descend thy beautiful gift of tongues
Incline not thine Omnipotent ear to my remarks on Lungs.⁵⁹

At first the poem appears as two playful couplets with satiric rhymes; however, in the context of Mansfield’s other uses of prayer, it offers readers time to consider a calculated ambiguity. Gerri Kimber discusses the difficulty the work presents to a translator: “the French version omits the humorous tone [...] by turning Mansfield’s rhyme into prayer-like prose.”⁶⁰ She continues, “the French version appears much more serious and even religious in tone.”⁶¹ Kimber and Claire Davison agree that the lines are “full of pathos,” and it is likely that the translator might have had to settle on a single interpretation of the poem.⁶² The fact is that the short poem offers both reverence and wit. The quatrain’s

54 *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 75.

55 *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 74.

56 *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 75.

57 *Ibidem*.

58 Jeffrey Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield* (New York: New Directions, 1978), 269.

59 *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks, Vols. 1 and 2*, ed. Margaret Scott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2: 144.

60 Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), 143.

61 *Ibidem*.

62 *The Collected Poems of Katherine Mansfield*, eds. Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison (Dunedin:

unholy aspect, what Kimber calls its "perceived 'blasphemous' content," works equally with its sincerity.⁶³ The opening line suggests a penitent addressing God with traditional respect: "Father [...] and Celestial Giver." However, the tone turns satirical about her reason for writing, her tubercular lungs. She lists her failing lungs with her healthier heart and liver and qualifies her request: *if* you are powerful, *then* respectfully note that I have overstated the condition of my lungs. In four lines, Mansfield captures both her reliance on prayer while subverting it with a dark humor.

Mansfield continued to use prayer in poems that remained unpublished in her lifetime. The strength of these works is their private nature, just as the strength of her journals and letters is in their private nature. In *Poems* (1923), John Middleton Murry published two prayers that further suggest the confluence of her private thoughts with her early religious background. Murry supplied one with the secular title "Stars."⁶⁴ Recently restored as "Most merciful God" (1915), it is, after all, not about stars; it is a meditation that leads to a revelation that truth exists not in a single answer but, rather, in the questions that arise from praying. It starts with the respectful direct address of the collects:

Most merciful God
Look kindly upon
An impudent child
Who wants sitting on.⁶⁵

The speaker leaves the safety of her house and garden to ponder the enormity of the night in the hope for change and correction. Looking into the heavens the speaker, with the alliterative "amazed, Almighty, August," sounds the sensation of awe.⁶⁶ The opening lines unite sound and vision: the reader hears the consonance in God and child but sees the presence of the letter "o" that connect six of the first twelve words. However, Mansfield's use of alternating end rhymes suggests that God is still distant. After the revelation of the vision, Mansfield tightens the order, switching to rhyming couplets that suggest a change to a closer relationship of her thoughts within the prayer. The penitent may be humbled, but she does not experience the immediate reward of an answer. Like much of her fiction and modernist works that aim at an open-endedness, this vision ends in ambiguity: "Was it spite [...] Was it duty..?"⁶⁷ The prayer leads to questions that linger into the night.

Otago University Press, 2016), 227.

⁶³ Kimber, *France*, 142.

⁶⁴ O'Sullivan retains Murry's title; Scott places it in the context of Mansfield's notebooks; Kimber and Smith refer to the poem by its first line.

⁶⁵ *KM Edinburgh Edition*, vol. 3, 93.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 93-4.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 94.

Murry also published “A Little Girl’s Prayer” (1919), a meditation on stillness. The anterior action is implied: the speaker had paused to look at a single bud. The petition becomes expansive: she asks to see “The other buds, the other blooms, / The other leaves” before a substantial request for tranquility: “take into my bosom/ The breeze that is his brother/ But stiller . . .”⁶⁸ Her final request is for sharpened senses, to “hear the small birds singing/ The song that the silence knows,” before an interruption and the final parenthetical moment:

(The Light and the Shadow whisper together,
The lovely moment grows,

Ripples into the air like water
Away and away without sound,
And the little girl gets up from her praying
On the cold ground.)⁶⁹

Mansfield cannot end the poem while still in prayer; that might imply a belief in a response. Instead, she shifts to the third person, contextualizing the meditation as part of a narrative. The “little girl” may be humbled, but she is not a child; children, in a Blakean vision, exist as clouds in the sky. Mansfield’s image of the cold ground echoes the finality of rippling shadows, a detached awareness of mortality.

Mansfield’s Modernist Statement About Prayer

T.S. Eliot’s resumption of a dialogue between the writer and Christian devotion is the standard paradigm for the modernist’s approach to religion. Mansfield contributes a different position: she embraces a dual impulse, retaining a place for prayer while dismissing orthodoxy. The approach to the spiritual, for both Mansfield and Eliot, necessitated turning away from the religion of their youth: Mansfield rejected her family’s tradition of religion and her early naïve impulse towards the evangelical; Eliot cast off his family’s liberal Unitarian faith. Their position as foreigners, Janet Wilson explains, instilled in both “a capacity for self-invention.”⁷⁰ The outsider status of Eliot and Mansfield might have bolstered their identity as artists, but their upbringing defined their need for a spiritual philosophy. Mansfield would have agreed with Eliot when he wrote that the writer must devote himself to a “total harvest of thinking, feeling, living and observing human beings.”⁷¹

68 *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 128.

69 *Ibidem*.

70 Janet Wilson, “‘Feuille d’Album’: Katherine Mansfield’s Prufrockian Encounter with T.S. Eliot,” in *Katherine Mansfield and the Bloomsbury Group*, ed. Todd Martin, 73-89 (Bloomsbury, 2017), 73.

71 T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 8.

Mansfield recognized Eliot's artistry. She famously read "Prufrock" aloud at one of Ottoline Morrell's literary salons at Garsington and admired the poem because, as she wrote to Virginia Woolf, it is "after all a short story."⁷² Mansfield's acknowledgment of Eliot's craftsmanship is again evident when the two left a London dinner party together; she recalls the event in cadences that sound like his: they walked "past rows of little ugly houses hiding behind bitter-smelling privet hedges, [and] a great number of amorous black cats loped across the road and high up in the sky there was a battered old moon."⁷³ To Mansfield, Eliot's ability to combine poetry and the short story spoke to her own desire, after her brother Leslie's death, to write poetry, or at the very least "a kind of special prose."⁷⁴ In her last mention of Eliot, in a letter to Violet Schiff, Mansfield maintains that despite speaking "so grudgingly of Elliot [sic ...] I think Prufrock by far and away the most interesting and the best modern poem. It stays in one's memory."⁷⁵ His influence is most evidenced in the rhythms in her fiction; she writes about choosing "not only the length [... but also] the sound of every sentence [...]. After [... writing] I read it aloud – numbers of times – just as one would *play over* a musical composition."⁷⁶

Mansfield, however, had other equally strong opinions about Eliot: aside from "Prufrock," Mansfield thought Eliot's poems "unspeakably dreary" and "without emotion."⁷⁷ In a letter to Dorothy Brett, Mansfield describes Eliot as "pathetic [... and suffering] from his feelings of powerlessness [... He] is too serious about himself, even a little bit absurd. [...] He wants kindly laughing at and setting free."⁷⁸ That last observation sounds not only like a description of Prufrock but also like a description of the daughters of the late colonel, who accepted indoctrination rather than rely on their own experience. Many readers would agree with C. K. Stead about the two writers, that by 1923 "one was dead; but [...] the other – as *writer* – was dying."⁷⁹

One way to evaluate Mansfield's importance alongside Eliot is through Langdon Hammer's question about modernism: "Is [...] 'modern-ness' an index of the way it extends the past, or is it rather 'modern' because it breaks with the past? Does 'modern' mean some kind of renewal and continuity, or does it mean rupture?"⁸⁰ Eliot's

72 *KM Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 318.

73 *KM Collected Letters*, vol. 1, 312.

74 *KM Edinburgh Edition*, vol. 4, 192.

75 *KM Collected Letters*, vol. 5, 256.

76 *KM Collected Letters*, vol. 4, 165.

77 *KM Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 318.

78 *KM Collected Letters*, vol. 5, 75.

79 C. K. Stead, "Katherine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot," in *Answering to Language*, 149-161 (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989), 160.

80 Langdon Hammer, "The Use of Quotation in Poetry," *Modern Poetry: Lecture 10*, (New Haven: Yale University Open Lecture Series, 2007), accessed 16 September 2017, <http://oyc.yale.edu/transcript/514/engl-310>

attraction to religious convention harks back to an ancestral identity, and “academics have tended to treat everything he published as of more or less equal interest” even though there was a “dramatic falling away” in his work over time.⁸¹ On the other hand, Mansfield in her short lifetime subscribed to the “Modernist agenda” of the literary magazine *Rhythm* (1911-13), which she edited along with Murry: “its declared intent [was] that art, to be modern, must first learn to be brutal.”⁸² That brutality is embedded not only in her observations about prayer but in the harsh turns in her prayer poems, works that appear conventional but whose themes contain a disquieting, modernist ambiguity. Eliot’s canonical status should not obscure Mansfield’s approach any more than one would now accept Eliot’s assessment of Mansfield. He believed Mansfield “to be a dangerous WOMAN.”⁸³ In a lecture at the University of Virginia, Eliot dismissed Mansfield’s story “Bliss” as “slight” but conceded the skill with which she “handled perfectly the *minimum* material – it is what [...] would be called feminine.”⁸⁴ That lecture, known for Eliot’s anti-Semitism, also exposes a dismissive misogyny that conflicts with Eliot’s spiritual equipoise, “the still point of the turning world.”⁸⁵

In contrast, Mansfield’s pilgrim is always on an uphill journey, attempting to steady herself on unstable ground. Her commentary on or reflection about her own spiritual state often goes beyond that of the “high-spirited pagan for whom the notion of art had replaced traditional religion as the source and receptacle of the highest truths and the finest achievements of humankind.”⁸⁶ She was upset with herself for not seriously reading the bible while at Queens College; her description of her headmaster, however, demonstrates that her attention had been on her craft; she describes him while delivering his lessons: “I have been very interested in the Bible. I have read the Bible for hours on end [... Why] didn’t I listen to the old Principal who lectured on Bible History twice a week instead of staring at his face that was very round, a dark red colour with a kind of bloom on it & covered all over with little red veins with endless tiny tributaries that ran even into his forehead & were lost in his bushy white hair.”⁸⁷ Mansfield’s prayer poems express acceptance of the same conflict between spiritual interest and her fascination with the quotidian. Finally, her modernism equates the growth of the penitent to her growth as a writer. In her notebook from October 1921, she confesses her struggle for attentiveness and the difficulty of summoning that through prayer:

81 Stead, “Katherine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot,” 160.

82 *KM Edinburgh Edition*, “Introduction,” v. 1, xxi.

83 *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, v. 1, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt, 1988), 389.

84 T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 35-6.

85 T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), 11.

86 Stead, “Katherine Mansfield and T.S. Eliot,” 151.

87 *KM Collected Letters*, vol. 4, 189.

I wonder why it should be so difficult to be humble. I do not think I am a good writer; I realise my faults better than anyone else could realise them. I know exactly where I fail. And yet, when I have finished a story & before I have begun another I catch myself *preening* my feathers. It is disheartening. There seems to be some bad old pride in my heart: a root of it that puts out a thick shoot on the slightest provocation ... This interferes very much with work. One can't be calm, clear, good as one must be while it goes on. I look at the mountains, I try to pray, & I think of something *clever*. It's a kind of excitement within one which shouldn't be there. Calm yourself. Clear yourself.⁸⁸

She does not write, "I must be calm and clear"; instead, she addresses not just herself, but the imperative also directs others to try the same practice. Later in the same entry she proposes a qualified answer: "Perhaps poetry will help." Mansfield is both struggling penitent and modernist writer: the struggle for self-knowledge comes from quiet, but there is no "Light Invisible."⁸⁹ Ultimately for Mansfield the sacred act is experiencing the present, knowing there is the possibility of finding truth in the ongoing act of writing.

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⁸⁸ Kimber, *KM Edinburgh Edition*, v. 4, 389-90.

⁸⁹ T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" *Collected Poems: 1909-1935*, (New York: Harcourt, 1936), 209.

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