

### Katherine Mansfield's Review of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*<sup>1</sup>

Some parts of this review have been examined many times; they are routinely used to illustrate the complex relationship between Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf. Furthermore, combined with an equally famous accompanying letter from Mansfield to John Middleton Murry,<sup>2</sup> they serve as a sort of Mansfield-manifesto of post-war literature. She, rather disappointed by Woolf's regression to traditional writing, allegedly vented her frustration in a way that many, including Woolf herself, considered too harsh. Subtly exploiting the novel's recurring naval metaphor associated both with the protagonist Katharine Hilbery and her mother, she likens it to a ship which is "sailing into port serene and resolute on a deliberate wind" (Kimber and Smith 532). Mansfield finds "her aloofness, her air of quiet perfection, her lack of any sign that she has made a perilous voyage – the absence of any scars" (Kimber and Smith 532) unnatural for the post-war period, and, although she acknowledges the technical perfection, calling it "fresh, new, and exquisite, a novel in the tradition of the English novel," she immediately makes clear that this is not a compliment: "In the midst of our admiration it makes us feel old and chill" (Kimber and Smith 534).

The letter to Murry further clarifies her reasons for dismissing the novel. She calls it "a lie in the soul," and famously associates its failure, and the failure of many other post-war novels, with lack of memory, since they, according to her, pretended "[t]he war has never been" (Mansfield et al. 82). Although she does not suggest that the topic should be the only one possible, admitting her own inability to talk about the events of war directly, she is firmly persuaded that the new era requires a search for new forms of expression since the old ones are no longer usable, and concludes her reasoning with this claim: "What has been stands, but Jane Austen could not write *Northanger Abbey* [now] – or if she did, I'd have none of her" (Mansfield et al. 82; emphasis in original).

While somewhat provocative and extravagant, the analogy between Woolf and Austen in the letter is indirect, made in the form of a juxtaposition and left tantalisingly without any further comment; it is, however, given a fair deal of attention in the review. Yet, although the comparison itself never fails to find its way into any discussion about the review, the novel it critiques, or the relationship between Mansfield and Woolf, it has not yet been properly analysed, and the significance of the Austen connection as well as the fairly long section of Mansfield's review which is dedicated to examining it are summarily overlooked.

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<sup>1</sup> "A Ship Comes into the Harbour," *Athenaeum*, 21 November 1919 (Kimber and Smith 532–4).

<sup>2</sup> To J. M. Murry, 10 November 1919 (Mansfield et al. 82).

The following analysis of this heretofore rather neglected aspect of the review takes into account two other texts, to some degree connected to it: notably Frank Swinnerton's extensive, two-part article published in the *Athenaeum* in September 1919,<sup>3</sup> shortly before Mansfield was given Woolf's novel to review; and, less importantly and somewhat speculatively, an unsigned review of *Night and Day* entitled "A Tragic Comedienne," published in *Nation*, a text which Woolf attributed to Robert Lynd, but Kimber and Smith include among Mansfield's critical texts.<sup>4</sup> It is of particular interest not only for its similarities to the signed *Athenaeum* review, but also because it, too, makes the connection between Woolf and Austen, albeit much more briefly.

The section of the review that deals extensively with Austen begins with Mansfield's claim that it "is impossible to refrain from comparing '*Night and Day*' with the novels of Miss Austen". According to her, there are moments when "one is almost tempted to cry it Miss Austen up-to-date" (Kimber and Smith 532). Interestingly, she does not continue by mentioning at least a single particular one of those moments, even though there would be many to choose from. *Night and Day*, after all, bears more than a passing resemblance to Austen's novels, a point made many times since by various other critics as well (de Gay 48–53; Gilbert and Gubar 19; Marcus 97–122). In a nutshell, there is Woolf's humour, dry wit, the charming absurdity of some of her characters, the overall plot structure, and some incidents in the story reminiscent of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in particular, Woolf's and Austen's similar emotional sobriety and detachment, and finally, there is Woolf's unmistakable nod to Jane Austen's legendary practice of hiding her writing with blotting paper whenever somebody entered the room: Katharine Hilbery is described as slipping "her paper between the leaves of a great Greek dictionary which she had purloined from her father's room for this purpose" every time she hears steps on the staircase (Woolf 42). What is more, the narrator's revelation that Katharine does not understand Greek appears to be the germ of Woolf's most famous works touching upon the issues women artists face in a patriarchal society: "On not knowing Greek" (1923) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which, incidentally, also include Jane Austen as an important element of their argument.

Mansfield, however, mentions neither the humour nor the resemblances in plot or structure, but focuses solely on Woolf's writing style. In this respect, Swinnerton's largely appreciative discussion of Austen, although probably not entirely responsible for her idea of comparing Woolf and Austen, seems to help elucidate the direction of Mansfield's thoughts.

Mansfield sees *Night and Day* as

extremely cultivated, distinguished and brilliant, but above all – deliberate.  
There is not a chapter where one is unconscious of the writer, of her

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<sup>3</sup> Swinnerton, "Jane Austen I," and "Jane Austen II,"; hereafter abbreviated as JA I and JA II.

<sup>4</sup> Anon. "A Tragic Comedienne," *Nation* (15 May 1920) (Kimber and Smith 599–602).

personality, her point of view, and her control of the situation. We feel that nothing has been imposed on her: she has chosen her world, selected her principal characters with the nicest care, and having traced a circle round them so that they exist and are free within its confines, she has proceeded, with rare appreciativeness, to register her observations. (Kimber and Smith 532–3)

“A Tragic Comedienne,” which is equally focused on the writing style and choices of the author, makes a very similar point when it claims that “we rejoice more in the accessibility of Mrs Woolf’s mind than in her story” (Kimber and Smith 602).

This emphasis on the presence of the author echoes Swinnerton’s main argument in the first article where he divides Austen’s novels into two groups, not solely based on their order of composition, and the significant time gap that separates them, but also on the gradually decreasing presence of Austen’s self-portraiture in them, what he calls “the need for personal exemplification which young novelists feel” (JA I, 839). He claims that, while in the first three she is present in different characters, in her other three novels she is no longer portraying herself, and this makes them in consequence “much more mature, less lively and effervescently satirical, and very much more analytic” (JA I, 839–40).

At this point, it could be argued that Mansfield’s observations are inconsistent as *Northanger Abbey*, which she mentioned in the letter, is, according to Swinnerton, the least affected in the first group of novels by this authorial presence. It is, however, necessary to remember that Mansfield did not use the comparison with this particular novel in her review, and that, according to Swinnerton, it is *Pride and Prejudice*, which *Night and Day* resembles the most, is the most personal. Furthermore, as discussed later, the reasons for including *Northanger Abbey* in the letter are based on a different part of Swinnerton’s argument.

Returning to the quote above, there are other interesting issues concerning Woolf’s alleged similarity with Austen and what Mansfield thought about their respective styles. The reference to Woolf carefully choosing her world and tracing circles around her characters indicates that Mansfield is alluding to Austen’s reputation for restricting herself to a limited and closed world of her own knowledge. This is upheld further in the review where she implies that Austen and Woolf do not correspond only in this aspect, but also in their restrained and sober approach to writing:

As in the case of Miss Austen’s novels, we fall under a little spell; it is as though, realizing our safety, we surrender ourselves to the author, confident that whatever she has to show us, and however strange it may appear, we shall not be frightened or shocked. Her creatures are, one might say, privileged; we can rely upon her fine mind to deliver them from danger, to temper the blow (if a blow must fall), and to see their way clear for them at the very last. (Kimber and Smith, 533)

In linking this aspect of Woolf and Austen, but also in the way she verbalised it, mimicking the slow, deliberate style of Woolf's text, Mansfield revealed not only her famed shrewd talent for observation, but, equally and more importantly, the instinctive understanding of the way the novel was written, even though she had no inkling of the reasons. It seems difficult to imagine that Mansfield's displeasure over the book would be so great, had she known that Woolf wrote it as therapy after a mental breakdown. Mansfield was never to know about this fact, just as Woolf, for a long time, did not entirely grasp the seriousness of Mansfield's condition, and, as a result, they, further wounded by gossip within their respective circles of friends, grew apart.

Mansfield's intuition, however, was unerring, and she astutely saw what the novel was doing: clinging to structure, borders, causality, and common sense in its resistance to disorder, chaos, uncertainty and the illogical nature of both the war and mental illness. In linking *Night and Day* with Austen's novels, she also touched upon their respective therapeutic potential; Austen's works were, after all, "prescribed" as reading for seriously shell-shocked soldiers, because it was believed that, for those "whose minds were shattered by dynastic history, the famously limited dimensions of Austen's fictional world could feel rehabilitative; her parlours could feel manageable; her very triviality could feel redemptive" (Johnson, "Divine Miss Jane" 154).

So far in the review, Mansfield shows where she thinks Woolf and Austen are alike. There is one slightly enigmatic statement apparently in favour of Woolf over Austen before Mansfield goes on to elaborate on what she sees as Woolf's deficiencies face to face with her more famous literary predecessor. The statement reads as follows: "It is the measure of Mrs. Woolf's power that her 'happy ending' could never be understood as a triumph of the heart over the mind" (Kimber and Smith 533; emphasis added). This seems to indicate that, for Mansfield, Austen, despite her neoclassical sobriety and emphasis on the healthy balance of reason and emotions, did not manage this in all her novels, and that, in at least one of her endings, the heart won over the mind.

This perceived small shortcoming, however, does not appear as serious as the ones she sees Woolf displaying when compared to Austen:

But whereas Miss Austen's spell is as strong upon us as ever when the novel is finished and laid by, Mrs. Woolf's loses something of its potency. What is it that carries us away? With Miss Austen, it is first her feeling for life, and then her feeling for writing; but with Mrs. Woolf these feelings are continually giving way the one to the other, so that the urgency of either is impaired. While we read we scarcely are aware which is uppermost; it is only afterwards, and especially, when recalling the minor characters, that we begin to doubt. (Kimber and Smith 533)

The repeated references to Austen's "spell" match almost perfectly the late 19th-century attitudes or rather, as Claudia Johnson has it, "platitudes [...] which make up a large part

of Victorian commentary on Austen” and in some form survive even to this day (Cults and Cultures 69–70). Mansfield seems to suggest that, for her, as indeed for many others, after analysing all the rational reasons why Austen was a great author, there remained an element of the unknown, some sort of unexplainable magic that made Austen so successful, even over equally technically accomplished writers. Alternatively, however, Mansfield did not necessarily have to subscribe to this belief herself, she might have been just reinforcing the whole point of her review: her conviction about the obsolescence of Woolf's method, by reverting to the matching kind of anachronistic criticism and terminology. In both cases, she would be paying Woolf a small compliment, as, according to her, she possessed the same quality as Austen, albeit not yet fully realised.

Mansfield surmises that a large part of Austen's appeal lies in the fact that her striving for technical perfection never overshadows her ability to tell a story, that her writing is seamless, appears effortless and natural, while Woolf does not entirely accomplish this: her sentences are brilliant, but the text does not always flow naturally, and the formal aspects of writing get in the way of storytelling. What is more, the novel's universe is far from being as well-functioning as Austen's:

We have the queer sensation that once the author's pen is removed from [the minor characters] they have neither speech nor motion, and are not to be revived again until she adds another stroke or two or writes another sentence underneath. Were they shadowy or vague this would be less apparent, but they are held within the circle of steady light in which the author bathes her world, and in their case the light seems to shine at them, but not through them. (Kimber and Smith 533)

Here again, Mansfield's assessment corresponds with Swinnerton's ideas, more particularly his analysis of *Emma* (1815), which, according to him, is “by far the most brilliant, the finest exhibition of its author's restrained wit, and the novel containing the most varied portraits” (JA II, 907). He sees it as a display of “group community” and, à propos of the minor characters, he shrewdly observes:

They interest us, certainly, and divert us; but the stuff of the book, its texture, and the feeling it gives us of absolute first-hand reality, is due to something besides the finished exemplification of character. It is remarkable how closely all these diverse persons are bound together, how they affect one another, and how the intricate relationships, recoils, and attractions, are all made a part of the web that holds our attention, of the picture that deepens with each page in our consciousness and our memory. (JA II, 907)

Swinnerton describes the novel as a well-oiled, well-working machine in which all the parts are interdependent, working and moving even if the reader's attention is not on them. On the contrary, according to Mansfield, *Night and Day* fails to achieve this level of technical excellence, as the minor characters do not fit naturally into the narrative and feel forced. Making further use of Swinnerton's remarks, not all Woolf's characters are

connected by “the fine threads” (JA II, 907) that would create the sense of community and reality, and, unlike Austen, her knowledge of character is not sufficient enough to enable her to “present it as idiosyncrasy” without caricature (JA II, 907).

The other part of this critique of minor characters is no less intriguing. The naval metaphor framing the whole review is not the only device Mansfield borrows from Woolf only to turn it against her. The image of the “circle of steady light” is as much an allusion to the attention Woolf gives her characters as it is a reference to the constant emphasis on lights in the novel itself and, yet again, to her attempts at “tempering the blow,” that is, at deliberately restricting the darkness of her fictional world. Interestingly, this is another element that links this review with the unsigned one which goes as far as suggesting that Woolf “could more fitly have called her book ‘Nighlight & Day,’ for the intensity and the fears of night have been shut out” (Kimber and Smith 600).

The claim that the minor characters are neither shadowy nor vague is yet another comeback from Mansfield, this time challenging Mary Datchet’s observation that her colleagues Mr. Clacton and Mrs. Seal are “in the guise of shadow people, flitting in and out of the ranks of the living – eccentrics, undeveloped human beings, from whose substance some essential part had been cut away” (Woolf 276). Mansfield is as good as saying that Woolf is contradicting herself and, although asserting they are like that, does not succeed in presenting them accordingly.

Finally, in declaring that the light “shine[s] at them, but not through them,” Mansfield further accentuates that she believes them to be caricatures rather than real people. While she herself started off writing characters like these, especially in her juvenilia, the stories of *In a German Pension* (1911), she very soon replaced the flat figures designed to stand in the spotlight only to be mocked by rounded individuals that, even in the worst cases, reflect the complexity of humanity and elicit respect or at least compassion. She holds that characters, even the minor ones, should not serve only as a means of entertainment, but be the bridge to some higher knowledge, the lens through which the light shines and illuminates the truth about human behaviour and personality.

At this point, the part of the review directly comparing Woolf and Austen ends, to be followed by the retelling of the story and the damning conclusion implicitly delegating the novel to the depths of history and out-dated literary production. The last paragraph of the review registers Mansfield’s surprise at the very existence of this kind of novel in this time and age, and returns to the image of the novel as a ship: “We had thought that this world was vanished for ever, that it was impossible to find on the great ocean of literature a ship that was unaware of what has been happening” (Kimber and Smith 534). At first sight, the sentence might appear rather confusing to a reader familiar with Mansfield’s work and the early 20th-century literary scene. Firstly, the reference to the vanished world immediately conjures up Mansfield’s most acclaimed works, the so-called New Zealand stories returning to her Antipodean and decidedly Victorian childhood, which are exactly that, the records of a time and world vanished. Mansfield, however, does not

speak about the temporal or spatial setting of Woolf's novel, but its form. The epitome of the story about the vanished world, and one of Mansfield's masterpieces, *Prelude* (1918), typeset by Woolf herself and published by the Hogarth Press in 1917, is her proof that one can in fact return to the past but present it in a thoroughly innovative manner, very different from that of pre-war aesthetics. All evidence suggests that Woolf indeed heeded Mansfield's rebuke and it was *Prelude* she took as an inspiration for her further work as one of her subsequent novels, *To the Lighthouse*, is on many levels similar to Mansfield's modernist reimagining of her early years (Smith 91–110).

Secondly, the quotation appears to belie its core assertion; having reviewed many books happily stuck in pre-war patterns, Mansfield knew very well that the "great ocean of literature" was in fact teeming with traditional production and she had surely no illusions about it stopping anytime soon. Unless, by the great ocean, she did not mean the vast expanse of the publication industry that included all sorts and standards of writing, but an ocean of great literature, in which case she was paying Woolf another backhanded compliment, telling her she considered her great at the same time as announcing she did not expect her to betray her potential by putting forward a novel like that.

Mansfield's review thus suggests that there were two disappointments for her in reading *Night and Day*: the first was the betrayal of the new approach that she must have felt as acute after such a promising beginning; the second that, even if she took and read it as a traditional novel, Austen-like, it did not attain the standard set by Austen's fiction. Consequently, for Mansfield, *Night and Day* was a double failure: first as a modern novel, second as a traditional one.

Most of the above, however, does not really elucidate the letter's remark about *Northanger Abbey*. Although there seems to be a general agreement that *Night and Day* is the least attractive of all Woolf's novels (Goodman 69), for the same reason Mansfield dismissed it, that is, for its traditional character, putting the much longer, technically more elaborate, and for all its humour and whimsical irony, a much more serious book alongside *Northanger Abbey* seems to be wide of the mark. As indicated earlier, there are more resemblances here to *Pride and Prejudice* than any other Austen's novel, and *Night and Day*'s slow, detailed, deliberate and plodding progression is rather like that of *Mansfield Park* (1814), which de Gay considers a major influence on it (48–53).

Mansfield, however, did not say anything about *Night and Day* being like *Northanger Abbey*. She just put them side by side mostly to create a dramatic effect and to emphasise, as strongly as possible, her displeasure and the conviction that *Night and Day* is a relic of the past that a writer of Woolf's calibre should be ashamed to bring out, just as Austen would be, knowing that an unrevised work of her early years made it to publication. The difference between the two, though, is that while Austen had no say in what happened to her text after her death, for all that Mansfield knew, Woolf went on this path willingly, something that she, unaware of her colleague's struggle, could not understand.

Mansfield, in her letter communication with Murry, relies on her conviction that he would connect her remarks with Swinnerton's article elaborating upon the perceived deficiencies of what he emphatically claimed to be "the least perfect in construction as in matter," "the least profound" and "the weakest as it is the slightest of all" Austen's novels (JA I, 839). She knew that her statement would never be dramatic enough if she used any other of Austen's works, as to her, Murry, and at that time possibly most readers, *Northanger Abbey* was tolerated only as a "literary toddler" (Carson 37), a juvenile whim of an author who proved in her other works that she could really write.

There are, however, some other interesting assertions in Swinnerton's discussion that might have made Mansfield think about the parallel between Woolf and this particular novel. Towards the end of the first part, he maintains that *Northanger Abbey*, coming as it does at the moment that separates the two periods of Austen's writing career, "marks a turning-point in her method" (JA I, 839–40). But while Austen turned to writing technically better and more elaborate works, Mansfield was possibly afraid that Woolf was, after a very promising beginning, turning back towards the safer, less experimental prose. Mansfield had read and liked Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and some of her short stories; one of which, the thoroughly experimental "Kew Gardens" (1919), she reviewed positively for the Athenaeum in 1919.<sup>5</sup> Mansfield felt Woolf, wielding great potential, was at the crossroads, but was afraid that, with *Night and Day*, she was turning away from the right direction.

There is one more remark in Swinnerton's article that could have possibly tempted Mansfield to put the two works in question side by side, and that is when he states that the weaknesses of *Northanger Abbey* are due to "its partly satiric conception" (JA I, 840), a claim that resonates also in "A Tragic Comedienne," which perceives the main problem of *Night and Day* to be its two incongruous and constantly warring sides, the tragic and the comic. If it is, indeed, Mansfield who wrote the review, she regards the novel as "a witty comedy wrongly cast," where, yet again, Austen enters the picture when Katharine Hilbery is characterised as moving "through the sheltered places of the book with an air of tragedy," just like Balzac would "among Jane Austens" (Kimber and Smith 599).

The following statement towards the end of the unsigned review could thus easily describe the authors of *Night and Day* and *Northanger Abbey* respectively, viewed through Swinnerton's and arguably also Mansfield's eyes:

She has, we think, in writing pure comedy deliberately sacrificed part of her genius. She has entered into the artist's struggle with her material with one hand tied behind her. Luckily, in writing this handicap matters less than in some other occupations. Mrs Woolf's talent is so splendid in its richness

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<sup>5</sup> "A Short Story," 13 June 1919 (Kimber and Smith 473–5).

and fine in its quality that half of it will go as far as the talents of ten less gifted writers. (Kimber and Smith 602)

These reservations about satire and comedy echo the Athenaeum review's similar concerns about the dangers of presenting characters for the sole purpose of mockery, of letting the light "shine at them, but not through them," having no deeper purpose than their entertainment value.

In the Athenaeum review, however, Mansfield chose to take a different path, and, instead of focusing on an imperfect and rather controversial analogy with *Northanger Abbey*, she decided to make a broader examination of the overall similarities of Austen's and Woolf's styles and the ramifications her choice of method meant for the latter. This approach was less radical, comparably more constructively critical and had much less potential of being insulting; for, in spite of all her uncompromising directness, Mansfield did have a point and was not trying to be mean. That was not what Woolf thought, though, at least not at first. What is more, for her, the overall negativity of the review was further aggravated by two circumstances: the writer she was compared to and the person of the reviewer. Mansfield was not somebody Woolf could easily dismiss as inconsequential; she cared about her opinion and valued her art more than she was ever able to express while Mansfield was alive. With Austen, Woolf had a similarly ambivalent relationship; she embraced her as much as she wanted to reject her, and, as Mark A. Wollaeger argues, in order to distance herself from her Edwardian contemporaries, she felt the need to first "disentangle herself from Jane Austen" (34). It is no wonder that, of all the remarks Mansfield made, it was the analogy with Austen that Woolf clearly resented the most, which is noticeable in her two recorded reactions. First, she interpreted Mansfield's assessment as being described as "[a] decorous elderly dullard [...]; Jane Austen up-to-date" (Woolf et al. 314); she returned to the topic later, somewhat sullenly maintaining that she would "rather write in [her] own way of *Four Passionate Snails* than be, as K.M. maintains, *Jane Austen over again*" (Woolf et al. 316). It is an indication of her distress for being thus criticised by a younger colleague whom she secretly admired that she did not realise that it was not that much "*Jane Austen over again*," but rather "*Jane Austen manqué*" that Mansfield had in mind. Mansfield's frustrated exclamation to Murry: "What has been stands," implies, after all, that Austen did well for her era, and that there is no fault with her method but with Woolf's misguided aspiration to apply it out of context and not mastering it so well at that.

It has been stated repeatedly that Mansfield's interactions with Woolf, their talks, letters and Hogarth Press's publication of *Prelude* had a profound impact on Woolf, and possibly nudged her in the direction of her distinctly experimental style (Kaplan 11; Smith 5; Alpers 251–2). Woolf admitted that, with the loss of Mansfield, something would be forever missing from her life and that she would think about her till the end of hers. This turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the references to Mansfield keep reappearing in Woolf's letters and diaries, the last one recorded only a few weeks before her death. It

seems, however, that there is another, so far unacknowledged, consequence of their relationship connected to the review discussed here. It could be argued that Mansfield's bold analogy further fuelled Woolf's desire to distance herself from Austen and contributed to her later, almost obsessive and constant reappraisal of Austen in the years following Mansfield's death. It is as if every time she mentioned or discussed Austen, she not only re-evaluated what made her a great author, what her flaws were, and what Woolf's position was with respect to both, but it was another way of answering to and remembering her one-time rival, Mansfield. Austen and Mansfield became Woolf's personal great ghosts, two women she could not help communicating with in her personal writings as well as her fiction.

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