

Blissful Thinking: Katherine Mansfield and the En-gendering of Modernist Fiction

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RESUMEN

La ideología (estética, autorial y general) del texto modernista parece rejractaria a los diseños de aquellos/as críticos/as que busquen las señas de una estética feminista que sea a la vez una estética de modernidad. Pero si se amplía un poco la definición del paradigma modernista, destacando sus principios anti-realistas y anti-organicistas, se posibilita la revaloración de unos textos escritos por mujeres que han sabido ajustar el paradigma al examen más o menos explícito de ciertos conceptos dominantes de sexualidad y de género. Como ejemplo de tal proceso figura el cuento «Bliss» de Katherine Mansfield. Aunque atacado por la crítica masculinista y feminista por su perpetuación de los valores «femeninos» de una poética sentimental, «Bliss» constituye una crítica sutil y modernista del concepto de la feminidad. Lo indeterminado del texto, sus silencios, ambigüedades y estructura abierta, ayudan a fomentar un importante «conocimiento negativo», de las condiciones sociales que impiden que su protagonista realice plenamente sus deseos emocionales. En este sentido el texto se vislumbra como uno de los fundadores de una estética femenina radical.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ficción modernista, feminismo, Mansfield, «Bliss», conocimiento negativo, estética femenina

ABSTRACT

The ideology (both aesthetic, authorial and general) of the modernist text has been seen as refractory to the designs of critics attempting to trace the development of a female aesthetics which is also an aesthetics of modernity. Yet a broader definition of the modernist paradigm, stressing its anti-realist and anti-organicist principles, gives a certain room for manoeuvre in the reappraisal of women's texts which actually adapt the paradigm to an implicit questioning of dominant notions of sexuality and gender. Such a text is Katherine Mansfield's «Bliss», which, though berated by both masculinist and feminist critics for its perpetuation of the «feminine» values of a sentimental poetics, constitutes a subtle modernist critique of the construct of femininity. The indeterminacy of «Bliss», its silences, ambiguities and open-ended structure, foster an important «negative knowledge» of the social conditions which prevent its protagonist from fully realizing her emotional desires. In doing so, it could be said to stand at the forefront of a radical female aesthetics.

KEY WORDS: Modernist fiction. feminism, Mansfield, «Bliss», negative knowledge, female aesthetics

I. MODERNISM, FEMINISM AND THE MEANING OF «LIGHT»

The scene is Lake Geneva. Edith Hope, a writer of romantic fiction, has been rested by her publishers, following the break-up of her marriage to Geoffrey and the no less successful affair with David, with whom she continues to correspond. Her stay at the *Hôtel du Lac* is spent in idle chit-chat, writing letters to David and endless reminiscences about what went wrong. Then, quite by chance, she meets Mr Neville, who hardly promises excitement but does offer Edith a shoulder to cry on. Wooed by Neville's strength and no-nonsense masculine pragmatism, Edith decides to accept his offer of marriage. As they take a boat across the lake, Edith finally buckles under the weight of her emotions.

«Edith,» said Mr Neville. «Please don't cry. I cannot bear to see a woman cry; it makes me want to hit her. Please, Edith. Here, take my handkerchief. Edith. Let me wipe your eyes. Your eyes are almost silver. Did you know that? Come.»

For the first time she rested against him and cried herself into a state of weariness. She closed her eyes and stayed leaning on his shoulder, steadied by his arm.

«You are very thin,» he said. «I am afraid that I might break you in half. But there will be time to worry about that later.» (Brookner, 1985: 168-69)

Winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, Anita Brookner's *Hôtel du Lac* was hailed by *The Times* as «a smashing love story ... very romantic». The passage above indeed shows Edith virtually filling the role of one of her heroines. Sensitive, tearful, physically frail, Edith finds, if not love exactly, a steadying masculine shoulder to support her, an arm to shield her from her own emotional frailty. Later in the novel, Edith informs David of her decision and at the same time asserts her faith in the values that underpin her own writing:

You thought, perhaps, like my publisher, and my agent, who are always trying to get me to bring my books up to date and make them sexier and more exciting, that I wrote my stories with that mixture of satire and cynical detachment that is thought to become the modern writer in this field. You were wrong. I believed every word I wrote. And I still do, even though I realize now that none of it can ever come true for me. (181)

Reread in this light, Edith's decision to take the hand of a stranger can be seen as a conscious, if flawed, attempt to let life imitate art — not the (more marketable) art of cynicism and detachment, but honest romance, the sentimentality which is the mark of both Edith's and her work's essential femininity.

Edith's distinction between «modern» satire and old-fashioned romance, neither of which exactly fits her own experience, helps us to focus an enquiry into the whole sense of the modern in art, and into the woman writer's fraught relation to it. Why should modernity be opposed to sentimentality?; or, to put it in Edith's terms, why should writing fiction which isn't sexy or cynical be deemed out-of-date and so unsaleable? Are there ways of writing as a woman which may be regarded as both «modern» and, in their fidelity to women's experience and life-decisions, as authentic stories of femininity? Let me make it clear that I shall be using the term «modern», and its aesthetic cognates «modernism» and «modernist», in the conviction that, as constructs of late capitalist culture, neither has as yet been fully superseded. The assumption of an achieved post-modern condition, with popular culture heralded as its emblematic form, founders on what John Frow (1986: 120) presents as modernity's inherent ambivalence: «The modernist paradigm is both unworkable (as a dream of endless novation) and inescapable, and precisely *because* of its aporia (the 'modern' as the perpetual present, the end of history which nevertheless remains subject to history). Until our historical space is totally altered, there can be no 'beyond' of modernism which would not *thereby* be a moment of it». ¹ The belabouring of modernism from positions supposedly «outside» or «beyond» it will not, then, be one of the aims of this essay. Rather, I am interested in the ways a so-called «sentimental» or «feminine» mode of writing is instituted as the germ of a female poetics *inscribed within the narrative space mapped out by modernism*.

This position is not without its own aporias. One is the historic resistance of feminists themselves to a more or less overt machismo poetics founded on experimentalism, self-consciousness and irony — the «cynical detachment» decried by Brookner's Edith. This fact has not surprisingly alienated women from a movement they construe as involving «an exclusion of everything associated with the feminine» (Felski, 1995: 24). ² On the other hand, the insistence of modernist

1. In *Cultural studies and cultural value* (1995) Frow deconstructs the value-ridden distinction between «high» and «low» culture which, among other things, has led to the promotion of the latter as the privileged site of the postmodern. See also Huyssen (1986).

2. For instances of female complicity in fostering a macho futurist cult of war, however, see Gilben (1989).

theorists and practitioners on the depersonalized, emotion-free nature of their work, on its inevitable incorporation in a patrilinear transpersonal tradition stretching from Dante to the present,³ would seem inimical both to the notion of an *écriture féminine* as issuing straight from the (individuated) female body and to a concept of literary influence which takes account of the meaningful interchange between texts produced by women.⁴ Finally, modernist visions of society as a cultural and historical «waste land», a hotchpotch of disinherited subjectivities, have dismayed feminists like Ama Yeatman (1990: 289), not because of the space they would appear to afford to cultural plurality and individualized agencies but, on the contrary, because such plurality is too often «reduced to, or contained within, the monovocal structures of *Geist* (Hegel), labor (Marx), and utility (Bentham) or, more vulgarly, within the everyday constructions of 'what every reasonable man knows,' 'what all civilized men regard as,' and so forth».⁵ In *The Waste Land* itself Eliot announces both the sterility of history and the splintering of Culture into myriad disconnected cultures. Yet, as Terry Eagleton has argued (1990: 150), the announced plurality is actually stemmed by an alternative sub-text (the notorious annotations) which is «nothing less than the closed, coherent, authoritative discourse of the mythologies which frame [the poem]». To talk of a meaningful dialogue between modernism and feminism, we need, then, to be aware of the justifiable aversion of feminists to the «ideology» (aesthetic, authorial and general) of modernism. If not overtly (or not always) misogynist, such an ideology has made it difficult for women authors to fully align themselves with the so-called «modernist paradigm».

Much depends here of course on the place modernism is accorded in our own narrations of literary history, on the tendency (often, though not necessarily.

3. The seminal statement of this view is of course Eliot (1932). Eliot's pretended sacrifice of the self to tradition is, as Maud Ellmann has shown (1987: 38), actually deceptive. By subsuming literary change into the «organic whole» of history, the artist in fact «universalises his identity at the very moment that he seems to be negated».

4. For a now classic statement of the former see Cixous (1975); meanwhile, the best-known account of female literary interchange remains Gilben and Gubar (1979).

5. Yeatman hails postmodernism as the movement which has «exploded» the «monological structures» of modern(ist) authority, but also hints that the explosion may well have come from within modernism itself, i.e., may well have involved an *im*-plosion of modernism's own structures. For a «post-»modernist acknowledgement of the role of modernist metanarratives in the construction of femininity see Fraser and Nicholson (1990: 33).

6. The terms are Eagleton's (1990: ch. 2).

dictated by the male-dominated industries of critical and literary production) to limit the category of the modern to those self-consciously «high»-cultural artefacts authored (mainly by men) at the start of our own century. These narrations often wilfully ignore what, following Frow (1986: 117), we might term the broader «sentimental» basis of the modernist aesthetics. The chief characteristics of such an aesthetics would be:

- (1) [I]ts attention to the status of the utterances it produces (although not, usually, by a political awareness of the social and institutional conditions of enunciation); (2) consequently an antimimetic impulse: the realities it constructs have a discursive rather than an ontological foundation; and (3) an antiorganicist impulse, working typically through the fragmentation of textual unity, through the play of contradictory genres of discourse, and through a splitting of the subjects of utterance.

Frow is careful to avoid associating modernism with a radical rupture in the means of literary production, affirming that it is not so much «opposed to a realist aesthetic as it is the culmination of the internal contradictions of realism». In doing so, he perhaps unreasonably devalues the politically progressive agenda of avant-garde movements operating (mainly) outside the Anglo-American ambit.⁷ As far as women writers are concerned, the definition is generous enough to accommodate those early-twentieth century authors who were already pushing against the edges of the realist aesthetics,⁸ while downgrading the social and political awareness which undoubtedly informed many of their aesthetic decisions. Nevertheless, and with these important reservations in mind, I want to use Frow's version of the paradigm as the framework for the discussion which follows. If the ideology of modernism is *per se* uncongenial to writers seeking to register female experience, an expanded definition of the impulses and aesthetic procedures instituted in the great modernist texts will help us to comprehend both how and why women authors nonetheless adapted its structures to their own perception of the real. A renewed focus on the act of narrative, on the constructedness of the realities it negotiates and on the heteroglot nature of the texts it constructs are, I shall argue. the compositional principles of authors like Katherine Mansfield, whose fictions could be said to inhabit the narrative space opened by modernism.

7. For an account of such movements, mainly in Germany, see Bürger (1989). On the political conservatism of Anglo-American modernism, see Felski (1995: 23).

8. Authors such as George Egeon, Olive Schreiner, Grant Allen and Sarah Grand who, as Patricia Stubbs has shown (1981: ch. 7), were blazing a trail for the later anti-realist work of writers like Woolf and Mansfield.

This is not, as I hope to show, or not simply, a case of occupation; texts like «Bliss» help lay the foundations of an aesthetics which is at once modernist and, in its attempt to link gender to a particular narrative style, less «feminine» than «female».⁹

The theoretical groundwork for such an aesthetics is already partly accomplished in Virginia Woolf's early essay «Modern Fiction» (1966). Woolf's essay is not a manifesto; there is no attempt to discredit an older, if outmoded, type of novel or to replace it with something closer to the modern episteme. Though she expresses an admiration for Russian fiction-writers such as Tchekov or the Joyce of *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*, Woolf declines to advocate a particular method of work. «Any method is right,» she states, «every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express» (109). Within this apparent pluralism, however, there is a clear preference for a certain fictional content or «material». Woolf's famous distinction between «materialist» and «spiritualist» fiction is largely predicated on what she construes as two distinct types of content: the trivial, transitory aspects of reality which fill the novels of Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy, or the «dark places of psychology» explored by the «moderns» with whom she implicitly identifies (109). The question is really one of freedom — freedom to «set down what one chooses» or, on the contrary, subjection to the «tyranny of reality», to the «411-fitting vestments» of a probabilistic mode of representation which limits one's vision even as it claims to sharpen it. «Life», writes Woolf,

[...] is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (106)

Though it would be a few years before Woolf was able to work these ideas into a deliberate technique, the «luminous» quality of the life depicted in her early fiction is felt by one of its first reviewers, Katherine Mansfield. «Kew Gardens», Mansfield would write (1930: 37), seems «bathed in [a sense of leisure] as if it were a light ... heightening the importance of everything and filling all that is

9. For the historical distinction between the «feminine», «feminist» and «female» phases of women's writing see Showalter (1977).

within [its] vision with that vivid, disturbing beauty» (my emphasis). This perception pinpoints the curiously Romantic basis of the «spiritualist» aesthetics sketched in Woolf's earlier essay. It's as if the «tyranny» of realism could only be eluded through the appeal to a kind of Coleridgean poetics predicated on the defamiliarizing power of the poetic imagination. The implicit Romanticism of such a conception of modernity floods Mansfield's own stated attitude to her work: «It takes the place of religion — it is my religion — of people — I create my people: of 'life' — it is life». Art supplants religion, becomes less a way of showing or presenting life than a way of living it. More disconcertingly for the kind of «materialist» mind critiqued by Woolf, the artistic ego becomes indistinguishable from the reality it tries to depict:

Oh. God! The sky is filled with the sun, and the sun is like music. The sky is full of music. Music comes streaming down these great beams. The wind touches the harp-like trees, shakes little jets of music — little shakes. little trills from the flowers. The shape of every flower is like a sound. My hands open like five petals. Praise Him! Praise Him!

No, I am overcome; I am dazed; it is too much to bear.
(Mansfield, 1927: 110)

This startling revelation, recorded just a few months after «Modern Fiction» first appeared, takes the tenets of Woolf's essay to their ultimate, «unbearable» conclusions. The roots of modern spirituality, the concern to depict life in all its complexity, are, it seems, none other than a Romantic, or more properly symbolist, fusion of subject and object — a fusion which involves a synaesthetic blending of the senses, an illumination of nature by a consciousness which springs into being as it settles on each of the objects within its narrow sphere.

Mansfield unfortunately never explains how these private epiphanies can be articulated through a poetics of fiction, or how they might embody a step beyond the aesthetics of Romanticism and symbolism. In her review of Woolf's novel *Night and Day* she returns to the problem of light, this time in direct relation to character and characterization, chastising Woolf for allowing the light to shine «at», not «through», her personages. The critique comes in the context of an acknowledgement that the present age is an «age of experiment» and that, if the novel dies, «it will be to give way to some new form of expression; if it lives it must accept the fact of a new world» (1930: 109). Yet what shining a light «through» characters might mean and how that (narrative?) stance might constitute a «new», i.e. not merely neo-Romantic, form of expression are unexplained. Mansfield's recognizably anti-realist technique, her experiments with free indirect

style and stream-of-consciousness, the insertion in her narratives of epiphanies or «moments of being», predate the adoption of similar techniques by both Joyce and Woolf. But the necessity of such aesthetic choices, their appropriateness to the «fact» of the new post-war world, are never made explicit. This same quietism has made Mansfield's recruitment as proto-feminist and/or modernist problematic. Woolf's response to the story «Bliss» is a clear instance: «'She's done for!'\», Woolf claims to have cried on reading the story.

Indeed I don't see how much faith in her as woman or writer can survive that sort of story. I shall have to accept the fact I'm afraid that her mind is a very thin soil laid an inch or two deep upon very barren rock. For Bliss is long enough to give her a chance of going deeper. Instead she is content with superficial smanness; & the whole conception is poor, cheap, not the vision, however imperfect of an interesting mind. (Woolf, 1954: 2)

Slightly more graciously, T. S. Eliot recognized the skill with which Mansfield had handled the «minimum material» of her story (the transition from ecstasy to revelation) and even ranked Mansfield alongside those other modern «heretics» Joyce and Lawrence. But what Eliot defines as the uniquely «feminine» quality of the material — its limitedness —, rules out the broader implications: «the moral and social ramifications,» he states, «are outside of the terms of reference» (Eliot, 1934: 36). More damaging is the critique by H. E. Bates (1941: 130). Specifically addressing the modern, «essentially feminine» use of free indirect style, which allows her characters to «show their thoughts by a kind of mental soliloquy», Bates immediately warns against the «danger» of such a technique: namely, that it confers on very different characters «a touch of sameness, until they are all chattering overgrown schoolgirls busy asking and answering breathless facile questions about love and life and happiness». The questioning tone, a «feminine» concern to show the minutia of experience by means of incursions into panial, gossipy, breathless visions of reality — these early characterizations of Mansfield's fiction spill over into modern conceptions of her work, compromising its modernity and even, disturbingly, its sanity. As Nariman Hormasji (1967: 97), in the first book-length study of Mansfield's fiction, would put it:

We shall be disappointed if we seek in her work for a philosophy of life, or philosophic speculations on the destiny of man, and of the universe. The world in which she lived was a narrow, circumscribed one. The pictures she drew with consummate skill could be easily put in a small gold-studded frame. She preferred children above all and a few other

human beings with slight variations, not by choice of a talented artist, but by the inner urge of a woman so mentally endowed as to enter into the spirit of childhood. She became a neurotic.

Doubts concerning the direction and seriousness of Mansfield's modernism find parallels in feminist debates over the value of her work in the formation of a feminist aesthetics. Woolf's condemnation of «Bliss» and the numerous literary squabbles which studded the relationship between both women;¹⁰ Mansfield's willing subjection to the dictates (literary and otherwise) of her partner John Middleton Murry, as well as her quite swingeing attacks on other women authors, have seriously marred attempts to present her work as offering radical new insights into gender or self-consciously inscribing itself in a female literary tradition.¹¹ Meanwhile, the vestigial presence in Mansfield's work of the aesthetic procedures of both Romanticism and symbolism has been regarded as a serious handicap to her reappraisal as a feminist author. Even worse, for one recent critic, Mansfield's «emphasis on 'wholeness', organic unity, and the like is open to the charge that it is *counterfeminist*, according to some definitions of feminist aesthetics» (Kaplan, 1991: 167; my emphasis). «Feminine» rather than «feminist», «Romantic» or «symbolist» rather than «modernist», «neurotic» or «childlike» rather than «responsible» or «mature» — these epithet-selections have greatly devalued Mansfield's contribution to a revision of both genre and gender. In what follows I intend to examine these characterizations in the light of a story on which Mansfield's reputation as a writer has largely hinged. Written in 1918, during a period of convalescence from consumption in the French town of Bandiol, «Bliss» marks the beginning of a more cynical, less overtly «sentimental» phase in Mansfield's work. In it is to be found the germ of what, in the final section, I shall outline as Mansfield's «female» modernism. By both foregrounding the insecure status of the female narrator and her grip on reality, as well as by putting into play a babble of conflicting notions of womanhood, «Bliss» adopts and adapts the modernist paradigm, as defined above, to an illumination of the concept of gender bequeathed to authors in the early part of our century.

10. See McLaughlin (1978) and Alpers (1980: ch. 14) for fuller accounts of the Woolf-Mansfield relationship, a relationship which often went beyond mere literary disputes.

11. An example is Elaine Showalter's attempt to establish a literary sisterhood between Mansfield and Woolf in *A Literature of Their Own*. Showalter explains Woolf's critique of «Bliss» as a natural reaction to her discovery in the story of «herself, her own hardness and her own vulnerability» (1977: 247). For a similar attempt to explain away Woolf's pique see McLaughlin (1978: 372, n11).

II. «IGNORANCE IS BLISS». BUT THEN —

On February 27th 1918, a day before completing «Bliss», Mansfield confessed in a letter to Murry: «The English language is darned difficult. but it's also darned rich, and so clear and bright that you can search out the darkest places with it» (Murry, 1928: 138). The same ambivalence — the inability to fully express herself coupled with moments of what seems like profound revelation — is evident in Bertha Young's struggles to deal with the powerful feeling of bliss which torments her virtually to the end of the story. «Oh, is there no way you can express it,» she asks at the start of the story, «without being 'drunk and disorderly'?» (Mansfield, 1964: 91). This sense of being spoken by a culture which cannot accommodate such feelings returns as Bertha censors her own telephone conversation with her husband Harry:

What had she to say? She'd nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment. She couldn't absurdly cry: «Hasn't it been a divine day!»

«What is it?» rapped out the little voice.

«Nothing. *Entendu*,» said Bertha, and hung up the receiver. thinking how more than idiotic civilization was. (94-5)

Bertha's perception of civilization's control over her own expression is not, however, accompanied by an awareness of her own natural freedom from such constraints. Too often Bertha is presented as merely aping the discourse she is expected to produce. The inability, or rather the fear, to give full expression to her feelings is clear as she cuddles her baby: «'You're nice — you're very nice!' said she, kissing her warm baby. 'I'm fond of you. I like you» (94). The fear turns to obvious self-deceit as she attempts to rationalize her happiness:

Really — really — she had everything. She was young. Hany and she were as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals. She had an adorable baby. They didn't have to worry about money. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. And friends — modern, thrilling friends, writers and painters and poets or people keen on social questions — just the kind of friends they wanted. And then there were books, and there was music, and she had found a wonderful little dressmaker, and they were going abroad in the summer, and their new cook made the most superb omelettes ... (96)

As Bertha «rifles through her assets» (Fullbrook, 1986: 97), it becomes painfully obvious that none of them is the genuine reason for her bliss. The piling

up of copulatives, as well as the defensive rhetorical tone of the whole passage, take us further and further from the centre of the emotion, reminding us that the very terms in which Bertha seeks to articulate her experience are terms she has assimilated, uncritically, from others. «'I'm absurd. Absurd!' She sat up; but she felt quite dizzy, quite drunk. It must have been the spring» (96). Bertha's phraseological mimeticism turns to awed silence when the Youngs' «modern, thrilling» friends arrive for dinner: the pompous Norman Knights, the dandified aesthete Eddie Warren and the enigmatic Pearl Fulton. As the conversation flits inconsequentially over poetry and «social questions», Bertha yearns «to tell them how delightful they were, and what a decorative group they made, how they seemed to set one another off and how they reminded her of a play by Chekhov!». She doesn't, of course, and when Harry complements her on her soufflé, her response is the barely controlled «hysteria» of the early part of the story: «she almost could have wept with childlike pleasure» (100). As the uneducated middle-class hostess, Bertha's self-perceived role is to admire the elegance and wit of her guests; her longing to join in the conversation is suppressed by her husband, whose reference to her culinary skills subtly reminds her of her true relation to the group. but more tellingly, by her marginal status vis-a-vis the «language» which binds the group together, a marginality which also prevents her from defining the source of her happiness.

This marginalization from (by?) the language of the other is counterpoised by two important «revelations». The first is of a mysterious communion with Pearl Fulton. The communion is prompted by the physical contact of Pearl's hand on Bertha's arm («What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan — fan — start blazing — the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?» [99]). The touch establishes, at least in Bertha's mind, a kind of subliminal communication between the two women, a communication which allows her (Bertha) to guess exactly the «mood» of her companion: «'I believe this does happen very, very rarely between women. Never between men,' thought Bertha» (101). The communication works, not by the discourse of social wit, but by a system of «signs» which, from Bertha's narrow perspective, suggest a symbolic level of understanding. The «sign» Pearl gives her is a request to see the garden and the shimmering pear tree, which Bertha has already interpreted as «a symbol of her own life» (96). As they look at the tree, bathed in the dreamy light of the full moon, Bertha draws what she deems to be the true implications of the experience: «How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands?» (102). Her inability to define and to give an outlet to her emotions is

interpreted as the dilemma facing both women, now bound (at least in Bertha's perception) both by their «other-wordly», sprite-like nature and by a very worldly sense of their own sexuality.

This communion, which takes place at the «symbolic» level of the story, significantly paves the way for another discovery: that of a sexual longing for Harry. The revelation comes, characteristically, amongst a clutter of second-hand opinions and stumbling, evasive euphemisms: «Oh, she loved him — she'd been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way. And, equally, of course, she'd understood that he was different. They'd discussed it so often. It had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter. They were so frank with each other — such good pals. That was the best of being modern.» (103). Modernity here is a keyword for the «frankness» with which Bertha has been taught to regard her lack of sexual appetite as the mark of her own frigidity. The awakening of desire is now inextricably linked to processes at work within her own body («But now — ardently! ardently! The word ached in her ardent body!»), recalling the allusions at the start of the story to the «late afternoon sun [that] burned in [her] bosom» and the complaint: «Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?» (91). Marital desire is invoked as the most likely channel for Bertha's repressed emotions. That the invocation should come hard on the experience with Pearl is in no way seen to invalidate this rather orthodox option. The «symbolic» inference of the pear-tree episode, with its clear overtones of a Joycean epiphany or «moment of being», is itself highly equivocal. Bertha's perception of the tree's value as personal symbol and female totem has already in some sense been undermined by the description of its plainly phallic attributes: «Although it was so still it seemed ... to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed» (102). When Pearl's true status is revealed at the end of the story — not the kindred spirit Bertha believes she has found, but rather a rival for her husband's sexual attentions — the more conventional value of the tree symbol is confirmed. When Bertha rushes to the window as if to demand an explanation for what she has discovered from her symbol, she finds a tree «as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still» (105). The «epiphany», whose focus is the tree, founders on the sheer indifference of nature, just as Bertha's newly-discovered desire for Harry or Pearl (or for both) is dashed by her discovery of the liaison between them. If the tree now stands for anything it is the death of desire, as well as her own emotional distance from the «modern» social group which she has been entertaining.

The ironic ending to the story, which undercuts Bertha's own «symbolic» interpretation of her relation to Pearl, understandably riled readers such as Woolf, seeking a rather more incisive revelation of the female «spirit». Bertha's patent

naïveté leads one to the conclusion that her «bliss» is based on no firmer ground than ignorance or, worse, the deliberate evasion of responsibility and knowledge into what critics have identified as «denial and repression» (Hanson and Gurr, 1986: 64). Indeed, the self-same narrative technique which encourages the reader partly to identify with Bertha's vision of events also leaves her alienated from a character who attributes her happiness to her discovery of a new dressmaker or is unable to read her husband's misogynist banter as an obvious mask for his designs on Pearl. The perceived «modernity» of Mansfield's fiction — a perception partly fostered by Mansfield's critique of Woolf — is not then accompanied by the idea that her work — and «Bliss» is generally cited as an example — provides any new or self-conscious insights into the question of sexual politics.¹² Bertha's "unreliability" (to cite that shibboleth of masculinist narrative theory) as a focus for the narrative, the gaps and ambiguities, the irony and sheer open-endedness of a story which concludes with a question («'Oh, what is going to happen now?」 [105]) — are, as Kobler maintains (1990: 98-9), the same conventions which threaten to «[undermine] the sense she has created in the story that Bertha's feeling of bliss is natural and positive». As for an answer to Bertha's final question, Kobler argues. «Bertha certainly does not know; if Mansfield knew, she didn't say; a reader can only make some guesses and draw some tentative conclusions».

One conclusion is that, rather than disable or defer a positive interpretation of the heroine's bliss, the modernist procedures adopted in the story subtly point to the socially-determined obstacles which hamper its expression. Indecision and indirection are, from this perspective, less an effect of Bertha's conscious self-deception than subtle allusions to the social gagging of female desire. Thus, countering what she calls the «pseudomystical» notion that the style of Mansfield's fiction reveals an «essentially feminine» concern with the minutia of female mental activity (a concern which, as we have seen, is presented as defusing the social and moral implications of the narrative), Sydney Janet Kaplan finds in stories like «Bliss» the first tentative steps of a writer seeking to register and reveal «a woman's experience of reality». The «special relationship» Mansfield's stories establish with their female readers includes the invitation to «fill in her ellipses» (Kaplan, 1991: 151), a process which, in the case of «Bliss», acknowledges the

12. Rather, as Kate Fullbrook has argued (1986: 96), Mansfield's recourse to allusiveness, to images of locked-up fiddles, pyramids of fruit or the walled garden of female sexual experience, would seem fuelled more by nineteenth-century fiction-conventions of metaphor and symbolic suggestion than by «twentieth-century 'empirical' conventions that represent sexual activity as a collision of bodies — mechanical and unproblematic occasions for the manufacture of 'natural', physiological pleasure» — conventions that are clearly at work in such widely acknowledged statements of the modern episteme as, say, Joyce's *Ulysses*.

author's «deconstructive» self-distancing from her heroine, whose mental soliloquies are exposed as the «rhapsodic» outbursts of a woman trapped within the (phallogocentric) construction of femininity and feminine style (160). Though Kaplan draws short of identifying the exposure of male constructs of the feminine as the hallmark of a radical feminist-modernist practice, she does show how an aesthetics founded on indirection and open-endedness can subtly point to the seams or edges of such constructs. Rather than betokening Mansfield's «shallowness» as a writer, her acquiescence in the masculinist values which define the social role of women like Bertha, the ironic elliptical style of stories like "Bliss" is part of a serious effort to reexamine and reconceive the notion of gender within which middle-class women like Bertha are inevitably trapped.

In this regard (and here I disagree somewhat with Kaplan's conclusions), the use of indeterminacy and silence can be seen, not as the carefully controlled mechanisms of mute response,¹³ but as marking moments of equivocation between incompatible notions of gender and sexuality. As Bertha's body «aches» with the discovery of her desire for her husband, Mansfield's heroine muses: «Was this what that feeling of bliss had been leading up to? But then —» (103). The equivocation suggests the fragility of the association between Bertha's undefinable feeling and what critics have defined as the «natural» physical yearning for her husband.¹⁴ It suggests that her bliss may in fact be too large for the constricting frame of «normal» marital relations and, given that the discovery is preceded by the frisson produced by Pearl's touch, that desire for her husband is itself partly explained by a quite distinct version of sexuality.¹⁵ That this alternative version will also prove a false trail is less important than the fact that, by means of these equivocations, the text opens new and revelatory vistas on something as «natural» as a wife's desire for her husband. In this respect the gaps and silences in «Bliss» are the textual equivalents of the topographical edges of Bertha's own domestic «world». In classic «feminine» fiction the home, writes Bowlby (1995: 78),

13. «[W]e know, don't we, these very same devices as well as we know our own unsaid speeches» (Kaplan, 1991: 152).

14. See, for instance, Kobler (1990: 97) who describes Bertha's bliss as «as natural as sap rising in the spring, as normal in a woman as the flowering of the pear tree in the Youngs' garden. When ... Bertha 'for the first time in her life' desires her husband in a sexual way and thinks about how 'at first' in the marriage she worried 'dreadfully' about the fact 'that she was so cold' ..., Mansfield reveals the truth of the matter.»

15. Magalaner (1978) suggests the Bertha-Harry-Pearl triangle may be an imaginative working-out of the complex relations linking Mansfield to Murry and to her life-long companion Ida Baker («L.M.»), but he strangely omits to indicate how this process operates aesthetically in the story. For Ida Baker's angle on the relationship see Baker (1985).

«figures as the place where the woman is confined, and from which she must be emancipated in order for her to gain access to a world outside that is masculine but only contingently so, and which offers possibilities of personal and social achievement that are not available within its limited sphere». Significantly, Bertha's first onset of bliss comes outside the house: «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 ...?» (91). It is into the familiar setting of the hearth that Bertha's bliss will irrupt and (vainly) seek an outlet. The garden, as we have seen, will offer only temporary relief: the space where Bertha believes she has discovered the secret communion between herself and Pearl is itself confined, literally walled-in, dominated by the phallic pear tree to which both women are, as it transpires, secretly subservient. The rest of the story, and Bertha's experience, will unfold within the claustrophobic setting of the Youngs' dwelling, crowded with the icons of middle-class life (fruit-bowls, cushions, coffee-makers, etc.), which Bertha will desperately (and literally) clasp as objects of her still unsatisfied sexuality. The ambiguity at work here, the ambivalence between the sexual and social significance of such objects, is reflected in the effects of Bertha's fruit arrangement:

When she had finished with them and had made two pyramids of these bright round shapes. she stood away from the table to get the effect — and it really was most curious. For the dark table seemed to melt into the dusky light and the glass dish and the blue bowl to float in the air.

This, of course in her present mood, was so incredibly beautiful She began to laugh.

«No, no. I'm getting hysterical.» (93)

Like the garden and the pear tree, the natural world is projected as a vehicle of Bertha's nascent sexuality, the round shapes formed by apples, pears and grapes, as symbols of her womanhood. But the domestic frame for the symbol, Bertha's «sensible» decision to buy some purple grapes «to bring the carpet up to the table» (92), once again seem to undercut the other-worldly nature of the symbol with solidly middle-class «feminine» views on household decoration — views Bertha herself seems to ventriloquize in her sense of her own hysteria. When at the end of the story she discovers the affair between Harry and Pearl, the discovery occurs precisely in the hall, the transitional zone between an «emancipating» and unconfined outdoors and the limited sphere of the hearth. As with Mansfield's use of language, vital knowledge is yielded at the interstices between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the domestic «space» of everyday female

experience and the mysterious and threatening outdoors. Rather than «domesticate» such insights, as Bertha does, the text once again points beyond itself to alternative (if still painful and confusing) conceptions of the real. In doing so, it once again sheds light on the sheer contingency and constructedness of the protagonist's social and sexual status.

III. CONCLUSION: FEMALE AESTHETICS AS «NEGATIVE KNOWLEDGE»

Defending modern art from the Lukácsian charge that, in foregrounding his own irnpressionistic conception of reality, the modern artist wilfully distorts the «object» of the work, Theodor Adorno writes (1980: 160):

In art knowledge is aesthetically mediated through and through. Even alleged cases of solipsism ... do not imply the denial of the object, as they would in bad theories of knowledge, but instead aim at a dialectical reconciliation of subject and object. In the form of an image the object is absorbed into the subject instead of following the bidding of the alienated world and persisting obdurately in a state of reification.

The «contradiction» between the absorption of the object into the subject and the dogged persistence of the unreconciled object in the world outside it lends modern, i.e. late capitalist art, what Adorno calls «a vantage-point from which it can criticize actuality». By exploring this contradiction modern art comes to constitute itself as the «negative knowledge of the actual world» (160). Though Adorno is not concerned with gender difference, drawing all his examples of modernist literature from the male literary canon, his «dialectical» notion of the process of representation, with art standing as an imaginative vantage-point on the reification of social relations in the actual world, provides a useful model for describing the aesthetic structures and processes at work in stories like «Bliss». Written a couple of years before women were granted the vote, Mansfield's text records in cruelly ironic form the experience of a woman struggling to come to grips with an emotion she is unable even to define. Possessing none of the «modern» attributes (intellectual prowess or, in the case of Pearl, a self-confident sexuality) enjoyed by her female dinner-guests, Bertha remains helplessly alienated from a world which escapes her understanding and, as the final «discovery» scene makes clear, condemns her to the role of perpetual voyeur of other people's pleasure. For women like Bertha, Mansfield's story suggests, exiting the domestic sphere means either symbolically misrepresenting reality or, more dangerously, discovering the «truth» of their own inexorable alienation. Yet even within the story's indeterminate structures, or precisely as a result of them,

Mansfield makes space for «negative knowledge», not of a character with whom she may or may not be identified, but of the «fact» of a world which restricts such embarrassingly feminine emotions as bliss to the sphere of the unrepresentable. By figuring forth the unspeakable edges of Bertha's blissful thinking, as well as locating her heroine's most significant discoveries at the very limits of the familiar female ambit of the home, Mansfield establishes the basis of a fiction which is both rigorously modernist and, in its illumination of gender, unmistakably female.

Bertha's difficulties in articulating and defining her emotion, her headlong «breathless» style studded with gaps, hesitations, cut-off clauses, etc., are uncannily reminiscent of Mansfield's own extra-literary writing style. At the same time, Mansfield's preference for such neurotic, childlike or simply innocent narrative «reflectors» may well betoken, as some critics have suggested, her own failure fully to adapt to the sophisticated circles in which, as partner to Murry, she was often obliged to mix. It is indeed tempting to see Mansfield's career, her recourse to characters like Bertha Young, as pivoting around the same kind of aesthetic and ethical resolve voiced by Brookner's Edith: the cynicism and irony of an enforced, though marketable modernity, or the more natural style of an outmoded, but more «sincere» sentimentalism? «Bliss», it seems to me, actually explores both positions, the modernist structures of the text — its gaps and ambiguities, its shifts of tone, its general indeterminacy reflected in Bertha's final question — encouraging both identification with, and alienation from, the blissful, sentimental impulses of its protagonist. Bertha's final discovery, as well as her failure to find an outlet for her passion, do not then retroactively mark the story as anti-, or counter-, feminist, a grudging confirmation of the insurmountable dominance of male versions of female sexuality which, for some critics, continues to hamper truthful pictures of women in contemporary fiction (Stubbs, 1981). As Cora Kaplan has written (1993: 870), if texts by women «reveal a 'hidden' sympathy between women, as radical feminist critics often assert, they equally express positive femininity through hostile and denigrating representations of women». Bertha's inarticulateness, her self-diagnosis of absurdity or hysteria, as well as her futile attempts to seek symbolic correspondences for her feelings in the phallic pear tree or the familiar objects of her emotionally-cramping domestic space, engender a positive femininity precisely through the «negative knowledge» they provide of the structures (both social and sexual) which repress and deflect such feelings as bliss. If the task of feminist criticism is, as Judith Butler has

construed it (1990: 2),¹⁶ to understand how «the category of 'woman', the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought», the rehabilitation of texts like «Bliss» is surely a useful and politically necessary gambit.

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16. Butler, of course, argues against such «ontological» categorizations, though there is surely no denying the (enduring) political value of concepts such as «woman» and «female» (and, for that matter, «modernism»).

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