CHAPTER 15

‘Dames seules’ Lost in Translation: The French Language in Katherine Mansfield’s Stories

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Abstract

Katherine Mansfield’s stories are interspersed with references to foreign languages, especially French. Beside the affective relation which the author had with France, the French language appears as one version of the ‘little language’ which Virginia Woolf also seeks as a means to reinvent the language of the novel, in order to get closer to the truth of affect, emotion and perception. What seems specific to Mansfield is that these issues are related to the ‘feminine’, situated beyond biological sex and gender distribution – and for this very reason ‘lost in translation’, untranslatable. Mansfield’s French voice conveys a sense of interior exteriority, of the Lacanian ‘extimacy’, for which the essay proposes a literary extension, ‘textimacy’, which is surely part of Mansfield’s voiceprint.

This essay focuses on ‘The Little Governess’ and ‘An Indiscreet Journey’ which are partially set in France, and on three of Mansfield’s ‘continental’ stories: ‘Bains Turcs’, ‘Je ne parle pas français’, and ‘Feuille d’Album’.

Katherine Mansfield belongs to a generation of modernist writers for whom the use of foreign languages was a contextual marker of the heterogeneity of both identity and language, and who were attentive to what happened in French literature with Maupassant, Flaubert, and of course Proust. Beyond this general statement, there is of course the singularity of each writer and it is interesting to note that an early review of In a German Pension identified Mansfield’s style as ‘almost French in character’.¹ She had such a good knowledge of the French language that she even started translating into English a French novel, La Jeune fille bien élevée by René Boylesve (1919) which she had bought in Marseilles in 1916 alongside Balzac’s La Femme de trente ans (1900).² Three of her ‘continental’ stories have a French title, which remains rather

enigmatic (‘Bains Turcs’, ‘Je ne parle pas français’, and ‘Feuille d’Album’), at least in the last two cases. In order to render the sense of interior exteriority, of liminality which the French language occupies in Mansfield’s stories, I will approach the issue in the light of the Freudian concept of the uncanny, further developed by Lacan into ‘extimacy’, for which I will propose a kind of literary extension, or ‘textimacy’.

What seems specific to Mansfield’s style is that these issues are related to the issue of the feminine beyond biological sex and gender distribution – and for this very reason ‘lost in translation’, untranslatable. Ultimately, my argument will be that the French language comes as a marker of textimacy, the index of what Claude Maisonnat has called the ‘textual voice’ which is by definition feminine, whatever the writer’s sexual identity.

A Dramatic Signpost

Let us begin with this brief record in ‘Bains Turcs’ of a conversation supposed to have taken place both in French and German. A rather disagreeable woman with a ‘horrid German voice’ – nicknamed the Mackintosh Cap because of her rubber cloth bathing cap – calls for the attendant at the Bains, in the presence of two blonde women with ‘gay, bold faces and quantities of whipped fair hair’ who share a box of ‘mandarins’ wrapped in silver paper:

‘Well, what is it, Madame. I’ve no time...’ ‘Please bring me a hand towel,’ said the Mackintosh Cap, in German. ‘Pardon?’ I do not understand. Do you speak French?’ ‘Non,’ said the Mackintosh Cap. 

3 A translation of Lacan’s ‘extimité’, by applying the prefix ‘ex’ (from exterior) to the root of the word intimate (intimacy); see the very useful Lacanian site http://nosubject.com/index.php?title=Extimacy:

The resulting neologism, which may be rendered by ‘extimacy’ in English, problematizes the opposition between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. For example, the real is just as much inside as outside. The unconscious is not a purely interior psychic system but an intersubjective structure. […] the Other is ‘something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me.’ Furthermore, the center of the subject is outside, the subject is ex-centric. The structure of extimacy is perfectly expressed in the topology of the torus and of the mœbius strip.

4 The textual voice is more exactly composed of all the disruptive forces that jeopardize the authority of the authorial voice. […] it is an indispensable active ingredient of literary texts. On account of its disruptive function, the textual voice will be equated here with the voice of femininity. C. Maisonnat. Feminine Ways, Female Voices: The Emergence of Women’s Writing in Contemporary Short Fiction (Lyon: Merry World, 2012), p. 31.