Enduring Presence

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Caroline Patey, Cynthia E. Roman
and Georges Letissier (eds)

Enduring Presence

William Hogarth's British and European Afterlives

Book 2: Image into Word

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Contents

List of illustrations ix

PART I The Hogarth Effect on Prose 1

ROSAMARIA LORETELLI
1 *The Analysis of Beauty* and the new eighteenth-century narrative paradigm 3

ROBERTA FERRARI
2 The drama of real life. Charles Lamb and 'tragic' Hogarth 25

PAOLO BUGLIANI
3 The comedy of artistic bathos. William Hazlitt's familiarity with Hogarth 41

FRANCESCA ORESTANO
4 Hogarth, Dickens, and the progress of vision 57

PART II Proto-Modernist and Modernist Offshoots 95

MARCO MODENESI
5 'A wholly popular name'. William Hogarth in French fin-de-siècle literature 97

MAX SAUNDERS
6 Hogarth, Ford Madox Brown and Ford Madox Ford 109

Author Use Only

MAURIZIO ASCARI
7 The present is the only time. Mansfield's 'Marriage à la Mode' and the inability to change 131

LIA GUERRA
8 Joyce's *Giacomo Joyce* and Hogarth's aesthetics 143

CHRISTINE REYNIER
9 Rebecca West's and David Low's intermedial dialogue with William Hogarth in *The Modern* 'Rake's Progress' (1934) 155

PART III Dialogues with Contemporary Novelists 181

ROBERTA CIMAROSTI
10 Creole Britain in Hogarth and David Dabydeen's Hogarthian books 183

SERENA GRAZZINI
11 The line of grace in Peter Handke's *Essay on the Successful Day*. With an excursus on Hogarth's reception in German-speaking areas 207

MARGARET ROSE
12 William Hogarth and Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital. The institution's afterlife in fiction and onstage 227

Author Use Only

ALESSANDRA CROTTI
13 *A Rake's Progress* of Stamford Hill? Howard Jacobson meets William Hogarth 239

GEORGES LETISSIER
14 William Hogarth's serpentine line in Alan Hollinghurst's 'variety composed' literary aesthetics 257

Works cited 277

Notes on contributors 315

Index of names (Book 2) 325

Author Use Only

Author Use Only

Illustrations

Figure 1 William Hogarth, Front page of *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 80

Figure 2 The Hogarth Room at Gad's Hill. *The Strand Magazine*, 7 July-December 1893 81

Figure 3 George Cruikshank, *The Streets, Morning* and *The Free and Easy* (1839), *Sketches by Boz*. Proofs of the etchings on copper. From the collection of Josephine Lea Iselin 82

Figure 4 George Cruikshank, Wrapper for January 1846, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*. Wood engraving on composite block. Courtesy of The Victorian Web 83

Figure 5 William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, Plate 1. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 84

Figure 6 William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress* (1735), Plate 5. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 85

Figure 7 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Wedding of Psyche* (1895). The Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp 86

Figure 8 William Hogarth, *Gin Lane* (1751). Etching and engraving. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 87

Figure 9 Ford Madox Brown, *John Kay, Inventor of the Fly Shuttle* (1893). Mural. Courtesy of Manchester Town Hall 88

Figure 10 Ford Madox Brown, *Work* (1865). Courtesy of Manchester City Art Galleries 88

Author Use Only

Figure 11 Lake Sullivan after William Hogarth, *The March of the Guards to Finchley* (1750/1761). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 89

Figure 12 David Low, 'The Press Hails a New Celebrity' (1934), *The Modern* 'Rake's Progress'. Photograph by Christine Reynier 90

Figure 13 David Low, 'The Rake Gives a Cocktail Party' (1934), *The Modern* 'Rake's Progress'. Photograph by Christine Reynier 91

Figure 14 David Low, 'The Rake Finds His Level' (1934), *The Modern* 'Rake's Progress'. Photograph by Christine Reynier 92

Figure 15 David Low: 'The Rake Backs a Possible World Champion' (1934), *The Modern* 'Rake's Progress'. Photograph by Christine Reynier 93

Figure 16 William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), Plate 4. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 170

Figure 17 William Hogarth, *A Scene from* The Tempest (1735). Courtesy of the National Trust 171

Figure 18 William Hogarth, *Columbus Breaking the Egg* (1753). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 172

Figure 19 William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), Plate 2. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 173

Figure 20 William Hogarth, *Boys Peeping at Nature* (1731). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 174

Figure 21 F. Morellon la Cave after William Hogarth, *Letter Headpiece for Fundraising Letter* (1739). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 175

Author Use Only

Figure 22 William Nutter after William Hogarth, *The Portrait of Captain Coram* (1740). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 176

Figure 23 William Hogarth, *Arms of the Foundling Hospital*. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 177

Figure 24 Luke Sullivan after William Hogarth, *Moses Brought to the Pharaoh's Daugher*. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 178

Figure 25 Simon François Ravenet after William Hogarth, *The Pool of Bethesda* (1736). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 179

Figure 26 William Hogarth, *The South Sea Scheme* (1721). Etching and engraving on paper. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library 180

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MAURIZIO ASCARI

7 The present is the only time. Mansfield's 'Marriage à la Mode' and the inability to change

ABSTRACT
Katherine Mansfield's 'Marriage à la Mode' (1921) can be regarded as the homage she pays both to William Hogarth's satirical series of paintings and to Chekhov's 'The Grasshopper' (1892), which also describes a failed marriage. The theme is further underlined by intertextual allusions to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While depicting the corrupting influence of fashionable society, thus reasserting the moralistic message of Hogarth's cycle, the story focuses on the heroine's ultimate inability to change, despite a transitory moment of critical self-awareness and genuine empathy for her less worldly husband. Many of Mansfield's stories famously pivot on what she called 'the blazing moment', a burst-through of heightened consciousness. But this flash of insight does not invariably result in lasting effects, as shown in this story, where the superficial lure of the heroine's trendy, artistic friends has the better over her inmost feelings.

Katherine Mansfield had a lively visual imagination, which responded vividly both to theatre and cinema, the visual component of which was even more central at the time of silent film than now. We could define Mansfield's creativity as immersive, a sort of extended reality. As she wrote in a letter, 'I *dreamed* a short story last night […] I didn't dream that I read it. No I was in it part of it and it played round invisible me.'[1] Mansfield's creativity was inherently multisensory. When she was young, she played the cello and music resounds throughout her writing. Moreover, she was also adept at tuning the voice of each character to their personality:

1 Katherine Mansfield, To J. M. Murry (10 and 11 February 1918), in Vincent O'Sullivan, and Margaret Scott, eds, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, 5 vols, vol. 2 (1918–1919) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 66.

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> In Miss Brill I chose not only the length of every sentence, but even the sound of every sentence – I chose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her – and to fit her on that day at that very moment. After Id written it I read it aloud – numbers of times – just as one would *play over* a musical composition, trying to get it nearer and nearer to the expression of Miss Brill – until it fitted her.[2]

What about Mansfield's response to painting? We can delve into this through a letter Mansfield wrote to her friend Dorothy Brett, who was a painter and a member of the group that gathered around Lady Ottoline Morrell at her country house, Garsington Manor. It was in 1915 – during World War One – that Lady Ottoline and her husband moved to their Oxfordshire residence. When, due to the Military Service Act of January 1916, all young men were conscripted, the Morrells decided to provide friends such as Aldous Huxley, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Duncan Grant and David Garnett – who were conscientious objectors and risked being prosecuted – with the opportunity to work in agriculture.[3] Brett was one of the visitors who regularly joined the group at weekends, and even painted a collective portrait of the Garsington clan – *Umbrellas* (1917) – in which Mansfield and Murry also feature.[4]

In September 1921, Brett sent Mansfield a photograph of one of her paintings – a portrait of three children. Mansfield's response reveals her painterly eye. Commenting on one of the children in the portrait, she wrote: 'There is a kind of weakness, too, in the painting of the head. It's as though you haven't held it in your hands.'[5] Holding something in one's

2 Mansfield, To Richard Murry (17 January 1921), in O' Sullivan and Scott, eds, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, vol. 4 (1920–1921) 165.

3 See Miranda Seymour, 'Why Garsington Manor was Britain's most scandalous wartime retreat', *The Guardian* (25 July 2014). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/25/why-garsington-manor-britains-scandalous-retreat> (20–02–2019).

4 See Frances Spalding, 'Dorothy Brett's *Umbrellas* (1917)', in Claire Davison, Gerri Kimber, and Todd Martin, eds, *Katherine Mansfield and Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 178–80.

5 Mansfield, To Dorothy Brett (12 September 1921), in *The Collected Letters*, vol. 4, 277. Later on, Brett sent Mansfield another set of photographs of her own paintings, to which her friend replied with further critical commentaries. See Mansfield, To Dorothy Brett (11 December 1921), in *The Collected Letters*, vol. 4, 335–6.

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hands means coming into contact with the three-dimensional nature of an object. This is the first issue Hogarth tackles in *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), where he claims that a painter should think of objects as empty shells so that 'the imagination will naturally enter into the vacant space within this shell, and there at once, as from a centre, view the whole form within, and mark the opposite corresponding parts so strongly as to retain the idea of the whole.'[6]

As we can see, Mansfield and Hogarth develop different approaches to the same perceptual goal – appraising things in space. Mansfield's letter to Brett also reveals her awareness of the need for composition, a balanced relation between the single parts and the whole: 'Three heads – a group like that – are – is – hard to manage. One wants to roll them round softly, until they combine [...]. They want to flow into each other a bit, especially if they are children.'[7] In the original letter, this passage is accompanied by a small drawing – three juxtaposed circles that have been drawn without lifting the pen from the paper, with a single, flowing gesture. Mansfield instinctively feels that Brett's portrait is structurally faulty and offers alternative solutions by sketching curves, which is precisely what Hogarth does in his chapter 'Of Attitude', where he claims that 'two or three lines at first are sufficient to show the intention of an attitude'.[8]

Having taken stock of Mansfield's keen eye for painting, which translates into a friendly ferocious criticism of Brett's portrait, let us move on to the second part of her letter to Brett, which tells us how Mansfield responded to a monograph on Cézanne her friend had also enclosed:

> The Cezanne book, Miss, you won't get back until you send a policeman or an urgent request for it. [...] He is awfully sympathetic to me. I am absolutely uneducated about painting. I can only look at it as a writer, but it seems to me the real thing. It's what one is aiming at.[9]

6 William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, edited by Ronald Paulson (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1997), 21

7 Mansfield, To Dorothy Brett (12 September 1921), in *The Collected Letters*, vol. 4, 278.

8 Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 102. Hogarth presents these lines as the sketch of a painting called *The Country Dance* (c. 1745).

9 Mansfield, To Dorothy Brett (12 September 1921), in *The Collected Letters*, vol. 4, 278.

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While keeping a low profile, perhaps because Brett had attended the Slade School of Art, Mansfield is actually engaging with the visual. The affinity Mansfield perceives between her poetics and that of Cézanne's is due to what I termed as the 'immersive' dimension of her creativity, which clearly transpires from another letter to Brett: 'It seems to me so extraordinarily right that you should be painting Still Lives just now. What can one do, faced with the wonderful tumble of round bright fruits, but gather them and play with them – and *become them*, as it were.'[10]

As an artist, Mansfield aims at transcending the boundaries of her own ego and identifying with the other, a goal she pursues through narrative techniques such as free indirect speech. As Mansfield writes, 'that is why I believe in technique [...] because I don't see how art is going to make that divine *spring* into the bounding outlines of things if it hasn't passed through the process of trying to *become* these things.'[11]

These passages resonate with Bergson's concept of intuition: 'the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible.'[12] Mansfield's art stems from this need to give art substance, to make it real, which is precisely what she finds in Cézanne. This is a quality we also find in Hogarth's paintings, which are marked by this ability to catch life in the making. I am thinking also of the theatrical quality of Hogarth's scenes, notably of a cycle such as *Marriage A-la-Mode*, which was in itself inspired by John Dryden's 1673 Restoration comedy.

Back to Mansfield, the letter in which she criticizes Brett's portrait was written exactly one month after she completed her own version, 'Marriage à la Mode', which is dated 11 August 1921. The story would eventually appear in *The Sphere* at the end of December that year. There is little doubt that Mansfield

10 Mansfield, To Dorothy Brett (11 October 1917), in *The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, 330.

11 Mansfield, To Dorothy Brett (11 October 1917), in *The Collected Letters*, vol. 1, 330.

12 Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), 7.

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intended this story as a scathing satire of a milieu she knew all too well – the group of artists and intellectuals that gathered around Lady Ottoline Morrell.[13]

While being rooted in a social reality Mansfield witnessed in first person, 'Marriage à la Mode' is also indebted to previous works of art. These range from Anton Chekhov's 1892 'The Grasshopper' – whose female protagonist prefers the company of her artistic friends to that of her physician husband[14] – to Hogarth's cycle, which also satirizes aesthetics and patronage. We know how closely art is associated with corruption in 'The Toilette' (1743), where the countess is portrayed while holding a morning reception – a levee, after the fashion of the royals. Licentious paintings ornate the walls of the bedroom, where the countess is surrounded by a castrato opera singer and a flautist among others. Crébillon's libertine novel *Le Sofa* (1742) can be spotted on the right, while the floor is strewn with an assortment of erotically charged objects.

Following in Chekhov's and Hogarth's footsteps, Mansfield explores the corrupting influence of fashionable society, notably of an artistic milieu. Although the story is characterized by variable focalization, we see things mainly through the eyes of William, who works in London and commutes at weekends to join his wife Isabel and their two children in the countryside. The story is marked by both a spatial and a temporal divide. The intimacy the couple shared in their small London home before relocating is contrasted with their present emotional and physical distance. Relocation itself, however, is presented as resulting from personal change. The 'new Isabel',[15] as she is repeatedly labelled, enjoys the countryside insofar as it enables her to revel with a group of trendy friends. These artists and writers enjoy full board at the expense of William, and yet ungratefully consider him irredeemably boring and old-fashioned. The text is pervaded by the

13 See Cherry Hankin, *Katherine Mansfield and Her Confessional Stories* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 150–3.

14 See Don W. Kleine, 'The Chekhovian Source of "Marriage à la Mode"', *Philological Quarterly* 42/2 (1963), 284–8.

15 Katherine Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', in *The Collected Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 309, 310.

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symbolism of food,[16] which betrays the materialist, greedy nature of this bunch of pseudo-bohemians, whose artistic calling actually verges on pose and pretence.

The main body of the story recounts the events of a weekend, in between two train journeys, and dwells on the lack of communication between Isabel and William, who is marginalized by his wife and guests. This narrative is followed by a coda. A few days later, Isabel receives a love letter from her husband, but instead of responding to his attempt to reconnect she reads the letter to her friends, who predictably ridicule William. Suddenly aware of her shallowness, Isabel runs to her room, intending to reply, but when her friends call to her, proposing a swim, she simply postpones this act of reconciliation, implicitly going on with her life.

For Isabel and her friends, everything revolves around form: what really matters is the aesthetic, which, however, turns into an emotional anaesthetic. Instead of its translating into a quest for meaning, art is pursued by Isabel's friends through an infantile thirst for excitement. This is first shown in the story indirectly, through the attitude of William and Isabel's children, who just want to be entertained. Their consumerist appetite for novelty contrasts with their old London life, when they just played with everyday objects that took on a magical quality, as transpires from the beginning of the story, when William is thinking of a possible gift to bring to his children:

> But what was William to do? […] In the old days, of course, he would have […] chosen them something in five minutes. But nowadays they had Russian toys, French toys, Serbian toys – toys from God knows where. It was over a year since Isabel had scrapped the old donkeys and engines and so on because they were so 'dreadfully sentimental' and 'so appallingly bad for the babies' sense of form.[17]

The new Isabel is particularly keen on the aesthetic education of her children, worrying that unless she takes care of this, they may one day grow

16 Mansfield's symbolic treatment of food is discussed by Diane McGee in *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

17 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 309.

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up and ask 'to be taken to the Royal Academy'.[18] What the sophisticated new Isabel does not realize is that her pseudo-bohemian friends are a bunch of pompous parasites rather than true artists. Self-conceit has taken the place of any authentic selfhood. Parody is substituted for the real thing. Irony provides a distance that safely screens one from emotions. The major artwork that results from the presence of Isabel's friends is this:

> On the wall opposite William someone had painted a young man, over life-size, with very wobbly legs, offering a wide-eyed daisy to a young woman who had one very short arm and one very long, thin one.[19]

What is satirized here is the inability of these avant-garde artists to experience things to the full. Everything is ridiculed, deformed, deprived of life.

Dennis Green, a would-be writer, keeps objectifying Isabel and the others with witty remarks, the repetitive nature of which actually betrays his absence of wit. As if evoking the titles of portraits, Dennis ironically freezes reality into still frames. Thus, when Moira longs to smell a pineapple William has brought from London, Dennis titles the scene ' "A Lady in Love with a Pineapple" '.[20] Likewise, when Moira runs into the hall with a box of sardines, Dennis gravely comments: ' "A Lady with a Box of Sardines" '.[21] Once again, when Isabel receives her husband's letter he promptly writes a caption for this scene ' "Look at her! A Lady reading a Letter" '.[22] While in Mansfield's eyes art should enable us to see into things with insight, 'Marriage à la Mode' presents a degraded conception of art as a childish and cruel game, which is actually parasitical on life.

When Isabel reads William's love letter to her friends, not only do they burst into laughter but Dennis exclaims: ' "You must let me have it just as it is, entire, for my new book, [...] I shall give it a whole chapter". '[23] We

18 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 309.

19 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 315.

20 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 315.

21 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 317. Mansfield's use of recurring 'sets of words and phrases' in order to critique 'the limitations of a life that does not adequately embrace change' is explored by W. H. New in 'Reiteration: Mansfield's Stories of Static Action', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, Special Issue, SP 4 (1997), 72–86.

22 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 319.

23 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 320.

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know how often the modernists preyed on each other's lives. Mansfield was repeatedly 'portrayed' in books ranging from D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) to Francis Carco's *Les Innocents* (1916), but Mansfield herself in turn drew inspiration from Carco for the character of Raoul Duquette in 'Je ne parle pas Français' (1920), another text at the centre of which we find the dichotomy between being and posing. Likewise, both 'Bliss' (1918) and 'Marriage à la Mode' testify to her complex relations with Morrell and her coterie. In one of her letters, for instance, Mansfield openly acknowledges Eddie – a character from 'Bliss' – as 'a fish out of the Garsington pond'.[24] Mansfield was actually part of the milieu she satirized in her stories, and her private writings amply testify to the qualms she felt while being confronted with this side of her inspiration.

While satirizing the Garsington set, 'Marriage à la Mode' also includes an element of self-analysis. Isabel is also a projection of Mansfield, one of the many conflicting selves she evoked when she famously wondered: 'True to oneself! Which self? […] there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys to the willful guests.'[25]

'Marriage à la Mode' climaxes in a tragically sterile moment of awareness, for Isabel is caught in a loop, unable to change. As phrased by Todd Martin, 'The ease with which Isabel dismisses responding to William suggests a final rejection of him and of the self that moments before recognized its own shallowness.'[26] Isabel can no longer harbour authentic feelings, and her life has turned into a pose. This is a capital sin in Mansfield's stories, where we are repeatedly confronted with what W. H. New called '*performed* emotion', when 'artifice has taken hold; ego has supplanted person'.[27] Mansfield is, however, too subtle to simply oppose an innocent William to a guilty Isabel. As Jennifer Dunn underlines, 'This "marriage

24 Quoted in Hankin, *Katherine Mansfield and her Confessional Stories*, 143.

25 Margaret Scott, ed., *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks*, 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002 [1997]), vol. 2, 203–4.

26 Martin Todd, 'The Sense of an Ending in Katherine Mansfield's *Marriage à la Mode*', *The Explicator* 69/4 (2011), 159–162.

27 W. H. New, 'Reiteration: Mansfield's Stories of Static Action', 77.

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à la mode" is more tragic than it first seems',[28] since the husband's current unhappiness is symmetrically mirrored in the old Isabel's unhappiness, as shown by this passage:

> But the imbecile thing, the absolutely extraordinary thing was that he hadn't the slightest idea that Isabel wasn't as happy as he. God, what blindness! He hadn't the remotest notion in those days that she really hated the inconvenient little house, that she thought the fat Nanny was ruining the babies, that she was desperately lonely, pining for new people and new music and pictures and so on. If they hadn't gone to that studio party at Moira Morrison's – if Moira Morrison hadn't said as they were leaving, 'I'm going to rescue your wife, selfish man. She's like an exquisite little Titania' – if Isabel hadn't gone with Moira to Paris – if – if ...[29]

The connection Moira traces – both here and, significantly, at the very end of the story – between Isabel and Titania not only evokes the theme of matrimonial conflict (a failing polarity between male and female) that characterizes Shakespeare's plays, but also resonates with other aspects of Isabel's characterization. The first is her association with water (Isabel repeatedly escapes from the gravity centre of her husband by going to swim), an archetypically female element in relation to the moon and in opposition to masculine symbols such as fire and sun. What is more surprising is Isabel's association with coolness, which her husband magnifies as follows:

> The exquisite freshness of Isabel! When he had been a little boy, it was his delight to run into the garden after a shower of rain and shake the rose-bush over him. Isabel was that rose-bush, petal-soft, sparkling and cool. And he was still that little boy. But there was no running into the garden now, no laughing and shaking.[30]

The symbolism here is obviously sexual, as if the female, watery dimension of Isabel was needed to quench Williams's fire and thirst.[31] The

28 Jennifer E. Dunn, 'Katherine Mansfield: "The Garden Party" and "Marriage à la Mode"', in Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, and David Malcolm, eds, *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 208.

29 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 313.

30 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la Mode', 311.

31 For a discussion of the trope of temperature in Mansfield, see Alex Moffett, 'Hot Sparks and Cold Devils: Katherine Mansfield and Modernist Thermodynamics', *Journal of Modern Literature* 27/2 (Winter 2014), 59–75.

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couple's past happiness, however, was such only from William's own perspective. Moreover, the husband's only response to this marriage crisis is a sterile attitude of nostalgia for a lost past. Although William's love letter is an attempt to break the barrier that separates him from Isabel, it is a doomed attempt, yet another *representation* of love, which lacks the force of direct communication and bodily warmth. Trusting his message to a letter, writing from afar, actually means positioning himself once again as an absence, instead of asserting his presence.

William is frozen in inaction and Isabel is condemned to repetition. Both characters prove unable to catch the moment and change, an existential issue that increasingly concerned Mansfield in her late life, when she came into contact with G. I. Gurdjieff's ideas. While the trope of repetition in 'Marriage à la Mode' seemingly derives from Chekhov's 'The Grasshopper', this is also the idea around which P. D. Ouspensky's 1915 novel *Kinedrama* revolves.[32] When the hero, on the verge of suicide, is given the opportunity to re-experience his life, he sadly proves unable to change its course. Mansfield could hardly have known Ouspensky's Russian parable on the mechanical nature of existence when she wrote 'Marriage à la Mode', for the novel was translated into English as *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* only in 1947. Yet, it was precisely in August 1921 that Ouspensky arrived in London, an event that eventually changed the course of Mansfield's life, the last months of which were spent at Gurdjieff's 'Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man', where she died in January 1923.

What about Hogarth? The couple we find in his own *Marriage A-la-Mode* are also unable to change. What Mansfield's narrative has in common with Hogarth's, moreover, is the use of revelatory details, as shown by this scene: 'The door was open; sounds came from the kitchen. The servants were talking as if they were alone in the house. Suddenly there came a loud screech of laughter and an equally loud "Sh!" They had remembered him.'[33] William is such a nonentity – due to his wife's and her friends' lack of consideration – that even the servants forget he exists.

32 Neither should we forget the relevance the idea of eternal return has in Friedrich Nietzsche's writings.

33 Mansfield, 'Marriage à la mode', 316.

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This cruel touch is really *à la* Hogarth, for we know that in paintings such as 'The Tête à tête' (1743) the attitude of servants is used as a litmus test to shed light on the behaviour of their masters. While in the background of this picture a servant has just woken up late like his masters, despite the advanced hour, the steward in the foreground is characterized as contrastingly alert. He is sternly dressed as a Methodist and has a book on regeneration in his pocket. His face plainly reveals what he thinks of the Viscount and his wife. Moreover, financial disaster is approaching, as shown by the bunch of unpaid bills he is holding in his hand.

Without venturing onto the ground of direct influences, we can notice a representational convergence between Hogarth and Mansfield. Both make skillful use of a typical technique of realism – those revelatory details[34] which signify only if viewers and readers prove able to decode them. Hogarth theorizes about this in *The Analysis of Beauty*, where he compares the pleasure of decoding 'allegories and riddles' to that of hunting and fishing, arguing that 'This love of pursuit, merely as pursuit, is implanted in our natures'.[35] Hogarth even theorizes about what Peter Brooks would call 'reading for the plot':[36] expanding on the delight the mind shows in following 'the well-connected thread of a play, or novel, which ever increases as the plot thickens, and ends most please'd, when that is most distinctly unravell'd!'[37] Hogarth's words uncannily anticipate the development of detective fiction, an intellectual exercise pivoting on the decoding of clues, and we all know that the so-called golden age of detective fiction, in the interwar period, roughly coincides with literary Modernism.

34 In Mansfield's story there is a detail that might perhaps be intended as a direct homage to Hogarth. The first painting in the cycle is entitled 'The Marriage Settlement' (1743) and curiously enough at the end of Mansfield's story a marriage certificate is mentioned, reminding us of the contractual nature of this bond. 'He's sending you back your marriage lines as a gentle reminder', one of Isabel's friends remarks, while another adds to the dose by commenting: 'Does everybody have marriage lines? I thought they were only for servants' (319). Snobbery has finally prevailed over any value.

35 Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 32.

36 See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

37 Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 33.

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Like Hogarth's paintings, and like detective fiction, Mansfield's stories do not signify on the surface, but imply a need for a high degree of attention. These deceptively simple narratives actually teem with psychological details, which are often conveyed by means of body language, and with symbols that verge on allegory, as if a secret code were being established between author and reader through the total sum of Mansfield's stories. These are the clues that need to be appraised if Mansfield's texts are to flower into meaning.

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