‘Too Perfectly Historical for Words’: Reading Sociably at the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace/Te Puakitanga

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There is a way of reading—not quite literary, and not at all solitary—that I like to think of as sociable. Sociability in reading is more than social reading in that it entails not just the presence of others in the reading but also congeniality and amiability: it requires the sense of a community not just of interest, but of enjoyment and affection. In sociable readings, literary works are of secondary importance to the social function of reading, as they serve to underscore writers’ status and guarantee the prestige of both writer and sociable readers rather than to act as a site of direct engagement or contestation: direct consideration of works is counter-productive to the goals of social connection and community maintenance. Sociable reading takes many forms, all centred around the pious reverence not for texts, but for an assemblage of objects, personages and places surrounding a text. Attention to these can better and less controversially sustain a community than can attention to the texts themselves. Sociable reading consists of what Helen Deutsch calls ‘author love’. To love an author sociably means more than to love texts. It mimics the relation between revealed religious texts and their divine origins—or, rather, the human conduits of the Word: its scribe-saints are the bodily writers behind the creation of literary texts, and its shrines are literary museums. Literary museums present a closed-off perfect history of the individual writer, usually situated in a recursive reading of the relationship between
the Life and Works. The Katherine Mansfield Birthplace/Te Puakitanga is one such place.

The Birthplace is only one of the most recent real-world efforts to remember or bring about the memory of the historical Katherine Mansfield in spaces close to those she occupied in her childhood. The first was a memorial tram-stop near the site of the Fitzherbert Street House where the Beauchamps lived at the time of Mansfield’s final departure from New Zealand. The tram-stop was funded by Sir Harold Beauchamp soon after Mansfield’s death. When the surroundings were razed with the construction of the motorway in the 1960s elements of the tram-stop were used in what is now the larger Katherine Mansfield Memorial Park, which takes in the area of about twelve of the destroyed homes near the site. The far more ambitious memorial project of the Birthplace was undertaken when it was discovered that not only had the Beauchamps’ first house on Tinakori Road not been destroyed during the construction of the motorway, as had previously been believed, but that it was for sale. A committee was soon formed to ‘acquire, preserve, maintain and re-use the birthplace of Wellington’s most famous daughter, Katherine Mansfield, a writer of international renown, and to foster appreciation and understanding of her work and her time’. The first of these objectives was achieved mid-1987, and the goal of establishing the house as a museum to both Mansfield and her times was set for the writer’s centennial the following August.

The committee expresses itself through its goals as redoubtably sociable. The emphasis on the quick and pragmatic action of acquisition, preservation and maintenance does little to establish the continuity between these and the later, less measurable goal of fostering appreciation and understanding of Mansfield’s work and her time. The ostensible link is the idea that the establishment of a museum would constitute a ‘re-use’ of the house; however, it is difficult to ‘re-use’ a building when it is defined exclusively as the place in which a famous person was
born. As opposed to the establishment of a maternity ward for literary fame, the construction of a literary museum makes ‘use’ of the location of Mansfield’s birth in an economic sense: the building will allow Wellington to accrue the cultural capital of having a ‘famous daughter’ who was only incidentally a ‘writer of international renown’. Any fostering of appreciation (notably the first benefit) and understanding of either Mansfield’s work or time is ancillary. The project’s ‘literariness’ is, then, importantly and ultimately incidental to the work it does for the overlapping communities who have an interest in it: in developing the museum, the most important front was the elaboration of the assumption that physical objects—ranging in scale from a candlestick to a house—can enable the understanding and appreciation of a text. This assumption makes a claim for the primacy of cued affect in social and sociable spaces over personal or intellectual interpretation in the approach to a literary text, and so allows the avoidance of reading in the search for physically verifiable detail. That is, the goal of establishing a museum enables the formation of communities which can appreciate writers without the necessity of having anything to do with the writing.

The building was given a Category One listing on the Register of Historic Places in mid-1986. By late 1987 the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace Society had been incorporated as a charitable trust. The Society engaged in what it called ‘invasive research’ to ascertain as much about the original condition of the building as possible before restoration began: extensive archaeological excavation found, among other things, sample crockery, wallpaper remnants, and the outlines of original flowerbeds. The structure, which for years had been in two residential flats, was returned to a single Victorian villa, and two bay windows were removed and replaced with the flat windows of 1888. The Society went to extraordinary lengths to locate physical details that would enable it to claim accuracy for its
representation of how the Beauchamp family lived during their five years in the house.

The Society committed itself early to a programme of fidelity, and this has particular ramifications for the way in which the museum is able to bear witness to the past. The fragments of wallpaper, for instance, were matched with samples in a wallpaper archive and special reproductions made. One pattern remained unmatched, so the Society commissioned a wallpaper designer to extrapolate from the fragments. Using these cues, the museum was then decorated to match. From this information, the Society situates original design elements within the late Victorian aesthetic movement’s vogue for *Japonisme*—an interest which is then attributed to Annie Burnell Beauchamp. Attention was also paid to the Beauchamp family’s economic situation at the time they moved in to the house: it was assumed that as Harold Beauchamp was not yet particularly wealthy the furnishings for the home of his young family would come from a variety of sources and represent a mixture of styles. Furniture was sought from a number of locations including the local community and as far field as Britain, and was installed progressively between the restoration and some point in 1996, eight years after the museum opened, when the décor reached its current stable form. Each room, with the exception of a resource room upstairs and the master bedroom, which is reserved for temporary exhibitions, is fully furnished to highlight its function in a typical Victorian home of that class. The displays are lavish by modern home-making standards. Each room is presented as a diorama, setting objects in lifelike relation to each other; the display does not include human figures, and is non-interactive. Visitors are restricted to viewing the display in each room from a small roped-off gangway, and are warned that going past the rope will trigger a motion-sensing alarm system. The displays thus privilege visual experience over other ways of generating the affect of ‘historical’ experience: you can go to the Birthplace and see objects in the relation they might have had to one another,
but you cannot place yourself within that system of relations. In this sense, a visitor to the museum is directed to look but not touch in the way a Victorian child might have been. A consequence is the layer of silence that comes when reverence for objects is augmented by the silence that is enforced on children in ‘adult’ spaces. This silence is directed at the community’s effort to bring together the collections that communicate the general idea of the past: more than the specific era, or even the writer who supposedly recorded it, it is the effort itself which commands reverence.

The intensity of the attention to detail in the reproduction wallpaper and crockery is intended to supplement a lack of positive historical knowledge about the content of each of the rooms. Where there is opportunity for the displays to include a touch from Mansfield’s personal recollections, this is done. Further, the displays incorporate details which have been extrapolated from Mansfield’s autobiographical fictions. In the drawing room, for instance, there is a small upright piano with a songbook at the ready, derived from the authority of the story ‘A Birthday’. When such details are presented, the aim is always to arrive at an authenticity of display based on certain logical assumptions about the fictional use Mansfield made of her actual memories. The aim is to amass authoritative detail about the house in that period, rather than to provide a kitsch display of only what could be expected to be encountered by readers familiar with certain material details in certain stories. This, then, is the peculiar tension of the displays in the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace: physical detail has been scrupulously reconstructed in order to perform, in effect, what is described throughout the tour script as the original house. Since the house is taken as a template for spaces described in Mansfield’s fiction, outside objects are introduced to give the impression of an enduring extra-textual reality even when the knowledge of any actual configuration of the furniture is derived solely from the text. In introducing the piano, for example, the tour booklet says:
In the drawing room there is as small piano as there was in *A Birthday* and on it is a photograph of KM’s mother, Annie Beauchamp (Anna in the story). […] According to a description in *The Aloe*, the Drawing-Room may have contained an oil painting by Belle Dyer (KM’s teenage aunt, called Beryl in the stories):

... of a large cluster of surprised looking clematis, for each flower was the size of a small saucer with a centre like an astonished eye fringed in black.7

The descriptive authority of Mansfield’s stories is treated as coming from a retrievable past. There *was* a small piano in ‘A Birthday’, and it has become conflated with the one that can be viewed by visitors who are encouraged to ignore the fact that both the piano and the photo have only been placed there by curatorial design so the house can conform to the fiction. The possibility of the oil painting by Belle Dyer is even more troubling to this scheme of representation because the personal artistic endeavours of Belle or Beryl or both cannot be sought on the open market nor honestly feigned on commission. The tour-script supplies a solution to this problem of its own making by noting that the subject of the painting can anyway be found in the decorations as a central motif in the recovered wallpaper: ‘How delightful to be surrounded in this room by clematis flowers on the wallpaper!’

The delight comes from the sense of recovery made in confirming the historical hunch found in—though not necessarily communicated by—*The Aloe*, rather than from the actual aesthetic impact of the wallpaper. *The Aloe*’s description of Beryl’s painting carries a sinister undertone of entrapment and fragility which is elided in the crudely material reading of the image: the brochure hits on material detail in the story without consideration of its treatment or meaning. Thus a particular difficulty arises in the museum’s effort to meld the past and
fiction. Where displays are freed from the obligation to find visual equivalents for the limited range of Mansfield stories that can be said to bear the imprint of the house, they can be enlighteningly generic and can communicate specific points of late Victorian social history. Where there is a material detail to be confirmed, however, the logic of the display requires an overdetermined avowal of a near correspondence between the image in the fiction and a real object that is brought to stand in for it in the museum. In these cases the supplementary object often fails to bear the weight of the past it is brought in to signify. To take Mansfield’s attitude towards the glimpse of an incommunicable though revelatory reality beyond the material seriously, items such as the small piano frustrate the potential of the other objects to signify more than pastness or their own antiquity. Stand-in objects communicate their own troubled relation to the stories they are set out to confirm, and in this they are as unable to refer to the bodily life of Katherine Mansfield as anything beyond the textual fiction.

The difficulty I have been outlining is one that Mansfield herself was especially alive to. Many of Mansfield’s stories display a concern with the effects of historical objects on people who observe them, and the silence that surrounds them in place of direct factual communication. Personal memory is the basis of the perception of the past, yet it is potentially unreliable. Several of Mansfield’s stories include points where the spectre of the loss of the past—or its inaccessibility when contained within a personal experience—that threatens present subjectivity with an eerie silence. This happens both when the object is the bridge to a personal memory and when it is the artefactual remnant of a past an individual did not experience. Sarah Sandley observes that for Mansfield, the reality of the present is often subordinate to the fixity of the past and the dreamed possibility of the future.8 Epiphanic understandings of the present, Sandley argues, come through what Mansfield herself describes as ‘glimpses’—moments of sharp focus on material objects that hint at a truth
or an understanding of the present beyond them. The kind of epiphany that her glimpses of the material world afford rests in the apprehension of the troubled relationship between the person remembering and the past, rather than in the mediated perception of the past itself. This past is inaccessible. Its attraction is the various sorts of terror, peace, articulation and silence that the material is able to afford, even if these cannot be brought fully into speech.

In reading a museum set up to foster understanding of Mansfield’s work it is best to look first to the way historical objects operate within the stories before setting objects out to communicate Mansfield’s history. The fragment ‘Father and the Girls’ offers a fruitful tension between the desire to appreciate or understand the past and the muteness of material things. The story demonstrates that the confusion in engaging with a material object of the past can be especially confounding if the object connotes only its own pastness without personal attachment. In an old Swiss chalet, a family encounters an ornate cast iron stove inscribed with the date 1623. The weight of the past that rests in the lifespan of the stove belittles the present. The reaction is bemused jollity until one daughter is taken in raptures:

‘Isn’t it all too perfectly historical for words, Edith! It makes me feel—’ She stopped, she looked at Edith who had followed her and whose thin shadow lay on the sunny floor. ‘Queer!’ said Emily, trying to put all she felt in one word. ‘I don’t know what it is’ (p. 481).9

The stove is able to articulate its age, but nothing more. It is the impact of the emptiness of the passing of four hundred years that is queer—destabilising and alienating. Importantly, Emily gushes that the stove’s age lends it a historicity beyond words. That is, the force of knowing the stove’s age perfects, or even transcends the need of the historical object to tell stories. To be perfectly historical is to connote pastness so thoroughly that the
articulation of the content of the past becomes unnecessary to its role as a marker or a witness of history. Emily’s condensation of her feeling into the one woefully inadequate word queer works in the same way as awestruck religious silence in that it leaves the space of articulation empty for an object that cannot speak of itself or of the things it is witness to. The reverent speech that leads to silence is a way of bringing about an aura of reverence around an object or an idea that forbids exploration of its significance. The potential of an object to mean things about the past is kept as an affective influence—the experience of queerness—as opposed to a bridge to understanding. The power of an historical object to induce reverence stems in this case from the limited potential of the object to occupy something like a speaking position, because father and the girls have no reserve of personal memories linked to the stove which it could trigger. The glimpse offers only an intimation of the weight of the past and the insignificance of one person’s life within the marked expanse of history. This weight, and the feeling of the unhomely it generates, is so strong that it causes the story, or Mansfield’s interest in writing it, to peter out less than a page after Edith’s pronouncement. Whatever the intended scheme of the story, it is sabotaged by the unspeakable realisation of the characters’ personal insignificance and their ‘perfect’ removal from the historical past.

‘Perfect’ removal from the past forecloses the kind of understanding and appreciation the Birthplace seeks to foster. If, in the view Mansfield expounds in her stories, the logic on which the project the Birthplace Society undertook to remember her is doomed to fail, the claims of the museum as a memorial to her need to be seriously interrogated: attention must be paid to the assertion that mute objects can aid an affective appreciation of their past, especially when such objects are arranged in a specific and purportedly meaningful location. This is important, as the museum’s mixture of relics and generic artefacts are placed together to aim at both the factual and fictional manifestations of
Mansfield’s own memories in the specific place where the logic of the memorial can claim that both took place. Even before it is filled up with relics and artefacts, the house is claimed to have instructive value, as ‘Mansfield’s Thorndon’ is asserted to be a significant site in literary history. This is despite the fact that without Mansfield’s literary version of the place, any of the many old houses in the neighbourhood could provide the community with the kind of heritage values that are presented in the generic displays. Insofar as it is sociable, the heritage value of any display of Victorian furnishings in situ in Thorndon overrides the paucity of the actual (read ‘original’) material with which the genius-saint’s body interacted. That is, the reverence directed towards Wellington’s most famous daughter is primarily a reverence towards Wellington’s past, despite the assertions of the tour booklet that the displays have a specific relevance to the life of a literary giant. It is therefore important to look at the way in which the museum encourages its visitors to feel about Mansfield.

In paying attention to the degree to which the memories presented in the museum are situated, a number of difficulties surface, not least Mansfield’s own avowal of the multifariousness of her personality. Mansfield’s moods and attitudes ranged over a wide spectrum; in her notebooks she repeatedly treats herself as though she were composed of multiple masks, each performing a different version of herself—she could be both cloyingly saccharine and poisonously cutting. It is difficult enough to reconcile the many different versions of herself to each other, so it is especially important to be aware of how the flux of her personality is negotiated when Mansfield is represented by others. There is no representation of her theory of personality at the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace, and the version of her it offers tends to stick to the aspects of her personality that fix her in her sentimentalist mode.

This Mansfield is the Mansfield-who-remembers, so it is unsurprising to see her given such prominence in the museum.
Her sentimental memories, enshrined in both the notebooks and in stories, act as guarantors for the place’s ability to claim Mansfield. The memorious version of Mansfield is also the best suited to representations of the writer that facilitate sociable reading practices. It is in this sociability that some of Mansfield’s almost phatic statements of nostalgia for a lost childhood and homeland can become the most circulated of her comments. This is because they deal directly with an identifiable commonality—the nation and specific places within its boundaries—in an uncritical fashion.

The community that reads the life of Katherine Mansfield, the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace Society (Inc.), is concerned chiefly with the acknowledgement and preservation of the link between Mansfield and her native Wellington suburb Thorndon, where the Birthplace is located, and the wider Wellington setting in which she spent a number of her childhood years. Sociable reading often centres around the recollection of material detail, which is something that the version of Mansfield put forward by the Birthplace Society is both very good at and committed to. In the famous journal entry in which she turns more steadfastly towards memorial detail of her New Zealand childhood, Mansfield revels in the possibility of bringing back into being the departed world as the repayment of a ‘debt of love’: ‘I shall tell everything—even of how the laundry basket squeaked at 75’.

The Birthplace Society underlines the intensity of the attention to detail in Mansfield’s memorial project in a book entitled Katherine Mansfield: A ‘Do You Remember’ Life, released to celebrate the first ten years of the Society’s activities. As well as presenting a mini-canon of the four Mansfield stories that take any recognisable aspect of the Tinakori Road house as their setting, the book contains two essays, one biographical and one critical, by Gillian Boddy, who acts in an advisory capacity to the Society. Boddy’s essays take the phrase ‘a “do you remember” life’ from one of Mansfield’s letters, and track the attitude that once a personal past is shared through fiction, it is taken by
others and understood ‘as if it were their own’. This transferred memory is taken as the basis for an understanding of the stories (‘Prelude’, ‘A Birthday’, ‘The Wind Blows’ and ‘The Doll’s House’) as containing articulable moments in which artistic transcendence is possible. The project of the book—to offer a ‘perfect introduction to the work and world of Katherine Mansfield—is an effort to allow uninitiated visitors (who can find the book among the souvenirs for sale in the entranceway to the museum) a road into better understanding not of Mansfield’s work and world, but of the experience of visiting the museum dedicated to her. As a primer, the book has an obvious slant towards asserting the primacy of the house in which she was born in her creative imagination. The view is skewed, so that the Birthplace exudes a sort of ontogenetic force on Mansfield that keeps drawing her back specifically to the house, but more generally to Wellington.

The presence of the house in these stories is, however, recognisably sparse. ‘A Birthday’ translates the myth of Mansfield’s birth into a geographically impossible Bavaria. The house only exists as a point of departure at the beginning of ‘Prelude’. ‘The Wind Blows’ takes place on the long-gone sea wall that was nearby; finally ‘The Doll’s House’ is included not because of its explicit setting—its working title was tellingly ‘At Karori’—but because photographic evidence establishes beyond doubt that the Beauchamp girls had been given the Doll’s House when they were still living on Tinakori Road, and one of the central attractions of the displays in the museum is a version of what the eponymous doll’s house might have been like, if indeed it conformed to the description given it by Mansfield thirty years later. Despite the tenuousness of these literary links to the Birthplace, and the resulting occlusion of other stories that would serve as exemplary introductions to Mansfield’s work, the idea of the book is to convey the impression that the Tinakori Road house exerted a mysterious pull on the imagination of the adult writer. This is conveyed quite forcefully on the book’s
cover. In the background is a sepia landscape of colonial Thorndon, looking out to Port Nicholson, while a portrait of Mansfield, circa 1912, occupies the lower foreground jutting next to the place occupied in the landscape by 11 Tinakori Road, which is circled in a pastel blue halo. A series of smaller circles in various colours leads from the house to Mansfield’s forehead. The illustration is cartoonish in its simplicity: Katherine Mansfield thinks or dreams of her Birthplace. The portrait of Mansfield used on the book cover is the trust’s most favoured image of the writer, taken two years before the more iconic image of Mansfield with her hair cropped but still curly, and with a bowenite pendant in one ear, which is the image preferred by The Listener and the Bank of New Zealand. Mansfield is young and fresh-faced, without puppy-fat but far from the gaunt expression common to her photographs after she contracts tuberculosis.

It is curious that this image should be the preferred portrayal of Mansfield, given that it represents her at that time in her life when she was becoming less and less attached to New Zealand, mixing in literary circles, finally replacing the clothes that had come with her, and—if her literary output is anything to go by—thinking very seldom of Tinakori Road or even of New Zealand. The portrait does show Mansfield at her least wilful—it is the meekest and most daughterly image there is of her. This consideration overrides the objection that the mental concern spelled out in the drift of thought bubbles is anachronistic. Since the version of Mansfield proffered by the Birthplace Society is one in which a constancy of memorial effort is implied, it makes sense that the most independent image of Mansfield should be co-opted to suggest her supposed psychic dependence on Wellington. This cover portrays a healthy young woman soberly contemplating her past, which is a far cry from the tubercular, grief-wracked mania in which Mansfield is reputed to have engaged in her mental rapprochement with her New Zealand past.
In affirming that Mansfield exhibited this memorious aspect of her personality continuously through her life, the publication effaces the specific regard with which the mature Mansfield approached her memories as a transmutation of her earlier resentment of Wellington. Since this transmutation is a particular event, it has no place in a space set aside for the sociable reading of her myth, which relies on the idea of her having a constant essence. Without the drama leading to a conversion to the ‘do you remember’ life, Mansfield’s relationship to the objects brought in to signify her is static, always sentimental, ready for affection towards anything, so long as it can be remembered. The result is that any statement of recognition can be taken as a statement of approval. This is doubly so when the curators obtained certain items only with great effort.

In 2008 the Society mounted a landmark exhibition to mark the hundredth anniversary of Mansfield’s final departure from New Zealand by bringing together a seemingly definitive set of items with the common provenance of having once been owned by Katherine Mansfield. The Material Mansfield: Traces of a Writer’s Life assembled relics and trifles from around the world, bringing together items that had never been housed together, even in Mansfield’s life. The exhibition was accompanied by a glossy catalogue published by Random House, as well as a special series of garments commissioned from leading New Zealand fashion designers, made for a woman of exactly Mansfield’s size and presumed taste. Mannequins bearing the clothes were placed in the permanent displays, along with banners of supporting quotations selected by the designers and short texts explaining their creations.

The bodily reality of these adjacent displays, the reliquary including some clothes actually owned by Mansfield, as well as two locks of her hair and a wide array of other items such as empty perfume bottles and souvenir poi, jarred with the made-to-measure grandiosity of the idea of legendary designers designing for a legend. Both approaches fit together because they
seek to go beyond the textual authority of memory and establish a physical currency to the myth of the writer. The perversity of designing clothing to exact specifications for a decades-dead woman is not the same perversity present in the desire to amass a collection of her extant belongings, but both articulate a sense of cultic practices that bring us back to the numbing attraction that is found in Mansfield’s work for sublime objects of the past. The sublimity of the relics is easy to understand: they represent the absence of their owner across an abyss of time, and can hope to speak something (as the curators of The Material Mansfield claim) of that owner’s personal sense of style—wrenched from their social and personal context, however, the potential here is limited. What is sublime in the commissioning of dresses for a decomposed body is the assumption that the dresses could once have been filled by the body of the writer, if only it could be as permanent as the troubling persistence of the body of the writer’s works.

Where Mansfield’s real clothing can be said to bear an aural trace of her use of them, the commissions had to imply Mansfield’s (abstract, departed) personality in a concrete medium, expressing more vibrantly the type of clothing she could have worn had she had the opportunity, and in a context where the function of the clothing was solely to communicate aspects of the intended wearer’s personality. The exhibition of the relics brings about a similar tension with the non-original items placed on permanent display in the museum. While the structure of the building can be said to bear the imprint of Mansfield (if only slightly, and from the time of her infancy) the logic of the display sees that real antique objects extrapolate what is assumed to have been Annie Burnell Beauchamp’s taste, though always within the bounds of generic predictability.

The sense of the particular that The Material Mansfield sought to convey cannot be present in the permanent displays, because although items themselves may be finely made, they signify best guesses and historical detail rather than specific interest. If we
are to take positively the reverent (though potentially damaging) silence that is evoked whenever Mansfield’s characters are confronted with a glimpse of another order through a sublime historical object, we must acknowledge that the burden of period signification makes it impossible for the hundreds of objects on display to speak their own silence across the void of time. More troubling is the thought that without the burden of signifying what the Beauchamps’ house might have looked like when Kathleen was born, the objects would speak their silence in a total cacophony, each bringing more than a century of its own past into the house. The museum would speak not only of the Beauchamp family, but of a sublime multitude of owners, much like the vault full of corpses labelled ‘Early Settlers’ in the cemetery up the motorway.

In one of her later stories, ‘The Canary’, Mansfield explores this tension between the internal push to share the affect of memory with others, and the silence of the objects which are supposed to invoke this. The woman narrator of the story is deeply invested in the potential of a nail to hint to future occupants of her house that her exceptional canary once lived in a cage hanging from it:

I should like to think it was there always even after my time. I sometimes hear the next people saying, ‘There must have been a cage hanging from there’. And it comforts me; I feel he is not quite forgotten. 
... You cannot imagine how wonderfully he sang (p. 428).

There is a gap between the canary’s exceptional ability to sing and the ability of the ‘next people’ to infer just how wonderfully that was. This the narrator cannot do even for herself. ‘I cannot describe it; I wish I could. […] Oh, I can hardly bear to recall it’ (pp. 429-430). The pain of recollection is the recognition of the distance, the rupture between event and memory, which gets in the way, disrupts and otherwise silences the possibility of narration. What this woman is really narrating is the pity of her
dependence on the bird for company, not the canary’s exceptional qualities in themselves. There is a sense in which the type of memorialisation described here is necessarily morbid. The possibility of knowledge through reflection leads to the impossibility of articulating the absence represented by the memory of the canary: ‘But isn’t it extraordinary that under his sweet, joyful little singing it was just this—sadness? Ah, what is it?—that I heard’ (p. 432). This perception of sadness through beauty is not at all extraordinary. The narrator’s own sadness is simply inextricable from the conditions in which she kept a bird she was to label exceptional.

In the nail, the narrator describes a trace or memorial index that she envisions the ‘next people’ reading as a sign that there was a cage hanging there. There is no opportunity for the nail as a memorial to articulate anything beyond its own facticity. The woman cannot be implied by the presence of the nail, neither can the exceptional nature of the bird’s singing, nor the pathetic feeling of the woman for the bird, nor even the species to which the bird belongs. The nail does, however, give the woman comfort that some form of information about the canary—that is, information about a cage—will persist, meaning that the canary will be ‘not quite forgotten’. Equally, the canary remains not quite remembered because to outside observers the amount of information that can be inferred from the nail is spectacularly limited, even to the point where it will tell only partly of its past use.

A sociable reading of ‘The Canary’ would say that Mansfield wrote a story in which an old lady gets caught up in her own memory, and would not fail to equate this with the narrative of Mansfield’s artistic and emotional turn to New Zealand. The desire to remember, and make known to others, would be recorded, and the rest elided. Such reading is the modus operandi of the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace: a community performs its own desire to remember itself on the stage of a remembered person’s desire to remember the community. In the
middle of this cycle is an assemblage of objects, some with direct associations with the place and the person, some with other pasts. The problem is that, unlike the woman remembering her canary, the song of the author persists, and engenders the desire to confirm the world of objects related to it while making it impossible for those objects to communicate anything more than the song does: And it comforts me; I feel that [s]he is not forgotten.

Notes


2 Helen Deutsch, Loving Dr. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 16-17.

3 This is the wording in the Society’s constitution. See Katherine Mansfield Birthplace Society, Inc. Visit the House, <http://www.katherinemansfield.com/visit/joinsoc.asp> [accessed 16 February 2009].


6 An exception: the brochure advertises that visitors can pay extra to be served with ‘A Cup of Tea’, but presumably in circumstances much different from those of Mansfield’s story of that name.
7 Katherine Mansfield Birthplace Society Inc., *Tour Script*, n. d.; n. p. This laminated booklet is handed out to visitors to guide them around the house. It includes a description of the contents of each room and a summary of the facts of Mansfield’s life.


10 For an example of how the multiplicity of versions of Mansfield offers a freedom to interpret her in many ways, see Alex Calder, ‘My Katherine Mansfield’, *Landfall* 172 (1989), 483-99.

11 *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks*, ed. by Margaret Scott (Lincoln and Wellington: Lincoln University Press and Daphne Brassell Associates, 1997) Vol I (p. 32). In addition to the confusion over the street numbering of the Birthplace, the Beauchamp family lived in two different houses on Tinakori Road at different times. The reference here is to the second of these dwellings.


13 Boddy, p.11.

14 Boddy, back cover blurb.

15 See Boddy, p.14 for a reproduction of the photo.

16 Alexander Turnbull Library, MNZ-2532-1/2-F. The portrait is also the cover image on Boddy’s centennial study *Katherine Mansfield: The Woman and the Writer* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1988), and the first image of Mansfield to be encountered on the Society’s web page.

17 Alexander Turnbull Library, 1/4-017274-F.

18 *The Material Mansfield: Traces of a Writer’s Life*, ed. by Laurel Harris, Mary Morris and Joanna Woods (Auckland: Random House, 2008). The catalogue is a lavish production, and includes sumptuous photographs of every item on display. Many of these are much
larger than life-size, including a picture in which a thimble appears to be the size of a human hand (p. 85).