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‘The Night of the Zeppelin’ by Tennessee Williams

Gerri Kimber

Recently, whilst on a Research Fellowship at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, I came across a ten-page, typewritten, first act (with autograph emendations), of an unpublished and unnamed play by Tennessee Williams, with two separate scenes, the first eight page scene called ‘The Night of the Zeppelin’ and the second, two-page scene called “Armistice”.

There are four characters in the play: Katharine Mansfield [*sic*], John Middleton Murry, D. H. Lawrence, and his wife Frieda Lawrence. Mansfield and Murry’s friendship with the Lawrences is well documented elsewhere, and was significant to all four of them. Having initially met in mid-1913, the two couples became firm friends almost immediately. Both Frieda and Mansfield were technically married to other men when they first met, and the families of both Murry and Lawrence were shocked at the women their sons had taken up with. In July 1914, Mansfield and Murry were witnesses at the Lawrences’ wedding and Frieda gave Mansfield her old wedding ring, which Mansfield wore for the rest of her life – indeed she was buried wearing it.

However, the relationship between the couples reached a crisis point in Cornwall in mid-1916. They had been brought together by Lawrence’s keen desire to found a community, which he wanted to call “Rananim”, a word taken from a Hebrew psalm that their Ukrainian Jewish friend S. S. Koteliansky was fond of singing. Such was Lawrence’s overwhelming enthusiasm for the project, Mansfield and Murry were browbeaten into returning to England from France, where they had just spent three blissful months in Bandol, with Mansfield rewriting ‘The Aloe’ and turning it into what would become one of her most famous stories, ‘Prelude’.

Of the grey granite cottage at Higher Tregerthen, near Zennor, just outside St Ives, rent £16 per annum, into which Mansfield and Murry moved in April 1916, Lawrence had written: “It is only twelve strides from our house to yours: we can talk from the windows: and besides us, only the gorse and the fields, the lambs skipping and hopping like anything, and sea-gulls fighting with the ravens, and sometimes a fox, and a ship on the sea”. As Murry wrote to Ottoline Morrell from Bandol on 26 February 1916: “We are going to stay with the Lawrences for ever and ever as perhaps you know; I daresay eternity will last the whole of the summer”.

Here is Mansfield’s own take on life in the Cornish “idyll”, in a letter to Koteliansky written on 11 May 1916:

You may laugh as much as you like at this letter, darling, all about the COMMUNITY. It *is* rather funny.

Frieda and I do not even speak to each other at present. Lawrence is about one million miles away, although he lives next door. He and I still speak but his very voice is faint like a voice coming over a telephone wire. It is all because I cannot stand the situation between those two, for one thing. It is degrading – it offends one’s soul beyond words. I don’t know which disgusts one worse – when they are very loving and playing with each other or when they are roaring at each other and he is pulling out Frieda’s hair and saying “I’ll cut your bloody throat, you bitch” and Frieda is running up and down the road screaming for “Jack” to save her!!

This early ‘Rananim’ was a disaster and, as Murry correctly guessed, eternity lasted barely two months. However, it remains a celebrated episode in twentieth-century English literary history. So many people have written about it, analysed it, fictionalised it. Amy Rosenthal wrote a play about it called “On the Rocks”, which played in Hampstead in 2008. I interviewed Amy at the time, and she said she felt compelled to write about this episode because it was just so comical and so obviously doomed to fail on every level. More recently, Professor Robert Fraser has written another humorous play based on these events in 1916, called “Bugger the Skylarks:

Lawrence and Mansfield at War”, published in *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, vol. 2 (EUP, 2010).

Back to Tennessee Williams, who openly acknowledged that as a writer he was profoundly influenced by Lawrence. Of course Williams never knew Lawrence personally, but he did correspond with Frieda. In his first letter to her, written on 29 July 1939, he wrote:

I am a young writer who has a profound admiration for your late husband work [*sic*] and has conceived the idea, perhaps fantastic, of writing a play about him, dramatizing not so much his life as his ideas or philosophy which strike me as being the richest expressed in modern writing.

Having requested a meeting, he visited her ranch in Taos, New Mexico just a month later on 29 August 1939. As James Fisher notes:

Lawrence’s experience connected with Williams’s, whose plays were similarly steeped in representations of sexuality previously unseen in American drama. [...] As a nomadic and restless writer, Williams seemed to be seeking validation from Frieda as Lawrence’s surrogate.

Williams’s poem “Cried the Fox” (1939) is dedicated to Lawrence, as is the play “Battle with Angels” (1941). Two further plays, “The Case of the Crushed Petunias” (1941) and “You Touched Me” (1945), are based on short stories by Lawrence. But perhaps Williams’s most well-known “tribute” to Lawrence was the one-act play depicting Lawrence’s final demise, “I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix” (1941). Perhaps tribute is the wrong word, however, for in his introduction to the play, Williams writes of Lawrence: “Much of his work is chaotic and distorted by tangent obsessions, such as his insistence upon the woman’s subservience to the male”. Norman J. Fedder remarks in his commentary on the play: “The short work [...] is, in effect, a rather uncomplimentary dramatization of these ‘tangent obsessions’”, since the play “consists, for the most part, of a series of hysterical quarrels between Lawrence and his wife, Frieda”. Indeed, Frieda Lawrence’s preface to the play is

almost, in Fedder's words, "a refutation of the work it introduces". This is a complex business.

As for Mansfield and Murry, they have walk-on parts in Williams's literary life. There are several mentions of them in his notebooks. On 13 March 1936 whilst studying a course at Washington University College on Contemporary British and American Literature, Williams records: "Got 'A' on Mansfield paper last night [...] It didn't deserve such a good grade". In another paper on the "Nature of Artists", he had written: "the greatest of the moderns were afflicted with respiratory disorders: Chekhov, Mansfield died of tuberculosis". In 1937 he writes: "Read Murry's autobiography 'Between Two Worlds' – Fascinating portraits". In a letter to Joseph Hazan from 3 September 1940, Williams comments:

Read the collected letter of D. H. Lawrence, the journals and letters of Katharine Mansfield [*sic*], of Vincent Van Gogh. How bitterly and relentlessly they fought their way through! Sensitive beyond endurance and yet enduring! Of course Van Gogh went mad in the end and Mansfield and Lawrence both fought a losing battle with degenerative disease – T.B. – but their work is a pure shaft rising out of that physical defeat. [...] They live, they aren't dead.

And so to "The Night of the Zeppelin", the title clearly referencing

Lawrence's poem "Zeppelin Nights":

Now, will you play all night!
Come in my mother says,
Look in the sky, at the bright
Moon, all ablaze!
Look at the shaking, white
Searchlight rays!

Tonight they're coming!
It's a full moon!
When you hear them humming
Very soon,
You'll stop that blooming
Tune –

[*Children sing on unheeding:*]
Sally go round the sun!
Sally go round the moon!

*Sally go round the chimney-pots
On Sunday afternoon!*

Lawrence himself remembered “the war horror drifting in, drifting in, prices rising, excitement growing, people going mad about the Zeppelin raids”. The first zeppelin raid in London occurred on 31 May 1915, and killed seven people. Initially the zeppelins flew too high for the anti-aircraft guns to reach them, but by 1916, incendiary bullets were bringing zeppelins down and as a result by September 1916 they were more or less phased out as a means of attack on London (with just one more raid to come in October 1917), replaced instead by aeroplanes. Witnessing a zeppelin raid in 1915, Lawrence wrote:

Then we saw the zeppelin above us, just ahead, amid a gleaming of clouds: high up, like a bright golden finger, quite small, among a fragile incandescence of clouds. And underneath it were splashes of fire as the shells fired from earth burst. Then there were flashes near the ground – and the shaking noise. It was like Milton – then there was war in heaven.

Mansfield also recorded witnessing a zeppelin raid whilst living in Francis Carco’s apartment on the quai aux Fleurs in Paris. Two zeppelins had flown over Paris, bombing areas near the railway yards. The day after the attack, on 21 March 1915, she wrote about her experience in a letter to Murry:

There came a loud noise like doo-da-doo-da repeated hundreds of times. I never thought of zeppelins until I saw the rush of heads & bodies turning upwards as the Ultimate Fish [...] passed by, flying high with fins of silky grey. It is absurd to say that romance is dead when things like this happen – & the noise it made – almost soothing you know – steady – and clear doo-da-doo-da – like a horn. I longed to go out & follow it [...].

In “The Night of the Zeppelin”, the setting is

the room of a shoddy lodging place in London, 1916. The Murrays, John Middleton and Katharine Mansfield [*sic*], are visiting the Lawrences. It is near Christmas. Some German cookies, made by Frieda and a bottle of wine are on a little table and there is a small artificial tree with home-made decorations. The legend, PEACE ON EARTH, crowns the tree.

In a humorous opening few lines, the four are playing charades, with Frieda and Lawrence trying to act out “Nero Fiddles While Rome Burns”: “Lawrence clasps his knee, Frieda rows energetically”. This first scene centres on the character of Katharine, who has by far the most lines.

Katharine: (slight and dark and feverishly bright, a radiant bird-like being)
 It’s something to do with boating.
 John: Rowing isn’t it?
 Katharine: (Exultantly shrieking) NERO!
 (She coughs)

As Katharine continues to cough, Frieda is anxious she is not warm enough, but they have run out of coal for the stove – just two lumps left. Lawrence makes the point that just one torpedo cost £4000 and that they could live on that for the rest of their lives: “And they shoot them like firecrackers”. For the price of two torpedoes “we could live in ivory towers for the rest of our lives”. Katharine acerbically notes, “An ivory tower on the Mediterranean. With central heating.” When Lawrence starts talking of the four of them “going off and making a new life somewhere”, Katharine, wearily – and not without a hint of sarcasm – gives him some suggestions: “Brighton Beach? Cornwall? [...] Avalon, perhaps.”

The sound of an air raid brings such trivial discussion to an abrupt halt. John rushes out to see if it’s a raid and immediately disappears into the night. Katharine asks Lawrence to “Call John back in. He loses his head whenever there is any excitement and runs around on the streets like a headless chicken”. She expresses her exasperation with the war: “It’s all so silly and messy. Why doesn’t the kindergarten teacher make these bad little boys stop throwing blocks at each other?”

Meanwhile, Lawrence at the window admires the pyrotechnic display. Katharine, her distress increasing at John’s disappearance, announces to Frieda’s horror that she is going to look for him. She and Frieda tussle as Lawrence cries “It’s

the zeppelin!” And echoing language Williams must have remembered from his reading of Lawrence, the stage directions note: “THE SKY THROUGH THE WINDOW IS CRIS CROSSED BY SILVER BEAMS. INTO THE LIGHTED AREA SAILS SERENELY THE CURIOUS SILVER OVAL OF THE ZEPPELIN”. After a detonation, Katharine, becoming hysterical, begs to be let out: “I feel stifled!” Shortly afterwards, in a long soliloquy, she exclaims: “A woman isn’t really lonely, I mean terribly lonely, until she falls in love. – (And then she’s alone on the desert – completely, completely alone!)” And a little further on in the same speech, in a clear reference to Mansfield’s story “Bliss”, Katharine says: “Frieda, did you ever see a pear tree early in the evening? [...] It’s just like a perfect host of little silver birds had come to roost on the branches”.

Katharine’s anxiety over the detonations and John’s absence makes her cough up blood and in another long speech she talks of her heart bleeding, not her lungs, and her youthful “mistake of believing in the possibility of things being lovely – instead of like they are”. Eventually John re-enters, “breathless and hatless”. Berated by Katharine for his absence, he says, “Little Kitty, I’m so sorry”. Katharine’s response: “Nobody’s sorry. Everybody knows that this is the way of the world [...] so they grin and laugh and go running about on the streets like the bombs were April showers! – raining down May flowers!” Revealing to John that she has coughed up some blood and that she thinks she’s dying, Lawrence interjects:

I bring up blood from the heart myself now and then.
All of us are dying I believe.
But we’re a Phoenix race, we’ll rise from our ashes.

However, Frieda’s sharp retort: “Lorenzo, quit preaching”, brings the atmosphere back down to earth: “Go and get a cab, the raid is over”. John carries Katharine out towards the cab who, “smiling wanly and blowing them a kiss”, calls out “Merry,

merry Xmas!” Once they’ve gone, Lawrence comments “poor Kitty! Not a great artist, perhaps, but a fine and delicate artist. She’s like that pear tree she mentioned – covered all over with ghostly silver birds”. After more theorizing about the horrors of war, Frieda interrupts with the announcement that it is starting to snow, and Lawrence suddenly hears “choir boys singing carols!”

FROM THE STREET COMES THE PURE SINGING OF A BOY’S CHOIR

—

“God rest ye, merry gentlemen,
May nothing ye dismay —”

CURTAIN

In the second, much shorter scene of one and a half pages, called “Armistice”, the setting is exactly the same, only this time just Lawrence and Frieda are present. Frieda is ironing as a shocked Lawrence enters the room to announce that the war is over. Frieda, ecstatic, laughs uncontrollably, as Lawrence starts to make plans for them finally to be able to leave the country. In a violent manner, “LIKE A MAN POSSESSED he capers and flings out his arms. – Stiffly, awkwardly, crazily! – He dances about the ugly little room.”

What to make of this experimental fragment? There are niggling factual errors, which are hard to ignore. The last zeppelin raid in 1916 took place on 23 September, three months before Christmas. Calling Mansfield “Kitty”? She was never, to my knowledge, called “Kitty” by anyone. Lawrence tended to misspell Mansfield’s name as Katharine, hence perhaps Williams’s spelling. Mansfield did not have a haemorrhage of the lungs until 19 February 1918, considerably later than the events described here. As for “Armistice”, by November 1918 Frieda and Lawrence were in fact living in some poverty in Derbyshire, having been forced out of Cornwall

under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act, because of Frieda's German nationality and fears she was a spy.

And yet, there are elements that ring true: Mansfield's sharp sense of humour and her perceptiveness (though perhaps not the overt self-pity and helplessness as witnessed here); Murry's absence for almost the entire time – as was so frequently the case when Mansfield needed him – and his seeming inability to deal with “life”; Frieda's practicality and calling a spade a spade; and finally Lawrence's philosophizing about the ways of the world and how he thinks things should *really* be. As noted above, Williams had read Mansfield's works – including the early editions of the journal and letters – as well as Murry's autobiography, and the relationship between both couples clearly fascinated him, as it has so many other authors since.

Having never been published, this piece has been almost entirely forgotten. Mansfield scholars will appreciate the fact that Tennessee Williams centred the scene “The Night of the Zeppelin” around her character, and relish this connection to an iconic American writer. The full text will appear in volume 7 of *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, to be published in September 2015 by Edinburgh University Press.

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