The Road and the Poetry of Charlotte Mew

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This paper introduces and discusses the work of the English poet Charlotte Mew (1869 – 1928). The image of the road is seen in many of her poems and ties some disparate texts together since it forms a useful common theme which can be traced throughout the poetry. Charlotte Mew's difficult life forms a background to the poems discussed here and a broad picture of it is presented. The paper ends with a discussion of Mew's rejection of the comfort of the Christian heaven in favor of an absolute peace, and this final topic is linked to the idea of debt and loss which permeate the poetry.

Keywords: The Road, Loss, Debt, Nature

Introduction

Although little recognized nowadays for her contributions to modern poetry, Charlotte Mew (1869 - 1928) produced some of the most remarkable verse of her day. Lauded by poets such as Hardy and Sassoon, befriended by Harold and Alida Monro (of the Poetry Bookshop in Bloomsbury) and published by Pound during his tenure at *The Egoist*, Mew should have been better known and more widely read in the hundred years since her first book of poetry was published. Instead, she has become a somewhat overlooked, but vital poet in whose work we can see Modernist experimentation carried out with a capably controlled and musical sensibility. At her best, she is remarkably adept, "very good and interesting and unlike anyone else" as Virginia Woolf described her (Fitzgerald 187), and quite unique.

Yet her life was not simply that of a poet trying to achieve recognition and financial security, indeed what time she seems to have devoted to writing was given in short bursts which came between periods of abstinence where she appears to have been distracted by personal circumstances. Mew was hardly a Victorian or Edwardian paradigm: one of seven children in a family watched over by a mother who fretted about seemliness, she would grow up to be quite a dandy. The was a petit (four foot nine) lady, who liked to dress in dark masculine clothes, and had an oval face with arching eyebrows giving her a surprised expression,

at least in the best-known photograph of her. She had a hoarse voice and distinctive bearing, and could animate her words with profanity when it suited her to scandalize her friends. "An imp with brains" was the phrase Mrs. Dawson Scott, founder of *International PEN,* put in her diary of 30th May, 1912 when they met for the first time (Fitzgerald 107).

As a child, Charlotte Mew enjoyed performing plays for her siblings and parents, who may have watched on with apprehension, wondering what would become of their unusual daughter. Three brothers died in early childhood, and over time, her surviving brother and another sister would be committed to institutions with the symptoms of schizophrenia. Charlotte Mew's life was anything but the comfortable one which her mother had for herself, and it was the keeping of their mother in a suitable and appropriate style that caused the sisters Charlotte and Anne much worry. When their father died suddenly, leaving mother and two daughters with the financial pressure of maintaining their middle-class position and also keeping up payments for two places at mental institutions, Charlotte saw that she would have to provide an income. Ladies could not be expected to take up work which was beneath them (and most of it was), and so writing offered a way to earn without being seen to work. Charlotte's first published work, in 1894, was a short story, and she would continue to focus on this form until well into the 1900s. There is evidence that she was writing and revising poetry early on, but it was not until 1916 that her first chapbook, *The Farmer's Bride,* was published. A century on, Charlotte Mew's work is still earning her admiration from those readers who have been fortunate enough to find it.

The Road

They are cutting down the great plane-trees at the end of the gardens.
For days there has been the grate of the saw, the swish of the branches as they fall,
The crash of trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves,
With the 'Whoops' and the 'Whoas,' the loud common talk, the loud common laughs of
the men, above it all.
(Mew 81)

Many of Mew's strongest poems include streets, roads and lanes. While she was fond of travel, and visited France often enough to learn to speak and read the language well (Monro x-xi), the image of the road in her poems is most often presented as a scene or a stage whose boundaries are actually fairly tight, rather than a long stretching highway. In this sense they are room-like, and can be seen as extensions of the space in which the poem's narrator occupies, often because they are connected to the poem by the narrator's being able to observe them. The quality of 'just over there' that these streets have allows Mew to set past

events within them and have them serve as settings for memories. The dramas which play out on them are immediate and often include reflection and revelation on the part of the narrative voice. "None but ourselves in our long gallery we meet," she says in "On the Asylum Road" (39), the gallery is a kind of passage with pictures and windows on either side; it offers us, travelers within our life journey, an opportunity for self-awareness amid the paintings hanging all around which remind us of our own experiences. Mew often remarks on the windows and doorways on her streets and perhaps it is because she was an urbanite that she could not have a street without buildings along it. For all her interest in the countryside, she could not imagine living very far away from Bloomsbury. So the roads of her poetry are usually urban ones, and the sense which we get of looking out a house window, or standing at a street corner and witnessing a little drama unfolding comes about perhaps from her interest in matters local which play out just outside a Bloomsbury window.

The lane in "On the Asylum Road" seems to be in the countryside, but not far away, perhaps at the outskirts of a town or city.

Theirs is the house whose windows - every pane -
    Are made of darkly stained or clouded glass:
Sometimes you come upon them in the lane,
    The saddest crowd that you will ever pass.

But still we merry town or village folk
    Throw to their scattered stare a kindly grin,
And think no shame to stop and crack a joke
    With the incarnate wages of man's sin.

None but ourselves in our long gallery we meet,
    The moor-hen stepping from her reeds with dainty feet,
        The hare-bell bowing on his stem,
Dance not with us; their pulses beat
    To fainter music; nor do we to them
        Make their life sweet.

The gayest crowd that they will ever pass
    Are we to brother-shadows in the lane:
Our windows, too, are clouded glass
    To them, yes, every pane!

(Mew 39)

One reason which has been offered for considering Mew not to be an early Modernist poet is her use of inherited forms (Lyon, 2011): the graveyard poem or the dramatic monologue, for example. While there are examples of form in her poetry which clearly have history, Mew deftly subverts her forms and bends them to her needs. "On the Asylum Road" appears to be a rustic lyric, but has strong similarities to the more philosophical sonnet form. Even her syntax at times recalls the halting effect of the caesurae and tentative flow of a John Donne line:

> Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
> And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
> And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
> And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
> One short sleep past, we wake eternally
> And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.
>
> (Donne 541)

The subject of "On the Asylum Road", the insane on their way to and from the asylum, is not described until the eighth line (just at the point where a typical sonnet would change its tone), and Mew creates a line which damns them and holds the tone of Christian certainty. The line sounds out of place after the rustic talk of joke-cracking and kindliness, and might even be a paraphrase of pulpit-talk the narrator has heard in that other house with stained glass windows. The mutual incomprehension of the two groups who meet on the lane has the effect of bringing out a shared human experience. Our 'brother-shadows' are attuned, and better suited to, a natural world from which they look over at us with stares scattered like light through clouded glass, and the reader is led to wonder at the barrier that separates the sane from the insane: were we on their side, what sort of sanity would we possess?

Sitting behind the ninth line of the poem is the often remarked-upon specter of Galtonian Eugenics: "What an extraordinary effect might be produced on our race, if its object was to unite in marriage those who possessed the finest and most suitable natures, mental, moral, and physical!" (Galton 165). Although Galton's suggestion from the early days of his studies was that the sub-par should be discouraged from breeding with the fit, the so-called (by historians, not Galton) 'negative eugenics' movement was the child of later eugenicists such as Karl Pearson. It would have been all but impossible for the Mew sisters to have avoided Eugenics and its idea of 'morbid inheritance': Galton had set up a research laboratory in University College London which Charlotte and Anne used to attend enthusiastically for public lectures. The newspapers at the time regularly printed stories on the subject and since it occupied not only a scientific domain but also informed a political and moral

debate, the discussion around the time was constantly referencing Eugenics. For someone who had been made supremely aware of the importance of seemliness, it might have been a frightening thought that her future had been already written, and that no matter how successful she might be in the short term, the prospect of insanity would be realized eventually. Charlotte and Anne decided that they had no business marrying and having children, and one day made a promise to each other that they would remain childless forever. This promise was easier for Charlotte to keep: her fear of embarrassment and loss of face worked to ensure that she would keep some secrets even from Anne. Charlotte had had intense feelings for women in the past and been hurt when the object of her desires had proved unattainable; being publically chaste and remaining unmarried in order that society might not degenerate must have seemed something of an easy promise.

Shadows

Mew did seem to be interested in children and the way in which they thought about their world. Possessing many child-like qualities herself, she may have felt kinship with them. "The Shade-Catchers" looks at children almost as another of the day's weather effects:

> I think they were about as high
> As haycocks are. They went running by
> Catching bits of shade in the sunny street:
> 'I've got one,' cried sister to brother.
> 'I've got two.' 'Now I've got another.'
> But scudding away on their little bare feet,
> They left the shade in the sunny street.
>
> (Mew 55)

This time the street is urban, but tree-lined. The children seem to be wind-sprites living enough in this world to be observed at play, but being of another world which frees them from some of the usual rules about light and shadow. The poem looks like a loose sextilla with an extra line, but the overall form seems less important than the individual couplets and the repetition of the five last words in the third line to form the final rhyme and end the encounter. Simplicity in form can sometimes relate to simplicity of subject: Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" (87) might be said to demonstrate this. Here, however, Mew's lines have an effortlessness which feels unforced and perhaps because of the very limited scope of vision of the narrative (it reports only a brief episode in a small field of view), the children's' entrance and exit feel gusty too. They are referred to by family relationship, which allows the narrator's voice to take on a more objective tone. This, and the slight suggestion of simple

regularity implied by the call and response of the children, suggests that these wind-children can be seen calling on the street and its inhabitants quite regularly. They are like the wind itself, and are not subject to, but agents of, its caprices. This detachment of cause and effect can be seen in another short wind poem, Christina Rossetti's "Who Has Seen the Wind?" (205):

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

The trees are bowing for the wind, not because of it. Mew's brother and sister have a similar detachment from causality as they scud along the street, collecting shadows which they do not need to carry with them in their pockets, and can leave behind for the adults to see.

Mew felt the absence of her dead and committed family members deeply. She had lived through the deaths of two brothers when she was young and this experience made its way into her poetry. Having loved and been rejected, she was familiar with romantic loss and knowing that a final loss, of oneself, is inevitable, she often explored these subjects and wrote about them in similar terms. Indeed, some of her poems seem to start as one loss, and become another. In "From a Window," the narrator's voice is a mixture of wistful reflection and stubborn determination:

Up here, with June, the sycamore throws
Across the window a whispering screen;
I shall miss the sycamore more, I suppose,
Than anything else on this earth that is out in green.
But I mean to go through the door without fear,
Not caring much what happens here
When I'm away:—
How green the screen is across the panes
Or who goes laughing along the lanes
With my old lover all summer day.

(Mew 71)

The road here is evoked by the title and we are left to imagine what the narrator can see from her window. Has something she can see inspired the reverie, or is it the summertime

and the tree? She is up 'here' (a floor at tree height) looking out through the leaves of the sycamore. Mew received a solid bible education as a child and would have been well aware that another short individual was associated with the tree: the tax collector Zaccheus. When Jesus came to Jericho, not only did Zaccheus succeed in seeing the Messiah despite the crowds, he was told to come down from the tree and prepare to be his host for the night. Zaccheus quickly promises that he will give away his possessions to atone for his past greed. Debt was a strong theme with Mew: it has been suggested that it came from her Christian upbringing. The idea that every pleasure must be paid for leads to the thought that perhaps this narrator is making a sacrifice of herself.

The narrator in "From a Window" looks outward but not at the street, instead she describes her resolution to leave (to lose) without care. It is the road in her mind's eye that we are taken to. The dreamy tone of the first four lines ('sycamore more, I suppose') ends at the 'But' where the poem turns and seems to grit its teeth. In this short text the mood changes again before the final lines when we get the feeling of the narrator protesting a little too much: the way that it ends with the three musical lines with their internal rhyme and strong end rhymes suggests that the memory of the lover is precious and the lanes of memory, like the street in "The Shade-Catchers", are host to ephemeral scenes which, while they can be recalled over and over in memory, will never be reenacted again.

Loss

A late poem, "Domus Caedet Arborem," illustrates Mew's changing mood nearer the end of her life. The streets are no longer the scenes of play and love, but have been taken over by malevolent spirits. Years before, when she had commiserated the felling of the trees at Euston Square near her house, she wrote a fairly long piece ("The Trees are Down") in which she demonstrated her abilities with form and voice. Returning to the subject later, she required only four lines, heaped with unease. The windows return as a theme, but are much changed:

Ever since the great planes were murdered at the end of the gardens
The city, to me, at night has the look of a Spirit brooding crime;
As if the dark houses watching the trees from dark windows
  Were simply biding their time.

(Mew 74)

The quatrain puts the streets in the hands of night and looming darkness. Her defiance seems to have given way to a purely descriptive, and therefore passive, approach to the

streets. There is a feeling that the menace is coming towards her from the end of the gardens and its approach is signaled by the windows successively darkening as it moves closer. The dark is penetrating the houses and cannot be shut out: the trees seem to have been the wall keeping it at bay. Mew's own darkness was to come when her beloved sister Anne developed cancer. Anne died in 1927, and Charlotte, aged 59, hopelessly depressed, took her own life less than a year later, in March 1928.

Loss and the preparation for loss are themes which interested Mew throughout her writing career. She seemed to feel the need to reexamine that point at which the individual decides to accept fate, and meet loss or death with poise and equanimity. Although she may have kept the Christian faith, there is another side to her character which rejects its consolations (Fitzgerald). The bright roads and grandeur of Paradise do not interest her: the world-weary narrator of "Not for that City" wishes nothing more than to be left to find peace in nihility:

> No, I think we shun
> The splendour of that everlasting glare,
> The clamour of that never-ending song.
> And if for anything we greatly long,
> It is for some remote and quiet stair
> Which winds to silence and a space for sleep
> Too sound for waking and for dreams too deep.
>
> (Mew 9)

The kind of reward which appears to be on offer here is unlike the pleasures Mew describes in her poems which celebrate life or its mysterious interconnectedness. It is awkward, garish and material, an assault on the senses. The true reward is the chance to simply walk away and not be called back.

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