



## Article

# “Always Trembling on the Brink of Poetry”: Katherine Mansfield, Poet

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**Abstract:** Today, Katherine Mansfield is well known as one of the most exciting and cutting-edge exponents of the modernist short story. Little critical attention, however, has been paid to her poetry, which seems a strange omission, given how much verse she wrote during the course of her life, starting as a very young schoolgirl, right up until the last months prior to her death in 1923. Even Mansfield devotees are not really familiar with any poems beyond the five or six that have most frequently been anthologised since her death, and few editions of her poetry have ever been published. Mansfield’s husband, John Middleton Murry, edited a slim volume, *Poems*, in 1923, within a few months of her death, followed by a slightly extended edition in 1930, and Vincent O’Sullivan edited another small selection, also titled *Poems*, in 1988. Unsurprisingly, therefore, critics and biographers have paid little attention to her poetry, tending to imply that it is a minor feature of her art, both in quantity and, more damagingly, in quality. This situation was addressed in 2016, when EUP published a complete and fully annotated edition of Mansfield’s poems, edited by myself and Claire Davison, incorporating all my recent manuscript discoveries, including a collection of 36 poems—*The Earth Child*—sent unsuccessfully by Mansfield to a London publisher in 1910. This discovery in 2015 revealed how, at the very moment when Mansfield was starting to have stories accepted for commercial publication, she was also taking herself seriously as a poet. Indeed, had the collection been published, perhaps Mansfield might now be celebrated as much for her poetry as for her short stories. Therefore, this article explores the development of Mansfield’s poetic writing throughout her life and makes the case for her reassessment as an innovative poet and not just as a ground-breaking short story writer.

**Keywords:** Katherine Mansfield; symbolism; *fin-de-siècle*; decadence; modernism; poetry; Arthur Symonds

## 1. Introduction

Today, Katherine Mansfield is well known as one of the most exciting and cutting-edge exponents of the modernist short story. Indeed, Peter Childs goes so far as to state that she was “the most important Modernist author who wrote only short stories” (Childs 2002, p. 94). Little critical attention, however, has been paid to her poetry, which seems a strange omission given how much verse she wrote during the course of her life, starting as a very young schoolgirl, right up until the last months prior to her death in January 1923. This article explores the development of Mansfield’s poetic writing throughout her life, and in the light of new discoveries of her poems, makes the case for her reassessment as an innovative poet, not just as a ground-breaking modernist short story writer.

## 2. Publication Chronology

Even Mansfield devotees are not really familiar with many of her poems beyond the five or six that have most frequently been anthologised since her death: for example, the poignant “To L. H. B.”, written

after the death of her only brother in WW1 (CP, pp. 109–10).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, until recently, there had been very few editions of her poetry published. Mansfield's husband, the critic John Middleton Murry, edited a slim volume, *Poems*, in November 1923, within a few months of her death. The volume complemented his posthumous publications of some of her unpublished manuscripts during 1923 and 1924 in his newly-founded literary magazine the *Adelphi*, which he personally edited from 1923–1930. As I noted in my book, *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (Kimber 2008), in the aftermath of Mansfield's death in January 1923, Murry started printing some of Mansfield's unpublished manuscripts, including poetry, in every issue, beginning with the very first one in June 1923, and this editorial policy continued for two years. Jeffrey Meyers called it Murry's "cult of Katherine Mansfield", stating that it was "unique in modern literature":

In a repetitive torrent of forty books, articles, introductions, poems, and letters to the press, published between 1923 and 1959, he [ . . . ]<sup>2</sup> deliberately constructed his myth of Katherine and established a posthumous reputation far greater than she had enjoyed in her lifetime.

[ . . . ] Murry's guilt about his selfish and irresponsible treatment of Katherine led directly to the egotistic enshrinement of his wife. As high priest of Katherine's cult, Murry wrote an *apologia pro sua vita* and glorified his own role, image and importance. (Meyers 2002, p. 254)

The amount of space given over to the Mansfield publicity machine in the *Adelphi* became such that even those friends and admirers closest to her during her lifetime turned away in disgust. As Frank Lea, Murry's biographer, subsequently remarked, Mansfield "became the presiding genius of the paper [*Adelphi*]"—till even the friendly Bennett was forced to remonstrate, whilst with the unfriendly it became an article of faith that Murry was 'exploiting his wife's reputation'" (Lea 1959, p. 113). The subsequent vilification of Murry for his actions tainted not just his own reputation but also his dead wife's in England for many years. Jenny McDonnell confirms how "Sylvia Lynd described his generation of a Mansfield industry as 'boiling Katherine's bones to make soup', while Lawrence claimed he 'made capital out of her death'" (McDonnell 2010, p. 170). In particular, Mansfield's poems started appearing regularly in the *Adelphi* from issue 2 onwards. Issue 3, for example (August 1923), contains a selection of six poems, published under the heading "Poems of Childhood by Katherine Mansfield".

The *Adelphi* poems were subsequently republished in Murry's 1923 edition, *Poems by Katherine Mansfield*, an imposingly large-sized, gilt-edged volume of 69 poems, designed not so much as to enhance Mansfield's reputation as a poet, but rather to enforce his own hagiographical Mansfield project. In his introductory note to the volume, he states:

[Mansfield's] "special prose" was the peculiar achievement of her genius. It seems to me that nothing like *Prelude* or *At the Bay* or *The Voyage* or *The Doves' Nest* had ever been written in English before. English prose was turned to a new and magical use, made crystal-clear, and filled with rainbow-beauties that are utterly undefinable. What might, in another writer of genius, have become poetry, Katherine Mansfield put into her stories.

Nevertheless, she [ . . . ] continued to write poetry. [ . . . Her poems] have the same simple and mysterious beauty, and they are, above all, the expression of the same exquisite spirit. To my sense they are unique. (Murry 1923, pp. xi–xii)

This sort of puffery is hard for any author to live up to and his selection of the more sentimental of Mansfield's poems only did her a disservice. This edition was subsequently followed in 1930

<sup>1</sup> All references to Mansfield's poems are taken from the *Collected Poems of Katherine Mansfield* (Kimber and Davison 2016a) and referenced in the text as CP followed by page number.

<sup>2</sup> Mansfield frequently uses ellipses in her writing. To differentiate her style ellipses from my own omission ellipses, I have placed all instances of the latter in square brackets and double-spaced the former.

by an almost identical selection (and identical introductory note), but this time in the recognisable green-grey, ribbed cloth boards to be found in the other volumes of her work thus far published by Constable (Murry 1930). There were only two additions (making 71 poems in all): “A Sunset” and “Old-Fashioned Widow’s Song”, both following the style choices of the first edition in their emotive sentimentalism, such as we find in the first stanza of “Widow’s Song”:

She handed me a gay bouquet  
Of roses pulled in the rain,  
Delicate beauties, frail and cold—  
Could roses heal my pain?  
(CP, p. 137)

Following the publication of these two almost identical editions, Mansfield’s poems were more or less ignored for almost sixty years, until Oxford University Press produced another selection, titled *Poems of Katherine Mansfield*, in 1988, comprising 71 poems, plus a handful of Mansfield’s short story vignettes, here renamed “prose poems”, several of which had been published in 1907 in the Australian little magazine, *The Native Companion*. This personal selection, by editor Vincent O’Sullivan, represented his own agenda as editor, in much the same way as Murry’s first edition 65 years earlier, though, of course, from different starting points. In his introduction, O’Sullivan justifies the omission of certain poems using the terms “mawkish”, “weaker” and “repetitive” (O’Sullivan 1988, p. ix), stating, “We may regard her poetry now as Mansfield herself intended to think of it—unassuming, often slight, serviceable enough for occasional published excursions into inherited effects and derived styles” yet also noting how she is “capable too of unexpectedly inventive turns and intensity” (p. xiii). And yet, O’Sullivan makes the—what we now know to be erroneous—claim, that “Mansfield made no claims to being a poet” (p. ix), and that she “clearly thought of her verse as secondary to her main business as a writer” (p. xii). Such an assertion was overturned by my discovery in 2015 of an entire poetry book manuscript by Mansfield, as I shall shortly reveal.

Overall then, it was unsurprising that critics and biographers paid little attention to Mansfield’s poetry, tending to imply that it was a minor feature of her art, both in quantity and, more damagingly, in quality. This state of affairs was comprehensively addressed in 2016, when Edinburgh University Press published a complete and fully annotated edition of Mansfield’s poems, edited by myself and Claire Davison, incorporating all my personal discoveries of new poems, including an unpublished book manuscript collection of 36 poems—*The Earth Child*—sent unsuccessfully by Mansfield to a London publisher, Elkin Mathews, in 1910—which had remained unnoticed in the archives of the Newberry Library, Chicago. My discovery of it in 2015 affirmed how, at the very moment when Mansfield, now back in Europe, was starting to have stories accepted for commercial publication, she was also taking herself seriously as a poet. Indeed, had the collection been published, perhaps Mansfield might now be celebrated as much for her poetry as for her short stories. Some of the poems in the collection had been referred to by Murry in his introductory note from the 1923 edition, when he commented: “I remember her telling me when first we met, that the beautiful pieces now gathered together [ . . . in the section] ‘Poems, 1911–1913’ had been refused, because they were unrhymed, by the only editor who used to accept her work” (Murry 1923, pp. xi–xii), (these poems having been erroneously dated by himself). He was referring, of course, to the editor of the literary weekly the *New Age*, A. R. Orage, who published a good deal of Mansfield’s work, especially during 1910–12, before she met Murry and changed her allegiance to his own little magazine, *Rhythm*. It would take some time for Orage to forgive Mansfield and start publishing her work again. The only poems she had accepted for publication in the *New Age* were parodies of other poets, such as we find here, written in the style of then Poet Laureate, Alfred Austin, and part of a larger piece, co-written with Beatrice Hastings, parodying many of the well-known writers of the day:

Droop ye no more—ye stalwart oaken trees,  
For mourning time is spent and put away—

Red, white and blue unfurls, the morning breeze  
 Bring leaves—strew leaves for Coronation Day.  
 (CW3, p. 389)<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The Influence of Symbolism, the *fin-de-siècle*, Decadence and Modernism on Mansfield's Creativity

It is only in the last few years that Mansfield has been accorded her rightful place in the canon of modernist women writers. In the first edition of Michael Levenson's *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Levenson 1999), she was only accorded a few brief mentions, an inexplicable oversight demonstrating how short story writers have frequently been marginalised. However, in Levenson's revised edition of the same book (Levenson 2011), space devoted to criticism of Mansfield was considerably enhanced, especially in the chapter "Modernism and Colonialism" by Elleke Boehmer and Steven Matthews. One of Mansfield's early biographers, Ian Gordon, had written as early as 1954: "She had the same kind of direct influence on the art of the short story as Joyce had on the novel. After Joyce and Katherine Mansfield neither the novel nor the short story can ever be quite the same again" (Gordon 1954, p. 17).

Jane Dowson's comments concerning modernist women poets are certainly pertinent to Mansfield's own experiences:

They lived as independent women, in reaction against the cultural complacency of their families and were sensitive to class as to gender divisions. One of their concerns was how to express a social conscience according to modernism's principles of impersonality, and their poetry negotiates between anti-realism and psychologically realist representation. Writing in opposition to the idealised 'feminine', they avoided gendered identity in their writing and offered new models of the women poet. (Dowson 2002, p. 6)

Although female modernists might have been less overtly experimental than their male counterparts, nevertheless, they were frequently more radical in their personal politics. Jeff Wallace also notes how modernism "is characterized by a transnational exchange of ideas and by the experiences of the émigré artist" (Wallace 2011, p. 212), which is again pertinent to Mansfield's situation. For most of the twentieth century, literary historians of modernism, for the most part, concentrated on a select band of male authors, such as Eliot, Pound and Joyce in England, and Gide and Proust in France, ignoring the work of the female writers of the time, believing them to be of little or no interest. For example, Bonnie Kime Scott relates how:

In 1965, [ . . . ] Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson assembled *The Modern Tradition*. Of its 948 pages, fewer than nine were allotted to women writers (George Eliot and Virginia Woolf) [ . . . ] While modernist studies are rolling off the presses at an unprecedented rate, a surprising number still find interest only in canonised males. (Scott 1990, p. 7)

Most modern critics agree that Mansfield's own unique form of modernism was not derivative of other contemporary writers but was rather a product of her symbiosis of late-nineteenth-century techniques and themes, for the most part introduced through her reading of Arthur Symonds, from her late teens onwards, when her tastes and preferences started to take shape and she began, with the symbolists and the decadents as her dominant influences, to write, as Sydney Janet Kaplan notes, the sort of fiction which was committed to the possibilities of narrative experimentation (Kaplan 1991).

In 1909, for example, travelling in the north of England on a train, Mansfield wrote in her diary: "And a man enters the carriage, very fair & full blooded—he reads a book of Meat Inspection, I the poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti—the Fleshly School of Poetry" (CW4, p. 106). The "Fleshly School of

<sup>3</sup> The four volumes (2011–2016) of the Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield (Kimber and O'Sullivan 2012; Kimber and Smith 2014; Kimber and Davison 2016b) are henceforth referenced in the text as CW1, CW2, CW3 and CW4, followed by the page number.

Poetry” was a scathing label used in 1871 by the Scottish poet Robert Buchanan to castigate the sensual aesthetics of late-nineteenth-century decadent poets, of whom Mansfield was clearly besotted. This influence manifested itself not just in her fiction, but especially in her poetry, as she came to appreciate in symbolist poetry, not just its dreamlike qualities, but also, as she matured as writer, its complexity, its use of precise images, and its use of conversational tone and rhythm. As such, Mansfield was emulating a *fin-de-siècle* convention, which in itself had been endorsed many years before by Baudelaire; indeed, her early experimental prose poems reveal the influence of the French Symbolists, such as we find here, in “Study: The Death of a Rose”: “So now it dies. And I listen for under each petal fold there lies the ghost of a dead melody, as frail and as full of suggestion as a ray of light upon a shadowed pool. Oh, divine sweet Rose. Oh, exotic and elusive and deliciously vague Death” (CW3, p. 138).

Mansfield also developed a youthful infatuation with the aesthetic movement and especially the works of Oscar Wilde, which matured into a lifelong admiration; his influence on all her writing was considerable. For Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr, “[in] her early attempts to piece together an aesthetic [she relies] almost entirely on the writings of Symons, and to a lesser extent, Wilde. From these two, she took ideas which continually influenced her art” (Hanson and Gurr 1981, p. 22). Indeed, Hanson develops this point elsewhere, stating that “Mansfield is a symbolist writer, taking from her early reading of Arthur Symons, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde the belief that in literature abstract states of mind or feeling should be conveyed through concrete images rather than described analytically” (Hanson 1990, p. 301). The Wildean influence encouraged Mansfield’s own radicalism and, as Pamela Dunbar notes, “her own life became, like Wilde’s, largely the result of a conscious decision to challenge restrictive social and sexual norms in the interests of broader experience and a deeper ‘truth’” (Dunbar 1997, p. xi). This wholly ‘modern’ outlook would play out not just in Mansfield’s life, but in her prose—and her poetry.

In particular, as noted above, Mansfield early on read and absorbed the works of Arthur Symons, especially his 1899 volume, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which he dedicated to W. B. Yeats. Indeed, as Hanson and Gurr affirm, “The Symbolist belief in the artist’s ability to create himself, to *become* his mask, sustained her throughout her career” (Hanson and Gurr 1981, p. 11). Symons, the central English decadent writer and critic of the 1890s, was also a poet of urban life, who found stimulation and metaphor in the music-hall and the city street. He dealt with aspects of London other writers usually avoided—prostitution and casual sex in particular—pursuing fleeting impressions without making moral connections, closely adhering to and therefore derivative of the tenets of Baudelaire, as expressed in the latter’s collections *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*. Indeed, the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 1895 expressed its shock at Symons’s literary output:

Mr Arthur Symons is a very dirty-minded man, and his mind is reflected in the puddle of his bad verses. It may be that there are other dirty-minded men who will rejoice in the jingle that records the squalid and inexpensive amours of Mr Symons, but our faith jumps to the hope that such men are not. (Anon 1895, p. 4)

Despite such protestations, the volume was to profoundly influence the next generation of writers and poets, including the Imagists and poets such as T. S. Eliot. It would introduce many English readers to French literature—including Mansfield; indeed no one was more influential than Symons in importing French literary ideas to England and fostering a new spirit of internationalism. (Yeats, Eliot and Pound all stressed their debt to Symons for having introduced them to Symbolism. See Levenson 1984, pp. 9–10).

Of his own attempts at poetry, Symons explains that, ‘I tried to do in verse something of what Degas had done in painting. I was conscious of transgressing no law of art in taking that scarcely touched material for new uses’ (Symons 1974, p. 93). The symbolist movement struggled on into the early part of the twentieth century, but its lofty ideals and inspirations could not be sustained in a modern world; its followers found themselves unable to uphold tenets which were so artificial and divorced from reality, and so moved on to form the tenet of what we now refer to as modernism. Kaplan confirms how Mansfield’s early mature work was symbolist in nature:



Mansfield's devotion to the '90s went deeper than fashionability and had a permanent effect on her literary career. [It] provided her with an ideal of the city which became linked with her own intensifying sense of sexual ambivalence and urge toward sexual experimentation. She had perceived that the world of the decadents was one of sexual ambiguity, a place where sexual boundaries broke down for the pure artist, where experience led to artistic creation. (Kaplan 1991, p. 72)

The practical aesthetics of symbolism include fluidity of rhythm, repetitions, echoes, and delicate evasions, all of which would eventually become trademarks of Mansfield's modernist, narrative technique. Her use of symbols increases the emotional and intellectual capacity, not just of her stories, but especially in her poetry, working on the reader in a powerful yet subliminal way. Mansfield even went so far as to copy the title of one of Symons's own poems, 'Leves Amores'—('Casual Love') and use it as the title for a youthful prose poem:

Come this Old Age. I have forgotten passion, I have been left behind in the beautiful golden procession of Youth. Now I am seeing life in the dressing-room of the theatre [ ... ] Yes, even the green vine upon the bed curtains wreathed itself into strange chaplets and garlands, twined round us in a leafy embrace, held us with a thousand clinging tendrils. (CW3, p. 90)

Here Mansfield deliberately omits any reference to the gender of the narrator, thus rendering the text sexually ambiguous at a time when she herself was experimenting with lesbian relationships, producing, as Stephanie Pride points out, 'a very differently structured discourse from that displayed in the texts of the male Symbolist writers' (Pride 1991, p. 98). Indeed, in modern day terminology, the title might be translated more aptly as 'Casual Sex'.

In Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Mansfield would have read the following passage where he quotes a translation from Gérard de Nerval: 'Everything in nature assumed new aspects, and secret voices came to me from the plants, the trees [ ... ] All things live, all things are in motion, all things correspond; the magnetic rays emanating from myself or others traverse without obstacle the infinite chain of created things' (Symons 1958, p. 17). Mansfield must surely have been under the influence of Symons's book when she wrote to her younger sister Jeanne from Bavaria in 1909:

Last night, sitting working here, the great jug of scarlet blackberry vine threw a twisted shadow on the wall—rather, my lamplight, more than a little fascinated, stencilled for me the trailing garlands with a wizard finger, and so I thought of you. Did you get the thought. Did you find it hanging on to the edge of your skirt ('Good gracious, is that a cotton. Where can I have picked it up') 'My dear, allow me to present you with a Bavarian mind wave!'<sup>4</sup> (Letters 1, pp. 93–94)

## 4. The Poems

### 4.1. 1903–1908

Eighty of the 217 poems in the 2016 volume of Mansfield's *Collected Poems* were written before she left New Zealand at the age of nineteen to return to England to become a writer, attesting to the importance of poetry composition in her creative life from a young age. Indeed, in 1903, aged just fifteen, on the steamer taking her from New Zealand to Britain for the first time, she wrote a verse collection called "Little Fronds", comprising seventeen poems (CP, pp. 9–17), the first extant poems of Mansfield's to have survived. As is only to be expected, Mansfield's early poems are juvenile in form and content, yet the sheer number attests to Mansfield's absolute need to find an expressive

<sup>4</sup> The 5-volume (1984–2008) of Mansfield's letters (O'Sullivan and Scott) is referenced throughout this article as *Letters*, followed by the volume and page number.

outlet for her burgeoning creative talent. And they are not all bad; glimmers of the later mature writer are occasionally evident, such as we find in the fourteen-stanza poem “Friendship (2)”, written once Mansfield was established at Queen’s College, Harley Street, where she and her two older sisters were educated from 1903–1906:

He sat at his attic window  
The night was bitter cold  
But he did not seem to feel it  
He was so old—so old—

The moonlight silvered his grey hair  
And caressed his furrowed face  
The clock at the old church tower struck twelve  
But he did not change his place.  
[. . .] (CP, p. 7)

The first line: “He sat at his attic window”, is situated within a domestic arena which features so prominently in Mansfield’s short stories, where at least one character will, at some point, be looking out of a window. These myriad references to windows by Mansfield reveal for Antony Alpers how a ‘trick of her mind is evident: she is constantly inhabiting one space while observing another, and has her characters doing the same’ (Alpers 1980, p. 53). This anticipates the concept of liminality in Mansfield’s short stories: how the view from a window—a *place-in-between*—can alter perceptions from the present to the past, from the past to the future, and invite the crossing of a metaphorical threshold to an event yet to be realised or understood. In standard ballad form, the poem has a clear narrative structure, and suggests the influence of Heine’s ballads, especially those in his *Book of Songs* (1827), a volume from Mansfield’s childhood that she kept with her all her life. Indeed, just four pages after this poem in the notebook in which it appears, is her transcription of a poem from that collection, “Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht” [Death is the cool night] (CW4, p. 11).

Back in New Zealand in 1907, Mansfield composed a book of children’s verse (see CP, pp. 28–47)—her first collection of poetry intended for publication—to be illustrated by a talented professional artist Edith Bendall, nine years her senior (with whom she conducted a youthful affair for a short time). The venture was inspired by her cousin Elizabeth von Arnim’s hugely successful publication, *The April Baby’s Book of Tunes*, first published in 1900, a mix of little tales, songs and nursery rhymes, with beautiful illustrations by Kate Greenway. The manuscript and drawings were sent off to a publisher in America without success; Mansfield’s poems were eventually returned, but the illustrations sadly lost. Four of the poems would go on to represent some of her earliest professional publications.<sup>5</sup> Claire Tomalin notes how the collection is “essentially a pastiche of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses*, with touches of Hans Christian Andersen” (Tomalin 1987, p. 35). Mansfield’s poem “When I was little”, exemplifies this mix of styles:

When I was quite a little child  
Just three o’clock or even less—  
I always fell and hurt my knees,  
And once I tore my party dress.

It’s such an awful thing to do  
Because folks say:—‘What not again!’

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Lonesome Child’ was published in the *Dominion*, Wellington, 1: 217, 6 June 1908, p. 11, a month before Mansfield left New Zealand for the last time. Similarly, ‘A Little Boy’s Dream’ was published in the *Dominion*, Wellington, 1: 221, 11 June 1908, p. 5. ‘A Day in Bed’ was published in the *Lone Hand*, Sydney, 1 October 1909, p. 636, with its third verse omitted. ‘The Pillar Box’ was published in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, London, 45: 202, February 1910, p. 300.

I wish they'd do it by themselves  
And feel perhaps, the awful pain.

I used to creep away and think—  
'I'll die today, to make them sad'  
The tears came always rushing down,  
Because I felt so very bad.

But when my daddy found me there  
And kissed me—heaps of times—you know  
I used to say—'Perhaps then, dads –  
I'll live another day or so.'

Walter de la Mare's *Songs of Childhood* (1902), is almost certainly another source of inspiration, especially his delight in combining childhood innocence with wry humour and pathos. Mansfield's poem, "A Fairy Tale", written in 1907, combines de la Mare's fairy whimsy with the lonely huts and snow-bound characters of Hans Andersen or even the Brothers Grimm:

Now this is the story of Olaf  
Who, ages and ages ago,  
Lived right on the top of a mountain  
A mountain all covered with snow.

And he was quite pretty and tiny  
With beautiful curling fair hair  
And small hands like delicate flowers  
Cheeks kissed by the cold mountain air.

He lived in a hut made of pine wood  
Just one little room and a door  
A table, a chair, and a bedstead  
And animal skins on the floor.

Now Olaf was partly a fairy  
And so never wanted to eat  
He thought dewdrops and raindrops were plenty  
And snowflakes—and all perfumes sweet.

In the daytime when sweeping and dusting  
And cleaning were quite at an end  
He would sit very still on the doorstep  
And dream—O—that he had a friend.  
[. . .] (CP, pp. 48–49).

During the time Mansfield spent back in Wellington, badgering her parents to let her to return to London to become a writer, her artistic impulse was frequently to write poetry, as evidenced in a diary entry for 1907:

Oh, do let me write something really good, let me sketch an idea & work it out. Here is silence and peace and splendour, bush and birds. Far away I hear builders at work upon a house, and the broom sends me half crazy. Let it be a poem. Well, here goes. I'm red hot for ideas. More power to your elbow, my dearest Kathie. That is so, and I shall do well.



Fitful sunshine now—I am glad, it will be a beautiful afternoon. But I pray you, let me write.  
(CW4, pp. 44–45)

In another diary entry in the same year, she notes: ‘O thank God that I have written five poems’ (CW4, p. 82).

Over a dozen previously unknown poems by Mansfield feature in the 2016 *Collected Poems*, discovered by me in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand, in early 2013. One of them, “To Pan”, is possibly the last poem she wrote before leaving New Zealand for the last time in July 1908:

[...]  
So we would laugh, your arm round my shoulder,  
Laugh at the world that was ours to keep,  
Cry that we two could never grow older,  
We were awake though the world lay asleep.  
Laugh until Pan the munificent giver,  
Woke from a slumber to play his part,  
Plucked a reed from the frozen river  
Fashioned the song of our firebound heart.  
‘Capable of a subjective passion,’  
So you stigmatise me, today –  
Well, my dear, we pass in this fashion  
But Pan, God Pan, continues to play.  
(CP, pp. 60–61)

In later years, Mansfield would codify references to sexual passion in letters and elsewhere with the word, “Pan”, such as we find in her story “Epilogue II” from 1913:

‘We danced together seven times and we talked the whole time. The music was very slow—we talked of everything. You know about books and theatres and all that sort of thing at first, and then—about our souls.’

‘What?’

‘I said—our souls. He understood me *absolutely*. And after the seventh dance. No, I must tell you the first thing he ever said to me. He said, “Do you believe in Pan?” Quite quietly. Just like that. And then he said, “I knew you did.” Wasn’t that extra-or-din-ary!’ (CW1, p. 335)

#### 4.2. 1909–1910

The period 1909–1910 was perhaps the most fruitful of Mansfield’s poetic writing career, in terms of quality and quantity. This became clear in 2015, when I uncovered a complete manuscript of poems she had sent to the London publisher Elkin Mathews in the second half of 1910, representing her second serious attempt at publication of her poetry, at the age of 22, this time with far better, more mature verse. All knowledge of the manuscript’s existence had been forgotten until 1999, when it was bequeathed by the estate of Jane Warner Dick (1906–1997) to the Newberry Library in Chicago, where its importance remained unnoticed by scholars until discovered by myself. Of the thirty-six poems in the collection, only nine had previously been published. The others were completely unknown and yet they represent some of the finest poems Mansfield ever wrote. The collection affirms yet again that, although Mansfield was starting to have stories accepted for commercial publication, she was still very much taking herself seriously as a *poet*.

Mansfield’s choice of publisher is revealing. Charles Elkin Mathews (1851–1921) was a British publisher and bookseller who played an important role in the literary life of London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with strong contacts with the Irish Literary Society, Rhymers

Club and the Arts and Crafts Movement. His catalogue included names such as Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symonds, and later on volumes of poetry by W. B. Yeats, Lionel Johnson, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Robert Bridges, among others. From 1892 to 1894 he worked in partnership with the publisher John Lane, culminating in the publication of *The Yellow Book* in 1894, which had exerted a deep fascination for Mansfield during her late teenage years. Death, love, decay, extreme emotion: all were expressions of Mansfield's mind-set at this time, culminating in the first of her stories written in dialogue form, "The Yellow Chrysanthemum" (CW1, pp. 116–19), written in March 1908 at the height of her fascination with Wilde and the decadents, influenced, of course, by the notorious *Yellow Book*.

As a collection, the *Earth Child* poems comprise a fascinating record of Mansfield's literary endeavours in 1909–1910, as well as offering an incisive illustration of her ability to forge a new literary voice assembled from personal memory, intercultural experimentation and contextual echoes. Had Elkin Mathews published the collection instead of rejecting it, Mansfield might have trod a much more assured—and renowned—poetic literary path. Mansfield intended *The Earth Child* sequence to be read as a poem-cycle rather than as individual poems, since the first 28 poems are numbered rather than titled. It shows the development of Mansfield's lyrical voice and poetic persona away from the influences of Oscar Wilde and fin-de-siècle symbolism, towards the more complex neo-Romanticism and early modernism of continental Europe. In addition, it provides a fascinating bridge from those earlier poems, sketches and vignettes through prose-poetry and on to narrative fiction, offering new insights into her evolution and apprenticeship as a writer.

Later in her life, Mansfield destroyed as much personal material—diaries, notebooks, letters—from the years 1909–1911, because she was embarrassed—and possibly ashamed—of much of her conduct during this time. These were Mansfield's "experimental", hedonistic years, where she could be found smoking hashish with Aleister Crowley, where she had one—possibly two—abortions, where she suffered a traumatic stillbirth alone in Bavaria in June 1909, and where she conducted an intense affair with a Polish émigré Floryan Sobieniowski (from whom she almost certainly contracted the gonorrhoea that would blight her health until a formal diagnosis and treatment in 1918), and then another affair when back in England during 1910–11, with both young schoolmaster William Orton, and his then girlfriend, Edna Dixon. She had also become addicted to Veronal (a barbiturate), whilst in Bavaria, a habit she found hard to conquer. As a result, uncovering any material from this period, such as the *Earth Child* collection, offers a rare glimpse into her mindset at this time.

In May 1909, Mansfield had been taken to Bavaria by her mother, who believed a water cure would turn her daughter away from lesbianism, the only reason she could come up with as to why she had left her then husband, George Bowden, the morning after her wedding. In reality, Mansfield had married the hapless Bowden to provide legitimacy for her unborn child, the result of a previous liaison. Mansfield stayed in Bavaria for another six months and elements of the writer's love affair with Sobieniowski are chronicled in this unpublished poetry. Indeed, some of the poems are directly written for or about him, with many poems suggesting a Central and Eastern European influence. For example, number XXII begins, "In the swiftly moving sleigh/We sat curled up under the bear skin rugs/And talked of the dangers of life" (CP, p. 86), reflecting, perhaps, their intimate relationship in Bavaria, whilst of course also bringing to mind images from the pages of the Russian writers Mansfield so admired, such as Tolstoy, where descriptions of winter outings by sleigh under bearskin rugs can be found in both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

Two letters from Mansfield accompany the *Earth Child* manuscript. Dated 8 November 1910 and 15 January 1911, they chronicle her failed efforts to persuade publisher Elkin Mathews to print the poems. The second letter is written in a tongue-in-cheek style, pleading with the publisher to put her out of her misery on whether her material will be accepted or not:

Dear Mr. Mathews

May I hear from you soon the fate of my poor 'Earth Child' Poems—I really am worrying about her immediate future—yea or nay.

Love her or hate her, Mr. Mathews, but do not leave her to languish!  
Sincerely yours  
Katharina Mansfield  
(CW3, p. 463)

If Mansfield did receive a note of rejection, it has not survived. This collection of unpublished poems would have almost certainly earned Mansfield early recognition as a poetry writer, since they clearly reveal her early maturity as a poet and surely makes the case for her reassessment as a talented poet all the more compelling.

Despite Mansfield's hedonistic behaviour at this time, there are some touching poems in the collection, redolent with metaphors about children and love. The generic versatility that is a hallmark of Mansfield's poetry—her ability to move between lyric, satire, parody and elegy—is much in evidence here. There is, yet again, a striking comparison to be made with Heine's poem cycle "The North Sea", from his *Book of Songs*. *The Earth Child* shares with Heine's, the mixture of elfin and human characters, fairy-tale elements in setting an event, the lyrical first-person voice, reflections on childhood, pastoral memories and a sometimes ironical distance. Heine's poetry was much in vogue in early twentieth-century Germany and Central Europe on account of its Romantic anti-authoritarianism. Although Mansfield had been gifted her copy of the *Book of Songs* in 1903, she may well have encountered them anew through Sobieniowski and his circle of émigré writers, during her stay in Bavaria in 1909. In poem III, for example, the lyrical "I" takes the reader into an eerie, fantasy world reminiscent of much late Romantic German and Central and East European poetry—Goethe, Heine, Lermontov, Kuprin and Mickiewicz, for instance. Mansfield's familiarity with such works can be traced back to London, where, since the 1830s, translations of Russian and Central European poetry had circulated, to discussions in the *New Age*, or to Sobieniowski's émigré circle in Germany:

### III

Through the dark forest we walked apart and silently  
Only the dead leaves beneath our feet kept up a ghostly conversation.  
As we touched them—they cried out: 'It is all over you are killing us'.  
Yet with swift steps and joyfully, we walked through the muffled forest.  
A wild scent burst from the ground and broke over us in waves  
The naked branches stiffened against the black air.  
Behind us an army of ghosts mimicked our steps  
They caught at the trailing shadows and fashioned them into cloaks.  
And pretended that under their cloaks, like us, they were trembling and  
burning.  
On the brow of the hill we stopped—the ghosts forsook us  
The forest drew back and the road slipped into the plains.  
A moon swung into the sky—we faced each other  
He said! 'Do not fly away'.  
I said: 'Are you a dream'  
We touched each other's hands.  
(CP, p. 77)

Additionally, her reworking of classic fairy-tale motifs such as we find in poem XIV, reveal a mature, "modern" voice creeping through, where modernity meets fantasy in her poetry for the first time:

### XIV

A little wind crept round the house  
It rattled the windows and door handles  
'Let me in—let me in', it lamented.  
But I pulled the curtain and lighted my lamp.

'O, how can you be so cruel', sobbed the wind  
 'My wings are tired: I want to go to sleep in your arms  
 There is peace in your heart, and a soft place for a tired child'.  
 I bent low over my books  
 'The night is so dark and the shadows are hurting me'.  
 I opened my window, leaned out and took the wind to my bosom  
 For a moment he lay silent  
 Then drew a long breath and opened his eyes  
 Maliciously smiling.  
 He sprang from my arms—blew out the lamp  
 Scattered the book leaves, leapt and danced on the floor  
 'Did you know', he sang,  
 'There was a spark in your heart  
 I have kindled it into flame with my breath—  
 Now rest if you can'.  
 (CP, p. 82)

#### 4.3. 1911–1922

After the excitement of Mansfield's first real publications of prose-poems and vignettes in Australia and New Zealand in 1907–1908, back in London in the early autumn of 1908, she entered the publishing world with verse as well as prose, her poems featuring in arts reviews such as *Rhythm*, published both in her own name and under pseudonyms such as "Boris Petrovsky", attesting to the importance she was placing at the time on literature from Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, in her own work as a literary reviewer during the early 1910s, we find examples of her sensitivity as a reader of poetry, and particularly her eloquently expressed belief of how best—and why—poetry should be translated from foreign languages (see, in particular, her review of Paul Selver's *Anthology of Modern Bohemian Poetry*, in *Rhythm*, CW3, pp. 436–7). Nor does she make any bones about disparaging bad poetry or self-indulgent, second-rate versifying. Her review of Kenneth Hare's collection, *The Green Fields*, in July 1912 declares:

The writing of slight verse is the easiest thing in the world—far simpler than the writing of prose—and perhaps it is the most valueless thing in the world. Mr Hare, having nothing to say, says it in rhyme, the which unfortunate state of affairs happens to most young ladies and gentlemen before they have learnt the gentle art of self consciousness. (CW3, p. 431)

In a notebook jotting in January 1916, Mansfield made the following candid admission: "I feel always trembling on the brink of poetry" (CW4, p. 192). Even if Mansfield's poetic output has been traditionally side-lined, readers of her notebooks and diaries cannot fail to notice how her need for poetry—both her own compositions, and her constant reading of other poets' work—remained a constant throughout her life. Reading notes in her notebooks and diaries, listing the poetry she was reading point to how very well read Mansfield was, and offer a first indication of the lasting influence of poetic styles and idioms, echoes of which can then be traced back through her own work. Rarely are these explicit references; they are resonances and half-allusions pointing to the literary recollections buzzing round her mind, which then resurface and enrich the intertextual tapestry of her own textual production. There are striking echoes of Hardy, Blake, Symons, Whitman, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson and Dowson, to name a few of the English-language influences; the European voices include Goethe, Heine, Wyspianski, Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Carco. Nor are these fleeting allusions restricted to the canonical or 'serious' poets. Mansfield's sense of poetic pastiche can recall Lear and Belloc; she can interweave uplifting snatches from popular hymns and The Book of Common Prayer, and set these alongside traditional nursery rhymes and sing-song ballads, before shifting just as suddenly, to tones reminiscent of some of the contemporary poets of her era—John Davidson and "the Rhymers",

Walter de la Mare and T. S. Eliot. Here is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of reading Mansfield's verse: the beguiling simplicity that contains so much. Notebook entries also abound in the last ten years of her life attesting to her *need* for poetry, such as in these examples, covering a span of ten years:

Then Catherine [*sic*] what is your ultimate desire—to what do you so passionately aspire?  
To write books and stories and sketches and poems. (1911, CW4, p. 121)

The day felt endless. Read in the evening and in bed read with J. a good deal of poetry.  
If I lived alone I would be very dependant on poetry. (1915, CW4, p. 148)

Then I want to write poetry. I feel always trembling on the brink of poetry. (1916, CW4, p. 192)

I have been a worm this morning & read poetry when I should have worked. (1918, CW4, p. 238)

Oh God! I am divided still. I am bad. I fail in my personal life. I lapse into impatience,  
temper, vanity & so I fail as thy priest. Perhaps poetry will help. (1921, CW4, p. 390)

Increasingly isolated as she spent more and more time abroad searching for a cure for her tuberculosis, she did indeed come to depend on poetry as a much-valued emotional support. Much of her own poetry is, of course, autobiographical and personal, but, as the above diary entry from 1921 reveals, it can also serve as an escape from the immediacies of life. Nevertheless, there is a striking difference between the number of poems written from 1903 up to 1910 (when Mansfield was 22): 150 extant poems, when compared with the number which survive that were written between 1911 and her death in January 1923—just 67.

The latter poems range widely in content and style. "Limbo" (1911) discovered by myself in the National Library of New Zealand in 2013 amongst her papers, is a particularly fine example of Mansfield's poetry, and worth quoting in full:

A wreath of pipe smoke rising in a ring;  
A tin clock ticking hollow on a shelf;  
Outside a ceaseless hammer-hammering;  
Next door shrill children's voices—and myself.  
The ticking is of dead men's bleaching jaws  
Wearily wagging in eternity,  
Marking the measure of the stroke and pause  
Of Death forging new sickles endlessly.  
The smoke is all my little vapour seal  
That flickers in a sudden gust of air,  
Wearily seeking for a long-lost goal,  
A goal that it shall find not anywhere,  
Nor find a home for all its wandering.  
The voices are the past calling to me  
From some old world of toil and hammering  
Across dim frozen wastes of icy sea.  
The clock ticks on. The rhythmic hammer noise beats  
Beats on. The pipe smoke writhes on overhead  
Terribly still. The piercing children's voice  
Stabs on relentless. Living, I am dead.  
(CP, p. 95)

The title of the poem and the bleak solitude of the speaking persona caught between conflicting worlds, spaces and times make it one of the most succinct and most explicit studies of liminality in Mansfield's oeuvre, a theme, as noted earlier, that recurs throughout her poetry, prose vignettes, fiction,

correspondence and personal writings. The repetitive rhythm of the hammering, the references to death, ambiguity and frozen wastes recall Eliot, Yeats and other modernist poets.

Mansfield's poetic output declined during the war years, but the death of her beloved brother Leslie Beauchamp, killed in a training accident in Belgium on 6 October 1915, prompted one of her most personal and moving poems, "To L. H. B." (CP, pp. 109–10). Not long after his death, Mansfield wrote in her diary: "Yes, though he is lying in the middle of a little wood in France and I am still walking upright, and feeling the sun and the wind from the sea, I am just as much dead as he is" (CW4, p. 171). Haunted by his death until her own in 1923, she would write to Ottoline Morrell in November 1918: "I keep seeing all these horrors, bathing in them again and again (God knows I don't want to) and then my mind fills with the wretched little picture I have of my brother's grave. What is the meaning of it all?" (Letters 2, p. 290, 17 November 1918). The final three lines of the poem: "By the remembered stream my brother stands/Waiting for me with berries in his hands/These are my body. Sister, take and eat" (CP, p. 110), evokes the physicality of her brother's dead body, while her words echo the taking of Communion in a Christian church service.

"Night-Scented Stock" (1917) is poem Mansfield wrote for Ottoline Morrell, following one of her visits to the Morrells' country home, Garsington Manor. It contains a tongue-in-cheek evocation of the latter's house-parties and lavish hospitality—something of a myth in Bloomsbury folklore—with invitations generously extended to all her friends and their acquaintances. However, Garsington was far more than a mere country house for parties. It had a working farm providing employment for a number of conscientious objectors during the war years and offered refuge for often impoverished artists, exiles and writers. Nevertheless, the poem is a powerfully evocative piece in its own right, irrespective of its biographical allusions. Partly a pastiche of exalted *fin-de-siècle* impressionism, comic patter and genteel posturing, its powerfully rhapsodic tone and setting produce a wholly "modern" effect:

[...]  
 But one with a queer russian ballet head  
 Curled up on a blue wooden bench instead.  
 And another, shadowy—shadowy and tall  
 Walked in the shadow of the dark house wall,  
 Someone beside her. It shone in the gloom,  
 His round grey hat like a wet mushroom.

'Don't you think perhaps 'piped someone's flute  
 'How sweet the flowers smell!' I heard the other say—  
 Somebody picked a wet, wet pink  
 Smelled it and threw it away—

'Is the moon a virgin or is she a harlot?'  
 Asked somebody. Nobody would tell.  
 The faces and the hands moved in a pattern  
 As the music rose and fell.

[...] (CP, p. 118)

Mention of the Ballets Russes, a particular favourite of Mansfield's brings a touch of exotic modernism to the poem, as does the line "Is the moon a virgin or is she a harlot?",<sup>6</sup> referencing the typical sort of highbrow conversation to be had at Garsington gatherings.

<sup>6</sup> See the Book of Revelation, 12, 1: 'a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars'.



During 1919–1920, Mansfield published eight poems in the prestigious literary weekly, the *Athenaeum*, during Murry's editorship, all under the pseudonym "Elizabeth Stanley", the maiden name of her paternal grandmother. The first one, "Fairy Tale" is strikingly reminiscent of her earlier fairy-themed poems, recalling similar motifs and imagery:

[. . .]  
 Now a strain  
 Wild and mournful blown from shadow towers,  
 Echoed from shadow ships upon the foam,  
 Proclaims the Queen of Night.  
 From their bowers  
 The dark Princesses fluttering, wing their flight  
 To their old Mother, in her huge old home.  
 [. . .] (CP, p. 128)

"Sorrowing Love", a flower-themed poem, bringing to mind similar poems by H. D., provides a strange blend of childlike fairy tale and chilling *fin-de-siècle* decadence. This is reinforced by the tone of the second and third stanzas, where the voice of the persona distributing flowers recalls Ophelia's speech in Hamlet, IV, v. (l. 19):

And again the flowers are come  
 And the light shakes  
 And no tiny voice is dumb,  
 And a bud breaks  
 On the humble bush and the proud restless tree.  
 Come with me!

Look, this little flower is pink,  
 And this one white.  
 Here's a pearl cup for your drink,  
 Here's for your delight  
 A yellow one, sweet with honey.  
 Here's fairy money  
 Silver bright  
 Scattered over the grass  
 As we pass.

Here's moss. How the smell of it lingers  
 On my cold fingers!  
 You shall have no moss. Here's a frail  
 Hyacinth, deathly pale.  
 Not for you, not for you.  
 And the place where they grew  
 You must promise me not to discover,  
 My sorrowful lover!  
 Shall we never be happy again?  
 Never again play?  
 In vain—in vain!  
 Come away!  
 (CP, pp. 131–32)

Mansfield's final extant poem, "The Wounded Bird", was written in the Hôtel d'Angleterre, Sierre, Switzerland, in July 1922, where she had moved in the hope that the air would be beneficial to her

ever-worsening tuberculosis. It clearly reflects the desolate frustration of a once freedom-loving, now fragile patient forced to endure the well-meaning intentions of those who come to nurse her. Mansfield habitually referred to her lungs as her “wings”, and it is therefore poignant to note that her last two poems (the previous one was called “Winter Bird”, written in 1921), penned just months before her death, should focus on birds. However, the theme also links back to some of her earlier poetry, notably in the *Earth Child* sequence, where bird imagery makes a frequent appearance. In tone and motif, “The Wounded Bird” bears comparison with Emily Dickinson’s “Hope is the thing with Feathers” (1891) and Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (1820), with the line: ‘O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed’. Here is Mansfield’s poem in full:

In the wide bed  
Under the green embroidered quilt  
With flowers and leaves always in soft motion  
She is like a wounded bird resting on a pool.

The hunter threw his dart  
And hit her breast,  
Hit her, but did not kill.  
O my wings, lift me—lift me  
I am not dreadfully hurt!  
Down she dropped and was still.

Kind people come to the edge of the pool with baskets  
‘Of course what the poor bird wants is plenty of food!’  
Their bags and pockets are crammed almost to bursting  
With dinner scrapings and scraps from the servants’ lunch.  
Oh! how pleased they are to be really giving!  
‘In the past, you know you know, you were always so fly-away  
So seldom came to the window-sill, so rarely  
Shared the delicious crumbs thrown into the yard.  
Here is a delicate fragment and here a tit-bit  
As good as new. And here’s a morsel of relish  
And cake and bread and bread and bread and bread.’

At night—in the wide bed  
With the leaves and flowers  
Gently weaving in the darkness  
She is like a wounded bird at rest on a pool.  
Timidly, timidly she lifts her head from her wing.  
In the sky there are two stars  
Floating, shining—  
Oh, waters—do not cover me!  
I would look long and long at those beautiful stars!  
O my wings—lift me—lift me  
I am not so dreadfully hurt  
(CP, pp. 140–41)

## 5. Conclusions

Mansfield’s verse is richly evocative of the poetic works she absorbs, with lingering memories of cherished lines, images and styles, but also it is always, unmistakably, her voice that we are hearing. Often her poetry can mark some sort of alchemy, as sights, sounds and memories are transmuted

into literature; similarly, many of her stories can be seen to start life as intensely poetic moments that gradually expand just enough to push poetry beyond its own constraints of rhyme and rhythm into prose. The hallmarks of her very best fiction are all to be found in condensed form in verse—her focus on the telling detail that captures some essential flavour or feel of a scene, the swift, sure strokes of a description that capture beauty or idiosyncratic quirks. In many poems, just as in the stories, diction and form are often simple and traditional: floating trochees, sing-song iambics, a certain sentimental sweetness that might just appear too cloying. But even the naïve effects can prove sophisticated, reflecting, as she matures as a poet, a denser modernist poetic fabric beneath the apparent simplicity: strong, regular metres suddenly slipping into free-running lines, crisp social niceties that change tune midway, predictable patterns that are suddenly transformed by casually thrown in hiatuses and subdued climaxes, flat-footed commonplaces and playful nonsense rhymes that abruptly acquire sinister overtones, and lyricism or fey innocence that carefully hides an underside that is faux-naïf or positively wicked. Such poems share resonances with symbolist poets like Arthur Symonds, but also with her own unmistakable “modern” voice.

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