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The Political Katherine Mansfield

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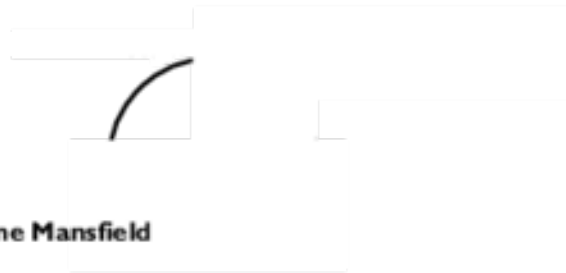
Ideologies that have been superseded by more enduring political discourses and literary figures who have been succeeded by greater authors are frequently relegated to the footnotes of cultural scholarship. But sometimes these lesser-known subjects of literary history, properly attended to, provide unique opportunities for a richer understanding of aesthetic developments. The study of British modernism, in particular, can benefit from a willingness to examine forgotten political-cultural relationships. Indeed, the period's extreme ideological complexity and cross-fertilization has served to mask the important political roles played by less celebrated artists in the formulation of modernist aesthetic doctrine. This is particularly true of Katherine Mansfield.

Most studies either neglect to include Mansfield in their accounts of modernism's emergence, or else try to correct this oversight by addressing her influence on Virginia Woolf.¹ She is largely thought of as someone who was "unaffected by contemporary literary trends and divorced from the great social, political and cultural events of her time."² Even those who contend that she participated in the development of a "female modernism" that gave literary voice to "an emerging feminist consciousness," as well as those who acknowledge that her stories explore "the theme of the exploitation of women," claim that Mansfield failed to do so in a perceptibly ideological manner.³

Mansfield's earliest collected short stories, those published in the years 1910-11, have been particularly ill-served by prevailing views of her indifference to political and social controversy. These are frequently dismissed as aesthetically unaccomplished and politically naïve. By 1920, Mansfield herself regarded them **[End Page 225]** as "immature," "juvenile," and "a lie."⁴ Scholars have generally drawn upon these comments to argue that the stories simply mirror popular fears of German invasion or offer an unbalanced reflection upon her lonely confinement at a German spa in 1909, where she gave birth to a stillborn child.⁵ Antony Alpers suggests that the stories, most of which were later republished in the volume *In a German Pension* (1911), were influenced by the 1909 box office sensation *An Englishman's Home*, a "clumsy melodrama" that "gave crude expression to the warnings by General Roberts of German readiness for war."⁶ Patricia Moran argues that the stories are lamentable instances of feminine "revulsion and self-loathing" for "the female body's materiality," that they "demonstrate how deeply devaluations of women cripple and deform women's estimation of themselves, even when women consciously resist and revise those demeaning cultural scripts."⁷

Despite their lowly critical status, however, these works have a great deal to teach us about Mansfield's politically engaged role in the development of early British modernism. Originally published in the British socialist magazine *The New Age*, these stories—viewed in proper historical context—reveal that she contributed to one of the least acknowledged, but nevertheless most important, shifts in political outlook and literary taste of her time. Though not as fully achieved (or even as modernist) as her later fiction, their occasional stridency and callowness only serve to emphasize their transitional literary-historical nature. Through their criticisms of German imperial culture and maternity and formal rejection of plot and discourse, these stories served dual political and cultural purposes. First, they undermined the authority of the dominant Edwardian currents of state-governed socialism and suffragist feminism while encouraging alternative forms of worker-governed socialism and individualist feminism. Second, they initiated a closely related shift from an influential Edwardian aesthetics of materiality and discursivity toward a new modernist aesthetics of spiritual liberation and perceptual immediacy.

The New Age (1907-22) is of great relevance to an understanding of the early politics of British modernism. From 1907-14, this weekly magazine, which had a large and diverse circulation base of more than 3,000 readers was not only the most significant clearinghouse of anticapitalist thought in Britain, but it was also a site of culturally pivotal debate about socialism, feminism, and the arts.⁸ Due to the fierce commitment to freedom of expression of the magazine's gifted editor...



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Edwardian Socialist Roots
of British Modernism*.



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