CHAPTER 16

Writing the Undiscovered Country: Katherine Mansfield, Childhood and France

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Abstract

Reading the Notebooks, ‘An Indiscreet Journey’ and ‘The Wind Blows’, this chapter addresses the place of Katherine Mansfield’s writing as an unconscious hinterland composed of ‘all the remembered places’ of childhood and the estrangement of ‘a little wood in France’, condensing and displacing time and space in the dream-work of indiscreet journeying. So when, after the death of her brother in the trenches of WWI, Mansfield says, ‘Oh, I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the ‘old world’; we read the ‘undiscovered country’ and the ‘old world’ as reversible, signifying the inscription of death as that strange continent to be explored in the present of writing, and bound in turn to the reminiscence of a shared past in New Zealand. Hence the writing is composed of both childhood and of France, to be ‘bound and wrapped’ like a child ‘and sent to New Zealand’ or as a book ‘back to England [...] une profession de foi’. At once filtered through the prism of brother-sister twinning or identification and through exile and departure, Mansfield’s œuvre dislocates temporality and topography to explore and define the topoi of that ‘undiscovered country’ which is both its hinterland and destination, as it searches back and forwards through the dark continent of death/war and sexuality. Finally, I trace this exploration back to the child/adult encounter of the piano lesson scene in ‘The Wind Blows’, as a founding moment of estrangement and enquiry, crystallising what Ferenczi was to call ‘the confusion of tongues’, concluding that between ‘An Indiscreet Journey’

1 Notebooks 2, p. 32.
2 Notebooks 2, p. 6.
4 Notebooks 2, p. 32.
5 Notebooks 2, p. 60.
6 Notebooks 2, p. 57.
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and ‘The Wind Blows’, Mansfield inscribes a gesture of departure and thereby a twofold movement of journeying into a past yet to be discovered, a question like a voice breaking somewhere between childhood and France.

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.8

In October 1915 Katherine Mansfield is reunited with her young brother Leslie Beauchamp in ‘a tall, grave house’9 between New Zealand and France, where she lives in St John’s Wood, London. They walk up and down the long garden at dusk, remembering the country of their childhood: ‘We were almost like one child’10 Her brother must leave for the front. A few days later he is killed in training there and she writes in her journal: ‘When I leave this house and this place it will be with you’.11 She leaves London for France, a few days later, and in November at Bandol writes: ‘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’.12

The phrase ‘in the middle of a little wood in France’ marks a place in the writing; it has the resonance of a fairy tale, a childhood hinterland of reading in New Zealand, as it points at one and the same time to an imaginary France as if glimpsed in a childhood picture book and a place of exile and estrangement: ‘a little wood in France’, un petit champ de France, a battle field or a war cemetery for the tomb of a soldier from afar. ‘We were almost like one child’; she too will die on the edge of a wood in France, the forest at Fontainebleau, outside New Zealand, Katherine Mansfield, née Beauchamp, out of France.13 ‘I think I have known for a long time that life was over for me, but I never realised it or acknowledged it until my brother died’.14 The brother’s death is the mark of a radical turning point, sealing the end of a life of twinhood, or is it the beginning? For like the deferred effect of an unconscious knowing, it inscribes

8 Notebooks 2, p. 16.
9 Notebooks 2, p. 16.
10 Notebooks 2, p. 15.
11 Notebooks 2, p. 16.
12 Notebooks 2, p. 16.
13 Leslie Heron Beauchamp in fact died in Belgium and is buried in the war cemetery at Ploegsteert Wood, near Messines. Mansfield’s displacement of her dead brother’s whereabouts only serves to further underline her unconscious fantasy of joining him in France, which underpins my argument throughout this text.
14 Notebooks 2, p. 16.