Mansfield Mobilised:
Katherine Mansfield, the Great War and Military Discourse

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Abstract:
This article examines the military discourse that Katherine Mansfield appropriated in her letters, focusing on three particular letter clusters from 1915, 1918, and 1919. I argue that the First World War and its accompanying rhetoric provided an important stimulus for Mansfield’s writing and later functioned as a counter-trope for her own personally more serious battle with illness. Both Mansfield’s deliberate and unintentional incorporation of military discourse in her correspondence resulted in a hybridized figurative language—an example of what Allyson Booth has called elsewhere ‘civilian modernism’—which was significant for Mansfield’s later literary development, and more broadly for our understanding of literary modernism.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield; World War One; modernism; military discourse; illness

Bulletin du Front:
I advanced to the consul and gained a local success, taking the trench as far as Paris. I expect to advance again under cover of gas on Saturday. The enemy is in great strength but the morale of the Wig is excellent. Please explain this to Ribni & make him salute.¹

Prefacing a letter to her partner and future husband John Middleton Murry in March 1918, Katherine Mansfield’s mock ‘Bulletin du Front’ demonstrates the permeation of her personal correspondence by military discourse. Stranded in Paris during a three-week bombardment by the German Superkanon ‘Big Bertha’ in March and...

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April 1918, Mansfield depicts her journey back to London as a military manoeuvre. Her explicit usage of war terminology demonstrates that she was very consciously parodying military reportage, while her comment about Ribni, one of her dolls, suggests the lighthearted tone of this text, intended solely for entertainment. The letter’s conclusion—‘Now I must go back to the trenches & go over the top to the station—Goodbye—breathlessly with all my lovely heart’ (CL II 131)—demonstrates the combination of military rhetoric with sentimentalism in Mansfield’s war writing: a curious hybrid in which the non-combatant has made combatant language a means of modernist experimentation.2

This article examines how Mansfield appropriated military discourse at different stages in her correspondence, as a female civilian modernist writer who lived in France and Italy and travelled in the war zones, but remained at a distance from the war. She wrote: ‘We are so near—really—Paris—London its nothing & yet between us there are swords & swords—’ (CL II 138). Three particular textual clusters in her letters demonstrate the variety of Mansfield’s experimentation with war rhetoric: March 1915, when the first air raids in Paris provided a creative stimulus for her writing; March 1918, when she developed the motif of herself as combatant while under bombardment in Paris; and July to December 1919, when she used war-generated figurative language to depict her increasing illness and began to assess the impact of the war on literature. Both her deliberate and unintentional incorporation of military discourse in her correspondence resulted in a hybridized figurative language—an example of what Allyson Booth has called elsewhere ‘civilian modernism’—which was significant for Mansfield’s later literary development.3 Less ‘gory’ and corporeally based than combatant writing, Mansfield’s use of this figurative language is instead based on a civilian visual vocabulary—the frame of reference that was available on the home front—drawing on everyday and household objects. More broadly, this article further nuances the project undertaken by critics such as Booth and Vincent Sherry to draw out the specific impacts of the First World War on modernist language.4

The seriality of the letter genre makes it an especially useful means of marking time, measuring progress, and implying continuity. Examining Mansfield’s letters in sequence allows us to trace the development of her figurative language within the individual letter—which she treated as a type of vignette with its own syntactical and rhetorical internal coherence—and across letter clusters. Shifting the earlier critical focus from Mansfield’s explicit war stories and her autobiographical responses to her brother’s death, this article
suggests that whereas the Great War only enters Mansfield’s fiction in largely oblique modes, it is in her voluminous private letters that we find ‘political Mansfield’, commenting on contemporary public events.\(^5\) The cultural critic Margaretta Jolly notes that ‘war letters by professional writers tend to show heightened awareness of the function of writing in such situations’.\(^6\) Mansfield evidently recognised the value of letters, demonstrated by her work transcribing and editing Chekhov’s letters with S. S. Koteliansky during 1919, and her prediction that her and Murry’s letters ‘will one day be published and people will read something in them […] that “ought to have told us”’ (CL III 106). Although the putatively private space of the letter allowed Mansfield more political freedom than her published stories, she was highly aware of both the contemporary threat of censorship and the likelihood of her letters being published posthumously.

Critical readings of Mansfield’s writing have, until recently, underplayed the significance of her wartime context and the extent of her civilian war experience. Vincent O’Sullivan, by contrast, asserts that, ‘[f]rom any perspective, the most important public event in Mansfield’s lifetime was the First World War’, the war she variously characterised as ‘a terrible, tedious calamity’ (CL I 252) and ‘that dark place’ (CL I 311).\(^7\) In February 1915, Mansfield travelled alone into the war zones to visit the French author and her then-lover Francis Carco, stationed in Gray, France, an event which provided the inspiration for ‘An Indiscreet Journey’ (written 1915), as well as being recounted in her Journal and two extant letters.\(^8\) On this trip, was Mansfield, as O’Sullivan suggests, ‘perhaps the first to record the effects of gassing’ on men at the front, or did she, as Mary Burgan argues, move ‘in the closed circle of her own sensibility in which the actual suffering of the wounded French soldiers seen along the way intrude[s] only as so many touches of local color’?\(^9\) Mansfield’s journey into the war zones and her experience of air raids in Paris in early 1915 provided her with an experience ahead of her contemporaries.\(^10\) O’Sullivan therefore argues that ‘[f]or a civilian, Mansfield saw a good deal of the war’.\(^11\) Moreover, Mansfield’s correspondence encompassed a social network of figures both publically and privately engaged in the war, including combatants, members of the War Cabinet and various ministries, medical personnel, conscientious objectors, and refugees. Of this network, Murry wrote that ‘no single one of Katherine’s friends who went to the war returned alive from it’, a comment that, although not strictly true, gives an indication of the importance for Mansfield of those who did not return.\(^12\) The accidental death of her brother Leslie (Chummie) Beauchamp in a hand-grenade accident during a training
session in October 1915 caused her enormous grief, exacerbated by
the deaths of her friends the poet Rupert Brooke in April 1915, the
artist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in June 1915, and the writer Frederick
Goodyear in May 1917. The inclusion of a quotation from Mansfield
on the New Zealand war memorial in Hyde Park Corner is therefore
highly appropriate.13

Despite Mansfield and Murry’s correspondence not being a
typical combatant/civilian epistolary exchange, Mansfield’s depiction
of letters as a survival mechanism may well have been exacerbated by
her wartime context. Despite the small but expanding critical discourse
surrounding letters and what has been termed ‘letterness’, there has
been limited analysis of the particular genre of war letters, with
existing literature typically focused on romantic or maternal epistolary
exchanges between the home front and the war zones.14 The wartime
authorities on all sides noted the importance of the continuance of the
post in wartime in terms of morale, and civilians were encouraged to
send regular letters to their loved ones in action, resulting in a new
mass epistolary culture. Due in large part to the increase in pre-war
literacy rates, letter writing became a popular form of communication
across all classes and age groups, with 12.5 million letters sent every
week to the Western Front. This prompted various wartime epistolary
innovations, including the establishment of mass censorship through
the Defence of the Realm Act (introduced in August 1914), and the
development of generic letter forms, such as the Field Service Postcard.
Letters also took on a new commemorative value during and after
the war, collected in memorial volumes for fallen soldiers, such as the
volume for Frederick Goodyear to which Murry contributed in 1918.15
Although these volumes were not a new phenomenon, in wartime they
came to stand in for the absent body of the soldier.16

Despite this new letter-writing culture, wartime conditions
frequently broke the expectation of reciprocity in what Liz Stanley
refers to as ‘epistolary ethics’.17 Mansfield frequently accused Murry
of neglecting his letter-writing duties: ‘I don’t know what you think
of yourself but I think you’re a little pig of a sneak. Not a letter—not
a sign—not a copy of the Saturday Westminster [Gazette]—plainly
nothing. Why are you so horrid—or is it the post? I’ll put it down to
the post & forgive you, darling’ (CL I 165). Their letters were often
disrupted by the wartime postal conditions, requiring the pair to send
telegrams instead. In March 1916, Mansfield wrote to her father that
the newspaper he had sent from New Zealand had been opened by the
censors.18 Until Mansfield and Murry’s marriage in May 1918, there
was the added complication caused by Mansfield’s use of the names of
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both Bowden (from her first marriage) and Mansfield. When she was in Italy in late 1919, the postal delays between England and Italy were further complicated by postal strikes. Murry devised a system for their correspondence, whereby each letter would begin with the number of days remaining until their reunion in May 1920.19 Mansfield’s letters in this period typically begin with the number of the letter(s) she has just received: ‘Treasure brought to shore today: Monday nights letter. No. 3. No. 4.’ (CL III 16). However, letters frequently arrived in the wrong order, which meant that the seriality of the ongoing conversation was broken, causing some confusion between the pair. For Mansfield, a break in correspondence was perceived as a matter of life or death: ‘My heart dies in my breast with terror at the thought of a letter of yours being lost—[...] I suppose I exaggerate—but I’d plunge into the Seine—or lie on a railway line rather than lose a letter’ (CL I 169). This association of the non-arrival of a letter with death would prove to be a long-standing pattern.

1915: The War as Creative Impetus

From the beginning of the war, Mansfield was keen to translate her war experience into writing. In late September 1914 she wrote to Laura Kate Bright, her future stepmother, far away in New Zealand:

Here in London, we are in the throes of this frightful war. There are camps of soldiers in the parks and squares, in the streets there is always the sound and the sight of soldiers marching by. The big white trains painted with the red cross, swing into the railway stations carrying their sad burdens and often at the same time other trains leave crowded with boys in khaki, cheering and singing on their way to the front. (CL III 139–40)

Imitating contemporary propaganda, Mansfield deliberately appropriated the register of newspaper reportage through common affective tropes and superlative descriptions, producing what Liz Stanley calls ‘a particular representational epistolary guise’.20 Despite Mansfield’s understanding of the human cost of war seen in the ‘sad burdens’, the letter becomes increasingly propagandistic as she applauds ‘the display of real and splendid courage on the part of all the people’ and notes ‘the poor Belgian refugees arriving in London, one an old lady of 93, who had walked miles to escape the soldiers’, and ‘a small boy, whose parents had both been shot’. It is not clear whether the ‘unacknowledged excerpt’ in the Wellington Evening Post as a ‘letter’ from London was published with or without Mansfield’s consent, but
the performative nature of her war writings was apparent from the war’s outset.\textsuperscript{21} She was perhaps playing on this new role a few months later in December 1914 and early 1915, when she told her father and brother that she was going to France to report on the war, when she was in fact going to visit Carco.\textsuperscript{22}

Mansfield’s representations of air raids in 1915 in letters to multiple recipients show how her letters were ‘tailored for particular correspondents’.\textsuperscript{23} Following her visit to Carco in February 1915, Mansfield stayed in his Paris flat in March and May, where she experienced some of the first air raids. On 21 March Mansfield wrote to Murry of the fervour that the first raid had excited: ‘Every soul carried a newspaper—L’Information came out on orange sails—La Patrie lifted up its voice at the metro stations. Nothing was talked of but the raid last night’. Mansfield herself clearly participated in the mass excitement, continuing in a seemingly breathless aside, ‘(Im dying to tell you about this raid but Im sure I shant be able to.)’. Despite Mansfield’s reservations about her ability to tell the story, her initial series of simple descriptive clauses without adjectival embellishment develops into an intensely literary depiction of the air raid:

I came in, made some tea—put out the lamp and opened the shutters for a while to watch the river. Then I worked until about one. I had just got into bed and was reading Kipling’s ‘Simple Contes des Collines,’ Bogey, when there was a sharp quick sound of running and then the trumpets from all sides flaring ‘garde à vous’. This went on—accompanied by the heavy groaning noise of the shutters opening and then a chirrup of voices. I jumped up & did likewise. In a minute every light went out except one point on the bridges. The night was bright with stars. If you had seen the house stretching up & the people leaning out — — & then 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 turned upwards as the Ultimate Fish (see \textit{The Critic in Judgement}) 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 but instead I waited and still the trumpets blared—and finally when it was over I made some more tea & felt that a great danger was past—& longed to throw my arms round someone—it gave one a feeling of boundless physical relief like the aftermath of an earthquake. (\textit{CL} I 158–59)\textsuperscript{24}

Mansfield was trying simultaneously to explain the event objectively for Murry (‘Bogey’, who is directly addressed) and to embellish it with her own romantic sense, allowing herself more creative licence as the
scene progressed. She makes use of internal rhyme (‘light [...] bright’),
and repetition of phrasing (‘the house stretching up & the people
leaning out’). The imagery of elongation is mirrored in the repeated
long vowel sounds: ‘a loud noise like doo-da-doo-da’ and ‘flying
high’. The syntax becomes increasingly disrupted through the multiple
ellipses, reproducing the nervous excitement generated by the air
raid. Mansfield depicts the mass response to the unfamiliar object in
synecdochal, almost futurist, terms, in ‘the rush of heads & bodies
turned upwards’ – a familiar modernist response. She belies her stated
unfamiliarity with the Zeppelin by constructing it into a metaphor by
means of a literary allusion to Byron’s *The Vision in Judgement* (1822). Mansfield – who was clearly thrilled by the experience – attempted to
express the intense emotion provoked by the air raid through the
simile of the experience of an earthquake.

Her reworking of this same event in letters to Carco and
Koteliansky demonstrates her deliberate use of different literary
modes. In a letter written in French to Carco the same day, Mansfield
seems more aware of the simultaneous attraction and danger of the
Zeppelins, noting that the sound of the motors was ‘as if at once
to reassure you and to deceive you’. The rest of the description is
fantastical: ‘But what pleased me most was the darkness in all the
houses when they opened the shades and the sight of all the people
at the windows. It was like a dream. I thought that everyone, quite
suddenly, was going to fly’ (CL I 161). Mansfield moves away from
direct description into fantasy, as the actual danger posed by the
Zeppelins is underplayed in favour of the aesthetics and pleasure of
the scene they prompt. Her letter to Koteliansky the next day is written
in a further different register, the mock-pastoral: ‘here the very fact
of walking about in the air makes one feel that flowers and leaves
are dropping from your hair and from your fingers’ (CL I 163). The
deliberately democratic syntax suggests the playful, childlike nature of
this letter, and removes the danger posed by the Zeppelins through
juxtaposition with natural bodies in the sky: ‘The nights are full of
stars and little moons and big zeppelins–very exciting. But England
feels far far away–just a little island with a cloud resting on it. Is it
still there?’ This is reinforced by the simple diction and the repetition
of conjunctions and words (‘little’ and ‘far’). The whimsical nature of
the letter–complete with Mansfield’s flirtatious sign-off, ‘With love to
you / Kissienka’ (CL I 163)–suggests that she immediately recognised
the possibility for literary experimentation presented by the war,
as is demonstrated by these three contrasting descriptions of air
raids.
Mansfield’s own excitement and fear is explicit in a letter to Murry written later the same day, telling him that she was ‘really rather thrilled’ when another alert began. The external environment both stimulated and disturbed her writing process, producing a syntactically and thematically disrupted narrative. ‘As I wrote that more bugles sounded’, she wrote, punctuating the rest of the letter with parenthetical updates and an unsettling combination of tenses:

These raids after all are not funny. They are extremely terrifying and one feels such a horror of the whole idea of the thing. It seems so cruel and senseless—and then, to glide over the sky like that and hurl a bomb n’importe où—is diabolic—and doesn’t bear thinking about. (There go the trumpets again & the sirens and the whistles. Another scare!) All over again. At B’s [the author Beatrice Hastings] this afternoon there arrived “du monde” including a very lovely young woman—married & curious—blonde—passionate—We danced together. I was still so angry about the horrid state of things. (Oh God—its all off again!) I opened the shutters—the motors flew by sounding the alarm—I cant talk about the tea party tonight. At any rate it isn’t worth it really. It ended in a great row. […] It seemed so utter rubbish in the face of all this—now. A very decent and pleasant man saw me home happily. Otherwise I think I might have been sitting in a Y.M.C.A. until this moment—it was so very dark.’

The juxtaposition of the sombre discussion of aerial bombardment with a more frivolous discussion of her attraction to a woman she met at the party that afternoon seems demonstrative of Mansfield’s disturbed thinking. This may have been an attempt to distract herself from her immediate environment, which she only allows to intrude as parenthetical statements with exclamation marks, or perhaps an unconscious linking of the fearful excitement of the air raids and the sexual stimulation of the young woman. The next day, however, Mansfield’s description of the dangers of the air raid were seemingly negated: ‘I felt very flat when I bought La Patrie at midday & found that no zeppelins had arrived after all’. However, she was explicit about the inspiration the event gave her: ‘This afternoon Im going to write about last night. […] Send it somewhere—will you please?’ (CL I 166). Although she didn’t eventually write the story, these passages demonstrate the creative stimulus the war initially gave Mansfield and her early attempts to represent her war experiences in writing.
In the Thick of the Bombardment: Mansfield and Combat in 1918

On first glance, Mansfield’s letters to Murry in 1918 seem to demonstrate a wholly different attitude towards war language, as she explained in February 1918 when she was in Bandol in the south of France for her health: ‘I put all the unfinished MSS I had brought with me here in a row last night […] & told them that none of them were really good enough— to march into the open (Ugh! No—I cant even in fun use these bloody comparisons. I have a horror of the way this war creeps into writing . . . oozes in—trickles in.)’ (CL II 70). Mansfield explicitly acknowledged the influence of the ongoing war on her own writing, using the metaphors of creeping, oozing, and trickling to describe its pervasive effects. Her parenthetical distaste for these ‘bloody comparisons’ admits the disjunction between the situation she is recording (her evaluation of her literary manuscripts) and her descriptive mode. The unconscious inclusion of unwanted words would continue to cause her frustration. As she wrote in 1919: ‘Even now, sometimes when I write to you a word shakes into the letter that I dont mean to be there’ (CL III 26).

The next month, however, in early March 1918, Mansfield returned to her earlier experimentation with the creative possibilities opened up by the war. Whereas Murry had previously been the ‘valiant little warrior’ (CL I 290) of the pair, Mansfield now depicted herself in the role of active (at least in civilian terms) participant in the war.28 She wrote of being ‘mobilised’:

Now about the Food cards. I am so glad you have got bacon because it means fat. I had already decided to try & persuade you to let us feed at home le soir while the war is on. Ill go out with a bastick and buy things and make scrunbunkntious little dinners for us. It will be 100 times as cheap and awfully good for I have gleaned many hints here— and essen mus der Mensch & I should always be black with fury if I gave up a cowpong and did not get what I thought a fair cooked return. The sugar of course I will save too for jam. Saxin just as good in coffee – That kitchen is so ‘to hand’ that we must make use of it while the war is on and save save save. See, Ill be mobilised too. I wont do it after the war but I will while the war is on. (CL II 105–6)29

Combining domestic with military imagery, this passage demonstrates the ‘civilian modernism’ Mansfield developed during the war.30 She appropriates the ‘epistolary guise’ of the wartime wife, ‘making do’ with the rationed provisions she has.31 The repetition of ‘save save save’ echoes the rhetoric of rationing, first introduced in Britain in
January 1918, and the repetition of ‘while the war is on’ further mimics contemporary war talk. The playful and lighthearted tone (seen in the pun of ‘fair cooked return’), the casual inclusion of French and German phrases, the colloquial language (‘scrunbuncktious little dinners’), and the exaggerated similes and metaphors suggest that this is another of Mansfield’s experiments with military discourse, intended solely for her reader’s amusement.

Developing her new participatory role, Mansfield wholly adopted the metaphor of herself as combatant during the next few weeks when she became stranded in Paris and depicted her attempts to return home to Murry in military language. It became clear in mid-March that she would be unable to travel home until granted permission by the authorities in Bedford Square. She sent her long-suffering companion L.M. (Ida Baker, nicknamed Leslie Moore by Mansfield) ahead of her to Marseilles to ‘spy out the land’ (CL II 123), and she wrote of her wish to ‘break though’, asking Murry to ‘keep calm and keep confident & know how I am fighting’. She signed the letter from ‘[y]our small but fighting Wig’ (CL II 127–28), one of the many familiar names used between the couple.

A letter from mid-March 1918 from Marseilles demonstrates Mansfield incorporating the feminine ‘weapon’ of sexuality into this military diction. Mansfield writes of the previous calm of Bandol ‘compared to this violent battle’ of Marseilles, telling Murry, ‘I must bring you up to date with this Battle of the Wig’ (CL II 129–30). Mansfield’s battle becomes feminised, with her ‘weapon’ being the extended metaphor of her own female sexuality, as she attempted to speed up the process of gaining permission to travel by flirting with the local doctor: ‘I determined to get him by the only weapon I could’. Mansfield returns to her combatant metaphor, writing of Marseilles as a war zone:

Marseilles is so hot and loud–They scream the newspapers and all the shops seem full of caged birds–parrots & canaries–shrieking too–And old hags sell nuts & oranges–& I run up and down on fire–Anything–anything to get home!–It all spins like a feverish dream. I am not unhappy or happy. I am just as it were in the thick of a bombardment–writing you, here, from a front line trench. (CL II 129–30)

Mansfield’s parody, where she writes of being ‘on fire’ and suggests that she is actually in the war zone, demonstrates her increasingly offhand appropriation of military idiom. The caged birds, rather than representing others, suggest her own feelings of entrapment. Through her negative phrasing, halting syntax, and use of dashes, her writing
itself imitates the fragmented experience of bombardment. The internal echo-chamber of this passage, characterized by polysyndeton and dualisms, ‘hot and loud […] parrots & canaries […] nuts & oranges […] up and down […] Anything—anything […] not unhappy or happy’, further demonstrates its construction for effect, rather than veracity. Her sign-off combines her masculine militaristic diction with her typical romantic language: ‘fighting & tired but yours for ever’.

The next letter, written the following day and quoted at the beginning of this article, takes Mansfield’s appropriation of war diction again into the realm of parody through the mock *Bulletin du Front*. Mansfield extends her parody to suggest that in taking on the combatant role herself, she has prevented Murry from participating: ‘I have fallen into this old war—I felt that one of us would—but Bogey—oh—God—I thank Thee that it is I and not my beloved who am here—’ (*CL II* 146–47). Although she presented it in romantic terms, Mansfield’s sense that she was the one suffering came from an understanding that her deteriorating personal health was her own battle to fight.

Mansfield’s playful parody would not last long. By the time she arrived in Paris in late March 1918, she was already highly fatigued and anxious to return to Murry in time for their imminent marriage. She recorded the physical impact of the air raids on her worsening health:

This place is in a queer frame of mind. I came out of the restaurant last night into plein noir. All the cafés shut—all the houses—couldn’t understand it. Looked up & saw a very lovely aeroplane with blue lights—“couleur d’espoir” said an old man pointing at it. And at the door of the hotel was met by the manager & made to descend to the caves. There had been an alerte. About 50 people came & there we stayed more than long enough. It was a cold place & I was tired. At eight this morning as I lay in bed—bang, whizz—off they went again. I washed & dressed & just had time to get downstairs before the cannons started. Well *that* alerte n’est past encore fini. Its now 3.45. (*CL II* 136–37)

In stark contrast to her playful depictions in March 1915 and even earlier the same month in March 1918, Mansfield’s unusually plain diction here reveals her physical and syntactic fatigue. Her initial sense of pleasure in the aeroplane in the ‘colour of hope’—presumably a French plane—is eliminated by the ‘alerte’ in which she then had to participate. Her depiction of the shells (‘bang, whizz’) is a deflated version of her previous efforts to record the auditory scene and is a typical piece of onomatopoeia that she appropriates. Her sense of exhaustion was not without foundation. The second alert, which had
been going on for nearly the past eight hours, continued as she wrote. Most importantly to Mansfield, the alert caused the closure of the post offices: ‘All I care is that it holds up all communication with England – no telegrams get through & letters are delayed’ (CL II 138). Later, she noted that, ‘as those letters were practically thrown into the Cannons mouth God knows if they will ever get there –’ (CL II 141). Perhaps it is in this respect that Mansfield could be accused of moving ‘in the closed circle of her own sensibility’, as Burgan suggests.34

Mansfield’s letters from this period are punctuated with expressions of her unhappiness and cynicism. The physical stress the raids put on her is evident. She was by this stage suffering from tuberculosis, the debilitating illness that would eventually kill her. On her return she wrote to L.M. that she had lost a stone.35 In March she wrote: ‘The spring this year seems to me hateful –cruel –cruel – [...] The world is hideous’ (CL II 138). She repeatedly wrote of her physical discomfort:

At one oclock this morning, I got up & wrapped up in shawlets & went down to the cave & sitting there in a heap of coal on an old upturned box – listening to the bloody Poles & Russians – it all seemed a sort of endless dream – Oh so tiring – so utterly fatiguing. I’ve caught a cold, too – and that makes the life in the caves so beastly – They are like tombs (CL II 139)

The air raids had ceased to be an impetus for her writing, but only an impediment: “writing” is rather difficult because of the bombardments’ (CL II 139), she wrote to Murry. However, there are still some instances of Mansfield finding inspiration in the air raids. Discussing the times when ‘the gunfire is violent’, she wrote, ‘I am keeping notes of the kind of things people say about it – some terribly good things’ (CL II 147). Even when she did not feel imaginatively stimulated, she continued to record her experiences. ‘As I write, I can hear the patrol planes booming away – and out on the boulevard all the shops are being protected with strips of paper over the windows – in all sorts of patterns –’, she wrote in late March, ‘But this is not Paris: this is Hell’ (CL II 140).

Mansfield’s letters from March 1918 therefore move from parodic and flippant representations of the war (seen in the imaginative sequence of herself as the ‘mobilised’ wartime housewife and as combatant) to descriptions of air raids in which anxiety and fatigue predominate. Simultaneously we see her increasingly flippant incorporation of war discourse, as the war became a counter-trope to her own more personally serious battle with illness. The rhetorical
strategies Mansfield used to represent the war in this period were both a means of expressing her anxiety and depression, and of managing it through depiction and containment of the war in humorous and offhand modes.

**Becoming ‘battle stained’: Mansfield and Illness in 1919**

After the war ended in November 1918, it became, as with many of her fatigued contemporaries, conspicuously absent from Mansfield’s letters. Instead, her worsening illness dominated her letters and, for the first time, shaped the rhythm of her correspondence. In Ospedaletti in northern Italy from September 1919 for her health, Mansfield became preoccupied with her own mortality as the potentially fatal nature of her illness was increasingly apparent. Her insistence on her own health, asserting in early November that ‘I’m not ill’ (underlined three times), alternated with her intense ‘fear of death’ (CL III 113). In late November, she was preoccupied with her own body: ‘I cant forget my body for a moment. I think of Death – the melancholy fit seizes me’. This preoccupation extended even to her surroundings: ‘Ospedaletti itself is quite the most beautiful little place Ive ever seen […] The cemetery bulks in my vision but then Im an abnormal creature’ (CL III 113).

Mansfield’s repeated fears about her illness coincide with her renewed use of figurative military language, perhaps because of the similarity between her illness and the long war that had lasted for years without hope of a positive resolution. In mid-October, she noted that ‘[i]t is my illness which has made me so bad-tempered at times. Alas! One cant fight without getting battle stained’ (CL III 26). Her acquisition of some ‘black soldiers cigarettes […] made to be distributed to dying Zouaves in hospital and–held over’ (CL III 45–46) aligned her rhetorically with those dying soldiers. Mansfield’s frame of reference now extended beyond the most recent war to war more generally, suggesting her very conscious inclusion of military discourse. At the end of October, her lung wasn’t ‘exactly painful but it creaks like a Sam Browne belt’ (CL III 61). In December, she described her heart in the terms of an American Civil War song: ‘It bangs throbs beats out “tramp tramp tramp the boys are marching” double quick time with very fine double rolls for the kettle drum. How it keeps it up I dont know’ (CL III 135). Even the weather was militarised in this period: ‘The storm […] has withdrawn to await reinforcements’ (CL III 66), whilst the wind was ‘blowing great huge guns’ (CL III 122). Mansfield’s particular focus on the metaphor of
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fighting demonstrates that she had again returned to the motif of herself as combatant. At the end of October, she was ‘fighting all the time the most overwhelming depression’ (CL III 61). In early November, she wrote despairingly, ‘Try to send me letters often or cards or papers from the office [...] But I can fight through all this if I am in touch with you.’ In November, she told Murry, ‘Let us fight now & then lay down our arms & love’, signing her letter, ‘You own own [sic] / Wig the warrior’ (CL III 80–81). Despite this joint call to arms, the renewed motif of herself as combatant and warrior was an expression of the knowledge that her illness was her personal battle.

Running alongside Mansfield’s preoccupation with her mortality and her renewed use of military language was her repeated expression of her dependence on letters, because of what she depicted as their restorative qualities. Letters, in Mansfield’s imagination, became a means of keeping away illness and death. In early October she was eagerly awaiting Murry’s next letter (‘I live for letters when I am away from you—for them—on them—with them’) and told him that she would be ‘made new again when your letter comes’ (CL III 9). Her joy when she received a postcard the next day is evident, joking that letters would even bring her back from the dead: ‘I feel quite different with this postcard. When I die, just before the coffin is screwed up, pop a letter in. I shall jump up and out....’ (CL III 9). In early October she wrote that Murry’s latest letter ‘was breath of life to me’ (CL III 13), and in November his ‘marvellous letter [...] breathes joy and life’ (CL III 109). Letters even induced a form of physical ecstasy: ‘Your letters [...] are almost too much for me: they make me feel breathless’ (CL III 42). In late October, she rhetorically linked the lack of letters with death: ‘I was simply dying for letters today, none yesterday or the day before’ (CL III 48).

Underlying Mansfield’s preoccupation with letters was her concern over continuity, where the seriality of letters acted as indicators of survival. In early November she told Murry: ‘If only one could rid oneself of this feeling of finality—if there were a continuity. [...] The feeling that one goes on [...] but its really all over’ (CL III 65). In late November, Mansfield feared that they would never meet again: ‘I get overwhelmed at times that it is all over, that we’ve seen each other for the last time’, and that later readers would find a ‘queer finality in their letters’ (CL III 106). In her preoccupation with her illness and mortality, Mansfield came to see letters in almost superstitious terms as a means of protection against her worsening illness, where the continuance of letters meant the continuance of life.
Mansfield’s preoccupation with her own mortality and renewed use of military figurative language coincides with the period when she began to consider the long-term effects of the war on literature and aesthetics. The day before the first anniversary of the Armistice, she wrote to Murry about Virginia Woolf’s new novel *Night and Day*: ‘The war never has been, that is what its message is. I dont want G. forbid mobilisation and the violation of Belgium—but the novel cant just leave the war out. There must have been a change of heart’. Expanding outwards from Woolf’s novel, Mansfield asserts that the war had fundamentally changed art and argues for the necessity of ‘new expressions new moulds’, suggesting (retrospectively) that the war had stimulated the ongoing development of literary modernism. She stressed the idea of facing the war: ‘it positively frightens me—to realise this utter coldness & indifference. [...] Inwardly I despise them all for a set of cowards. We have to face our war—they wont’. Mansfield then linked this idea of facing the war with facing her illness: ‘I fail because I don’t face things. I feel almost I have been ill so long for that reason’ (CL III 82).\(^{39}\) She presented herself as a soldier or warrior in comparison to the ‘cowards’ Woolf and the ‘Blooms Berries’, as she disparagingly referred to them to Ottoline Morrell (CL I 326). It is perhaps this linking of the war with her illness which contributed to the language of suffering that both Murry and Mansfield used. He told her on 11 November that ‘I am convinced that you and I have suffered the war more than anyone’ (CL III 99). Mansfield’s response is similarly couched in the language of involvement: ‘I share it all—your knowledge of how we have suffered, how we seem of all our generation to have been to the war’ (CL III 98).

Preoccupied throughout November with the aesthetic effects of the war, Mansfield suggested a few days later that the war had provoked a knowledge of mortality and a need to ‘face’ death. Her dissatisfaction with the contemporary novel led to her own modernist manifesto, which outlines the conditions of post-war writing:

I can only think in terms like ‘a change of heart’. I cant imagine how after the war these men can pick up the old threads as tho’ it never had been. Speaking to you Id say we have died and live again. How can that be the same life? It doesn’t mean that Life is the less precious of [sic] that the ‘common things of light and day’ are gone. They are not gone, they are intensified, they are illumined. Now we know ourselves for what we are. In a way its a tragic knowledge. Its as though, even while we live again we face death. But through Life: thats the point. (CL III 97)\(^{40}\)
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During the period when Mansfield was concerned with her worsening illness and mortality, she suggested that the war also provided a knowledge of mortality; that after the war, death was omnipresent as an inherent part of life. Mansfield again returns to the language of ‘facing’ death, linking this with her own need to face her illness, again implicitly presenting her illness as a mode of war experience. In late 1919, Mansfield’s intense anxiety concerning her illness and mortality, her renewed use of military diction and her preoccupation with the effects of the war were mutually reinforcing. She described her own aesthetic method as follows:

But of course you dont imagine I mean by this knowledge ‘let us eat and drink-ism’. No, I mean ‘deserts of vast eternity’. But the difference between you and me is (perhaps Im wrong) I couldn’t tell anybody bang out about those deserts. They are my secret. I might write about a boy eating strawberries or a woman combing her hair on a windy morning & that is the only way I can ever mention them. But they must be there. Nothing less will do. They can advance & retreat, curtsy, caper to the most delicate airs they like but I am bored to Hell by it all. (CL III 97–98)

This is the paradox in Mansfield’s work: her repeated calls to ‘face’ the war and her seemingly contradictory method of indirection, only explicitly referring to the war in a handful of her stories. Her assertion of the significance of the war for the arts coincided with her own renewed use of its diction and tropes: even her ‘deserts’ ‘advance & retreat’.

For Mansfield, 1919 was therefore a period of increasingly debilitating illness and preoccupation with her own potentially imminent death, and simultaneously a time of asserting the impact of the war on literature. The reintroduction of militaristic discourse into Mansfield’s writing in the second half of 1919, following the seemingly deliberate exclusion of it in the first half of the year, was not coincidental, but indicative of her linking the war dead with her own potential death. Reading Mansfield’s statements about post-war literary form in November 1919 in their broader epistolary context therefore gives her remarks about the necessity of facing and representing the war – and by extension, death – a different resonance.

Conclusion: Mansfield as Civilian Modernist

Contrary to the idea that the war had ‘used up words’ as Henry James claimed in 1915, Mansfield was interested in the possibilities for aesthetic experimentation and new figurative language that the war
This article has examined the ways that Mansfield used the war and embraced it as a subject matter in three clusters of letters from 1915, 1918, and the second half of 1919. Mansfield’s initial attempts to render her civilian war-experience in the 1915 cluster demonstrate her pleasure at experimenting with different modes of writing her new subject. The combination of expressions of anxiety and depression with playful and flippant uses of military discourse in her 1918 letters from Paris suggests that the war had become, to Mansfield, at least, a less serious subject than her own illness. Here, Mansfield developed the motif of herself as combatant and the war as a counter-trope to her own battle with illness. Her letters from July to December 1919 demonstrate her renewed use of military diction at a time when her illness was becoming increasingly debilitating and she was preoccupied with her own mortality, at the same time as she was considering the impact of the war on the arts. These overlapping discourses of the war, illness, and mortality were not coincidental, but mutually reinforcing.

Rather than being ancillary writings then, letters may actually be where modernist experimentation and innovation took place. For Mansfield, letters were an importance space for experimentation, allowing her to try out military tropes and figurative language in various contexts, as well as providing a space to exercise her thoughts on post-war literary form. Although Mansfield’s comments on the ‘new expressions new moulds’ necessitated by the war are regularly quoted, this article has situated them in their broader epistolary context, which is tied up contextually with Mansfield’s preoccupations with illness and mortality and her deliberate and renewed use of military figurative language. Reading her letters in this context, as well as the new mass epistolary culture of wartime, allows us to read this modernist manifesto afresh.

Although the war did not make Mansfield into a modernist writer—she was already an experimental writer before the war began—her writing was clearly highly stimulated and developed by this new subject matter. The hybrid literary idiom developed in Mansfield’s letters would in turn influence her creative development and her fiction. In her stories which explicitly mention the war, we see the war’s influence through the ways it was experienced and understood on the home front by civilians. The war is contained, domesticated, and commodified into ‘toy cannons and soldiers and zeppelins’ or represented through a crying woman (‘Spring Pictures’, 1915); depicted as causing changes to civilian life through the satire of upper-class callousness of ‘Two Tuppenny Ones, Please’ (1917); experienced through the interior monologue of a civilian woman in
response to a letter from a soldier in the war zones (‘Late at Night’, 1917); depicted as something which impedes leisure travel (‘A Dill Pickle’, 1917); presented through sentimental souvenirs brought home to sweethearts and through references to ‘my poor dear lad in France’ (‘Pictures’ (1919); seen through the ‘men in khaki’ and “‘hospital boys’ in blue’ in a crowd on a public holiday (‘Bank Holiday’, 1920); and depicted through a parent’s grief at the loss of his son (‘The Fly’, 1922). Even ‘An Indiscreet Journey’ (1915), the only story written directly from Mansfield’s experience in the war zones, depicts the violence of war through a smashed bottle and spilt wine in a French cafe. The war provoked Mansfield into a mode of civilian modernism, which became the style of (some of) her later stories, and it turned her, through her response to Woolf, into the theorist of modernism that she might not otherwise have become.

Notes


10. The first air raids on the UK took place on January 1915 on Great Yarmouth and King’s Lynn on the East Coast, but the first raids on London happened in May 1915, making Mansfield’s experience in Paris a novel occurrence to her British metropolitan readers.


15. 12 March [1918], *CL II* 119. This was published as *Frederick Goodyear, Letters and Remains, 1887–1917* (London: McBride, Nast & Co: 1920).

16. Mansfield often played with this sense of letters as what Stanley refers to as a ‘simulacrum of presence’ during the war and postwar years, p. 208. Her letters are frequently personified or take on human qualities: ‘these letters take a shape which is like you—they are a minute manifestation of you. The A walks, the Y is a man waving his arms, the E is someone sitting down’ [16 November 1919], *CL III* 98–99.

17. Stanley, p. 203.


22. To Harold Beauchamp, 15 December 1914, *CL I* 142. 143n5 discusses the letter from Leslie Beauchamp to Harold Beauchamp of 11 February 1915 which mentions this.

23. Stanley, p. 211.
24. For an interesting reading of Mansfield’s accounts of the 1915 air raids, see Alex Moffett ‘Katherine Mansfield’s Home Front: Submerging the Martial Metaphors of “The Aloe”, Katherine Mansfield Studies, 6 (2014), 69–83.
25. As the footnote explains, the title is confused with Murry’s 1913 poem The Critic in Judgement. O’Sullivan and Scott, CL I 160n6.
26. The letter is recounted in Carco’s Montmartre à vingt ans (1938) and the original manuscript has been lost, meaning that, as O’Sullivan and Scott note, ‘one must be wary of accepting what he quotes as completely authentic’, CL I xxiii.
27. She wrote the next day within the same letter: ‘After all I never wrote a thing’, [22–24 March 1915], CL I 166.
28. ‘Warrior’ was figurative for Murry, who had been declared medically unfit for active service and instead worked in the War Office as editor of the Daily Review of the Foreign Press.
29. Saxin, a brand name for saccharine, was a sugar substitute used due to wartime shortages.
30. Booth, p. 5.
31. Stanley, p. 223.
32. [16 March 1918], CL II 125.
33. Mansfield was ‘Wig’ and Murry was ‘Tig’.
34. Burgan, Illness, Gender, and Writing, p. 37.
35. [18 April 1918], CL II 166; To Ida Baker, [12 April 1918], CL II 164.
36. This is ‘[t]he first line of the chorus from “Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!”, the well-known song of the Northern armies in the American Civil War, the words and music by G. F. Root’, O’Sullivan and Scott, CL III 139n5.
37. A Sam Browne belt is a ‘leather belt for dress uniform, with a strap passing over the right shoulder’, O’Sullivan and Scott, CL III 61n3.
38. [2 November 1919], CL III 65.
39. The review was published as ‘A Ship Comes into the Harbour’ in the Athenaeum, 21 Nov. 1919, O’Sullivan and Scott, CL III 83n1.
40. The ‘common things of light and day’ alludes to Wordsworth’s Ode: Intimations of Immortality (O’Sullivan and Scott, CL III 98n5), which was Mansfield’s current ‘bedfellow’ (97).
41. The ‘deserts of vast eternity’ is a quotation from Andrew Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’ (O’Sullivan and Scott, CL III 98n6).