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The Letters and Journals of  
Katherine Mansfield

*A Selection*

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EDITED BY C. K. STEAD

ALLEN LANE

the height of a garden spade I spent weeks – months – watching a man do all these things and wandering through canes of yellow butter beans and smelling the spotted speckled broad bean flowers and helping to plant Giant Edwards and White Elephants. Oh, dear, I do love gardens! Think of little lettuces and washing radishes under the garden tap. I'd better stop. I just saw you climb into a cherry tree, and leaning against the trunk of the tree I saw and smelt the sweet sticky gum . . .

To J. M. Murry

[15 April 1920]

. . . I envy you 'madly' going to see *Cymbeline*. If you knew how full my mind is of Shakespeare! It's a perfect world – his pastoral world. I roam through the Forest of Arden and sit on the spiced Indian sands laughing with Titania. When we *do* get a small quiet moment – *what* talks! But you are going to Stratford-on-Avon. Lucky, lucky boy! And you won't remember for a moment that was the first English country your wife saw, and she used to walk about there with her hair down her back, wearing a pinky-grey hat and even in those days carrying one of those small green Shakespeares (but of course, it was Amleto, then.) . . .

[24 April 1920]

. . . Oh, how I agree about Shylock! I think *The Taming of the Shrew* is so *deadly* too. I am certain Bill never wrote it: he bolstered up certain speeches, but that is all. It's a hateful, silly play, so badly constructed and arranged. I'd never go to see it. I think we shall have a Shakespeare festival one year at Broomies – get actors there to study their parts – act out of doors – a small festa – a real one. I'll be stage director. *I am dead serious about this . . .*

Really, it's grilling hot today! I feel inclined to make a noise like a cicada . . .

Journal

[April 1920]

When autograph albums were the fashion – sumptuous volumes bound in soft leather, and pages so delicately tinted that each tender sentiment had its own sunset sky to faint, to die upon – the popularity of that most sly, ambiguous, difficult piece of advice: 'To thine own self be true' was the despair of collectors. How dull it was, how boring, to have the same thing written six times over! And then, even if it was Shakespeare, that didn't prevent it – oh, *l'âge d'innocence!* – from being dreadfully obvious. Of course, it followed as the night the day that if one was true to oneself . . . True to oneself! which self? Which of my many – well really, that's what it looks like coming to – hundreds of selves? For what with complexes and repressions and reactions and vibrations and reflections, there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor, who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys to the wilful guests.

Nevertheless, there are signs that we are intent as never before on trying to puzzle out, to live by, our own particular self. *Der Mensch muss frei sein* – free, disentangled, single. Is it not possible that the rage for confession, autobiography, especially for memories of earliest childhood, is explained by our persistent yet mysterious belief in a self which is continuous and permanent; which, untouched by all we acquire and all we shed, pushes a green spear through the dead leaves and through the mould, thrusts a scaled bud through years of darkness until, one day, the light discovers it and shakes the flower free and – we are alive – we are flowering for our moment upon the earth? This is the moment which, after all, we live for – the moment of direct feeling when we are most ourselves and least personal.

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To Richard Murry

[17 January 1921]

... It's a very queer thing how *craft* comes into writing. I mean down to details. For example. In *Miss Brill* I choose not only the length of every sentence, but even the sound of every sentence. I choose the rise and fall of every paragraph to fit her, and to fit her on that day at that very moment. After I'd written it I read it aloud - numbers of times - just as one would *play over* a musical composition - trying to get it nearer and nearer to the expression of Miss Brill - until it fitted her.

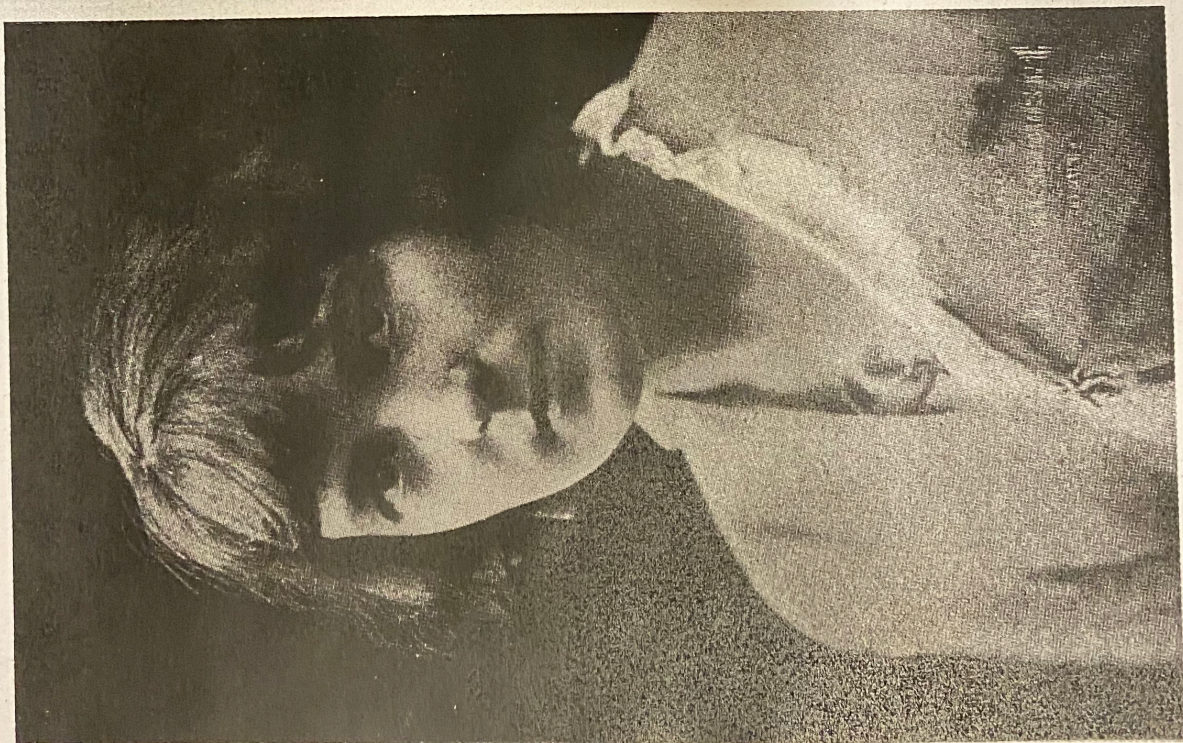
Don't think I'm vain about the little sketch. It's only the method I wanted to explain. I often wonder whether other writers do the same - If a thing has really come off it seems to me there mustn't be one single word out of place, or one word that could be taken out. That's how I AIM at writing. It will take some time to get anywhere near there.

But you know, Richard, I was only thinking last night people have hardly begun to write yet. Put poetry out of it for a moment and leave out Shakespeare - now I mean prose. Take the very best of it. Aren't they still cutting up sections rather than tackling the whole of a mind? I had a moment of absolute terror in the night. I suddenly thought of *a living mind* - a whole mind - with absolutely nothing left out. With *all* that one knows how much does one not know? I used to fancy one knew all but some kind of mysterious core (or one could). But now I believe just the opposite. The unknown is far, far greater than the known. The known is only a mere shadow. This is a fearful thing and terribly hard to face. But it must be faced.





*Garsington, 1916*



*1914*