

I have already said that Mansfield had contracted tuberculosis. I saw her about six months before her death.⁹ She spoke in a high-pitched voice that night. Her wind-pipe seemed to vibrate like a reed, and each time she finished speaking, she seemed short of breath and her cheeks became flushed. I found it most distressing to see how weak she was. The slightest excitement caused her to raise her voice, and when she did so she wheezed and her chest heaved almost visibly. The pity of it! I lowered my voice in the hope that she would do likewise, and for a while she spoke more quietly. But the moment she began to get carried away, she would raise her voice again. Finally I could not bear to see her consuming her energy in this way on my account, and remembering how Murry had repeatedly warned W and S, I took my leave. It was altogether no more than twenty minutes from the time I entered the room to the time she saw me out of it.

Our conversation was an interesting one. Most of the time, she was giving her opinion of some of the novelists then popular in England: Rebecca West, Roma Wilson, Hutchinson, Swinnerton and one or two others. I am afraid few of my readers will be familiar with these writers and so her views might not interest them. But Murry, who is one of the most learned of the younger English critics, and whose speech at Oxford last year, 'The Problem of Style', is judged to have been the most important contribution to criticism since Matthew Arnold, frequently praises Mansfield's brilliant literary judgement, her unfailing critical acumen. So I feel it would be a great shame not to record something of her casual remarks that evening. She told me that she had just come back from Switzerland, where she had lived close to the Russells. They often talked about the merits of the East. She had always had a respect for China, and now she found herself becoming one of its warm admirers. She said that what she liked best was Chinese poetry in the translations of Arthur Waley. She thought that the Chinese art of poetry was a wonderful revelation to the West. But she was disappointed with Amy Lowell's translations. In this context she used one of her favourite expressions: 'That's not the thing!' She asked me if I had done any translations myself, and encouraged me several times to have a try. She believed that only a Chinese could translate Chinese poetry.

She asked me whether I wrote fiction too. Then she inquired which of Chekhov's stories the Chinese liked best, and if they were well-translated, and which other writers had exerted an influence on Chinese literature.

She asked me which novelists I liked best. I said Hardy and Conrad's work was wonderful. She raised her eyebrows and smiled.

'Isn't it! We have to go back to the old masters for good literature—the real thing!'