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*Modernism Reloaded: The Fiction of
Katherine Mansfield*

It's very largely as a Modernist that we now know Katherine Mansfield. Successive waves of new emphasis in the study of literary Modernism have brought her work ever closer to the centre of current understandings of how, when, where, and why this decisive movement arose, and of what it can be said to have accomplished at its most radical. Gender and sexual politics, the interaction of metropolis and colony, periodical networks: whichever way you look, the new emphasis fits.¹ No wonder Mansfield has recently been hailed as Modernism's "most iconic, most representative writer."²

The aim of this essay is to bring a further perspective in Modernist studies to bear on Mansfield's fiction, in order primarily to illuminate the fiction, but also, it may be, the perspective. The one I have in mind is that provided in broad outline by enquiries into the historical sequence which leads from nineteenth-century sciences of energy to twentieth-century sciences of information. Introducing an important collection of essays on the topic, Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson explain that the invention of the steam engine at the beginning of the nineteenth century resulted both in the technological reorganization of industry and transport, and in a new research emphasis on the mechanics of heat.

¹ Respectively, Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Elleke Boehmer, "Mansfield as Colonial Modernist: Difference Within," in Gerry Kimber and Janet Wilson, eds, *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield: A Centenary Volume of Essays* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 57-71; and Jenny McDonnell, *Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Marketplace: At the Mercy of the Public* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

² Gerry Kimber and Janet Wilson, "Introduction," in Kimber and Wilson, eds, *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield*, 1-10 (p. 1).

At mid-century, the development of thermodynamics was consolidated in the modern energy concept. The mathematics of probabilities adopted in the statistical methods of both social and physical sciences carried thermodynamics toward a logic of order and randomness that later unfolded throughout the twentieth century in the forms of quantum mechanics, cybernetics, information theory, and the subsequent and ongoing expansion of computer sciences and communication technologies.

By the late nineteenth century, Clarke and Henderson add, electromagnetism had joined thermodynamics in challenging current conceptions of physical reality. Inventions such as X-rays announced radiant energy in the form of electromagnetic waves. “The discovery of radioactivity and the identification of the electron subsequently kept the thermodynamic and electromagnetic themes of energy in the forefront of the public’s imagination well into the twentieth century.” The scientific and technological discourse of energy pervades the manifestos and self-explanations broadcast by avant-garde writers and artists of the period. It became, Clarke and Henderson conclude, a “basic impetus for artistic and literary modernisms.”³

Examples of impetus are not hard to find. “We might come to believe,” Ezra Pound observed, “that the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying.”⁴ Pound specifically invoked the idea of electromagnetism to claim that the imagination “gives light where it meets resistance.”⁵ He was by no means alone among his contemporaries, as Tim Armstrong has shown, in conceiving literary production as a form of incandescence which lights up the reader.⁶ It has

³ Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Introduction,” in Clarke and Henderson, eds, *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2-3.

⁴ Ezra Pound, “The Serious Artist,” in *Literary Essays*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 41-57 (p. 49).

⁵ Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, rev. ed. (London: Peter Owen, 1952), 97.

⁶ Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19. Armstrong has proved indefatigable in demonstrating Modernism’s saturation in electrical energies. See also his *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 115-22; and Bruce Clarke, *Dora Marsden*

long been the custom to observe that Pound and his collaborators prided themselves on their energy. Hugh Kenner's classic account of *The Pound Era*, for example, treats Wyndham Lewis, the inventor of Vorticism, as though he were some kind of electrical demi-god. "In Pound's experience," Kenner reports, "Lewis was a phenomenon without precedent. He stood outside the human race, or more exactly outside what it had made of itself through letting its energies lapse. (All is energy.)"⁷ The "modern energy concept," as Clarke and Henderson call it, could be said to have established a formula for the conduct of literary experiment c.1910 to c.1925.⁸ It seems reasonable to assume that scientific and technological discourse contributed to what we might think of as a revival of the ancient rhetorical use of the term to indicate vigorous expression: "that same forcibleness," in Sir Philip Sidney's phrase, "or *energia*, (as the Greeks call it), of the writer."⁹

Of course, not all forcibleness is electrical or thermodynamic. It seems appropriate to associate Mansfield with the Bergsonian evolutionary vitalism which dominated London literary circles in the years before the First World War.¹⁰ For a brief period the avant-garde magazine *Rhythm*, launched in June 1911 by John Middleton Murry with a little help from the Fauvist painter John Duncan Fergusson, became a platform for enthusiastic expressions of vitalism. "Our intention," Murry announced in the magazine's first issue, "is to provide art, be it drawing, literature or criticism, which shall be vigorous, determined, which shall have its roots below the surface, and be the rhythmical echo of the life with which it is in touch."¹¹ The editorial's reliance on organic metaphor to

and Early Modernism: Gender, Individualism, Science (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

⁷ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 241.

⁸ Ian F.A. Bell, "The Real and the Ethereal: Modernist Energies in Eliot and Pound," in Clarke and Henderson, eds, *From Energy to Information*, 114-25.

⁹ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. R.W. Maslen, 3rd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 113.

¹⁰ Eiko Nakano, "Katherine Mansfield, *Rhythm* and Henri Bergson," in Janet Wilson, Gerry Kimber, and Susan Reid, eds, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2011), 30-41.

¹¹ John Middleton Murry, "Aims and Ideals," *Rhythm* 1.1 (1913): 36.

expound a philosophy of essential rhythm betrays its origin in a biological rather than a thermodynamic “energy concept.” Murry also contributed to the first issue an uncompromisingly vitalist hymn to intuition. “Modernism,” he wrote, “is not the capricious outburst of intellectual dipsomania. It penetrates beneath the outward surface of the world, and disengages the rhythms that lie at the heart of things, rhythms strange to the eye, unaccustomed to the ear, primitive harmonies of the world that is and lives.” Art’s job was to dig down deeply into instinctual life in order to release energies trapped there by too much civilization. It was through his editorship of *Rhythm* that Murry met Mansfield, and D.H. Lawrence. She may well have felt compelled by his thesis that art “turns to regard the things of daily life with the eyes of the heightened reason; and in the moment of intuition once more to behold and make actual, though for a moment, the great continuity.”¹² But I’m not convinced that the great continuity was really her thing. The energies which traverse and shape the later writing, in particular, are very much more spasmodic—more discontinuous, more jittery—than the ideas of *durée* and *élan vital* then in circulation would readily have accommodated.

At the beginning of “Bliss,” for example, Bertha Young longs to echo rhythmically the life with which she feels supremely in touch—“to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again”—but is instead gripped by a kind of spasm, or seizure. “What can you do,” Mansfield wonders on her behalf, “if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!—as though you’d suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe? ...”¹³ The feeling of absolute bliss which overcomes Bertha strikes me as electrical in nature, function, and scope, rather than bio-evolutionary. This was, after all, the era of the establishment of particle physics by the momentous claim that atoms are not fundamental, as had long been thought, but themselves conglomerations of yet smaller particles (electron, proton, neutron). Mansfield seems to want to measure the force of blissful energy by its suffusion of being right down to the sub-atomic level.

¹² “Art and Philosophy,” *Rhythm* 1.1 (1913): 9-12 (p. 12).

¹³ Katherine Mansfield, *Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2001), 91-2. Henceforth *S*.

Michael Whitworth has rightly reminded us that scientific knowledge, far from distributing itself uniformly throughout a culture as an intellectual atmosphere, is conveyed differentially by specific material media. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Whitworth points out, the media distributing scientific knowledge included newspapers, periodicals, and weeklies such as *The Nation* and *The New Statesman*, but not, on the whole, avant-garde magazines. Murry's *Rhythm* (1911-1913) stuck to Bergson; Murry's *Athenaeum* (1919-1921), with a wider circulation, included a weekly science column as well as regular reviews of scientific books.¹⁴ Any reader of the *London Times* who took more than a passing interest in physics would have known that the term "particle" belonged to one of the most adventurous yet authoritative idioms in which energy was now spoken about. On 12 September 1912, the *Times* reported that the eminent physicist Sir J.J. Thomson had the previous day given a paper on "The Structure of the Atom" at a meeting of the British Association in Birmingham during which he drew attention to the relation existing "between the frequency and the energy of the vibrating particle":

The energy acquired depended on the frequency and not on the intensity of the radiation. To him, there were insuperable difficulties in supposing energy to be "done up" in units, and he illustrated this point by a simple analogy, concluding the paper with mathematical proofs of his argument.¹⁵

I quote this report, not because I believe Mansfield read it, but because it gives a flavour of the popular discourse of particle physics. The media specific to Modernist literary culture did not, in fact, ignore that discourse altogether. Indeed, they further popularised it, in certain quarters, by trenchant rebuttal. T.E. Hulme, writing about Bergson in *The New Age*, a journal to which Mansfield contributed frequently, set out to demolish the "mechanistic view" that occurrences of all kinds ultimately amount to no more than a "change of position

¹⁴ Michael H. Whitworth, "Science in the Age of Modernism," in Peter Brooks, Andrzej Gąsiorek, Deborah Longworth, and Andrew Thacker, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 445-60 (pp. 449-50).

¹⁵ "British Association," *Times*, 12 September 1912, 10-12 (p. 10).

of indivisible particles.”¹⁶ Dora Marsden, defining the imaginary in an issue of *The Egoist* which also included an extract from Lewis’s *Tarr*, poems by H.D., Lawrence, and May Sinclair, as well as Pound’s review of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, similarly cast physics as the enemy. Marsden wanted to show that “molecular movement” has as much claim to be thought of as a form of consciousness as “a state of bliss or of agony or any kind of feeling whatsoever.” Her own view of the relation between subject and object required that scientific description—“It says, for instance, that every particle of matter in the universe attracts every other particle with a force of fixed potentialities for all given cases”—should give way to an enquiry into causes. “*Why* do all particles of matter attract one another?”¹⁷

It would not be impossible to argue that Mansfield’s particle is one of those “tentative” and “fragmentary” metaphors which Modernist writers used, as Whitworth has shown, to define “their own formal experiments in literature and those of others.”¹⁸ An argument to that effect would require further research into the nature and extent of her familiarity with media in general. It would also have to take account of uses of the term both elsewhere in her writing, and in modes of non-literary discourse other than the scientific. For there is at least one further story in which the particles at issue would appear to be entirely compatible with a Bergsonian intuition of primitive harmonies. In “Prelude,” Linda Burnell does a great deal better at rhythmic echo of the life she’s in touch with through reverie or day-dream than Bertha Young ever will through hopping on and off the pavement. “Yes, everything had come alive down to the minutest, tiniest particle, and she did not feel her bed, she floated, held up in the air” (*S* 28). Mansfield can’t be said to have switched vocabularies from Bergsonism to sub-atomic physics as *Rhythm* gave way to the *The New Age* and the *Athenaeum*.

In the meantime, the particles which flourished in the sorts of publication we don’t know whether Mansfield read or not were of the cheerfully hygienic and

¹⁶ “Notes on Bergson,” *New Age*, 10.5 (1911): 110-12 (p. 112).

¹⁷ “Observations Preliminary to a Definition of ‘Imaginary,’” *The Egoist*, 4.2 (1917), 17-20, 31 (pp. 19, 31). Bruce Clarke has explored her “vitalistic reification of the ego as the life force sublimated into self-consciousness” at length; see *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism*, 9.

¹⁸ Whitworth, “Science in the Age of Modernism,” 457.

self-improving variety. Contemporary advertisements for toothpaste and the like dilate on suffusiveness with an eagerness not wholly dissimilar to “Bliss” and “Prelude.” Pears Soap is of such “incomparable quality,” we learn, that “every particle of it comes into use as SOAP.”¹⁹ Similarly, “every particle” of Horlick’s Malted Milk “is wholesome nourishment, it keeps indefinitely, and there is absolutely no waste.”²⁰ Bertha Young and Linda Burnell no doubt wish that the incomparable quality of their bliss would keep indefinitely.

This thumbnail sketch of discursive contexts is intended to suggest that an investigation of Mansfield’s exposure to energy concepts other than the vitalist, if not exactly straightforward, might none the less prove productive. I won’t undertake such an investigation here. To my mind, the priority now is to establish what it is in the texts that might demand an elaboration of scientific and other contexts. My aim is to define the nature, scope, and function of the energies which traverse and shape a substantial selection of stories concerned primarily with urban experience. A certain kind of spasmodic manifestation of energy became her distinctive subject-matter. These spasms compelled her to write a certain kind of story. Whether the meanings we assume Mansfield’s stories to have produced are determinate or indeterminate is beside the point. These stories do not in fact ask to be interpreted at all. Instead, they store and redistribute energy. That is how they can be said to have reloaded Modernism. So, while there are metaphors in the exposition which follows, they are my own, or drawn from critical theory and the history of science. The metaphors have been trained on something I believe to be absolutely fundamental in the writing, at once a concern and a method.

Giggling

Much of the critical attention devoted to Mansfield as Modernist has taken as its focus her concern with, as she herself put it, “the moment which, after all, we live for—the moment of direct feeling when we are most ourselves and the least

¹⁹ Display advertisement, *Illustrated London News*, 23 December 1911, p. 1100.

²⁰ Display advertisement, *Illustrated London News*, 9 December 1916, p. 717.

personal.”²¹ The term critics most often use to describe her representation of such moments is one which has long been a mainstay of the study of literary Modernism: epiphany. Epiphany is at once a moment of self-realisation, on the protagonist’s part, and of insight, on the reader’s. We see into her seeing. Two forms of knowledge, intra- and extra-diegetic, coincide; and the result is the story’s measure of wisdom.²² But how sure are we that the concept of epiphany, as developed in Modernist studies, will do critical justice to the full range of spasms identifiable in Mansfield’s writing? Linda Burnell, floating, held up in the air, can surely be said to have undergone an epiphany. And so can Bertha Young, when, towards the end of “Bliss,” she stands side by side with Pearl Fulton, gazing at the pear tree in the garden (*S* 102). But Bertha, at the beginning of the story, stood in the street convulsed by a spasm, knows nothing more herself as a result of the experience, and reveals even less to the reader. In a subtle and evocative account of *jouissance féminine* in Mansfield’s stories, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet makes full use of the concept of epiphany to explain those moments in them when the protagonist appears somehow to have exceeded the patterns of gender and class expectation, to have come upon a pleasure all her own. She also notes, however, that the representation of such moments quite often incorporates a jagged rhythm strikingly at odds with epiphany’s completeness in itself. “Transferred to the textual body, the swing of the *on and off* mood which seems so characteristic of the cast of female characters will provide the very beat, the rhythm structuring the moment of vision enclosed by many stories, at the point of contact with the Real of enjoyment, pulsing with ungendered life.” The metaphor Paccaud-Huguet adopts to describe the jagged rhythm prompting Bertha’s desire to step on and off the pavement is that of the electrical switch.²³ What that metaphor brings out, very much to my purpose, is

²¹ *The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield: A Selection*, ed. C.K. Stead (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 173.

²² See, for recent examples of this approach, Anne Besnault-Levita, “—Ah, What Is It?—That I Heard’: Voice and Affect in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Fiction,” in Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber, and Susan Reid, eds, *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism: Historicizing Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2011), 89-100; and Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 105-123.

²³ “A Trickle of Voice: Katherine Mansfield and the Modernist Moment of Being,” in Kimber and Wilson, eds., *Celebrating Katherine Mansfield*, 131-43 (pp. 135-6).

the sheer arbitrariness of the feeling of bliss, as Mansfield represents it. Now replete, now vacant, switched abruptly on by an unknown agency, and abruptly off again, bliss cannot produce “vision.” The violent alternation which renders it palpable thereby declares it to be pure energy.

If we’re on the lookout for pure electrical energy, we could do worse than start with the remarkable amount of giggling that goes on in Mansfield’s stories: a habit whose lack of resemblance to epiphany has hitherto shielded it from critical curiosity. To giggle, the dictionaries tell us, is to laugh continuously in a manner not uproarious, but none the less suggestive of uncontrollable amusement. Giggling constitutes a distinctly odd version of the moment Mansfield so valued: the moment of “direct feeling” when we are “most ourselves and the least personal.” At once active and passive, wise and stupid, sought after and disavowed, contagious and isolating, a self-affirmation and a confession of helplessness, it switches itself incongruously on and off to a rhythm or beat all its own. Indeed, incongruity defines it. In Mansfield’s stories, giggling arises for the most part in indirect relation to expressions either of authority or, more often, of heterosexual desire. It is, in short, a dissident energy. But we need to note from the outset just how radical a dissidence she imagined it to embody. Being an energy, an electrical on/off device, giggling captures a person at their least personal. It could almost be said to *want* to reduce her or him to their least personal, switching itself on when confronted by the spectacle of other people becoming most themselves as they lay claim to authority or desire, or both. We might hazard that it doesn’t like *expression*: the whole identity masquerade. That profound scepticism disables any attempt to grasp the moment of direct feeling in, or as, epiphany.

“Carnation” concerns the competing claims made on the reflective consciousness by expressions of homosexual and heterosexual desire. Schoolgirl Eve (“curious Eve”) has brought a carnation into the classroom with her, on a hot summer’s day. “She snuffed it and snuffed it, twirled it in her fingers, laid it against her cheek, held it to her lips, tickled Katie’s neck with it, and ended, finally, by pulling it to pieces and eating it, petal by petal” (S 653). Carnations are carnal (from the Latin for fleshly). By eating this one in front of Katie (“They taste like—like—ah well!”), Eve converts it into a symbol. She encodes her desire.

Eve is not, however, the only attraction. In hot weather, the master, M. Hugo, gives pedagogy up as a bad job, and instead extracts from his coat-tail pocket a little book of poems:

They often giggled at it when he handed the book round. Poor old Hugo-Wugo! He adored reading poetry. He would begin, softly and calmly, and then gradually his voice would swell and vibrate and gather itself together, then it would be pleading and imploring and entreating, and then rising, rising triumphant until it burst into light, as it were, and then—gradually again, it ebbed, grew soft and warm and calm, and died down into nothingness.

The great difficulty was, of course, if you felt at all feeble, not to get the most awful fit of the giggles. Not because it was funny, really, but because it made you feel uncomfortable, queer, silly, and somehow ashamed for old Hugo-Wugo. But—oh dear—if he was going to inflict it on them in this heat ...

“Courage, my pet,” said Eve, kissing the languid carnation. (655)

Neither M. Hugo’s orgasmic performance as a reader nor Eve’s counteractive reiteration of flower-symbolism could very well be more blatant. So it goes on. Katie, “turned away to the dazzling light outside the window,” hears a man and a horse clatter over the cobbles below:

She *saw* him simply—in a faded shirt, his sleeves rolled up, his chest bare, all splashed with water—and as he whistled, loud and free, and as he moved, swooping and bending, Hugo-Wugo’s voice began to warm, to deepen, to gather together, to swing, to rise—somehow or other to keep time with the man outside (Oh, the scent of Eve’s carnation!) until they became one great rushing, rising, triumphant thing, bursting into light, and then—

The whole room broke into pieces.

“Thank you, ladies,” cried M. Hugo, bobbing at his high desk, over the wreckage.

And “Keep it, dearest,” said Eve. “*Souvenir tendre*,” and she popped the carnation down the front of Katie’s blouse. (656)

The blatancy of Eve's gesture would seem to cancel out the blatancy of the participial orgasm simultaneously enjoyed (with or without knowing it) by the two men. It's hard to tell which performance, male or female, has made the greater impression on Katie. They may even require each other for maximum effect. In such a context, the fit of the giggles which appears to have overcome Katie stands out by not expressing anything at all. It makes her feel uncomfortable, queer, silly, ashamed. This is not a sensation from which a great deal is to be learned. But who could doubt its violent intensity? We don't speak lightly of a "fit" of the giggles. From the point of view of intensity, all that distinguishes Katie's fit from the elaborately encoded displays of male and female desire which frame it is an awareness that it has switched itself on and off mechanically. The glimpse it offers of a person at her least personal prompts the thought that *all* violent feeling, however plausible its expression, might switch itself on and off mechanically, and is therefore not to be trusted to determine when it is that she is most herself. That Bertha Young's initial feeling of bliss more closely resembles a fit of the giggles than it does an epiphany should cast at least some suspicion on the durability of its later and in appearance more deeply motivated reiteration in front of the pear tree (the point of its entrance into symbolism).

I don't have the space here in which to account fully for the persistence of giggling in Mansfield's later stories. But I do want to emphasize a little further its definition as incongruity and arbitrariness. It always crops up unexpectedly; and it crops up as an antidote to the faith we might otherwise be inclined to invest in powerful expressions of powerful feeling. In "Mr and Mrs Dove," Anne gets the giggles whenever she encounters Reginald, the young man desperate to propose to her:

Another queer thing about it was, Reggie had an idea she didn't herself know why she laughed. He had seen her turn away, frown, suck in her cheeks, press her hands together. But it was no use. (*S* 290)

The queer thing about giggling is the queer thing in it: a refusal to signify in the way that other actions and gestures signify. Roland Barthes would have described its occurrences as the production of that third meaning which, neither

denoting nor connoting, “obtusely” neglects to ready itself for interpretation.²⁴ Reggie certainly feels the obtuseness of Anne’s laughter; feels it as the absence of desire:

There, with the gay herbaceous border behind her, Anne faced Reginald. “It isn’t that I’m not awfully fond of you,” she said. “I am. But”—her eyes widened—“not in the way”—a quiver passed over her face—“one ought to be fond of—” Her lips parted, and she couldn’t stop herself. She began laughing. (*S* 291-2)

That would seem to be that. But a fit of the giggles, having switched itself on, can perfectly well switch itself off again. The “marital” behaviour of Anne’s pet doves provides a symbolic language capable of suturing the wound made in the conventions of courtship by her obtuse spasm. Connotation reasserts itself. Repeated reference to Mr and Mrs Dove accustoms Anne to the thought of Reggie as a husband. By the end of the story, it looks as though she will accept his proposal of marriage. An antidote has been found to giggling’s antidote to expression. That second antidote, however, may prove as arbitrary in its application as the first. We don’t know exactly why Anne has switched herself on again, or what the consequences of her self-reversal are likely to be.

The respect Mansfield felt for giggling is evident in the attention she devoted to its brutality. In “Miss Brill,” a young woman being groped by her boyfriend on a park bench collapses at the sight of the protagonist’s ermine toque.

“No, not now,” said the girl. “Not here, I can’t.”

“But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?” asked the boy. “Why does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn’t she keep her silly old mug at home?”

“It’s her fu-fur which is so funny,” giggled the girl. “It’s exactly like a fried whiting.”

²⁴ Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” in *Image—Music—Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 52-68.

“Ah, be off with you!” said the boy in an angry whisper. Then: “Tell me, ma petite chère—”

“No, not here,” said the girl. “Not yet.” (S 335)

The fit may well be strategic. But energy violently released has unpredictable consequences. It is the laughter provoked by her *toque*, rather than remarks about her age, which sends Miss Brill home in utter mortification. By the same token, refraining from a fit of the giggles—as Fenella does, in “The Voyage” (327), as the narrator of “An Indiscreet Journey” does, at the sight of another *toque*, this one of black velvet, with a sea-gull camped on the top of it (622)—amounts to a moral victory. Mansfield sought out for representation energies which had not yet been channelled, which had not yet fallen foul of the vast cultural repertoire of denotations and connotations. The narrative form which accommodated that energy would have somehow *not* to channel it in the process; or, rather, to channel it in such a way as not to sublimate it into meaning. It would have to avoid succumbing to epiphany. In my view, Mansfield’s great contribution to literary Modernism lay in devising such a form. Her short stories are built like a machine.

Narrative Structure

In most cases, the narrative function of the fits of the giggles in Mansfield’s stories is proleptic. They anticipate more decisive feelings of arousal to come, feelings which may either endorse them or overturn them, but cannot altogether quell the suspicion of arbitrariness they have provoked. I want to begin to sketch a more comprehensive account of the emergence of those subsequent states of arousal by describing a particular narrative structure characteristic, it seems to me, of a significant number of her most brilliant stories of everyday urban life. It’s a structure I think of as bicameral. Why bicameral? Because the action begins in one room, or chamber, and ends in another. These rooms can be distinguished from the story’s other spaces, interior or exterior, by the intensity with which they have been both dwelt in and dwelt on. They occupy and are occupied by the protagonist. And they yield descriptive detail. The narrative relation proposed between the two dwelt-in and dwelt-on spaces is in each case metaphoric rather than metonymic. The effect of the development of the story is not to link one *to* the other contiguously, but rather to substitute one *for* the other.

Here are some examples, not amounting to a complete list, with some indication of variations within the pattern. They are for the most part urban stories.

Mansfield's Bicameral Stories (Movement between Buildings)

	Public	Private
“The Man without a Temperament”	salon (hotel)	bedroom (hotel)
“The Little Governess”	carriage (train)	drawing-room (flat)
“The Garden-Party”	garden (big house)	bedroom (small house)
“The Voyage”	cabin (boat)	bedroom (house)
“The Stranger”	cabin (boat)	bedroom (hotel)
“The Tiredness of Rosabel”	bus	bedsitting-room
“A Cup of Tea”	shop	bedroom (house)
“A Blaze”	café	boudoir
	Private	Public
“Psychology”	studio	doorstep/garden
“Pictures”	bedsitting-room	café
“Life of Ma Parker”	kitchen (flat)	street (“nowhere”)

In ordinary use, the term “bicameral” defines a form of government involving legislative chambers of different character and function. There is a similar difference in character and function between the two metaphorically linked spaces in these stories. Transition across that difference in character and function, either from the relatively public to the relatively private, or from the relatively private to the relatively public, in each case by metaphor rather than by metonymy, produces a further and more fully developed state of arousal of some sort. We could call that arousal knowledge, since it is no longer merely a fit of the giggles: though not a knowledge likely to result in action. It is, rather, a hyper-energized *state* quite likely to include the loss of illusion.

All of the stories I’ve so far mentioned involve movement from one building to another, or from the interior of a building to its exterior. But there are also stories which involve movement from one room to another within the same building.

Mansfield's Bicameral Stories (Movement between Rooms in the Same Building)

	Proximity to or distance from the public street	
“Bliss”	dining-room	drawing-room
“The Daughters of the Late Colonel”	dining-room	drawing-room/bedroom
“A Married Man’s Story”	sitting-room	(childhood) bedroom
“Sixpence”	drawing-room	nursery
“The Wrong House”	dining-room	kitchen

Here, the difference in character and function between one space and another tends to be measured in relation to proximity to or distance from the public street. The purpose of bicameral narrative structure is, once again, to channel arousal without sublimating it into meaning; to re-distribute it. We need to conceive the intricacies of this process in terms which would at least have been available to Mansfield, even if (to the best of my knowledge) she didn’t adopt them herself.

The concept I have in mind is that, not of “modern energy” in general, but of Maxwell’s Demon. Maxwell’s Demon was a celebrated thought-experiment undertaken by the physicist James Clerk Maxwell in order to refute the second law of thermodynamics, which decrees that in any closed system differences of temperature and chemical potential will over time even out, thus producing formlessness, or entropy. The experiment envisages a vessel full of air at uniform temperature.

Now let us suppose that such a vessel is divided into two portions, A and B, by a division in which there is a small hole, and that a being, who can see the individual molecules, opens and closes this hole, so as to allow only the swifter molecules to pass from A to B, and only the slower molecules to pass from B to A. He will thus, without expenditure of work, raise the temperature of B and lower that of A, in contradiction to the second law of thermodynamics.²⁵

²⁵ James Clerk Maxwell, *Theory of Heat*, 9th edn (New York: Longmans, Green, 1888), 328-9.

Maxwell's Demon counteracts the entropic drift towards equilibrium by sorting the fast molecules from the slow, and thus re-establishing the heat differentials which permit work to be done. In Mansfield's stories, the transition from one dwelt-in and dwelt-on room to another constitutes a comparable sorting device. It counters entropy by re-establishing "heat differentials" of some sort whose product is a state of arousal.

During the final decades of the nineteenth century, the second law of thermodynamics was widely held to predict the heat death of the universe, and thus the end of evolution. As Anson Rabinbach puts it, "obsession with fatigue in nineteenth-century thought was not merely a sign of the 'real' weariness of individuals in industrial society, but of the negative aspect of the body conceived as a thermodynamic machine capable of conserving and deploying energy."²⁶ One response to this bleak prospect was to discover in new sources of organic metaphysical energy an antidote to mechanical physical exhaustion. D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* is the most complex and ambitious Modernist expression of evolutionary vitalism as a response to the threat of social, psychic, and physical entropy.²⁷

Lawrence began to draft the novel in Cornwall in April 1916, shortly after Mansfield and Middleton Murry had moved into the cottage next door. The first two chapters of this draft, "Prologue" and "The Wedding," both subsequently abandoned, probably date from that month. "Prologue" remains, in its candid account of Rupert Birkin's desire for men, and of his overwhelming attraction to Gerald Crich, Lawrence's most radical advocacy of evolutionary vitalism. I want to argue that "Prologue" provides a context for "Bliss," which was first published in the *English Review* in August 1918. In her absorbing account of Murry and Mansfield's drift away from Lawrence's influence towards that of Bloomsbury, Sydney Janet Kaplan points out that in December 1916 they were spending the Christmas holiday with Lady Ottoline Morrell at Garsington when the manuscript of *Women in Love* arrived. Ottoline was deeply hurt by the caricature

²⁶ Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 48.

²⁷ Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism*, 162-7.

of her as Hermione Roddice. Murry and Mansfield, while not at this time reading the manuscript, took her part. Kaplan describes these events, and their variously evolving relationships with her, as the “emotional background” to “Bliss.”²⁸

“Bliss” has a bicameral narrative structure. As the story begins, Bertha is in the public street, and proleptically in a state of arousal, or bliss. Her homecoming, we might note for future reference, involves a minor assault on the membrane separating the outside from the inside of the closed system which is bourgeois domesticity. She’s forgotten her key, as usual, and has to rattle the letter-box to get attention (*S* 92). The bulk of the subsequent action takes place either in the drawing-room at the back of the house or in the dining-room at the front, where a meal is shared with Bertha and Harry’s “modern, thrilling friends” (96), including her latest discovery, Miss Pearl Fulton. It was in describing the curious intimacy which develops between Bertha and Pearl that Mansfield came closest to a Lawrentian evolutionary vitalism: or at least to that vitalism which, in the abandoned “Prologue” to *Women in Love*, accounts for Rupert Birkin’s wild homoerotic longing. The difference lies in her penchant for the electrical.

In the prologue, Birkin and Gerald Crich spend a week climbing in the Tyrol with a mutual friend. They both recognize that some kind of “sudden connection” took place the moment they first clapped eyes on one another. “There had been a subterranean kindling in each man. Each looked towards the other, and knew the trembling nearness.” Up in the mountains, in a “strange fire of abstraction,” the three men “had reached another state of being, they were enkindled in the upper silences into a rare, unspoken intimacy, an intimacy that took no expression, but which was between them like a transfiguration.” The intimacy is epiphanic: it takes no expression from either, but none the less transfigures their friendship, sublimating energy into meaning. When Birkin and Crich meet again, in the house of Sir Charles Roddice, “the enkindled sensitiveness sprang up again like a strange, embarrassing fire. They scarcely

²⁸ Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Circulating Genius: John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield and D.H. Lawrence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 69, 57.

knew each other, yet here was this strange, unacknowledged, inflammable intimacy between them. It made them uneasy.”²⁹

So it is when Bertha leads Pearl into the dining-room. “What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—fan—start blazing—blazing—the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?” (99). Like Rupert Birkin, Bertha marvels at the infallibility of this mutual recognition. “What she simply couldn’t make out—what was miraculous—was how she should have guessed Miss Fulton’s mood so exactly and so instantly” (101). Mansfield has quite closely reproduced Lawrence’s account of an unacknowledged, inflammable, transfiguring homosexual intimacy. Bertha, however, unlike Rupert, cannot sustain this level of sublimity. A further, yet more queer failing assails her. “She had to talk because of her desire to laugh” (101). Noticing the habit one of her guests has of tucking things down the front of her bodice, she “had to dig her nails into her hands—so as not to laugh too much” (101). The proximity of what seems like it might turn into an expression of desire has reduced Bertha to a fit of the giggles, which she swiftly suppresses. The fit’s flickering on and off indicates, at the very least, that the fire of bliss lit in the dining-room remains proleptic. The energy it consumes has not yet been fully sorted, and so made productive. It requires yet more difference between itself and the dinner party picturesquely evolving like “a play by Tchekof” (100).

After the meal has ended, Bertha, Harry, and their guests move into the drawing-room at the back of the house. It is in this transition from a relatively public to a relatively private room, or through this transition, that Mansfield’s *Demon* does its work, separating out the elements of the preliminary or proleptic bliss which Bertha had felt since the afternoon: the fast from the slow, the on from the off. We can say that separation has already begun, during the dinner party, as Bertha, reconfiguring the party as a play, distances herself from the social and cultural conventions which still bind her firmly. But it’s transition which confirms that change has happened. In the drawing-room, Pearl Fulton summons Bertha away from her guests to the window overlooking the garden. In a strange fire of abstraction comparable to that felt by Birkin and Crich in the “upper silences” of

²⁹ D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, ed. David Farmer, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 489-90. Henceforth *WiL*.

their mountain-top, Bertha and Pearl gaze at the pear-tree in the garden, caught in a “circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world” (102). Mansfield has once again begun to think like Lawrence. In “Prologue,” Birkin displaces his desire for Crich onto Hermione Roddice, without ultimate satisfaction.

After these nights of superfine ecstasy of beauty, after all was consumed in the silver fire of moonlight, all the soul caught up in the universal chill-blazing bonfire of the moonlit night, there came the morning, and the ash, when his body was grey and consumed, and his soul ill” (*WIL* 495).

Lawrence’s chill-blazing bonfire of moonlight is hard to distinguish from Mansfield’s. Just as Birkin’s perfect understanding with Gerald Crich makes heterosexuality possible again for him, and indeed necessary, if ultimately unsatisfactory, so in the immediate aftermath of her perfect understanding with Pearl does Bertha for the first time desire her husband. In both cases, there has in theory been some kind of social and psychic evolution through the arousal of mutually understood homoerotic feeling. Mansfield, however, brings her blissful protagonist back to earth even more abruptly than Lawrence had done. One of Bertha’s guests wants her to admire a poem in a book which she finds for him on a small table opposite the drawing-room door. “While he looked it up she turned her head towards the hall. And she saw ...” (*S* 105). What she sees is Harry and Pearl making an assignation. Bertha, having finally switched herself on, in what feels like a transformative moment of direct feeling, an epiphany, must now switch herself off again. Like Katie, in “Carnation,” she has been assailed by contrary expressions of homosexual and heterosexual desire. For her, too, the only real lesson learned lies in the mechanical coming and going of a fit of the giggles. Lawrence would never have dared think *that* thought.

Mansfield’s *Demon*, unlike Maxwell’s is only ever provoked into action by a sudden influx of energy from outside the system; and there is no guarantee, as we’ve seen, that its sifting and sorting will have a benevolent effect. As often as not, arousal is accompanied by abjection. The suddenness of this influx of energy converts the membrane separating the inside from the outside of bourgeois domesticity’s closed system into a zone of spectacle and shock. That is where

obtuse meaning most often manifests itself. The obtuse in Mansfield is the outside seen from the inside, or, less often, the inside seen from outside. It marks exteriority itself as a necessary and absolute force. Rather, the obtuse in Mansfield is the outside *heard* from inside, or vice versa. In this zone of spectacle and shock, one faculty collides with another, vision with hearing. Mansfield rarely describes the public street. But she takes care to let us know that it is indeed a very lively place. It is alive above all with *noise*. Mrs Bean shuts the door on the funeral parade which has arrived at “The Wrong House,” and leans whimpering against it. “*Clockety-clock-clock. Cluk! Cluk! Clockety-clock-cluk!* sounded from outside, and then a faint *Cluk! Cluk!* and then silence. They were gone” (S 666). In “Revelations,” “‘Coal! Coal! Coal! Old iron! Old iron! Old iron!’ sounded from below. It was all over. Understand her? He had understood nothing” (192). In Mansfield’s stories, bicameral structure creates a mechanism for the absorption and channelling of a shock from outside which in its initial manifestation takes the form of a merely obtuse meaning. This shock is difference itself.

Noise’s exteriority plays a crucial part in another bicameral story, “The Daughters of the Late Colonel.” Much of the action takes place in the dining-room of the flat Josephine and Constantia continue to occupy after their father’s death. Little, or not nearly enough, separates the dining-room from the kitchen run by their fearsome servant, Kate:

They were interrupted by Kate bursting through the door in her usual fashion, as though she had discovered some secret panel in the wall.

“Fried or boiled?” asked the bold voice. (S 278)

This archipelago of permeable semi-public spaces contrasts with the two sealed-off private spaces at the front of the building. Mansfield’s *Demon* drives Josephine and Constantia repeatedly from back to front, for anxious discussions about Kate in the drawing-room, or to clear away their dead father’s belongings, in the bedroom to which he had been confined during the last years of his life. It is his death, of course, which has made the difference, which has set the *Demon* going. We know that the drawing-room and bedroom are at the front of the building because street-noise forcibly intrudes into them:

But at that moment in the street below a barrel-organ struck up. Josephine and Constantia sprang to their feet together.

“Run, Con,” said Josephine. “Run quickly. There’s sixpence on the—”

Then they remembered. It didn’t matter. They would never have to stop the organ-grinder again. (281)

Will the difference made by their father’s death, a difference enforced by a metaphoric and metonymic transition to the rooms at the front of the house, enable them to lead lives of their own? At the end of the story, Constantia remembers the times she had come into the drawing-room, “crept out of bed in her night-gown when the moon was full, and lain on the floor with her arms outstretched, as though she was crucified. Why? The big, pale moon had made her do it” (284). But D.H. Lawrence this isn’t. There will be no sexual regeneration brought about by unburdening. These mock-epiphanies (Josephine gets one, too) cannot throw off the shadow of the most powerful feeling either of them has ever known: the fits of giggling which once sustained them, when they were much younger, against their father’s tyranny, and which now recur with a vengeance. One of these fits overwhelms Josephine, at the very beginning of the story, as she wonders whether or not they should give their father’s top-hat to the porter. “The giggle mounted, mounted; she clenched her hands; she fought it down; she frowned fiercely at the dark and said ‘Remember’ terribly sternly” (262).

The entrances to houses and apartments generate a good deal of obtuse meaning, in Mansfield’s stories. Exteriority almost always arrives by taxi, with the intention of being heard before it is seen. In “Widowed,” Mrs Howard, awaiting the arrival of Major Hunter, should perhaps fear the worst. “There was the taxi—making an enormous noise at the door” (S 509). In “The Dove’s Nest,” already widowed Mrs Fawcett, awaiting the arrival of her husband’s old friend Mr Prodger, should perhaps hope for the best when a “long, firm trill” sounds from the front-doorbell, a device to which she and her daughter have hitherto not been able to apply more than a “tentative little push” (450). Exteriority *sounds*, in Mansfield. It pulses obtusely against the closed system of bourgeois domesticity, while those inside quake at its reverberations, like Monica Tyrell, in “Revelations.” “But this morning she had been awakened by one great slam of

the front door. Bang. The flat shook” (190-91). This time it’s the wind, but other indignities are to follow, including the sharp cries of “Old iron!” which coincide with the complaint that her boyfriend Ralph has “understood nothing” (192). Sometimes you can hear exteriority when you’re standing out there in the middle of it. In “*Je ne parle pas français*,” Dick tells Raoul Duquette that he’s leaving for England the next day as they stand outside his hotel, waiting for the concierge to release the door-catch. England, Dick blandly remarks, is only a few hours away. “The door cracked open” (73). The door cracking open is one of Mansfield’s most beautiful effects. Is this what interiority sounds like to someone who is already too far outside it—outside the hotel, outside friendship, outside the story itself, perhaps—to know what it might amount to?

I’ve tried to recapture in this essay the view expressed by the most perceptive of Mansfield’s first readers that hers was a writing by spasm. “She found herself seized upon by a scene,” Elizabeth Bowen remarked, “an isolated incident or a face which, something told her, must *have* meaning, though she had yet to divine what the meaning was.”³⁰ Virginia Woolf, commenting on the 1934 Modern Continental Library edition of Mansfield’s *Letters*, drew attention to “that direct flick at the thing seen which was her gift.”³¹ Itself a perpetual convulsion, the writing could not but become engrossed by the fate of an energy which switches itself on and off apparently at will. Vitalism, disengaging the rhythms that lie at the heart of things, was never going to work for Mansfield. Instead, she devised a narrative structure which channels or sorts energy, rather than merely prompting it to express itself, to arise like a transfiguration, or an epiphany. In stories such as “Bliss” and “The Daughters of the Late Colonel,” the force of exteriority or difference enters the closed system of bourgeois domesticity from outside, usually by means of some faculty other than vision. Pearl Fulton arrives late, by taxi, and the coolness of her touch starts a fire blazing in Bertha. Class-difference erupts when the sound of the vulgar public street—the barrel-organ, Kate’s bold voice—penetrates the sanctuary into which a professional man’s daughters have retreated. These sounds resonate within the building. The energies they channel

³⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, “A Living Writer,” in Jan Pilditch, ed., *The Critical Response to Katherine Mansfield* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 73, 71.

³¹ Anne Oliver Bell and Andrew McNeillie, eds, *Dairy of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1977-1984), vol. 4, p. 315.

will not become meaningful until they have been sorted. The sorting, by Mansfield's *Demon*, involves the recognition that space is socially and culturally coded. Bourgeois ideology distinguishes between those rooms in a house which face outward, converting the stranger into a guest, temporary or permanent; and those which face inward, in order to create an inner sanctum or family retreat. In Mansfield's bicameral stories, movement from a space coded semi-public to a space coded semi-private sorts the energies throbbing in or through the shock already brought indoors into a hyper-energized state which constitutes work done, or difference made. This movement is by metaphor as well as metonymy. A hostess takes her guests into dinner. Daughters decide to clear out their dead father's bedroom. In the process, Mansfield's *Demon* has reversed entropy by insisting, to the reader, on difference. But is it ever enough? However hard it tries, the *Demon* cannot altogether expunge the traces of that other preliminary or proleptic bliss, queer, foolish, embarrassing, incongruous, unavoidable: a fit of the giggles. Mansfield's stories demand that we take energy seriously, as a subject-matter, and a provocation to method. Their strong implication, which further enquiry may or may not substantiate, is that Modernism should be regarded as a doctrine not of art for art's sake (as was once thought), or of medium for medium's sake (as some now think), but of energy for energy's sake.