

'Tea, Zen and Cosmic Anatomy': *The Mysticism of Katherine Mansfield*

GERRI KIMBER

This essay explores Katherine Mansfield's spiritual development, culminating in her decision to enter Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau, near Paris, in the autumn of 1922, together with her desire, as she expressed it at the end of her life: 'I want to be all that I am capable of becoming so that I may be – [...] a child of the sun'.¹

Aside from her childhood, when the Beauchamp family were regular worshippers at the old St Paul's Cathedral in Wellington, Mansfield was not a practising Christian. Her search for the spiritual was of a much more esoteric nature, leading her ultimately to join Gurdjieff and his followers at Fontainebleau, where she died. Ruth Mantz notes that '[m]any of her early diaries – not included in the *Journal* – already reflect a desperate personal need for a mystical philosophy'.² My book on Mansfield's reception in France discusses how the reactionary Catholic critics, who so swiftly claimed Mansfield after her death, ignored this aspect of her personality.³ Yet, as early as 1908, she was formulating opinions which today we might almost term 'new age', such as, '[t]o weave the intricate tapestry of one's own life, it is well to take a thread from many harmonious skeins – and to realise that there must be harmony'.⁴

There was a particular strand to this spirituality which manifested itself in Mansfield's personal life as well as in her creative endeavours, and that was her deep fascination with the Orient and its traditions. I shall show how this eventually linked up with her attraction to Ouspensky and Gurdjieff and the theosophical philosophies expounded in the book *Cosmic Anatomy*,⁵ which would have such a deep effect on her at a critical time in her life.

Mansfield had been back in Europe for less than two years when the enormous Japan-British exhibition was held at White City in Shepherd's Bush, from 14 May to 29 October 1910. It was the most concerted and systematic attempt by Japan to explain its traditional society and arts, modern industry, and empire, to its most important international ally, Great Britain. There were 'Japanese shrines and a village, miniature gardens, jugglers and wrestlers, prints and porcelain, the