

"Outdaring with a kiss all-powerful wrath:" Images of War, Images of Death

What, perhaps, "made" Richard Aldington a real writer was his experience of the 1914-18 War and the subsequent agony of being a physical survivor of the "holocaust." Aldington's 1941 autobiography *Life for Life's Sake* tells as much as he thinks seemly of the process by which he pieced himself together after survival and demobilisation, avoiding the twin whirlpools of indulgence and falsification, prompted by the "sudden and artificial remoteness" thrust on him by the outbreak of another war: "The thought that all this must again be endured and perhaps repeated until this malicious and foolish species has gone, is a thought not to be borne."¹

Aldington is particularly conscious of "certain reticences" in *Life for Life's Sake*, and it is certain that these are unconnected to matters military, social, literary, or for the most part personal. They have, notwithstanding the exhilarating frankness of the assault on "Victorian" (and Post-Victorian) sexuality in *Death of a Hero* (1929), to do with love and sex, part chivalric compunction for the feelings of H.D. his estranged wife, part characteristic inclination to eschew self-pity and wear the heart upon the sleeve.

Yet sex was a crucial component in Aldington's precarious post-War healing process. Reticent as he felt himself to be, he was infinitely more eloquent than other survivors, a bit less of a "gentleman" *au fond*, perhaps. Graves, Sassoon, Blunden, at least in print, in their poetry, in their memoirs/autobiographies, touch lightly if at all and in no discernible detail on the erotic ramifications of their war experiences. It is by no means Aldington's only theme, but it is central, unavoidable, obsessive. It is ultimately as much in the repairing of his maimed sexuality as of his profession, finances, physical health, friendships, that Aldington turned the corner from his overwhelming sense of (guilty) community with the armies of dead soldiers to the ringing affirmation of *Life for Life's Sake* which makes him one of the most attractive of leading post-War English writers.

Most of Aldington's pre-War writing is as much felt in the mind as felt in the blood, the prentice work of a genuine but callow and imitative young man. The marriage to H.D. had something puppy-doggish about it too. Hilda loved Ezra Pound but couldn't have him, Richard loved Brigit Patmore, but she was married, and so they married each other. Genuine, no doubt, but untempered by much else than the Greek Anthology (from which both these Poundling Imagists translated in the years before the War) and literary idealism.

The marriage, then, was full of unpleasant tensions long before, in the spring of 1916, Aldington resolved the contradiction between his horror of the war and his sense that he ought to be in it, and joined up, serving first as N.C.O.,

then Captain in the Royal Sussex Regiment. With intermittent furloughs he served in the trenches until demobilisation in February 1919. During the three years "through my own folly or worse, I had got my personal life into a tragical mess,"² a process fictionally treated, up to a point, in *Death of a Hero*, a mess involving among others Frieda and D.H. Lawrence, Cecil Gray (probably the father of Hilda's child Perdita), "Arabella" (Dorothy Yorke), John Cournos, Bryher (Winifred Ellerman/Mrs. Robert McAlmon) and a crew of others, almost none of whom had an inkling of life in the trenches ("Un peu gaga?" Elizabeth suggested. Fanny shrugged her shoulders"). However blithely self-inculpatory Aldington was after the fact, however justifiably indignant "those who had not been in it" (to use R.H. Mottram's phrase) were when the coarsened clumping simulacra came home on leave, months of horror at the Front changed boys like Aldington out of all recognition. Death was their familiar: being dead to start with, then the physical heft of it, the rotting corpses, edacious rats, tattered things out on the no-man's-land wire, individual death, mass death, not-quite-death, pervasive, indiscriminate, man-dealt, technologised, womanless, guaranteed death. The life-expectancy of a junior officer at the Front. . .

Unsurprisingly, the human experience at the furthest pole from this in Aldington's mind, if not in the minds of all the Captain Evanses ("Evans had been taught to respect all women as if they were his mother; would therefore have fallen an easy prey to the first tart who came along, and probably have married her"), was also a matter of bodies. Women's bodies, naked and white and whole, in the act of all acts which affirms life and drives inevitable death to the furthest borders of the consciousness, "the subtle, inexhaustible joys of the tender companionate woman's body."³ Pre-War Aldington had begun, if *Death of a Hero* has any autobiographical value, his assault on the sexual sterility of his parent's age and the forging of a pagan, worshipful celebration of the "Mother of the race of Aeneas, voluptuous delight of gods and men, sacred Aphrodite."⁴ Then came the dislocation, not just war, but a particularly hideous kind of war, an unprecedented wedding of progressive technology and the age-old charnel house, a premature *memento mori* of shattering force.

Not all of Aldington's sexual insights were supplied by his travails and meditations in the trenches, just as sex was not the only gouger of his psychic wound. Compare the beautiful but relatively cocooned Greek Anthology stuff in *Images* (1915) with the *Images of War* and the *Images of Desire* both of which appeared in 1919. The 1915 has its harsh moments ("Most of all I believe/ In gods of bitter dullness,/ Cruel local gods/ Who seared my childhood"), though the sexual ones are sad rather than savage. Mad France hurt Aldington into poetry, though the marriage to H.D. and the unwholesome goings-on of her circle had begun to prep him nicely for the knife: "An atmosphere of sex hysteria which is only a part of war hysteria, prevailed"⁵ wrote Cournos, just back in London from Petrograd.

The 23 pieces of *Images of Desire* make explicit the relationship between sex and war. They constitute a narrative, at least in emotional mood, of what

could be any love relationship, H.D. and Richard's, any perceptive lover's, but trammelled in the circumstances of war, *the War*. A soldier is back on leave from the trenches, and the images are those of the imminent likelihood of death on his return and the body of the woman with whom he is passing the days and nights of his furlough. Pivotal is "Before Parting" which sharply juxtaposes the horror of the trenches and the rapture of love-making:

Though in that horror of din and flame and murder
All men's blood grows faint and their limbs as water,
Though I return once more to the battle,
Though perhaps I be lost to you for ever—
Give me, O love, your love for this last brief season,
Be mine indeed as I am yours.⁶

Before parting, the soldier images and hymns the woman's body, her mouth ("a crushed flower," "an orange-grove in April"), her body ("whiter than the moon-white sea," "flower-like," "laden with sunlight and sharp heat"), her "little breasts," the "kisses and whispers and stabbing heart-beats." But in France again, doubt assails: "Have I lost her, lost her indeed?"

My dear will lie alone,
Or lie in other arms than mine
While I lie like a stone.⁷

In *Images of War*, too, a sequence to some extent interchangeable with *Images of Desire*, memories of before parting are mocked by the desolation and horror of the battlefield, by jealousies natural in absences less drastic than those of war, by the coarsening of the lover ("And how will you dare touch again/ Dear slender women with those disfigured hands?").

Love—Desire—War. Bit by bit the soldier subdues himself to what he works in. Winterbourne in *Death of a Hero* "felt a degradation, a humiliation, in the dirt, the lice, the communal life in holes and ruins, the innumerable deprivations and hardships."⁸ There are moments of relapse—

'So that hate poison not my days
And I still love the earth,
Flowers and all living things,
And my song still be keen and clear
I can endure.'

—but by the culmination of *Images of War*, blood, death, cynical wistful bitterness are the keynotes:

Ah, you women, cruel exquisite women,
What a love-fountain is poured out for you,
What coloured streams for your pleasure!
Go your ways, pass on, forget them;
Give your lips and breasts to the old men,
The kindly, impetuous, glowing, old men!

The soldier's kinship is utterly transformed: "... instead of women's living bodies,/ I see dead men—you understand?— dead men/ With sullen, dark red gashes/ Luminous in a foul trench."⁹ Winterbourne wishes only that "he was one of the skeletons lying on Hill 91, an anonymous body among the corpses lying outside on the street." The women have supped on the blood and bodies of the young men: now leave them to the "kindly" old, too old to serve and die but not too young to usurp the lost generation's beds. "'I said that since I had seen so many men's bodies mangled, suffering and dead, the thought of human flesh was repulsive to me. I said that I hated the thought of women. I almost yelled at him: 'I don't want your bloody whores! I don't want ever to touch a bloody woman.' '"¹⁰

Aldington caused all kinds of offence by *Death of a Hero* and its associated war writings, none so virulently castigated as his explicit equation of *eros* and *thanatos* so startlingly elicited in women by the butchery of war. "But the effect of George's death on her temperament was, strangely enough, almost wholly erotic. The war did that to lots of women. All the dying and wounds and mud and bloodiness—at a safe distance—gave them a great kick, and excited them to an almost unbelievable pitch of amorousness."¹¹ "Of course," he adds, "in the eternity of 1914-18 they must have come to feel that men alone were mortal, and they immortals." And not merely did women sleep with cannon-fodder. They produced it, following what Aldington tabbed as "the deep primitive physiological instinct—men to kill and be killed; women to produce more men to continue the process."

So, a disintegrating marriage with Elizabeth/H.D., a stormy affair with Fanny/"Arabella," the normal complexities of man and woman at any time, the special hideousness of the War, the dizzying transformation of social and sexual values in the telescoped watershed years of 14-18: here is Aldington at demobilisation, maimed, "bitter," guilty, shipwrecked. "It was a kind of disgrace to have survived, and what was the worth of survival when body and mind were poisoned?"¹²

It was touch-and-go in that post-War decade. Terrible seeds, each like a corpse within its grave, lay ripe in Richard Aldington. But the seeds of life were readying too:

But we who do not drug ourselves with lies
Know, with how deep a pathos, that we have
Only the warmth and beauty of this life
Before the blackness of the unending gloom.¹³

Death of a Hero purged "perilous stuff which had been poisoning me for a decade" and loosened the grip of the millions of dead comrades, English and German and French, calling so insistently from beyond life. Hell and death, hatred and renunciation of women, sterility, impotence, lovelessness were not to leave Aldington howling in outer darkness:

We are of those that Dante saw
 Glad, for love's sake, among the flames of hell,
 Outdaring with a kiss all-powerful wrath;
 For we have passed athwart a fiercer hell,
 Through gloomier, more desperate circles
 Than ever Dante dreamed:
 And yet love kept us glad.¹⁴

Notes

- ¹ Richard Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake* (London: Cassell, 1968), p.173.
- ² *Life for Life's Sake*, p. 189.
- ³ Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London: Hogarth, 1984), p.90.
- ⁴ *Death of a Hero*, p. 134.
- ⁵ John Cournos, *Autobiography* (New York: Putnam's, 1935), p.327.
- ⁶ Richard Aldington, *The Complete Poems of Richard Aldington* (London: Wingate, 1948), p. 137.
- ⁷ *Complete Poems*, p. 140.
- ⁸ *Death of a Hero*, p. 289.
- ⁹ *Complete Poems*, p. 108.
- ¹⁰ Richard Aldington, *Roads to Glory* (Freeport, N.Y., 1970), p. 278.
- ¹¹ *Death of a Hero*, p. 18.
- ¹² Richard Aldington, *All Men are Enemies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1933), p. 131.
- ¹³ *Complete Poems*, p. 148.
- ¹⁴ *Complete Poems*, p. 122.

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