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Lithe Pale Girls

Robert Crawford

Richard Aldington: Poet, Soldier and Lover, 1911–1929

By Vivien Whelpton

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In 1906, May Aldington, a writer and innkeeper, published a novel called *Love-letters that Caused a Divorce*. It tells the story of Kitty Yorke, who falls in love with a married man. She abandons her marriage in order to run away with her lover, but eventually, after desertion and long hardship, returns to her husband. May Aldington lived long enough to see her son have a protracted series of affairs, including a lengthy one with a woman called Yorke. One of the reasons he disliked his parents may have been that his life veered too close to his mother's fiction. Among Edward Godfree Aldington's early gestures of rebellion was his rejection of the name his parents had given him: from his teens he called himself Richard. A sparkling-eyed poet who played rugby at school, he caught the eye of many women. In his youth he had a taste for velvet jackets and bow ties; he had studied some Greek, and relished the Romantic Hellenism of Keats's *Endymion*, whose famous first line ('A thing of beauty is a joy for ever') leads on to a description of the 'breathless honey-feel of bliss'.

After dropping out from University College London, Aldington became the lover of Brigit Patmore, a strikingly beautiful woman ten years his senior who was married to a philandering insurance man. She knew many writers in London, including the recently arrived Ezra Pound. As soon as she caught sight of Aldington's 'broad shoulders' and 'determined mouth', she wrote, she was fascinated. She invited Aldington and Pound to tea. Patmore was also attracted to Pound's American friend Hilda Doolittle, and before long Aldington had become Doolittle's lover too.

They fell in love while translating ancient Greek. Aldington, at 19, was too young for a ticket to the Reading Room of the British Museum. Doolittle, who was 25, sat under the imposing dome, transcribing Greek materials. The two young poet-translators met daily, trying to make versions of verse from the Greek Anthology, that gathering of nearly five thousand poems assembled roughly two thousand years ago, many of them showing, as one of the *epigrammata erotica* puts it, how Love 'lighteth the torch for youth'.

Before they met, Doolittle had had a Greek nickname: Pound called her 'Dryad'. Teenage sweethearts, they had got engaged; but then the Dryad had fallen in love with a young woman called Frances Gregg and had accompanied her to Europe; Pound later got engaged to someone else. Now the Dryad was fascinated by this heterosexual young Englishman who shared her love of Greek, wrote poetry, was erotically experienced and had determinedly

changed his name. She didn't like her own name much either. Some years earlier she had written stories as 'Edith Gray'; most often, though, in literature and in life, she was called H.D.

The story of the love affair has been told before, and was set in its wider English and American contexts especially thoroughly by Helen Carr in *The Verse Revolutionaries: Ezra Pound, H.D. and the Imagists* (2009), a monumental work to which Vivien Whelpton acknowledges a debt. Whelpton, however, has done her own research, and, though occasionally her text can be confused and confusing when it comes to dates, she gives a good sense of the complexities of this and Aldington's many other relationships. Her focus on a relatively brief period of his life means that his childhood is given rather short shrift, and much of her book deals with Aldington the poet even though his fiction has lasted best. *Death of a Hero*, published in 1929, is one of the best English novels to deal with the experience of combat in the First World War.

An examination of *Death of a Hero*, which Aldington began work on 'almost immediately after the Armistice' but didn't return to for a decade, forms the conclusion to Whelpton's book. Aldington the novelist is flawed but holds the attention; Aldington the poet is prolific, but often rather too easy to keep up with; Aldington the lover is prolific too, and most readers will be grateful to Whelpton for guiding us round the hairpin bends and blind alleys of his relationships.

Much to H.D.'s excitement, in 1912 Aldington, having gone with her to Italy the previous year, followed her to Paris. There they read poems together. They went to galleries. Fuelling their love of the Greeks, Richard wrote a sonnet in her notebook on 4 July 1912. It articulated a longing for

Scurry of satyr-hooves in dewy lands,
Pan-pipes at noon, the lust, the shaggy fur,
White blossoms and swift Dionysiac mirth.

It wasn't very good, but Hilda liked its author. By the end of the month they had moved in together, or at least lived in separate rooms in the same house, 6 Church Walk in Kensington. They were still seeing a good deal of Patmore, Gregg and Pound, who enjoyed pronouncing on their verse. 'Richard has just brought me a bad poem,' Pound recorded that September, 'and departed with dampened spirits.'

But Pound, a fellow devotee of the classics, was sympathetic to Aldington's Greek enthusiasms, and was eager to position him as part of the new poetic movement in which he, Pound, was predominant. He sent Aldington's 'Choricos', 'To a Greek Marble' and another poem to Harriet Monroe in Chicago. They duly appeared in Monroe's magazine, *Poetry*, in November 1912, with a note explaining that 'Mr Richard Aldington is a young English poet, one of the "Imagistes", a group of ardent Hellenists who are pursuing interesting experiments in *vers libre*.' Though Pound soon shifted his attention to Chinese verse and sought to play

down the Hellenism of this new movement, Aldington's poems, which liked to display 'lithe pale girls,/Daughters of Okeanos' and 'loves in Phrygia' with 'The far ecstasy of burning noons', remained excitedly Hellenistic.

Very soon the January 1913 issue of *Poetry* brought a clutch of 'Verses, Translations and Reflections from "The Anthology"' (which meant the Greek Anthology) by H.D. Her Priapus has 'flayed us with thy blossoms'; her 'Hermes of the Ways' has waited while 'The great sea foamed,/Gnashed its teeth about me.' Intense (and often erotic) feeling in these poems is set in an ideal Greece of the imagination. 'Epigram (*After the Greek*)' is signed – and this seems to have been Pound's suggestion – 'H.D., "Imagiste".' A note explained that 'her sketches from the Greek are not offered as exact translations, or in any sense as finalities, but as experiments in delicate and elusive cadences, which attain sometimes a haunting beauty.'

It was Imagism's sense of cadence that many later commentators picked up on. Yet for these two a sense of identification with the Greeks was just as vital. Enthusing in 1913 about 'exquisite Greek bronzes and marble reliefs and statues', Aldington maintained that 'the ancient Greeks' were 'more concerned with beauty and the beautiful appearance of things, than any system or work of ethics and conduct'. When he and H.D. spent some time in Italy that year, Aldington found on the Amalfi coast 'Theocritus and Homer in form and colour'. He invoked one of the poets of the Greek Anthology, Meleager, and maintained that in order to love Italian beauty 'one must have known the deep passionate love for Greece.' Pound wrote that H.D. and Aldington were 'wholly Hellenised at Capri'.

Aldington's scribbles on the back of a bill for wine, cheese and sardines show that their Hellenisation was also erotic: 'Touch lips; and cheeks; let naked breast beat on breast, foot touch foot.' Noting that 'the Dryad has arrived with its faun,' Pound found the prospect of his strikingly attractive former girlfriend growing so close to his handsome poetic protégé both amusing and exasperating: 'H and R are submerged in a Hellenism so polubendius and so stupid that I drop in the street about once in every 15 minutes to laugh at them ... I don't know – Hellenism? True, they have attained a dullness almost equal to the expression (*facial*) of gk. statuary – but I wonder – I think they *must* be in love.'

Not long before they married in October 1913, Aldington and H.D. had a further overdose of Greek from their friend Henry Slonimsky, who had just completed a PhD on Heraclitus and Parmenides, and, in the way of some postgraduate students, spoke to them 'for hours ... of Hellas and Hellenism, of Pythagoras and Plato ... of Empedocles and Heraclitus, of Homer and Thucydides, of Aeschylus and Theocritus'. The young couple were in their element. H.D. had recently published 'Sitalkis', a Greek-accented work that reads like a love poem to Aldington and was (she recalled) bound up with her time in the Reading Room; he had published a version of a recently rediscovered Sappho fragment that H.D. had transcribed for him in the museum.

Aldington's poetry, so closely linked to H.D.'s, was almost always inferior to hers: he has a tendency to state the obvious in a way that strives after intensity but can sound like lecturing.

Sometimes (as in his 1915 poem 'Interlude'), he yoked 'lithe girls' dancing 'from Attica' to modern life represented by 'the Red Lion' pub on High Holborn, and he incorporated into his verse Baudelaire's words (soon to be reused by T.S. Eliot) '*Mon semblable, mon frère*'. Aldington could mix 'Helen of Sparta,/ Dryope, Laodamia' with 'a whore in Oxford street', but generally his Greece represents an ideal of love and beauty that isn't always convincing when the diction is that of sub-Keatsian Romanticism.

Aldington and H.D.'s bookish and idealistic marriage was soon tested to destruction. She got pregnant just as war began and their child was stillborn in May 1915: 'The nurse said it was a beautiful child & they can't think why it didn't live,' Aldington wrote to the Imagist poet and anthologist Amy Lowell hours after the birth. 'It was very strong but wouldn't breathe.' A year later he began an affair with Florence Fallas, another young mother who had lost a child. Writing of 'forbidden caresses,/The cleft of your body,/Your closed eyes', he articulated his new love, and was compared by one reviewer to Simonides, author of some of the greatest and most laconic Greek epitaphs. Aldington was hardly Simonides.

H.D., meanwhile, was being courted by another young poet, the American John Cournos, to whom she wrote in 1916, 'If love of me – absolute and terrible and hopeless love – is going to help you to write – then *love me*'; but she made clear that 'the great and tender and bitter Greek love is beyond my love for you.' In 'Eros' a speaker asks:

Is it bitter to give back
love to your lover if he wish it
for a new favourite,
who can say,
or is it sweet?
Is it sweet
to possess utterly,
Or is it bitter,
bitter as ash?

In the poems gathered in her 1924 collection, *Heliadora*, but written earlier, H.D. obliquely recalls translating Greek with Aldington. In 'Heliadora' two poets argue over phrasing. In 'Fragment Forty' she takes as her starting point a fragment of Sappho, 'I know not what to do: my mind is divided.' Like Aldington, but with greater intensity, she went over and over aspects of their relationship for the rest of her life. In an undated letter which Whelpton assigns to 1916, H.D. writes: 'Everything burns me ... I am torn and burnt out.' Around this time she wrote to Cournos:

I love Richard with a searing, burning intensity. I love him and have come to this torture of my free will. I could have forgotten my pride broken and my beauty as it were, unappreciated. I could have found peace with you. But of my own will I have allowed this fire to burn me. Of my own will I have come to this Hell. I believe this flame is my very Daemon driving me to write.

With her Daemon driving her, H.D. once more fused her own passion with that of the Greeks. Aldington, not long afterwards, began a new sequence of poems 'in the Greek manner', *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis*, which celebrates an affair between a goat-girl and a hetaira. Aldington, like his wife, explored Greek love in its various forms; unlike her, he was determinedly heterosexual.

After he joined the Devonshire Regiment in June 1916, then became an officer in the Royal Sussex regiment in November 1917, his Hellenic sensibility came under continual assault from the brutalities of army life and the horrors of warfare. The verse he now started writing had, for the first time, a documentary impact:

Four days the earth was rent and torn
By bursting steel,
The houses fell about us;
Three nights we dared not sleep,
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash
Which meant our death.

But his war poems never achieve the compacted surprise that distinguishes the best work of Wilfred Owen, another poet who went to the battlefield full of Keats; and not much that Aldington wrote is as moving as the plain diction of Ewart Alan Mackintosh in 'In Memoriam, Private D. Sutherland, Killed in Action in the German Trench, May 16, 1916, and the Others who Died'. Aldington is at his best when less an observer of his own fears and emotions than a recorder (the Imagists were surely the camera's greatest poetic rivals), noticing some of the telling details that catch us off guard:

Three little girls with broken shoes
And hard sharp coughs,
Three little girls who sold us sweets
Too near the shells,
Three little girls with names of saints
And angels' eyes ...

In a letter to F.S. Flint, Aldington records his discovery of the graves of some little French girls killed by a shell, adding that 'I often go and stand by them & think many things.' Enduring heavy gas-shelling and bombardment, he forced himself not just to notice but to note in verse the details of what he saw, presenting them at times in a kind of lineated photography:

The way one corpse held its stiff yellow fingers
And pointed to the huge dark hole
Gouged between ear and jaw right to the skull.

He tried to maintain contact not just with H.D. but also with his prewar self. To an American patron, the Reverend Charles Bubb, whose small press would publish books by Aldington

and H.D., he wrote in 1917 that ‘until I joined the army I had lived with dreams, books and love – the shock of change was too abrupt and I still feel like a man gasping vainly for breath after being kicked in the stomach!’ While Aldington was at war, D.H. Lawrence made overtures to H.D., who seems to have found sex with her husband difficult after the loss of their child. She rebuffed Lawrence, but Aldington began a long affair which would ruin his marriage.

This affair was with Dorothy (known as Arabella) Yorke, a young artist from Philadelphia who lived in London; Aldington found the dark-eyed, stylishly dressed Yorke irresistible, and made no secret of the fact. He celebrated his excitement in *Images of Desire*, whose poems celebrate ‘your breast-flower peering from our bed’, ‘your lips, your budded breasts!’ and so on. ‘I suppose in a way I care for Arabella & in a way I care most terribly for you,’ he wrote from France to H.D. ‘The truth is: I love you & I desire – l’autre.’ Aldington and Yorke played Adam and Eve in a December 1917 charade arranged by Lawrence at 44 Mecklenburgh Square in London, where the landlady had already complained that Aldington’s affair was damaging the reputation of the house. H.D. played the tree of life, Frieda Lawrence the serpent and D.H. God; Cecil Gray (about to become H.D.’s lover) was ‘the angel at the gate’.

Aldington and H.D. had liked to imagine that their marriage resembled that of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but it’s rare for two poets to have a happy marriage. He tried to justify his actions by reproaching H.D., telling her that what he perceived as her ‘ardour for perfection’ was making her deeply unhappy; he told her that his ‘body hungered for a woman who was earthy like me. And you, too, needed a spirituality that was less gross than mine.’ Back at the battlefront he wrote to H.D. that he was ‘living in a hole 30 feet underground with a pint of water per diem for drinking & bully & biscuit for food’. ‘To some extent’, he explained (thinking about Arabella and writing to his ‘dear, dear beautiful child-wife’), ‘the history of an impulsive or erotic man is simply that of successive enslavements & exceedingly painful emancipations from different women. Unfortunately, it seems as if another woman is the only means of escape.’ H.D., it seems, told him that she felt as if she did not have a body; he sought to convince her that she had ‘a beautiful and passionate’ one.

While this was going on H.D. was visited by a young woman who had learned her first collection of poems by heart and who was just about as obsessed with H.D. as Aldington was with Yorke. This young woman, Bryher, would become H.D.’s long-term companion. More pressing, however, was the discovery that H.D. was pregnant with Gray’s child. Aldington tried to convince her that this meant ‘Gray becomes your husband & I merely your lover ... You become Gray’s; you have ceased to be mine.’ Aldington felt he could not love the new baby; he could never forget ‘our own sweet dead baby’. Despite the pregnancy, he seems to have come to associate H.D. with sterility, a quality he found oddly alluring. He wrote to her of wanting to hold ‘sterile breasts’ against him, and argued that ‘the emotions that bind lovers together are exquisite & sterile like poetry.’

His wife's situation caused him 'shame and anguish': 'I have made a mess of things,' he wrote. During the autumn of 1918, he felt his marriage was 'fini fini fini' and told his wife bitterly that 'women are not so essential to life as they imagine.' When the war ended, he felt he'd been given 'the gift of another life', but it was one in which Yorke urged him not to accept paternity of H.D.'s child and in which H.D. would grow closer and closer to Bryher. When H.D. caught pneumonia very late in pregnancy, Aldington wrote urging her to 'remember your Greeks at Marathon!' On 31 March 1919 the child was born, and named Perdita. Neither Aldington nor Gray wanted to be seen as Perdita's father, and Bryher resented her arrival. 'You were not given poetry to sit and worry over an infant,' she told H.D. 'I am very jealous for your poetry and I will even fight Perdita about it. She will be much healthier and happier for the next year or two in a home.'

Aldington had lost faith in his writing: 'I'm nothing but a mediocre poet, and a less than mediocre critic.' He had a heightened awareness of 'the "lostness" & bitterness of my generation'. He resolved to break with H.D., wanting to burn her letters and writing to wish her "bon voyage" and some peace in the sunlight of your Hellas'. The brilliance of their peculiar Greek love was behind them.

Though a few critics may have regarded Aldington's *A Fool in the Forest: A Phantasmagoria* (1925) as a jazz-age work comparable to *The Waste Land*, its mumblings about 'the glory of Hellas' and 'mental death' reveal it as second-rate. By this point Aldington (as Eliot had done) was experiencing severe nervous exhaustion, partly as a consequence of his wartime experience, and appeared to see his future in becoming a critic rather than a poet. He seemed to be stagnating, and sought escape in further dalliances, one of them with the artist and writer Valentine Dobrée, a former lover of the painter Mark Gertler and now the wife of Eliot's friend Bonamy Dobrée. Aldington fantasised about Valentine in a long poem that lacks intensity despite its exclamation marks: 'Why cannot we be wise like the Epicureans/Who thought not of possession but of enjoyment?' She eluded his grasp, and in 1927, as if his life were being scripted by the novelist who gave birth to him, he returned to his first lover, Brigit Patmore, while continuing his relationship with Yorke and flirting with other women, including Nancy Cunard.

In 1928 he travelled with Yorke and Patmore to the island of Port Cros, off the French Mediterranean coast; Frieda and D.H. Lawrence were there too. Nude bathing parties helped kept the sexual excitement high. Sharing a bedroom with Yorke, Aldington sneaked out to sleep with Patmore, and wore Cunard's beads round his neck; Yorke, in turn, had sex with a Sicilian servant. Lawrence (whose biography Aldington would write years later) grew convinced that Aldington's 'desire to be raped' was 'very strong'. 'It was,' Aldington wrote to H.D. soon afterwards, 'like a series of demented scenes from some southern *Wuthering Heights*.' He broke up with Yorke, and went off with Patmore to Toulon. The following year H.D., encouraged by Bryher (who by then had made a marriage of convenience with the American poet Robert McAlmon, but continued to live with H.D.), was ready to divorce Aldington, and Patmore was prepared to divorce her husband and end her three-year alliance

with another lover who was threatening to kill himself if she left. Observing all this, H.D. (to whom Aldington eventually decided to remain married for the time being) thought her husband ‘a besotted fat sentimentalist’, yet felt still that ‘nothing can cut across what my “psychic” self or “core” feels towards him.’ This didn’t stop her taking a new lover of her own, Kenneth MacPherson, who soon married the now divorced Bryher, so that they could live in a triangular relationship.

It’s a struggle to keep up with all the bed-hopping. By 1928 Aldington was dancing with H.D. in Paris, remembering just how attractive she could be, while assuring Patmore: ‘I want you.’ He had returned again, too, to Greek translation, and started work on a version of Euripides’ *Alcestis*. Yet when, years afterwards, he recalled having thoughts about ‘Euripidean tragedy’, it wasn’t in the context of translation or poetry but was bound up with the writing of his best novel.

Like so much of the rest of Aldington’s work, *Death of a Hero* is uneven. Much of it was produced in 52 days when Aldington renewed his relationship with Patmore, who was also writing fiction. His book managed to bring together in a convincing, sometimes bitter and bemused way both his sense of life as erotic confusion and his consciousness of the horrors of modern warfare. Like Arthur Miller’s later *Death of a Salesman*, *Death of a Hero* has a protagonist who is an engaging and far from conventional hero. The first half of the novel draws on George Winterbourne’s conflicted feelings for two women – surely (though the author denied it) based on H.D. and Yorke. The second, better half is an account of what it was like to be involved in front-line fighting.

In May 1928, H.D. sent Aldington a copy of the recently published translation of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Aldington, an admirer of Herbert Read’s war memoir *In Retreat* (1925), thought it ‘great’, and it spurred him on to try to give fictional form to his own experiences. His book isn’t perfect: too much of it is spent settling scores. The ironically designated hero, Winterbourne, has parents who are ‘grotesques’; his mother finds her son’s death in battle ‘erotically stimulating’. There are also rather clumsily satirical portraits of Eliot, Pound and other literary figures, but the book is truly impressive in its ability to communicate what it felt like for a sensitive man to fight. Winterbourne stays in touch with his old lovers, ‘but it was useless. They were gesticulating across an abyss. The women were still human beings; he was merely a unit, a murder-robot, a wisp of cannon-fodder. And he knew it. They didn’t. But they felt the difference, felt it as a degradation in him, a sort of failure.’

This perception towards the end of Part I leads into the memorable depiction in Part II of the way ‘month after month of the war dragged on with its interminable holocausts and immeasurable degradation of mankind.’ His narrator speculates that ‘it would be much more practical to fight modern wars with mechanical robots than with men.’ Yet he also shows what it was actually like to be a soldier in a trench billet with breath frozen on your blanket and icicles in your moustache. ‘The boots beside him froze hard, and it was agony to struggle

into them. The bread in his haversack froze greyly; and the taste of frozen bread is horrid. Little spikes of ice formed in the cheese.'

His hero shits himself uncontrollably, gets lost on the battlefield at night and can't find the frontline. The reader sees the industrial stock of wooden crosses to memorialise the dead; the fields rendered flowerless by toxic phosgene; the vomited blood; the corpse through whose decaying boot can be glimpsed 'thin, knotty foot-bones'. Occasionally, as when Winterbourne senses a quiver of spring one night ('O Andromeda, O Paphian!') there are hints of the poetic Hellenism Aldington could never leave behind. Yet his prose continues to rub the reader's nose mercilessly in the realities of front-line soldiering:

He seemed to spend his time plodding through interminable muddy trenches, up to the ankles, up to the calves, up to the knees; shovelling mud frantically out of trenches on to the berm, and then by night from the berm over the parapets, while the shells crashed and the machine-gun bullets struck gold sparks from the road stones. When he was not doing that, he was scraping mud with a knife from his boots and clothes, trying to dry socks and puttees and to rub some warmth into his livid, aching feet. He had not known that wet cold could keep one's legs so achingly dead for so long. He had not known how wearisome it could be to drag tired legs and carry burdens through deep, sticky chalk mud, where each step was an effort, where each leg stuck deep as the other was laboriously pulled from the sucking mud. He had not known that one could hate an inert thing so much.

For such passages *Death of a Hero* deserves to be as well-known as Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* or Wilfred Owen's poems. Winterbourne ends up wishing he was among the dead. 'He had not even the courage to shoot himself with his revolver; and added that last grain of self-contempt to his despair.'

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