

An Introduction to *Death of a Hero* by Richard Aldington

I

Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* was one of the earliest in the flood of 'war books' that emerged between 1928 and 1932. It had taken a decade for most (but not *all*) combatant writers to put their thoughts into print. Some of them opted to write memoirs, others chose the form of a novel. Richard Aldington, Frederic Manning and the German writer Erich Remarque wrote novels – chiefly because they needed to kill off their protagonists. However, their narratives maintain a high degree of fidelity to their own war experience.

II

Aldington was twenty-two years old in August 1914. Having left University College, London in 1911 after barely two terms because of his father's financial difficulties, he had managed to live on freelance journalism and a small allowance from his family in order to work at his vocation as a poet. He met the American poets Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and together they founded 'Imagism'. In 1913 H.D. and Aldington were married. He became assistant editor of the *Egoist*, a small-circulation modernist journal. When war broke out, he was not keen to enlist. H.D. became pregnant but in 1915 her child was still-born. They moved out of London to rural Devon and in the summer of 1916, shortly before married men were to be conscripted, Aldington joined up. His war experience took a toll on his marriage, already damaged by the failure of the couple to come to terms with the loss of their child and a consequent break-down in their physical relationship; Aldington engaged in a passionate extra-marital affair with Dorothy Yorke, another young American; H.D.'s resort to comfort elsewhere led to a pregnancy; and when Aldington returned to London on demobilisation in 1919, they separated. His affair with Yorke became a nine-year long relationship.

In the autumn of 1928, Aldington and Yorke, along with an old friend, Brigit Patmore, spent two weeks on the Mediterranean island of Port Cros with D.H. Lawrence and his wife, Frieda. Here, for Aldington, events were dramatic: he ended his relationship with Yorke and started what would be an eight-year long partnership with Patmore; and, in this highly charged atmosphere, he began to write *Death of a Hero*. It would be completed over the next six months in Paris.

III

Aldington – like his protagonist – reached the Western Front in January 1917. The Battle of the Somme had closed down in November 1916 and preparations were underway for the Allied spring offensive in which the British would engage in the Battle of Arras in order to support the French action on the Chemin des Dames. Aldington's 11th Leicester Battalion were the Pioneers of 6th Division – units whose tasks were to construct trenches, roads and

railways, but also to serve as infantry when required to do so. The division was serving in the area to the north-east of Arras, in what had been the Loos Battlefield in the autumn of 1915, north-west of the mining town of Lens and in the heart of the industrial area of north-east France. The ground here was uniformly flat, dominated by slagheaps, mine works, industrial buildings and villages that by 1917 were masses of rubble. Aldington's 'M-' is the village of Maroc and his 'Hill 91' is Hill 70, which the British had failed to capture in the Battle of Loos and which remained in German hands until taken by Canadian troops in August 1917. Aldington returned to England to undertake officer-training in May, as the Battle of Arras was being wound down. He did not return to the front until nearly a year later, commissioned as a second-lieutenant in the 9th Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment.

On 21 March 1918 the German Army broke through the Allied lines, penetrating thirty miles in only two days. The 9th Royal Sussex were in Fifth Army, which bore the brunt of 'Operation Michael', fighting four major defensive battles over a fortnight, desperately trying, as it withdrew, to maintain its links, with Third Army on the left flank and the French on the right, until the line finally stiffened on 4 April, fifty miles back from its starting point. Meanwhile, the German onslaught shifted north to Arras and then to Flanders, where it continued throughout April. The already depleted British Army suffered 236,000 casualties, of whom 120,000 were taken prisoner. Every available man in England was drafted to France; Aldington left England on 18 April.

The 9th Royal Sussex were now stationed in the Loos sector which Aldington had left in the spring of 1917. Hill 70 was now in British hands. Like Winterbourne, Aldington became an acting company commander, because of the battalion's shortage of officers. Now that the Germans had exhausted their reserves, the Allied advance to victory began. Lens was taken on 28 August. Shortly afterwards Aldington was sent on a signals course – he would be the battalion's signals officer on his return. By 8 October he was on his way back to his battalion.

Winterbourne was back on the Somme, that incredible desert, pursuing the retreating enemy. They came up the Bapaume-Cambrai road by night, and bivouacked in holes scratched with entrenching tools in the side of a sandy bank. The wrecked countryside in the pale moonlight was a frigid and motionless image of death. They spoke in whispers, awed by the immensity of desolation. By day the whole landscape was covered with the debris left by the broken German armies. Smashed tanks, guns with their wheels broken, stood out like fixed wrecks in the unmoving ocean of shell-holes. The whole earth seemed a litter of overcoats, shaggy leather packs, rifles, water-bottles, gas-masks, steel helmets, bombs, entrenching tools, cast away in the panic of flight. By night the sky glowed with the flames of burning Cambrai, with the black hump of Bourlon Hill silhouetted against them.

24th Division was ready to take part in the final battle of the Hindenburg Line, the Battle of Cambrai. From bivouacs near Cantaing, the battalion had moved forward to a position east of the St Quentin Canal. They captured villages to the north-east of Cambrai; Aldington's 'F-' is not easy to identify: the principal village taken by the battalion in this sector was Cauroir on 9

October 1918. His 'K-', where Winterbourne arrives the evening before his death, is also hard to identify. The battalion left Bermerain on 3 November and attacked the high ground to the north of Wargnies-le-Grand and Wargnies-le-Petit on the 4th as part of the advance across the River Rhonelle. This was the end of Winterbourne's war. Aldington's service would not end until February 1919 as the 9th Sussex became part of the Army of Occupation.

IV

In a 1934 letter to the American critic Gorham Munson, Aldington explained: 'I kept a rough concept of the Euripidean tragedy in mind, which is why I give the whole plot of the story in the Prologue—the intention there being to avoid false surprise.' The Prologue therefore concerns the reception of the news of the death in battle of the hero, George Winterbourne, by his parents, wife and mistress, and ends with the diegetic narrator's explanation of his need to tell George's story:

The death of a hero! What mockery, what bloody cant! What sickening putrid cant!
George's death is a symbol to me of the whole sickening bloody waste of it, the
damnably stupid waste and torture of it. ... That is why I am writing the life of George
Winterbourne, a unit, one human body murdered, but to me a symbol. It is an
atonement, a desperate effort to wipe off the blood-guiltiness.

Like a Greek tragedy, the novel then proceeds to three major episodes in the drama of George Winterbourne's life: Part One covers his family life and upbringing and Part Two his pre-war and early wartime life as a young painter (rather than poet) in London and, in particular, his relationships with two young women, and the intellectual and artistic circle within which he moves; Part Three covers George's wartime service until his death on 4 November 1918, but actually ends with Field Marshall Foch's Armistice letter to the troops of the Allied Armies. True to the Greek model, the novel concludes with an epilogue, an elegiac poem which begins:

Eleven years after the fall of Troy,
We, the old men—some of us nearly forty—
Met and talked on the sunny rampart
Over our wine.

Thus, if we take the Trojan War as a metaphor for the Great War, the poem is set at the time of the writing of *Death of a Hero* by the thirty-six year old veteran.

Aldington told Munson that his other guide was 'a rough concept of a symphony' and he gave the four narrative sections headings that suggest sonata form: the Prologue is headed *allegretto* and the three main sections *vivace*, *andante cantabile* and *adagio*.

In a prefatory letter to Hal Glover, Aldington also refers to the work as a 'jazz novel'. *Death of a Hero* flits between George's viewpoint and that of the narrator, and it incorporates a

poem (the epilogue), a document (Foch's proclamation), trench signposts and snatches of soldiers' and music-hall songs, onomatopoeic (and capitalised) representations of the sounds of artillery, and a range of prose styles from the satirical and the didactic (even declamatory) to evocative descriptions of the sounds, sights and smells of the battlefield, while retaining throughout a sequential narrative that never becomes fragmented. Aldington was frequenting Henry Crowder's Plantation Club at the time he was writing the novel and it is feasible that he saw his eclectic approach as reflecting the style of music to which he was listening. However, in his comment that the term 'jazz' seemed appropriate to the theme, he was perhaps evoking the surface brilliance and gaiety and the deeper disillusionment characteristic of the post-war 'jazz age', summed up for him in the personalities and life-styles of Nancy Cunard and her contemporaries.

V

Aldington employs a clear 'before, during and after' structure in his novel, being enabled to do so, despite the death of his hero, by his use of the narrator figure. However, his *protagonist's* journey ends in despair and death: 'Something seemed to break in Winterbourne's head. He felt he was going mad and sprang to his feet. The line of bullets smashed across his chest like a savage steel whip. The universe exploded darkly into oblivion.' And the world of the aftermath is one of which the narrator says:

Something is unfulfilled and that is poisoning us. ...It is the poison that makes us heartless and hopeless and lifeless – us, the war generation, and the new generation too. The whole world is blood-guilty, cursed like Orestes, and mad, and destroying itself, as if pursued by an infinite legion of Eumenides.

If this is Greek tragedy, its conclusion does not provide us with catharsis.

The memoir, the autobiography and the autobiographical novel generally present us with split personalities: the innocent character who embarks on the journey that is the narrative, and the mature, changed 'character as narrator' (who may or may not be the author – a possible third persona) looking back. Aldington's novel is not formally autobiographical; because he kills off his soldier self, he needs an alternative narrator. The device is appropriate to his chosen form: the constant commentary on the action by the unnamed narrator (an army officer acquaintance of the protagonist) resembles that of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Aldington moves him in and out of the diegesis as he relates matters to which as a character he would not have had access. Like a Greek chorus, the narrator is both within and outside of the story. He is also, unapologetically, the authorial voice, in effect the post-war Aldington.

Until Part Three, the same cannot be said of Aldington's protagonist. Winterbourne's innocence strikes the reader as extraordinary naiveté, although that does not appear to be the *authorial* viewpoint. His artistic sensibility also makes him more vulnerable. The problem (and this has been fastened upon by many critics down the years) is that Aldington as author

is himself so angry – with his parents, his school-teachers, the artistic community and with his lovers, as well as with the pre-war establishment – that his view is distorted. It makes for some very entertaining, if heavy-handed, satire, but ultimately, it is not entirely honest. He presents Winterbourne as a victim because he feels *himself* to be a victim. And that is not the whole truth. His upbringing had left him with a crippling sense of self-pity that only surfaced during his war experience, which *was* grim (and he did, unlike Sassoon, Graves and Blunden, begin the war as a ranker and a pioneer). Furthermore, the war deprived him of a literary world in which he had achieved some success and in which he felt himself to have a place; Sassoon, Graves and Blunden had barely begun their poetic lives. Where the war enriched their creativity, it crippled his, at least temporarily. They were unencumbered with personal relationships – Blunden and Graves were only schoolboys – whereas Aldington had got himself into an emotional mess which the war would aggravate, and for which he would pay for the rest of his life.

VI

The first two parts of *Death of a Hero* are a vivid, if one-sided, portrait of a late Victorian lower middle class upbringing and of literary pre-war London, with vastly amusing, if breath-takingly vituperative, portraits of Ford Madox Ford (Shobbe), Ezra Pound (Upjohn), D.H. Lawrence (Bobbe) and T.S. Eliot (Tubbe). Aldington presents us with an analysis of the materialism, philistinism and hypocrisy of middle-class society at the turn of the century while the contempt he expresses through his narrator for George's father and the anger with which he portrays his mother are breath-takingly personal and violent. In his portrait of the literary and artistic world there were certainly scores being settled, but the message is that the artists and intellectuals, who claimed to be rejecting the humbug and hypocrisy of the Victorians, were themselves guilty of the same vices: 'Self-interest, though universal, is less tolerable in those who are supposed to be above it' and '[v]anity is none the less odious even when there is some reason for it.' Readers have assumed that Elizabeth and Fanny are modelled on H.D. and Yorke, respectively, but, although there are some superficial resemblances, the characters exist, more generally, as vehicles for Aldington's views on women and on sexual relationships. Aldington told H.D. that Elizabeth and Fanny were modelled on Nancy Cunard and Valentine Dobrée, towards both of whom he had made rejected advances in the period prior to the writing of the novel, and, again, there are some marked similarities.

VII

As for Part Three: it is possibly the finest British account of warfare on the Western Front and its impact on an individual that we have. That is partly achieved by what happens to narrative viewpoint in this section. Aldington the author and his representative persona, the un-named officer narrator, disappear from the page: everything we see is filtered through the

gaze of Winterbourne himself. Aldington lets George tell his own story; we get only one brief appearance by the narrator. George is even given the opportunity for the kind of exposition that has formerly been the province of the narrator, when, at rest camp at Boulogne, having observed – and admired – the fighting men, he asks himself, ‘[W]ho were their real enemies?’ and he sees the answer ‘with a flood of bitterness and clarity’:

Their enemies—the enemies of German and English alike—were the fools that had sent them to kill each other instead of help each other. Their enemies were the sneaks and the unscrupulous; the false ideals, the unintelligent ideas imposed on them, the humbug, the hypocrisy, the stupidity. If those men were typical, then there was nothing essentially wrong with common humanity, at least as far as the men were concerned. It was the leadership that was wrong—not the war leadership but the peace leadership. The nations were governed by bunk and sacrificed to false ideals and stupid ideas.

This passage is the continuation of the thoughts that have begun to consume Winterbourne from the moment the draft set off on the journey to France, and this extended passage of exposition is the last one in the novel. Here George becomes, not the earnest and naive dupe and victim that he has been for much of the earlier part of the novel, but the thinker and observer, through whose artistic, sensitive and increasingly mature vision, we are to be introduced to the actualities of the battlefield. Here is the preliminary bombardment for the Battle of Arras, viewed – and heard – from the sector to the north:

The roar of the guns was beyond clamour—it was an immense rhythmic harmony, a super-jazz of tremendous drums, a ride of the Valkyrie played by three thousand cannon. The intense rattle of the machine-guns played a minor motif of terror. It was too dark to see the attacking troops, but Winterbourne thought with agony how every one of those dreadful vibrations of sound meant death or mutilation. He thought of the ragged lines of British troops stumbling forward in smoke and flame and a chaos of sound, crumbling away before the German protective barrage and the Reserve line machine-guns. He thought of the German front lines, already obliterated under that ruthless tempest of explosions and flying metal. Nothing could live within the area of that storm except by a miraculous hazard. Already in this first half-hour of bombardment hundreds upon hundreds of men would have been violently slain, smashed, torn, gouged, crushed, mutilated. The colossal harmony seemed to roar louder as the drum-fire lifted from the Front line to the Reserve. The battle was begun. They would be mopping-up soon—throwing bombs and explosives down the dug-out entrances on the men cowering inside.

And here is Winterbourne a year later, now an officer, returned to the same sector of the battlefield:

At dawn one morning when it was misty he walked over the top of Hill 91, where probably nobody had been by day since its capture. The heavy mist brooded about him in a strange stillness. Scarcely a sound on their immediate front, though from

north and south came the vibration of furious drum-fire. The ground was a desert of shell-holes and torn rusty wire, and everywhere lay skeletons in steel helmets, still clothed in the rags of sodden khaki or field grey. Here a fleshless hand still clutched a broken rusty rifle; there a gaping, decaying boot showed the thin, knotty foot-bones. [...] Alone in the white curling mist, drifting slowly past like wraiths of the slain, with the far-off thunder of drum-fire beating the air, Winterbourne stood in frozen silence and contemplated the last achievements of civilised men.

George Winterbourne dies. But the narrator, like the author, lives on. He expresses the agony of survival in an outburst towards the end of Part Two of the novel:

You, the war dead, I think you died in vain. I think you died for nothing, a blather, a humbug, a newspaper stunt, a politician's ramp. But at least you died. You did not reject the sharp sweet shock of bullets, the sudden smash of the shell-burst, the insinuating agony of poison gas. You got rid of it all. You chose the better part.

Aldington's *threnody* is not only for the dead but also for the living. George Winterbourne's pre-war life and his war experience are his creator's in almost every detail; but the unnamed narrator and the survivors in the epilogue stand in for the post-war Aldington and his generation. Reliving war experience while writing is a way of working through trauma, and killing off the protagonist is a means for the author to free himself from his wartime self – Manning and Remarque both do it – but Adrian Barlow ('Answers to my Murdered Self' in Kelly, Lionel (ed.), *Papers from the Reading Symposium* (University of Reading, 1987), pp. 22-23) argues that the 'split perspective' of *Death of a Hero* reflects the notion, explored by Aldington in his poems *Eumenides* and *A Fool i' the Forest*, of 'the murdered self', his belief that his unique and creative personality ('A self which had its passion for beauty / Some moment's touch with immortality') did not survive the war.

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