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Vivien Whelpton, Richard Aldington: Poet, Soldier and Lover: 1911-1929, The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge 2014, 414pp.

Biographers need to present their subjects in the context of the other people who mattered most to them. But with some subjects the context is in danger of taking over. Especially if the other people emanate the kinds of intellectual and emotional force-fields of D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, H. D., T. S. Eliot, or Nancy Cunard. Theirs were the circles Richard Aldington moved in, and through. He also moved, prolifically and effortlessly, between the genres of poetry, criticism, fiction, and then biography. A founding contributor to the poetic movement of Imagism just before WWI; then a war poet; author of the best-selling 'jazz' novel *Death of a Hero* (1929), which George Orwell thought 'much the best of the English war books'; later controversial first as a satirist of his former fellow-modernists, then for his biography debunking T. E. Lawrence, which scandalized the British literary establishment: there was plenty in Aldington's work to secure him a place in literary history. Add a private life with more narrative interest than those of many writers, and it's no surprise that he has already been the subject of several biographical books: *Richard Aldington: An Intimate Portrait* (1965), by his friends Alister Kershaw and F.- J. Temple; Charles Doyle's *Richard Aldington: A Biography* (1989); and then Norman T. Gates's *Richard Aldington: An Autobiography in Letters* (1992). What is more surprising is the extent to which he figures in relation to others: in Caroline Zilboorg's *Richard Aldington & H. D.: The Early Years in Letters* (1992); Michael Copp's *Imagist Dialogues: Letters between Aldington, Flint and Others*; or Helen Carr's monumental group biography of poetic modernism: *The Verse Revolutionaries* (2009).

Modernism's volcanic bursts of -isms and schisms means its story or stories can't be told independently of coteries, campaigns, small magazines, alliances and enmities. Take the force of nature that was Pound. As scholars produce volume after volume of his idiosyncratic, typographically bizarre letters, we get a renewed sense of how much of his considerable energy went into literary networks, propaganda, advocacy and denunciation. Yet even though these published letters are being separated out by individual correspondent, any sense of the distinctiveness of a relation to any particular correspondent – of how Pound might have been different with – might have modulated his language or personality according to whether he was writing to Joyce or Lewis or Ford or Harriet Monroe – disappears behind the vortex that is Pound, buffeting his contacts into joining his campaigns.

Aldington's case is different. Why does he appear to exist more clearly amongst his networks than as standing alone? The recent prestige of 'relational' life writing and group biography is one factor. The turn in modernist studies to the magazines in which the campaigns were often conducted is another. These have both been useful correctives to the atomistic, poet-as-hero-worshipping individual biography, by restoring the milieu shaping an artist's work. But it is also to do with the extraordinarily close-knit nature of the group Aldington found himself in before and after the war. In 1912 the unhappily married Brigit Patmore introduced him to

several writers, including Pound, who had been in London since 1909; and the poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), who had been Pound's lover in the US. The three poets agreed to form a new movement – Imagism – propounding an intensely visual vers libre that sought to abandon the excessive verbalism and hypnotic sonorities of the post-Swinburnean fin-de-siècle. Aldington and H. D. became lovers while accompanying Pound on a trip to Paris that year. They were married in the autumn of 1913; and though their physical relationship didn't survive the strains of the war, and a still-born child, they remained emotionally and intellectually extremely bonded. In the months before the war, Aldington, H. D. and Patmore all took dictation of passages from *The Good Soldier* by another mutual friend (and friend of Pound's), Ford Madox Ford. Ford had developed an infatuation for Patmore, and they may have had a brief affair. Towards the end of the war, Aldington met an American art student, Dorothy ('Arabella') Yorke, and began a tempestuous relationship with her that lasted the next decade. The problem was that emotionally he and H. D. never really untangled themselves. When she had a daughter by another lover, who had left and wouldn't acknowledge paternity, she wanted Aldington to say the child was his; but he and Yorke panicked. From this point it was 'Bryher' (Annie Winifred Ellerman) who became H. D.'s most important lover for the rest of her life. Nonetheless, H. D. and Aldington remained married (but separated) until 1938.

In 1928, though, Brigit Patmore was back in Aldington's life, this time as his partner, and they visited D. H. and Frieda Lawrence, who were staying in a fort on Port-Cros (an island near Hyères). He had known Lawrence – another 'discovery' of Ford's, together with Pound, both launched in *The English Review* – from before the war. Aldington had been expected to become editor of the TLS, for which he had been reviewing throughout the 20s. But it had been a visit from Lawrence (while Aldington was still living in a Berkshire cottage) that had transformed his work, convincing him that he needed to write more personally, and also to write fiction. Lawrence was already terminally ill; and after his death Aldington would become one of his major champions, writing introductions for Penguin reissues of his works, and an impassioned, if conflicted biography: *D. H. Lawrence: Portrait of a Genius, But . . .* (1950). In the South of France in the late 1920s he worked on the war novel that would make him famous; and which contained satirical portraits not only of H. D. and Yorke, but of Ford and Lawrence, and the other figure who loomed largest in his literary and social world, T. S. Eliot.

That tendency to fictionalize and satirize suggests another reason for Aldington's inextricability from a coterie. His aesthetic network consisted mainly of other writers; and though all novelists draw upon real acquaintances when inventing imaginary friends, this group did so with a particular and reciprocal intensity. To understand the dynamics of the group, and to try to filter out the fictionalisations, a biographer needs to read the profoundly autobiographical *Death of a Hero* alongside Lawrence's novel *Aaron's Rod* (1922); H. D.'s *Bid Me to Live* (not published till 1960, but begun in the 30s); Patmore's two fictional books; and *Miranda Masters* (1926), a novel by another Imagist, John Cournos, based on H. D., who kept him on hand as her marriage to Aldington was disintegrating. These in addition to their copious correspondences, and gossip about them in their other fellow-modernists' memoirs

and letters. Perhaps it's not surprising that coteries of writers carry on like this, as a way of working off creative and sexual rivalries and anxieties; and it's certainly not unparalleled (the 'quartet' of books about Ford's affair with Jean Rhys, written by the two novelists and their partners, is roughly contemporary). But it does suggest an unusually inward-looking and interdependent circle.

Vivien Whelpton, in her new biography, has performed this sifting and detecting with exemplary care, and provides a sensitive and engaging portrait of Aldington among his fellow artists. Her four hundred pages take him up to the pivotal year of the publication of *Death of a Hero*, when he was only thirty-seven. Whether the remaining thirty-three years of his life – more than half his adult span – will receive a second volume is left teasingly open in an 'Afterword'. If they do, the challenge will be similar to that faced by Richard Holmes's magisterial biography of late Coleridge, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, of managing to make the story of decline and increasing rebarbateness as compelling as that of youthful energy and idealism. Whelpton's subtitle – *Poet, Soldier and Lover: 1911-1929* – indicates her emphases clearly enough; though it is also one of the few false notes in a tactful and balanced study. This is partly because of the first date. Though the narrative does indeed start in 1911, with Aldington embarking on life in Bohemia, a second chapter flashes back to explore 'Family Secrets'. True, Aldington's family and childhood are less well documented than his literary life; but Whelpton gives as thorough an account as we're likely to get or need. More serious is the absence of the 'Novelist' from the list. True, Aldington had only published one novel by 1929; but not only was it his most important; it was the book that drew most searchingly on his early life. As she says, there were to be seven more novels; so clearly 'Novelist' will be the burden of a second volume. The first needed to include *Death of a Hero* for the way it dealt with Aldington's enervating war experiences, and survivor's guilt. To have paused the story just before its appearance would have made for anti-climax. But to end with it is not just to reach the point where he has become a novelist: it is to frame the entire story as that of the process by which he moves from poet to novelist. The issue this raises is in a sense the central critical one for Aldington. He is an important force in the development of modernist poetics, certainly; especially as a critic, an editor (of the *New Freewoman*, which became one of the major outlets for high modernism, *The Egoist*); an authority on the French literature that so many modernists – Eliot, Pound, Ford – believed foundational; also an energetic translator; and anthologist. But his poetry – quoted extensively and analysed generously here – reads slightly embarrassingly alongside that of Pound or H. D. or Eliot. The early, Imagist verse is the best, often surprising with expressive delicacy and beauty:

The red deer are high on the mountain,
They are beyond the last pine-trees,
And my desires have run with them.

But it too often buzzes with the energies of Pound and H. D. – his orientalism, her classicism – though at lower voltage. If this example reads like Ovid writing haiku, what works in it is the teasing obliquity of the metaphor. In the private language of the three poets, Aldington was 'the Faun' to H. D.'s 'Dryad'. Does his desire run with the deer because of his faun-like

nature? Because there is something deer-like in the hypersensitivity of the beloved? Or because the pace and nervous energy of his desire feels like the frenzy of a panicked herd? Pound defined his 'ideogrammic method' as 'juxtaposition without copula'. Though Aldington uses an 'And' here, the juxtaposition suggests metaphors without insisting on any. Too often, though, the stanzas spell out the simile that turns the image into autobiographical lyric. As in these, from the same poem, 'Images':

Like a gondola of green scented fruits
Drifting along the dark canals of Venice,
You, O exquisite one,
Have entered into my desolate city.

or:

The flower which the wind has shaken
Is soon filled again with rain:
So does my heart fill slowly with tears
Until you return.

A poem might be able to carry off the image of a heart filling with tears as a metaphor rather than an anatomical awkwardness; but the metaphor within which it is enclosed here is too laboured for the effect of Oriental understatement being sought.

When he turned to fiction in the late 1920s it was a declaration of independence: not just from the 'cant' of his Victorian parents' generation; but from the condensation and ironisation of Pound; from the classicising minimalism of H. D.; from the obliqueness and obscurity of Eliot. *Death of a Hero* is intensely personal in a new way. The earlier verse was personal about his feelings, but not about the context of those feelings: the experiences of his life. Now Aldington attempts autobiographical fiction with a Lawrenceian passion and explicitness. But there's a difference. Lawrence's novels may contain Lawrenceian diatribes about degeneration, sincerity, and the feelings. But though characters like Birkin or Mellors may seem like Lawrence's mouthpieces, the novels don't, because the more Lawrenceian characters are placed in a dramatic context, their views challenged by the other characters. In *Death of a Hero* both the narrator and George Winterbourne are Aldington, and the other characters exist as caricature counterfoils to them. *Death of a Hero* is one of the most powerful statements of what it was like being traumatised by the war; what it was like not to be able to get over the grief for the appalling scale of loss, or the guilt at having been one of those who survived. It is eloquent, gruesome, harrowing. But it is also relentless, hectoring, and discursive. As with the verse, there's a mismatch between its formal ambition on the one hand (structured like a Greek tragedy, it gives the ending of the story at the beginning, so we then see George's fate working itself out as something inexorable; suicide as inevitable); and on the other, the looseness of the outpouring of blood-guilt, and anger at the older generation. The angry caricatures are powerful; shocking even, as with the scandalising example of George's parents becoming self-dramatising, and his mother even becoming sexually

aroused, on hearing the news of his death in battle. One result of *Death of a Hero* was to show Aldington that his best gift may have been satirical rather than lyric. The process that freed up his novelistic potential certainly seems to have had a negative effect on his verse. *A Dream in the Luxembourg*, for example, was written, as Vivien Whelpton shows convincingly, as a result of Aldington's infatuation for Valentine, the wife of his friend Bonamy Dobrée; but published as 'For B.' (presumably Brigit Patmore). It presents a paean to romance, but in flat, conversational free verse which is both too discursive, and uneasy with its own conventions, not least its continual invocation of a literary tradition:

Now I am so much moved as I write this
That my hand shakes with excitement,
And there is so much to say
I scarcely know where and how to begin;
So hard is it to be truly Reasonable
When you are a little crazy with a Romantick love. (243)

One way not to begin is by telling us about the excitement rather than letting us feel it in the language and style and form; another is with an archaistic spelling like 'Romantick', which wants to glamorise its irrationality by referring it back to a Keatsian romanticism. The failure to specify the craziness comes across as mere laziness. By contrast, the prose Aldington wrote after reinventing himself as a novelist included some of his best work: the fictionalised satirical portraits collected as *Soft Answers* (1932). This includes caricatures recognisable as Pound or Nancy Cunard. But the most vicious, but also the most powerful, is the satire of T. S. Eliot as Father Jeremy Cibber, which had been published separately as *Stepping Heavenward* (1931). The parodic account of *The Waste Land* is unmistakable:

With these valued allies, Cibber exactly at the right moment produced his epoch-making Notes on the Provincial Itinerary of the Emperor Antoninus. At first sight it seems impossible that so abstruse a work should have epoch-making consequences; but then, as we all know, it is the method and not the substance of a work which makes its value. And Cibber had method. The Itinerary itself was relegated to footnotes, while the notes, cast in the form of a commentary, became the text. In the opening pages Cibber politely but decisively annihilated every living historian of eminence except Cholmp. Then, in passages of unparalleled eloquence, now known to every schoolboy outside the great Public Schools, he lamented the decay and disappearance of so many once great and prosperous cities. In prose which moved with the stately tread of conscious superiority, he lamented the degradation of Kingship and the fetid growth of democracy, and pointed out that the ruinous European War had been the combined work of the Socialist Free-thinkers and the Jews. But the War, he insisted, was but a trifle, a mere symptom. . . (Soft Answers 284)

This has a vitality and humour that is impressive. It is also devastatingly accurate, especially given that it appeared three years before Eliot's notorious book *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, with its attacks on Lawrence, Yeats and Pound that make it more

surprising than it might otherwise be that Eliot was offended by Aldington's treatment; and its claim that 'reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable'. Aldington had been worried that Lawrence might have been offended by his own *D. H. Lawrence: An Indiscretion* in 1927. He wasn't, but wrote a clairvoyant letter wondering what made Aldington seem 'more to be living from a character not his own' than anyone he knew, feigning a 'conscience' that Lawrence didn't believe he had: 'What is it that you are afraid of? – ultimately? – is it death? Or pain? Or just fear of the negative infinite of all things? What ails thee, lad?' It was Lawrence's questioning that made Aldington look into his mind, and especially to confront the negative infinite of death and pain that had been the war. From then on much of his writing attempted what he'd been attempting in his relationships: to affirm life over war and negativity. The same year *Death of a Hero* appeared, 1929, Aldington gave another parody clearly directed at Eliot, this time of 'The Hollow Men':

A greatly admired poem by the most admired poet of the day may be summarized in the following excerpted words:

Hollow-dried-meaningless-dry-broken-dry-paralysed-death's-hollow-I-dare-not-death's-broken-fading-death's-final-twilight-deadcactus-stone-dead-fading-death's-broken-dying-broken-last-sightless-death.

The poet's genius is not in question, but I hate this exhibitionism of a perpetual suicide mania which never, never, comes to the point. . . . It is the War despair which involved so many of us and from which the healthy-minded have been struggling to escape, not yearning to wallow in.

That doesn't seem the right diagnosis of Eliot, whose poetry is as much about feeling already dead, and fearing being re-animated, as it is about the living desiring death. (He told Middleton Murry: "I have deliberately killed my senses – I have deliberately died in the last ten years in order to go on with the outward form of living – this I did in 1915 – What will happen if I live again?")¹ But it seems the right self-diagnosis: the struggle to escape 'war despair', that made morbidity in literature seem intolerable to Aldington. At least, it was the struggle to become healthy-minded again after the damage done by the war. That was why he needed to renounce Eliot in favour of Lawrence.

Vivien Whelpton's book gives a finely-detailed portrait; the best we have. Where others have focused more on his literary contacts, or his relationship to H. D., hers is the fullest and most revealing about Aldington's complex private life: sympathetic for the most part; though the note of reproof in the verdict of him as confused and evasive about sexuality seems false both to the man and the times. Both Aldington and H. D. lived out a version of 'free love' with more grace and less harm than in many more conventional marriages, and any harm that might have ensued to H. D.'s daughter cannot be attributed to Aldington. While the book brings out the importance of the roles he played as modernism ran its frenetic course from Edwardian London to jazz-age Paris, it makes one suspect that his biography may in the end

be more significant than his writing. Much will depend on the case Whelpton makes for Richard Aldington: Novelist.

Max Saunders

Endnotes:

1 To John Middleton Murry, [mid-April? 1925], *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 2, 1923-1925, edited by Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (London: Faber, 2009), 627.
