

Classic Poetry Series

Richard Aldington
- poems -

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Richard Aldington(8 July 1892 – 27 July 1962)

born Edward Godfree Aldington, was an English writer and poet. Aldington was best known for his World War I poetry, the 1929 novel, *Death of a Hero*, and the controversy arising from his 1955 *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Inquiry*. His 1946 biography, *Wellington*, was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.

Aldington, christened Edward Godfree, was born at Portsmouth, Hampshire, England, on July 8, 1892. At an early age, he moved with his mother, Jesse May, and father, middle-class lawyer Albert Edward Aldington, to Dover. There he grew up with his sister Margery and attended preparatory schools, after which he studied for four years at Dover College.

When he was sixteen, the family moved inland to Harrow, and then to Teddington. There, Richard (he chose to be called Richard while still a boy) enrolled in University College. He did not much enjoy the academic standards there, however. This was probably due to his having gotten used to the informal, eclectic education he provided himself in his father's excellent library, and studying with his older friend Dudley Grey who was a classical scholar and world traveler. In any case, he did not complete his education at University College due to a sudden financial loss suffered by his father, that forced him to withdraw.

His early years were spent living a spartan lifestyle, concentrating mostly on the writing of his poetry and occasionally publishing it, earning him an invitation by Brigit Patmore to a party where he met members of London's literary avant-garde such as Ford Madox Ford (then known as Ford Madox Hueffer), Harold Monro, W.B. Yeats, and Ezra Pound. After befriending Aldington, Pound soon introduced him to his American friend, Hilda Doolittle. Aldington and Doolittle were quickly attracted to each other and found that they had much in common including an ardent love of classical Greece and its literature.

With a little financial help from his parents, Aldington was able to go to Paris for a few months in 1912. "Ezra and H.D. were there," he wrote, "so I didn't lack the companionship." He fell in love with Paris, wrote a few poems, and translated a few works. He then returned to London, but only for a short time before setting off on his first trip to Italy which lasted seven months. He was with Doolittle at this time and remembered it in later years as "the good time." By the time he got back to London in the summer of 1913, Pound was already working on the first anthology of Imagist poetry, *Des Imagistes*.

Two years into the Great War, on June 24, 1916, Aldington and his friend, Carl

Fallas left for military service. They were stationed at Dorsetshire until December, when they had completed their training and were sent to France. The two and a half years that Aldington spent in active duty during WWI was to become perhaps the greatest single influence on his writing for the decades to follow. His first, and perhaps most well known novel, *Death of a Hero*, is described by Norman Gates as "one of the best novels about World War I and a savage satire of the society that RA felt was responsible for it." His most immediate literary response to the war was his collection of poetry *Images of War*, published in 1919.

The 1920's and 30's Aldington's career advanced as writer and critic. He enjoyed an influential friendship with T.S. Eliot, who took over editorship of the literary journal, the *Egoist*, from Aldington in 1917. He published 24 books, as editor or translator, or collections of his poems, between 1920 and 1929, including the first book of his about his friend D.H. Lawrence, *D.H. Lawrence, An Indiscretion*. Over the following ten years, he published several more collections of short stories, three long poems, four editions of his collected poems, miscellaneous literary journalism and wrote seven novels. He published his last novel, *The Romance of Casanova: A Novel*, in 1946.

In 1935 he traveled to the United States and rented a house on the Connecticut River at Old Lyme and lived there off and on for the following ten years. In 1937 he fell in love with the daughter-in-law of his old friend Brigit Patmore. Netta (at the time, Mrs. Michael Patmore) traveled with Aldington to Italy in April, and the two stayed there until October. While in Italy, Aldington finished his last important poem, *The Crystal World*, and was working on a novel, probably *Seven Against Reeves*. After Netta obtained her divorce from Michael, the two were wed in London on June 25, 1938. Their daughter, Catherine, was born shortly afterwards, and by September they were back in France where they stayed until February, 1939.

In New York, in 1939, Viking had published Aldington's novel *Rejected Guest*, then offered him editorship of *The Viking Book of Poetry of the English Speaking World*. Back in Connecticut, Aldington sold serial rights to his memoirs to the *Atlantic Monthly* which were published in 1941 by Viking under the title *Life for Life's Sake*. He had been deeply disturbed by the First World War, and after the start of the Second, he felt that the Europe he had known was no longer there for him. His memoirs contained what he then felt was his farewell to his prewar Europe.

After the Aldingtons had moved to Florida, Richard began working on his biography of the Duke of Wellington (published in 1943). This marked the

beginning of his rather significant career as a biographer over the next ten years. In 1942, recalling the sale of the film rights to *All Men Are Enemies* ten years earlier, Aldington took his family to Hollywood where he hoped to work as a screen writer. They stayed in Hollywood for over three years while Richard worked as a freelance writer for the studios. He also finished *The Duke*, which he began in Florida, edited the *Portable Oscar Wilde*, and did a few translations.

In 1954, income from the royalties from his numerous works diminished considerably with the publication of Aldington's biography of legendarily heroic Lawrence of Arabia. *Lawrence L'Imposteur: T.E. Lawrence, the Legend and the Man*, was published first in Paris, then a year later in London under the title, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Inquiry*. Aldington expected that he would be writing the biography of a hero, but in the process realized that the legend of the man was, in fact, legend indeed--and mostly of T.E. Lawrence's own making. Even though in later years, most historians came to agree with Aldington's account of the facts of Lawrence's life, the general public in 1955 was not ready to accept it. The abuse aimed at Aldington from his critics was overwhelming and resulted in publishers refusing to print his works and bookstores refusing to stock them for lack of demand.

After 1957 the public's poor opinion of Aldington subsided somewhat, and his works went back into print and he was given more editing work. Several of his works were translated into Russian and he found himself quite surprised by his popularity in the Soviet Union. In February of 1962, he received an invitation from Alexei Surkov, Secretary of the Soviet Writers Union, to visit the USSR for the celebration of his seventieth birthday. Aldington looked forward to having the opportunity to flaunt his acceptance among his Russian readers to his fellow British intellectuals for whom he felt quite a bit of disdain. Before his death in 1962, in a letter to Eric Warman in May of that year, Aldington writes that with his trip to Leningrad and Moscow, "I shall at least have the pleasure of annoying some people in G[reat] B[ritain]." Aldington was asked to give a speech to the Writer's Club in Moscow during the celebration of his 70th birthday. Mikhail Urnov recalled Aldington's words, "Here, in the Soviet Union, for the first time in my life I have met with extraordinary warmth and attention. This is the happiest day of my life. I shall never forget it."

At The British Museum

I turn the page and read:

"I dream of silent verses where the rhyme
Glides noiseless as an oar."

The heavy musty air, the black desks,
The bent heads and the rustling noises
In the great dome
Vanish ...

And

The sun hangs in the cobalt-blue sky,
The boat drifts over the lake shallows,
The fishes skim like umber shades through the undulating weeds,
The oleanders drop their rosy petals on the lawns,
And the swallows dive and swirl and whistle
About the cleft battlements of Can Grande's castle...

Richard Aldington

Bombardment

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.

The fourth night every man,
Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion,
Slept, muttering and twitching,
While the shells crashed overhead.

The fifth day there came a hush;
We left our holes
And looked above the wreckage of the earth
To where the white clouds moved in silent lines
Across the untroubled blue.

Richard Aldington

Childhood

I

The bitterness. the misery, the wretchedness of childhood
Put me out of love with God.
I can't believe in God's goodness;
I can believe
In many avenging gods.
Most of all I believe
In gods of bitter dullness,
Cruel local gods
Who scared my childhood.

II

I've seen people put
A chrysalis in a match-box,
"To see," they told me, "what sort of moth would come."
But when it broke its shell
It slipped and stumbled and fell about its prison
And tried to climb to the light
For space to dry its wings.

That's how I was.
Somebody found my chrysalis
And shut it in a match-box.
My shrivelled wings were beaten,
Shed their colours in dusty scales
Before the box was opened
For the moth to fly.

III

I hate that town;
I hate the town I lived in when I was little;
I hate to think of it.
There wre always clouds, smoke, rain
In that dingly little valley.
It rained; it always rained.
I think I never saw the sun until I was nine --

And then it was too late;
Everything's too late after the first seven years.

The long street we lived in
Was duller than a drain
And nearly as dingy.
There were the big College
And the pseudo-Gothic town-hall.
There were the sordid provincial shops --
The grocer's, and the shops for women,
The shop where I bought transfers,
And the piano and gramophone shop
Where I used to stand
Staring at the huge shiny pianos and at the pictures
Of a white dog looking into a gramophone.

How dull and greasy and grey and sordid it was!
On wet days -- it was always wet --
I used to kneel on a chair
And look at it from the window.

The dirty yellow trams
Dragged noisily along
With a clatter of wheels and bells
And a humming of wires overhead.
They threw up the filthy rain-water from the hollow lines
And then the water ran back
Full of brownish foam bubbles.

There was nothing else to see --
It was all so dull --
Except a few grey legs under shiny black umbrellas
Running along the grey shiny pavements;
Sometimes there was a waggon
Whose horses made a strange loud hollow sound
With their hoofs
Through the silent rain.

And there was a grey museum
Full of dead birds and dead insects and dead animals
And a few relics of the Romans -- dead also.
There was a sea-front,

A long asphalt walk with a bleak road beside it,
Three piers, a row of houses,
And a salt dirty smell from the little harbour.

I was like a moth --
Like one of those grey Emperor moths
Which flutter through the vines at Capri.
And that damned little town was my match-box,
Against whose sides I beat and beat
Until my wings were torn and faded, and dingy
As that damned little town.

IV

At school it was just as dull as that dull High Street.
The front was dull;
The High Street and the other street were dull --
And there was a public park, I remember,
And that was damned dull, too,
With its beds of geraniums no one was allowed to pick,
And its clipped lawns you weren't allowed to walk on,
And the gold-fish pond you mustn't paddle in,
And the gate made out of a whale's jaw-bones,
And the swings, which were for "Board-School children,"
And its gravel paths.

And on Sundays they rang the bells,
From Baptist and Evangelical and Catholic churches.
They had a Salvation Army.
I was taken to a High Church;
The parson's name was Mowbray,
"Which is a good name but he thinks too much of it --"
That's what I heard people say.

I took a little black book
To that cold, grey, damp, smelling church,
And I had to sit on a hard bench,
Wriggle off it to kneel down when they sang psalms
And wriggle off it to kneel down when they prayed,
And then there was nothing to do
Except to play trains with the hymn-books.

There was nothing to see,
Nothing to do,
Nothing to play with,
Except that in an empty room upstairs
There was a large tin box
Containing reproductions of the Magna Charta,
Of the Declaration of Independence
And of a letter from Raleigh after the Armada.
There were also several packets of stamps,
Yellow and blue Guatemala parrots,
Blue stags and red baboons and birds from Sarawak,
Indians and Men-of-war
From the United States,
And the green and red portraits
Of King Francobello
Of Italy.

V

I don't believe in God.
I do believe in avenging gods
Who plague us for sins we never sinned
But who avenge us.

That's why I'll never have a child,
Never shut up a chrysalis in a match-box
For the moth to spoil and crush its bright colours,
Beating its wings against the dingy prison-wall.

Richard Aldington

Daisy

*Plus quan se atque suos amavit omnes,
nunc...*

- Catullus

You were my playmate by the sea.
We swam together.
Your girl's body had no breasts.

We found prawns among the rocks;
We liked to feel the sun and to do nothing;
In the evening we played games with the others.

It made me glad to be by you.

Sometimes I kissed you,
And you were always glad to kiss me;
But I was afraid - I was only fourteen.

And I had quite forgotten you,
You and your name.

To-day I pass through the streets.
She who touches my arms and talks with me
Is - who knows? - Helen of Sparta,
Dryope, Laodamia ...

And there are you
A whore in Oxford Street.

Richard Aldington

Epilogue

<i>Che son contenti nel fuoco</i>

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.

Richard Aldington

Goodbye!

Come, thrust your hands in the warm earth
And feel her strength through all your veins;
Breathe her full odors, taste her mouth,
Which laughs away imagined pains;
Touch her life's womb, yet know
This substance makes your grave also.

Shrink not; your flesh is no more sweet
Than flowers which daily blow and die;
Nor are your mein and dress so neat,
Nor half so pure your lucid eye;
And, yet, by flowers and earth I swear
You're neat and pure and sweet and fair.

Richard Aldington

Images

I

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

II

The blue smoke leaps
Like swirling clouds of birds vanishing.
So my love leaps forth toward you,
Vanishes and is renewed.

III

A rose-yellow moon in a pale sky
When the sunset is faint vermilion
In the mist among the tree-boughs
Art thou to me, my beloved.

IV

A young beech tree on the edge of the forest
Stands still in the evening,
Yet shudders through all its leaves in the light air
And seems to fear the stars -
So are you still and so tremble.

V

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

VI

The flower which the wind has shaken
Is soon filled again with rain;

So does my heart fill slowly with tears, <!--O Foam-Driver, Wind-of-the-
Vineyards, -->
Until you return.

Richard Aldington

Lemures

In Nineveh
And beyond Nineveh
In the dusk
They were afraid.

In Thebes of Egypt
In the dust
They chanted of them to the dead.

In my Lesbos and Achaia
Where the God dwelt
We knew them.

Now men say "They are not":
But in the dusk
Ere the white sun comes -
A gay child that bears a white candle -
I am afraid of their rustling,
Of their terrible silence,
The menace of their secrecy.

Richard Aldington

Prelude

How could I love you more?
I would give up
Even that beauty I have loved too well
That I might love you better.
Alas, how poor the gifts that lovers give
I can but give you of my flesh and strength,
I can but give you these few passing days
And passionate words that, since our speech began,
All lovers whisper in all ladies' ears.

I try to think of some one lovely gift
No lover yet in all the world has found;
I think: If the cold sombre gods
Were hot with love as I am
Could they not endow you with a star
And fix bright youth for ever in your limbs?
Could they not give you all things that I lack?

You should have loved a god; I am but dust.
Yet no god loves as loves this poor frail dust.

Richard Aldington

Round-Pond

Water ruffled and speckled by galloping wind
Which puffs and spurts it into tiny pashing breaks
Dashed with lemon-yellow afternoon sunlight.
The shining of the sun upon the water
Is like a scattering of gold crocus-petals
In a long wavering irregular flight.

The water is cold to the eye
As the wind to the cheek.

In the budding chestnuts
Whose sticky buds glimmer and are half-burst open
The starlings make their clitter-clatter;
And the blackbirds in the grass
Are getting as fat as the pigeons.

Too-hoo, this is brave;
Even the cold wind is seeking a new mistress.

Richard Aldington

The Faun Sees Snow For The First Time

Zeus,
Brazen-thunder-hurler,
Cloud-whirler, son-of-Kronos,
Send vengeance on these Oreads
Who strew
White frozen flecks of mist and cloud
Over the brown trees and the tufted grass
Of the meadows, where the stream
Runs black through shining banks
Of bluish white.

Zeus,
Are the halls of heaven broken up
That you flake down upon me
Feather-strips of marble?

Dis and Styx!
When I stamp my hoof
The frozen-cloud-specks jam into the cleft
So that I reel upon two slippery points ...

Fool, to stand here cursing
When I might be running!

Richard Aldington

The Poplar

Why do you always stand there shivering
Between the white stream and the road?

The people pass through the dust
On bicycles, in carts, in motor-cars;
The waggoners go by at dawn;
The lovers walk on the grass path at night.

Stir from your roots, walk, poplar!
You are more beautiful than they are.

I know that the white wind loves you,
Is always kissing you and turning up
The white lining of your green petticoat.
The sky darts through you like blue rain,
And the grey rain drips on your flanks
And loves you.
And I have seen the moon
Slip his silver penny into your pocket
As you straightened your hair;
And the white mist curling and hesitating
Like a bashful lover about your knees.

I know you, poplar;
I have watched you since I was ten.
But if you had a little real love,
A little strength,
You would leave your nonchalant idle lovers
And go walking down the white road
Behind the waggoners.

There are beautiful beeches down beyond the hill.
Will you always stand there shivering?

Richard Aldington