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A. E. BARLOW

IMAGISM AND AFTER : A STUDY OF THE POETRY

OF RICHARD ALDINGTON

M.A. Thesis. 1975

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ABSTRACT

Richard Aldington is more often remembered to-day as a novelist and biographer than as a poet, but it was as a poet that he first made his reputation, and as a poet that he should figure most prominently in recent literary history. His career began under the ægis of Ezra Pound and he quickly became part of the avant-garde literary circle from which the modernist movement was to evolve. He was a leading member of the Imagists, editing The Egoist and publishing articles and manifestos on Imagism, as well as contributing to the Imagist anthologies. He helped to publicise the poetic theories which Ezra Pound derived from T.E. Hulme and he was attracted also to the ideas of the French Symbolists and of Remy de Gourmont. His own early verse, however, reveals more clearly his interest in classical models. The dominant theme of his pre-First World War poetry was that of the conflict between the ideal world of his imagination and the reality of life in the modern city. The real test of his art and ideas came in 1917 when he went to fight in France; he was the only Imagist to write war poems from first-hand experience, and in general his war poetry has been underestimated: he presented with great clarity the struggle to maintain a belief in the value of life in the face of overwhelming destruction. At the same time he wrote a series of love poems which were to reveal his weaknesses rather than his strengths as a poet: a lack of creative and imaginative control which resulted in weak technique.

After the War, Aldington began to lose sympathy with modernist practices, and attacked the tendencies towards extreme compression and obscurity. Increasingly, he became isolated from the literary mainstream of the time, even though his major long poem, A Fool in The Forest, had much in common with Eliot's poetry of the twenties. Aldington was disillusioned with the post-war world and there is a strong strain of bitterness in his poetry of this period. In 1929 he published his first novel, Death of a Hero, and thereafter his interest in writing poetry began slowly to lapse, although some of his best writing is to be found in the poetry he wrote between 1930 and 1937. Gradually he overcame his bitterness and there was a note of slightly desperate optimism in his last long poems.

Aldington's reputation as a poet has been overshadowed by his later notoriety as a biographer; however, his contribution to the poetic renaissance in England between 1910 and 1918, his significance as a modernist who rejected modernism, and his close association at a crucial period with many major figures of twentieth-century literature, deserve greater recognition than they have so far received.

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A.E. Barlow.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes to the text:

TLS., The Times Literary Supplement.

Life, Life for Life's Sake, English ed., 1968.

CP., The Complete Poems of Richard Aldington, 1948.

A Fool, A Fool i' The Forest, 1924.

A Dream, A Dream in the Luxembourg, 1930.

PART 1. Chapter 1.

Introduction

Who now regards me or who twines
Red wool and threaded lilies round the brows
Of my neglected statues? 1

When Richard Aldington's volume of memoirs, Life For Life's Sake, was published posthumously in England in 1968, an anonymous reviewer² was puzzled by the fact that so conscientious and prolific a writer as Aldington - "a journeyman of letters" is how he described him - should have faded so rapidly from the public memory: it was only six years since Aldington's death, yet all but one of his books had gone out of print in England. The reviewer recalled that Aldington had been first an Imagist poet, then a novelist and, in his later career, a biographer who produced harsh and sour books on, among others, D. H. Lawrence and Lawrence of Arabia which, said the reviewer, had led Robert Graves to describe him as "a bitter, bed-ridden, leering asthmatic, elderly hangman-of-letters". The reviewer himself thought that this was going too far but he admitted an element of truth in Graves's description. His own judgement on Aldington's life as a writer was more restrained: "Still, if it was not a great or even a successful career, it was not a dishonourable one, and there is no reason to cast dust upon his unlaurelled head."

There is, indeed, no reason to cast dust, but is there, alternatively, any reason to try to cast some light on Aldington?

1. 'The Faun Captive', CP., p.69. (For note on texts of Aldington's poetry, see Bibliography.)
2. TLS., 26 December 1968, p.1447.

He died in 1962 and since then has rapidly faded into obscurity; out of a total of over one hundred titles listed under his name in the British Museum Catalogue, only one has remained consistently in print. Ironically, this is T.E. Lawrence: A Biographical Enquiry (1955), the book which (by its attempt to expose T.E. Lawrence as a charlatan and fraud) did most to destroy Aldington's reputation in his own country. As a poet he is to-day represented in only a very few anthologies: he finds no place in the new Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse (1973). His Complete Poems was published in 1948 and went out of print long ago. When Aldington is remembered to-day it is usually as a "between-the-wars" writer and certainly it was during the twenties and thirties that his reputation as a poet and novelist was not unimpressive. However, his career as a writer spanned not twenty but fifty years and if, ultimately, it was neither great nor wholly successful, it had a certain value. In the history of twentieth century letters Aldington is not someone who can be overlooked completely and, as a poet particularly, his work remains of interest and of some significance. It is the primary aim of this study of his poetry to show why, and to what extent, this is so.

It was as a poet that Aldington first came to public notice: he was a leading figure in the Imagist movement and therefore played his part in the remarkable rekindling of English poetry which occurred immediately before and during the First World War. He was one of

the first practitioners of vers libre in England and one of the first to insist that vers libre should not be an excuse for shoddy craftsmanship. His later disenchantment with the Modernist movement and with the direction that poetry was taking in the 1920s makes his own poetry a useful yardstick by which to measure some of the fundamental tendencies which have influenced poetry over the last fifty years. He was closely connected with Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Herbert Read and D.H. Lawrence and other major figures; he is an interesting link, therefore, in the historical development of recent literature. While considering Aldington's poetry, however, it is important always to bear in mind that even at the first, Imagist, phase of his career his interest was by no means confined to poetry: it was under his editorship that The Egoist published James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist; in the twenties he was responsible for the first publication of the writings of Samuel Beckett. Both as a friend and as a critic he helped D.H. Lawrence: his book, Portrait of a Genius, But..., was one of the first major works on Lawrence, and his introductions to Lawrence's novels are still published in the Phoenix Library editions. Aldington was always outspoken, and his outspokenness lost him many friends; finally, indeed, with his biography of T.E. Lawrence, it ruined his reputation and left him irretrievably in the literary wilderness. Curiously, at the time of his death, the two countries where his reputation stood highest

were the United States and the U.S.S.R..

The potential significance of Aldington's poetry can be seen by a glance at the period during which he was writing. The claim that the Imagists laid the foundations of the Modernist movement in poetry is no longer the accepted belief that it was twenty years ago¹; nevertheless the Imagists were important - an attempt will be made later to assess this importance² - and Aldington was a significant member of the group until 1917, the year in which he went to fight in France as a private soldier. In this, too, he is worth consideration for he alone of the Imagists, indeed almost alone of the radical young English poets, actually fought in the war. (I use "radical" here in a literary rather than a political sense; the Imagists were radical in comparison with the Georgians, to whose ranks Blunden, Sassoon and Graves belonged.) The war affected Aldington's whole life and work profoundly: in a certain sense he continued to be a war poet long after 1918 for the implications and consequences of the war, both personal and external, were to provide, directly and indirectly, much of the material that he worked into his poems and novels.

The first point which should be stressed, therefore, is that Aldington was not only an Imagist poet; indeed, later in his career he came to reject specifically many of the tenets of Imagism and

1. See, for example, 'The New Kingdom of Ezrael', TLS., 2 February 1973, pp. 109-110, and Donald Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry, 1973 for arguments that Hardy, not the Imagists, fathered modern poetry; see also below, p.29.
2. See below, Chapter 2.

resented, as did the other Imagists, being treated only as a member of a group of like-minded poets, not as a poet in his own right. In the Introduction to his Complete Poems he said:

I claim no share ... in the so-called 'revolution of 1912'. It was mere accident that what I was writing then chanced to meet with the approval of the verse revolutionaries Willy-nilly I have been associated with the 'revolt of 1912', and I think it appropriate ... to dissociate myself from attitudes which are not mine.¹

They may not have been Aldington's attitudes in 1948 and he may have been moving away from them as long before as 1918 but one is bound to say that in 1912 he had aligned himself eagerly and gratefully with Ezra Pound's "verse revolutionaries". Nevertheless, the war dissolved the Imagist movement, as it also and more rapidly dissolved the Vorticists, and the 1920s found Aldington living first in an isolated Berkshire village and then, increasingly, abroad. In this he was following writers like Pound, Lawrence and Madox Ford, and such geographical alienation mirrors the theme of growing isolation, one might say of desolation, which dominated his poetry at this time. In the early twenties he was a close friend of T.S. Eliot, and critics were not slow to point out the similarities between Aldington's A Fool in The Forest and The Waste Land. To-day, few people remember Aldington's poem; yet, it may justly be said to speak for its generation with scarcely less eloquence and no less anguish than Eliot's masterpiece. Interestingly, however, it was at precisely this time that Aldington was becoming wary of the tendencies

1. 'Introduction', CP., pp.13-14.

of Modernist poetry and it was probably The Waste Land more than any other single work which altered his attitude to the direction he believed that poetry ought to take.

Thus, one may trace in Aldington's poetry of the twenties a gradual rejection of the very trends which he himself had helped to establish. This may have been a factor in his decision to begin writing novels and, from the time of Death of a Hero (1929) onwards, Aldington the poet was under increasing pressure from Aldington the novelist; eventually the novelist won and, after 1937, Aldington stopped publishing new poetry altogether, but not before he had produced one poem, A Dream in the Luxembourg, which was immensely popular and was deemed to be "perhaps more evocative of the 1920s than much more pretentious poetry."¹ The 1920s which this poem evoked were far removed from the world of The Waste Land, closer to the emancipated atmosphere of the 'Gay Twenties' than to the acquiescent despair betrayed in Exile or A Fool in the Forest. One is always conscious in Aldington's poetry of the struggle by the artist to come to terms with the society of which he is a part and with the times to which he belongs, and of his determination to find a way of life which will be personally fulfilling. The difficulty of doing this in the years during and after the war is reflected in his poetry of the time, and the impact of this poetry is undoubtedly the greater for the fact that Aldington endured the active involvement of fighting for two years. It

1. 'Obituary: Richard Aldington', The Times, 30 July 1962, p.12.

would, of course, be absurd to claim that in this Aldington was at all unique: a number of writers survived the war and all found it difficult to readjust themselves and to reconcile their experiences in terms of their art: few writers, however, have expressed these conflicts with greater candour or vividness than Aldington.

His poetry, therefore, recommends itself for consideration for two reasons: first, because it is not without significance in the study of the development of English poetry in this century and, secondly, because it is of interest on its own terms and has so lacked attention in recent years as to have been almost totally neglected. He was not a great poet, but on the whole he was a good, if uneven, one and his poetry is still worth reading to-day: in the work of few other poets, writing at the same time, is the quest for an identity and for a kind of life which, to be true to himself, he can valuably lead, so vividly charted as in the poetry which Richard Aldington produced between 1912 and 1937.

Aldington was closely connected with other, greater writers than himself: though he achieved a distinctive voice of his own, it was only natural in a writer whose first poems were published before his twenty-first birthday that he should show the influence of those whose friendship he valued and whose work he admired. Some such debts he was always willing to acknowledge, others less so: however strenuously he proclaimed his independence from Ezra Pound's

influence, he owed him a great deal, not least the chance to establish himself as a writer in the first place. Influence is a notoriously difficult thing to prove and, on the whole, is perhaps best left to speak for itself. Nevertheless, in places where it can reliably be shown in the course of this study, it will be indicated; at other times it will be sufficient to point to associations or shared interests. For instance, Aldington was a firm, though critical, admirer of D.H. Lawrence, and a close friend as well. They had themes and interests in common, most notably a strong sense of the fundamental power of the earth and of the value, indeed the necessity, of travel. Yet it would be invidious to suggest that the presence of this sense in Aldington's early writing reflects the influence of his older friend. Similarly, they were both exponents of vers libre but any close resemblance in the styles of the two men was most certainly not the result of collaboration or imitation. Lawrence attained the unique distinction of appearing in both the Imagist and the Georgian anthologies, yet had no interest in the theories or principles of either group, while Aldington was actively involved in the development of Imagism. However, to take another example: although Aldington came to be closely connected with the theory of Imagism, this theory had its origins largely in the ideas of T.E. Hulme, who strongly influenced the thinking of Pound and the Imagists but whom Aldington actively disliked and whose influence he refused to acknowledge.

It would, therefore, be rash and probably unprofitable to approach Aldington's work primarily through the influence of those with whom he was at one time or another associated. The fact remains, however, that Aldington is a thread in the evolving pattern of this century's literature and a detailed account of his life and of his many friendships would supplement valuably the rather tantalising portrait he paints of himself in Life for Life's Sake and the brief but revealing glimpses to be found in the memoirs of Brigit Patmore. Aldington was a controversial figure from the time of the publication of Death of a Hero onwards, and the events of his later life are scarcely of less interest than those of his earlier. However, it is the years down to 1937 which cover the period during which he was active as a poet, and a brief account of them will not be out of place at this point.

The Biographical Background

Aldington was born in Portsmouth in 1892 and spent the first years of his life in Dover, where his father was a solicitor. His parents were comfortably middle-class and his childhood was uneventful, although as a young man he looked back at "that damned little town" with surprising and rather self-regarding bitterness:

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. ¹

Later, in his autobiography, Aldington was to write more positively and with greater detachment about his childhood. Although he was never a keen scholar at school he quickly became an avid reader and was fortunate in being allowed the run of his father's well-stocked library. Poetry attracted him most and he was to claim that, by the time he went to university, he had read every poet on the required English course. From the age of fifteen he had begun to write, as well as to read, poetry, and from then on never seriously considered anything other than a literary career. His parents had intended him to follow in his father's footsteps, but at least they did not actively discourage his literary interests; for instance, his mother sent some of his poems to Bernard Shaw, and Aldington himself, while going through a phase (not sustained) of admiring Swinburne, made the customary pilgrimage to The Pines on Putney Common to visit the by then very decrepit Watts-Dunton.

Meanwhile, he was still a pupil at Dover College, where he was unhappy and not very successful; the account of George Winterbourne's miserable schooldays in Death of a Hero suggests that Aldington's recollections of school did not mellow with time. Although he left Dover with a place at University College, London, he was remembered by the school not for his academic ability but for his rebelliousness.

1. 'Childhood', CP., p.57, 3.75-81.

What he rebelled against was the conditioning which, he feared, would fix him irretrievably in the middle-class provincial world of his parents. Even at this comparatively early stage, he felt an aversion to "bourgeois respectability"; this aversion was to lead him first into the Bohemian pre-war London circle and then abroad, so that, after 1928, he never had a permanent home in England. The fear of becoming conventionally respectable haunted him always and could not be kept below the surface of his work: it is very evident in the concluding sections of A Fool in The Forest, and the behaviour of the suburban middle-classes more often excited his ridicule than his sympathy:

I also might have rocked and craned
 In undergrounds for daily news,
 And watched my soul grow slowly stained
 To middle-class unsightly hues.¹

Just as he was approaching the end of his school career, Aldington left Dover and, as a result of a change in the family fortunes, moved with his parents first to Harrow and then to Teddington. This latter move coincided with his enrolment at London University to read English. While he was there, A.E. Housman and W.P. Ker, the eminent Medieval and Provençal scholar, were the leading literary figures in the English faculty, but Aldington, to his later regret, never had any very close contact with them. In fact, he remained at University College only for a year: he was quickly bored with his course and, when his father went bankrupt after a series of unfortunate financial speculations, Aldington was not sorry to leave. He managed to get a job as sports reporter

1. 'To Those Who played for Safety in Life', CP, p.174.

for a Fleet Street newspaper, an incongruous first appointment for someone who always despised English heartiness. At the same time, another newspaper accepted a couple of his poems.

In 1911, therefore, Aldington rather uncertainly began his literary career at the age of nineteen. For a few months he lived in 'digs' in London and devoted all his spare time to reading, but he quickly began to meet other writers and by the end of the year he had been taken under the wing of that remarkable editor A.R. Orage, whose magazine, The New Age, was a nursery for so many writers who were later to become important figures. Through Orage, Aldington met Ezra Pound and Harold Monroe; through Pound, he met Madox Ford, whose secretary he became in 1912, and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, the American poet), T.E. Hulme, F.S. Flint, D.H. Lawrence and several others. Thus, by the time he was twenty, Aldington had entered the literary circles of pre-war London, though he was as yet completely unknown to the public at large. He was undoubtedly fortunate to have met the right people at precisely the right moment, and he always acknowledged the help given to him at this time, but, living as he was on the few guineas a week he collected from editors, it cannot have been an easy beginning.

The remarkable features about the London literary world before 1914 were the way in which the community of writers and artists was clearly identifiable as a social group, and the ease with which, inside this community, people whose views, ideas and life-styles varied enormously managed to co-exist with a surprising lack of tension. Although there

were rival groups and coteries, there were at the same time certain people who linked these factions together and prevented a hostile polarisation. Harold Monro is a good instance: as founder of the Poetry Bookshop in Devonshire Street, he was at one time or another host to almost every young poet in London. By inclination he was a Georgian and contributed to, as well as published, the Georgian Poetry anthologies. His interests, however, were not confined to the limitations of Sir Edward Marsh, the editor of the Georgian anthologies, or of J.C. Squire, who effectively took over the Georgian leadership after the war. Monro published work by Imagist poets, including Aldington, and in his magazines Poetry Review and Poetry and Drama he was prepared to publish work by anyone who wrote seriously. He approved of the Imagist attack on shoddy standards and "poetasting", and he devoted the third issue of Poetry and Drama almost entirely to the Futurists, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Georgians. At his Poetry Bookshop poets met, readings were held, and what Monro termed "an informal guild of poets" flourished, encouraging in a practical way the identity of the poets in London at this time as a cohesive group. X

Another linking figure was T.E. Hulme, although his influence ranged across the arts and was by no means confined to poetry alone. Hulme, as a philosopher interested primarily in aesthetics, and (perhaps equally important) as a great talker who enjoyed an audience, was a member of the Poets Club which had existed briefly

in 1908 and a leader of the unnamed club which succeeded it in the following year, "the forgotten school of 1909" as Pound referred to it when publishing Hulme's "Complete Poetical Works" at the end of his own Ripostes in 1912.¹ In fact, Hulme's contribution to Imagism as such remains a matter of dispute even today; perhaps one should say of confusion, since F.S. Flint accused Pound of stealing the ideas for Imagisme from Hulme, while Pound claimed that the true father of Imagisme was not Hulme at all, but Madox Ford.

It is important here to notice the distinction between "Imagisme" and "Imagism"; "Imagisme" was the name given by Pound to the small group of poets of whom he was undoubted leader between 1912-14, while "Imagism" is the name by which the movement as a whole is known. Pound considered that "Imagisme" was his own trade-name and resented the fact that the anthologies published after 1914 were still called Imagist anthologies. Even though he dissociated himself from the movement he continued to think of it as, in a certain sense, his own for many years afterwards. (This distinction between "Imagisme" and "Imagism" is observed throughout the present work.)

From 1912 until the beginning of the war, Hulme's home at 67, Frith St. was a rendezvous for nearly all the younger, and several of the elder, generations of all kinds. Imagists and Georgians, Futurists and Vorticists met there on equal terms: Pound and Drinkwater, Epstein and Gaudier-Brzeska, Rupert Brooke and

1. cf. Ezra Pound, Collected Shorter Poems, 1952, p. 269.

Aldington, Wyndham Lewis and Walter Sickert were among the heterogeneous group who were to be found at Hulme's Tuesday evening salons, and in so far as this degree of fellowship existed among the serious artists of that particular era, one can appreciate Pound's reason for describing London between 1912-14 as 'The Vortex'.

This, then, was the world that Aldington entered and it is not surprising that he rapidly made many contacts among editors and publishers who would be willing to give him a chance to get into print. Of the older generation, Ford Madox Ford, one of the most intriguing figures of this period, encouraged Aldington to write and gave him the means to do so by employing him for a while as his secretary. He helped many young writers in various ways, and Aldington's comment on him sums up the spirit which existed so strongly for these few years:

Ford had the rare merit of believing in the republic of letters. He thought that writers and artists, whatever their personal rivalries and differences, should support each other publicly. I don't know anyone else who did so much to help other writers, with the possible exception of Ezra [Pound].¹

In all this activity Pound was very much in evidence: he was most closely associated with Ford, whose salons at South Lodge, the home of the novelist Violet Hunt, rivalled Hulme's. At this time, Pound was also involved in helping W.B. Yeats to remodel his verse, in writing articles on recent European literature for Orage's New Age and in appointing himself European correspondent to Harriet Monroe's

1. Life, p.144.

Chicago magazine, Poetry, then just being launched. Pound, too, believed firmly in the "republic of letters", and was determined to establish himself as a leader of it, and Aldington was adopted as a fellow-citizen from the outset. Aldington had become very friendly with H.D., whom Pound had known in America, and all three used to meet regularly to discuss each other's poetry. Independently, it seems, they had arrived at certain ideas about poetry and were evolving styles which had characteristics in common. Their meetings used to be held in a tea-shop in Kensington and caused great amusement to friends who heard about these literary tea-parties. Robert Frost has recalled:

Pound had an afternoon meeting once a week with Flint and Aldington and H.D. and at one time Hulme, I think. Hulme started with them. They met every week to rewrite each other's poems I never went to one of these meetings. I said to Pound, 'What do you do?' He said, 'Re-write each other's poems.' And I said 'Why?' He said, 'To squeeze the water out of them.'¹

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Imagiste movement, at least in the form in which it presented itself to the world, began in these curious circumstances. Pound invented the label "Imagiste" as an eye-catching selling point and Aldington and H.D. accepted the label because at that time their overriding concern was to see their poetry in print. The movement as such was launched when their poems appeared under the Imagiste heading in Poetry at the end of 1912. Throughout the following year the Imagistes kept their name alive but

1. Writers at Work, ed. Kay Dick, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p.72.

their number and output remained very small. In June 1913 Poetry and Drama referred to "a new school of English poetry" - it was an effective publicity stunt (or, as Aldington later called it, "simply advertising bull-dust"). Nevertheless, having launched Imagisme, Pound was obliged to justify its existence and to explain its function, and it is at least partly true that the theory of Imagisme was not fully worked out until the movement was under way. Although Pound was undoubtedly the leader in all this, he did not monopolize the group's propaganda, and it is probable that the celebrated principles of Imagisme¹ were worked out jointly, even though they appeared under Pound's name. Flint and Aldington were also enlisted to write about the movement : Flint contributed an article to the March 1913 issue of Poetry which set out certain ideas about the movement in the form of an interview with an unnamed member (clearly Pound²). In the same year, when Pound began to talk of compiling an anthology of Imagiste verse, and when in August 1913 he became Literary Editor of The New Freewoman (later The Egoist but at this time a feminist magazine) and turned it into the mouthpiece of the movement, it was clear that Imagisme had become something more than just an idea in the minds of three or four people.

If Imagisme established Pound's reputation, it launched Aldington's, and however much he later resented having the Imagist label attached to him, his career would have been very different without it.

1. See below, p.36.
2. cf. C.Middleton, 'Documents on Imagism from the Papers of F.S.Flint', in The Review, no.15, April 1965, p.36.

Des Imagistes : An Anthology appeared in 1914, edited by Pound, and it contained ten poems by Aldington, more than by any of the other contributors, among whom were H.D., William Carlos Williams, Madox Ford and James Joyce. With this anthology the Imagistes were now an identifiable group and, even if their sales were never to be as impressive as those of the Georgians, they were successfully launched. When The New Freewoman changed its name to The Egoist, Pound hoped to persuade the wealthy American poet Amy Lowell (who had had one poem in the 1914 anthology) to finance the magazine and pay him a salary as editor, but she declined and the original editor, Dora Marsden, remained nominally in charge, Aldington becoming assistant editor. Pound's enthusiasm for a movement he could not completely control began to wane and his interest started to turn towards the artistic activities of Gaudier-Brzeska and Wyndham Lewis. This led him into close contact with the more radical, Futurist group, the Vorticists, a shift which Aldington was to recall with amusement: "Ezra had now attached himself to the Blast group, and was busy patenting a new movement, Vorticism, whatever that may have been."¹ This comment is not without its own irony, for Aldington himself was a signatory of the Vorticist manifesto² though he was not actively involved with the Vorticists and came to regard their strident outbursts as dangerously destructive.

1. Life, p.126.

2. Blast, no.1. 1914, p.43.

When, in the summer of 1914, Amy Lowell proposed that future Imagist anthologies should be edited by a committee of all the contributors, Pound refused to have anything to do with the scheme and, piqued, would not allow his title, Des Imagistes, to be used again; when the next anthology appeared in 1915, it was entitled Some Imagist Poets, and the affected final "e" was dropped, never to be used again. Ironically, however, in September 1914, at the precise moment when Pound was washing his hands of the Imagists, he produced the longest and most serious discussion of Imagism in an article in The Fortnightly Review¹ which was meant to be an introduction to the theories of Vorticism.

It was after Pound's departure that Aldington found himself at the head of the Imagist movement in England. Amy Lowell was providing the finance and looking after publicity in America while Aldington was left in effective control of The Egoist; most important, Amy Lowell entrusted to him the task of drafting the Imagist Credo which prefaced the second anthology. At the same time, Aldington's own interests were developing : he contributed a series of travel articles to The New Age and began to translate Greek and Latin poetry. He was a gifted linguist and, encouraged by Pound and Flint, he was reading widely in French literature. Although his poetry owed little directly to the Symbolistes, he was immediately impressed by the writings of the poet and essayist, Remy de Gourmont, whose work

1. Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism', in The Fortnightly Review, vol. .xlvi, September 1914, pp. 461-471.

Aldington did much to promote in England, and whose influence can be glimpsed in some of Aldington's own poetry, notably in A Dream in the Luxembourg.¹ One of Imagism's main contributions was to stress the importance of the European tradition and to lift English poetry out of the rut of insularity into which the Georgians were steering it with such determination. Aldington may take some credit in this; both during this period and in the twenties when he was the chief reviewer of French Literature for The Times Literary Supplement. Nor were his interests here confined to poetry: he was one of the first to review, seriously and fully, the novels of Proust outside France.

(1915 was the most important year so far in Aldington's career: in addition to the activities just listed, he published his first volume of poems, Images (1910 - 1915) which appeared under the imprint of Monro's Poetry Bookshop. The same volume, under the title of Images Old and New, was published simultaneously in the United States, a remarkable achievement for a poet only twenty-three years old, and one made possible by his association with the magazine, Poetry, which in its short life had already earned a very high reputation. Although the war had begun, Aldington remained in London with H.D. (by now his wife); he had been turned down by the Medical Board when he tried to enlist in the Army in 1914. He was unhappy to be in this situation: "Under the stress of inner conflict I lost the serenity

1. See below, Chapter 7, pp. 210-217.

and harmony which form a large part of real success in life. I thought it was a plain duty to be in the army and cowardly to be out of it."¹ Several of his former friends and acquaintances had joined up and some, like Gaudier-Brzeska and Hulme, had already been killed. In 1916 he volunteered again, and this time was accepted. He enlisted as a private soldier and was sent to a training camp in Dorset at Wool, coincidentally the very place where T.E. Lawrence, with whose reputation Aldington was to become so disastrously entangled forty years later, was to live the last few years of his life, likewise as a private soldier.

Aldington spent the last two years of the war in France. He was commissioned at the end of 1917, but returned suffering from shell-shock and ill from severe gas poisoning. His experience left him embittered and temporarily disenchanted with humanity; it may be said that the whole of his future career as a poet and novelist was to be a struggle to reconcile himself to himself and to humanity. The image of Aldington as an ill-tempered, ageing misanthrope is a false one, but it is just close enough to the truth to have become the popular misconception among those who so much as remember his name, let alone read his books. Nevertheless, it is a misconception to which Aldington himself gave colour:

We should not say "as savage as a wild beast", but "as savage as civilized man." How can we look upon ourselves and our species with anything but disgust?²

1. Life, p.155.
2. ibid., p.174.

When Aldington returned to England after the war both his personal and literary careers seemed to be in disarray. During the war he had helped D.H. Lawrence and Frieda by lending them half of his flat to live in after they had been obliged by the suspicious authorities to leave their cottage in Cornwall. While on leave, Aldington had had an affair with Arabella Yorke, a close friend of Lawrence's, and H.D. had become emotionally involved with Lawrence himself. The result of this unhappy confusion was that Aldington and H.D. separated, and Aldington went to live in Lawrence's remote cottage in Hermitage, a Berkshire village; shortly afterwards he moved to Padworth and until 1927 lived part of each year in this village and part abroad. In spite of his private difficulties and stresses, however, and the closure of The Egoist in 1919, the war had not adversely affected his career: he soon brought out two volumes of verse, Images of War and Images of Desire, the former containing some of his finest short poems and the latter some of his worst. The reasons for this disparity will be analysed in the appropriate place.¹ Here it suffices to say that Aldington found elusive the quality of control necessary to give dramatic and poetic impact to his verse. That he recognized the value of this control is evident from the occasions when it appears in poems which reveal a high degree of craftsmanship; on the other hand, its absence is conspicuous in other poems. In fact, it becomes a feature of

1. See below, Chapters 4 and 5.

Aldington's work, in his novels and biographies no less than in his poetry, that the balance between the vigorous discipline of craftsmanship and the vigorous demands of the writer's emotional and imaginative drives is at best precarious and, at worst, forgotten altogether. Critics have often complained that Aldington's work in the twenties and afterwards is strident and hysterical, sometimes even lacking in taste. In several instances these complaints are justified, though more frequently with his novels than with his poetry. Indeed, it is in the poetry that one can find Aldington's own awareness of these tendencies, an awareness expressed with a measure of ironic control:

O pour un moment
que je laisse couler
tout le flot de ma (si belle!) amertume ... ¹

Within a year of the end of the war, Aldington had become a regular reviewer for The Times Literary Supplement, which ensured him a sufficient basic income. His circle of friends was changing: Pound had gone to Paris, D.H. Lawrence had left England also, and Aldington felt estranged from those whom he had known in 1914 who had not participated in the war. In Life for Life's Sake he describes a literary dinner which he attended in 1919:

But what estranged me was the sense of futility emanated by these gentle, amiable people. They seemed so hopelessly out of date, so unaware that earth's foundations had trembled and that nothing would really be the same again. It was as if we were making vain gestures to each other across a river of death I felt I had nothing to say to them or they to me.²

1. A Fool, CP., p.214, xviii.1-3.
2. Life, p.197.

There were compensations, however; Herbert Read, whom Aldington had met in 1916 or 1917, had become a close friend, as also had Eliot, who invited Aldington to join him as assistant editor of The Criterion. Throughout the twenties, Aldington contributed reviews to the magazine, but his involvement was not as great as it might have been, owing both to the lengthening periods he spent abroad and to the fact that in 1923 the friendship between Aldington and Eliot came to an abrupt and unfortunate end after a disagreement over a publishing contract. The association between Eliot and Aldington would make a fascinating footnote to the literary history of the post-war period: for a short time their careers ran parallel and then diverged completely, but though Aldington was scathing about Eliot's academicism and poetic obscurity, and wrote an unnecessarily savage lampoon against his former friend (Stepping Heavenward 1932), he never lost completely his early respect for Eliot and continued to support him against the attacks of other critics:

It is insane to question Eliot's genius: as a poet or his extreme skill as a critic. What can be attacked, and should be, is his expressed and implied attitude; and the over-intellectual, over-specialized type of poetry he has created as a refuge from life.¹

Whatever their personal differences, their fundamental disagreement was a literary one; in spite of their common literary background Eliot came to embody the Modernist approach to writing, while Aldington gradually moved away towards a verse that was almost

1. Aldington to James Reeves. Reprinted in 'Nine for Reeves. Letters from Richard Aldington', ed. Miriam J. Benkowitz, in Bulletin of New York Public Library, vol. lxix, no.6, June 1965, p.351.

self-consciously personal in style. What Aldington objected to most strongly was the extent of impersonality and compression in Eliot's verse. In a letter to Herbert Read he wrote:

I am inclined to join issue with you over the "compression, intensity, essential significance" line. You provide me with my chief reply - that way lie sterility and eventual silence. The fact that I have broken out of that narrowing ring of "intensity of expression" is to me the most hopeful sign for future work....¹

In 1923 Aldington published Exile and Other Poems, an interesting and varied collection which explored in several moods the poet's overwhelming sense of isolation and attempted to find some approach to acceptance of a positive role in an unsympathetic world. A Fool in the Forest, written during 1924 and published early the following year, was Aldington's most ambitious poem and, on balance, his major poetic achievement. In it Aldington charted the conflict between his imaginative and intellectual personalities and the sources of his disillusion and isolation. It was Aldington's first long poem and it demonstrates that he had the ability to write at length on complex themes and to sustain poetic impact.²

The ten years between 1925 and 1935 were the most successful and productive of Aldington's life. They saw the start of the second phase of his career, as a novelist and short story writer, beginning with the publication of Death of A Hero in 1929. This was one of the most successful novels to be written about the First World War, although the greater part of the story deals with the life of the

1. Aldington to Read, 23 December 1924. Reprinted in 'Richard Aldington's Letters to Herbert Read', ed. David S. Thatcher, in Malahat Review, Univ. Victoria, B.C., no. 15, July 1970, p.13.
2. For a full discussion of the poem see below, Chapter 6.

main character, George Winterbourne, in the years leading to 1914. It is an angry novel, imperfectly structured and intentionally polemical, but its evocation of life in the trenches and of the impact of prolonged spells at the Front led it to be compared favourably with All Quiet on the Western Front, perhaps the classic novel of the war. Within the next three years Aldington had edited Imagist Anthology, written two more long poems, The Eaten Heart and A Dream in the Luxembourg, and published two more novels, The Colonel's Daughter and All Men Are Enemies, which firmly established his new reputation as a "between-the-wars" writer.

All this time Aldington was living almost entirely abroad, travelling in Italy and the South of France with Brigit Patmore, to whom he dedicated A Dream in the Luxembourg. He no longer needed to support himself by journalism and his energies found their main outlet in his new enthusiasm for writing novels. Poetry began to take second place, and there was a gap of five years between A Fool in the Forest and A Dream in the Luxembourg. Explaining this gap to James Reeves, Aldington wrote that it was

partly for personal reasons, but partly because I could no longer follow the trend of modern poetry with conviction. I thought it (1) too intellectualised, (2) too stylised, too much a matter of immensely skilful phrasing, (3) too specialised, appealing only to a few hundred over-educated people. I waited for some impulse (the "snap of the mind" people used to call inspiration).¹

It is particularly interesting to note here Aldington's objection to writing aimed exclusively at a limited audience: when he began his

1. Aldington to James Reeves. Reprinted in 'Nine for Reeves. Letters from Richard Aldington', ed. Miriam J. Benkovitz, in Bulletin of New York Public Library, vol.lxix, no.6, June 1965, p.351.

career his interests, his poetry and his circle of friends had all seemed to indicate an attitude to literature which despised popular success; after the war he claimed that he wanted to write for his fellow soldiers, for people with no specialised literary interests, yet the poems he wrote before A Dream in the Luxembourg are hardly distinguished by the ease with which they would be enjoyed by those not numbered among the "few hundred over-educated people". Confronted with the choice of following wholeheartedly the direction of Modernism or of withdrawing and trying to cut a path of his own, Aldington chose the latter. This transference of allegiances is the crucial aspect of his career as a poet and what makes him such an interesting figure of this period. It is one of the main aims of this study of Aldington's poetry to examine the reasons for, and the underlying implications of, this shift.

With hindsight, we may say that this shift was to some extent predictable, for Aldington was unlikely to ever be fully content with Modernism. The limitations demanded by a strict adherence to the principles of Imagism were bound to prove irksome to such an individualist; indeed, as will be found, he never fully accepted these principles, and to this extent there exists a gulf between Aldington the Imagist theorist and Aldington the Imagist practitioner. It was probably the knowledge of this which led him to play down the significance of Imagism in his work, even to pretend that it hardly existed at all:

by 1925 he was already at pains to present himself as a wholly individual poet, capable from the very beginning of choosing his own sources of influence and example. In particular he wanted to disclaim the influence of those who were at the heart of Imagist Theory, Pound and Hulme:

I don't know what Pound got from Hulme, but I do know that my debt to Hulme = 0 Also I had written what Pound christened "imagist" poems before I had ever heard of Hulme. The point is that Imagisme, as written by H.D. and me, was purely our own invention and was not an attempt to put a theory into practice. The "school" was Ezra's invention. And the first Imagist anthology was invented by him in order to claim us as his disciples, a manoeuvre we were too naifs to recognize at the time, being still young enough to trust our friends.¹

In all the discussion of Imagism and its significance, two facts have emerged in the years since 1931, when the first full length study of the movement, Imagism and the Imagists, by Glenn Hughes, was published. The first is that the movement was much less closely-knit than its outward appearance would have suggested to contemporaries. Imagism was presented to the world as a theory of poetry practised by a group devoted to its promotion, but, in fact, it was in a certain sense little more than eight or nine people who, for a time and for various reasons, published their work under a common label. Usually, it is the tendency of history to group writers together for the convenience of reinforcing a particular theory of shared influence; with the Imagists the process has been reversed. Secondly, as has already been suggested, the poetry preceded the theory and not vice-versa.

1. Aldington to Read, June 1925. Reprinted in 'Richard Aldington's Letters to Herbert Read', ed. David S. Thatcher, in Malahat Review, Univ. Victoria, B.C., no. 15, July 1970, p.18.

As a movement, Imagism had died by 1917, and during the twenties Aldington began to assert his independence as a poet; nevertheless, in the five years that Imagism had officially existed it created for itself sufficient importance for its influence to be felt long afterwards. Its place in the literary history of the century was assured when T.S. Eliot stated in a 1953 lecture that:

The point de repère usually and conveniently taken as the starting point of modern poetry is the group denominated 'imagists' in London about 1910 The poets in the group seem to have been drawn together by a common attraction towards modern poetry in French, and a common interest in exploring the possibilities of development through the study of the poetry of other ages and languages.¹

Eliot concluded that the movement was, on the whole, "chiefly important because of the stimulus it gave to later developments", not the least of which was, of course, Eliot's own poetry, for Imagism did much to create the climate in which The Waste Land could be accepted immediately as one of the most important poems of the century.

Aldington wanted, naturally enough, to be accepted as a writer who was known on his own merits and not on those of a group which no longer existed. As a poet, he found himself overshadowed by the greater success of his friends, and it is often suggested (although there is no tangible evidence for this) that his attacks on Eliot were prompted by simple jealousy. It is not surprising, therefore, that once Death of a Hero proved so popular, Aldington began to think of himself primarily as a novelist. Between 1930 and 1935 he published

1. T.S. Eliot, 'American Literature and the American Language', St. Louis, 1953. Reprinted in To Criticise the Critic, 1965, pp.58-59.

three novels and two collections of short stories. It was as a novelist that his reputation was now established, although the popularity of A Dream in the Luxembourg kept his name as a poet alive too. His attitude to poetry had altered and he regarded it less seriously: he described Life Quest (1935) as "rather a nice poem, about the best thing I'd done in that line" and continued:

But in the literary football scrum it is considered a foul for anybody who writes novels which are read to write poetry as well, and the reviewing umpires blew disapproving whistles.¹

When one thinks of the many novelists who have also achieved important reputations as poets, one is bound to say that this seems a very feeble excuse for poor reviews.

The Crystal World (1937) was the last individual volume of poetry that Aldington published; his Complete Poems appeared eleven years later, containing all the poems which he wished to keep in print, but omitting nearly all his translations and humorous verse. If Aldington wrote any further poems after 1938 they were never to appear in print. He continued to live abroad and spent the Second World War years in the United States. After eight novels he concentrated on biographical and critical work: biographies of Voltaire, Wellington, R.L. Stevenson, D.H. Lawrence and T.E. Lawrence. His last published work was a critical biography of the Nobel Prizewinning poet, Mistral. After the uproar surrounding the publication of his biography of Lawrence of Arabia in 1955, Aldington's reputation slumped immediately,

1. Life, p.363.

and he spent his last years alone in Provence, defending himself against the attacks of an outraged Establishment. He was attacked with what today seems excessive viciousness (especially since the burden of his thesis, that Lawrence was a fanatic and a fraud, has come to be at least partially accepted), and the aftermath of that attack remains even now. Aldington is forgotten, or ignored, and an ever-increasing number of people have never heard of him. It is unlikely, however, that he will be forgotten entirely: a biography is in preparation (by Professor Harry T. Moore) and the growth of interest in the early twentieth-century literary scene has already led to an anthology of Imagist verse,¹ in which Aldington is well represented. The publication of such a book as Jon Silkin's Out of Battle reminds one that Aldington wrote war poetry well worth consideration, and, in 1972, two of his short stories, Yes, Aunt and Now Lies She There, were dramatised for television. Recently, also, Dame Rebecca West, as a young woman^a friend of Aldington's and a member of the Vorticists, said that

Pound was a man of steely ambition and a fantastic character. But neither he nor T.S. Eliot - and this is rather tragic - struck one as such a wonderful character as Richard Aldington did, of whom not nearly so much was heard.²

In his own lifetime it was Aldington the novelist who won most acclaim, and Aldington the biographer who received most opprobrium; today it is Aldington the poet who is most seriously underrated and most worthy of reconsideration.

1. Imagist Poetry, ed. Peter Jones, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
2. Interview with Rebecca West in The Listener, vol.90, no.2290, 15 February 1972, p.211.

Chapter 2.Aldington and the Theory of Imagism

Axiom: A Poet is one who creates poems not one who creates theories of how poems might or should be written.¹

They [the Imagists] were tired of ... the melancholy nineteenth-century automatism by which no natural object can appear without trailing its vainglorious little cloud of moralising behind it. They were right to be tired. One aspect of the history of poetry is an intermittent warfare against automatisms, clichés of feeling and expression.²

The earliest account of the Imagist movement appeared on 1 May 1915 in The Egoist in an article entitled 'The History of Imagism'. In it Flint attributed the original impetus to T.E. Hulme, an emphasis which did not altogether please Ezra Pound who, in spite of having first used the word "Imagiste" in connexion with Hulme's poems, resented the importance given to Hulme, believing that if anyone deserved the credit it was either himself or Ford Madox Ford. At this distance in time, it is not easy to decide where the credit ought to be apportioned, but Hulme's contribution cannot lightly be dismissed even if Flint was deliberately trying to minimize Pound's rôle; it has been claimed that "both he [Flint] and Aldington, who requested the 'History', intended that it should deflate Pound's expansive pride as the founder of a new school of poetry".³

(Aldington, it will be remembered, was at the time literary editor of The Egoist.)

We do not know how much of a hand Aldington may have had in the initial formulation of the published principles of Imagisme. Probably

1. Aldington to Read, June 1925. Reprinted in 'Richard Aldington's Letters to Herbert Read', ed. David S. Thatcher, in Malahat Review, Univ. Victoria, B.C., no. 15, July 1970, p.19.
2. Graham Hough, Image and Experience, 1960, p.14.
3. S.K.Coffman, Imagism. A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry, Oklahoma, 1951, p.47.

Pound put into words the ideas mooted in the Kensington tea-shop meetings, but whether or not this is so, it cannot be doubted that he learnt much from the discussions with Hulme, probably more than from his friend Ford. Ultimately, of course, who conceived the ideas is not greatly important; what matters ^{are} is the ideas themselves, and it is therefore necessary that, before discussing in this chapter Aldington's contribution to developing the theory of Imagism, some account should be given of the ideas themselves.

Since the later years of the previous century artists in Europe, in France especially, had been concentrating their interest in the 'object', and in the desire to see and to depict things as they are, without romantic affectation or subjective introspection. In the plastic arts, the work of a sculptor such as Brancusi gives a good illustration of what was aimed at; clarity and simplicity are the keywords. In a letter to William Carlos Williams, Pound gave as his priority in art "To paint the thing as I see it",¹ and Hulme echoed the importance of this in an article in The New Age:

An artist is one of those people who, seeing a definite thing, realize that the conventional means of expression, be they plastic or verbal, always let this definite thing leak through and do not convey it over.²

There are two significant points in this definition of Hulme's: first, the emphasis on the "definite thing" and, secondly, the awareness that the "conventional means of expression" are no longer adequate. Implied in this is the belief that the artist has a

1. Pound to W.C.Williams, 21 October 1908, in The Letters of Ezra Pound, ed. D.Paige, 1951, p.39.
2. T.E.Hulme, in The New Age, vol. viii, no.13, 27 April 1911, p.607.

special ability and a special function which sets him apart from other men:

Between nature and ourselves, even between ourselves and our own consciousness, there is a veil ... that is dense with the ordinary man, transparent for the artist and the poet Could reality come into direct contact with sense and consciousness, art would be useless, or rather we should all be artists.¹

Here one can detect the note of élitism which is so marked in the avant-garde circles of pre-war Europe. The artist, in whatever medium he is working, has a special responsibility because he has an abnormal clarity of vision. In Hulme's terms, the poet's task is to seize his intuition in terms of language, and this language should not be self-consciously "poetic"; it must be the language of ordinary speech. As A.R. Jones explains in his book The Life and Opinions of T.E. Hulme, Hulme insisted that words

are nothing more than "beads on a chain", and meaning is conveyed by the "chain", the relations between words, more than by the "beads", the words in themselves. New ideas are expressed in language not by any change in vocabulary, not by coining new words, but by a change in the relationship between words.²

Behind this metaphor of "beads on a chain" there lies one justification for the emergence of free verse as one of the tenets of Imagism. Absolute flexibility is held to be essential if the language is to operate with complete efficiency and effectiveness. In these circumstances, conventional metre is not necessarily desirable; at best it may be superfluous, at worst a hindrance. However, there is also an element of revolt entailed by the abandonment of regular

1. T.E.Hulme, quoted in A.R.Jones, The Life and Opinions of T.E.Hulme 1960, p.45.
2. T.E.Hulme, quoted loc.cit., p.57.

metre: vers libre was not new when the Imagists appeared on the literary scene, but it was by no means universally accepted. To write in vers libre, therefore, was one way to proclaim their separateness from the kind of poetry they wished to replace. Free verse was not a condition of Imagism, but acceptance of free verse came largely as a result of Imagism. As Aldington himself was to proclaim in 1915:

We do not insist upon "free verse" as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of the poet may often be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms.¹

To return to the original principles of Imagisme: once the words "Imagisme" and "Imagiste" had been used by Pound to promote the verse of Aldington and H.D. in Poetry, it was necessary to give the "school" a coherent platform. Groups and movements were proliferating and each was identifiable either by its members, or its publications, or its manifesto. The Georgians marched under the paternal banner of Sir Edward Marsh, the Sitwell group were known by their magazine Wheels, and the Futurists were recognized by their adherence to the strident proclamations of Marinetti. The Imagists could hardly survive if represented by only two completely unknown poets without any explanation of their aims. Accordingly in March 1913, an article entitled 'Imagisme' appeared in Poetry and for the first time the celebrated principles were put into print:

1. Some Imagist Poets, 1915, p.vi.

1. Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.¹

Although this article was written by Flint, the principles came directly from Pound² and from Pound also came the enigmatic remark that the "doctrine of the Image" was something which the members did not wish to discuss in public. Nevertheless, in the same issue of Poetry, Pound defined the Image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"³. Once again, one notices the emphasis on concentration; as an illustration of what he meant by this definition, Pound was fond of quoting his first haiku-type poem:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.⁴

Here concentration is so intense that even the title, 'In a Station of the Metro', is an integral part of the poem. One notices the way in which the "thing" is directly treated: the thing seen - faces in a rush-hour crowd - is presented in such a manner that the reader cannot doubt what the poet has seen, and can also conceive the picture in the same terms, visual and imaginative, as the poet. One finds economy and precision here, yet the juxtaposition of two images expands as well as defines the range of what the poet has seen. Here is the Imagist technique at its most effective and most important level; what is aimed at is nothing less than the

1. 'Imagisme', in Poetry, Chicago, vol.i, no.6, March 1913, p.199.
2. cf. C.Middleton, 'Documents on Imagism from the Papers of F.S.Flint', in The Review, no.15, April 1965, pp.35-51.
3. 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', in Poetry, Chicago, vol.1, no.6, 1 March 1913, p.200.
4. Ezra Pound, Collected Shorter Poems, 1952, p.119.

enlargement of the reader's sensibility so that, to revert to Hulme's terms, the artist makes transparent for the reader the veil between nature and ourselves. As Professor J. Isaacs has stated in The Background of Modern Poetry, "Imagism is not the facile presentation of images or pictures; it is hard, clear, unblurred statement, whether it uses metaphor or not."¹ If Imagism contributed nothing more to modern poetry than an awareness of the value of "hard, clear, unblurred statement", its importance would still be assured, but it has another claim: the Imagist technique and the theory behind it are direct antecedents of T.S. Eliot's concept of the "objective correlative":

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative", in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in a sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.²

After the publication of Des Imagistes : an Anthology, Pound's interest shifted to Vorticism as he came increasingly under attack from those who resented his "dictatorship" of the movement. Not all the other members agreed with his theories of "the Image"; some were not interested in them. Aldington was prepared to support Pound in print, although he was unhappy about the extent of Pound's control; F.S. Flint, as perhaps the only member of the original group with a reputation strong enough to be able to challenge Pound, was the first to quarrel openly with him, attacking all the bases

1. J. Isaacs, The Background of Modern Poetry, 1951, p.39.
2. T.S.Eliot, The Sacred Wood, 1920, p.100.

of Pound's authority in Imagisme:

There are at least three stupid things about Imagisme: the word itself is stupid; the tables of the law of Imagisme, laid down by Mr. Pound ... are stupid; and the crowning stupidity of all is Mr. Pound's belief, which he holds strongly, that his was the dynamism that created both the law and the works exemplifying the law which he managed to publish, in 1914, in a book called, ungrammatically and with the silly title of, "Des Imagistes: An Anthology."¹

In the face of such a challenge, Pound's response was curious: he seemed simultaneously to disown Imagisme and to make it his own personal property, transferring it to Vorticism. His interpretation of Imagisme became more extreme and less concise: he attacked free verse and advocated a return to form without making it at all clear what kind of form he had in mind:

The verbal expression of the image may be reinforced by a suitable or cognate rhythm-form and by timbre-form. By rhythm-form and timbre-form I do not mean something which must of necessity have a "repeat" in it. It is certain that a too-obvious "repeat" may be detrimental.²

So, as Pound was busy cutting himself, and being cut, off from the other Imagists, it was Aldington who found himself in charge of Imagist theory: he was editing The Egoist, and contributing regularly to other magazines, and it was to him that Amy Lowell looked for the critical weight to balance the financial and business acumen which she could provide. Pound resented Amy Lowell for three main reasons: she declined to provide finance automatically for all his editorial ambitions, he did not consider her to be a serious poet and he felt that her attitude to Imagism was a dilution of what he believed the movement

1. Quoted by Middleton, 'Documents on Imagism from the Papers of F.S. Flint', in The Review, no.15, April 1965, p.40.
2. Ezra Pound, 'Affirmations-IV. As for Imagisme', (The New Age, vol.xvi, no.13, 28 January 1915. Reprinted in W. Cookson, Ezra Pound. Selected Prose 1909-1965, 1973, p.347.

stood for. In particular he disapproved of the emphasis she laid on vers libre (or "cadenced verse" as she called it) at the expense of the Image itself. Pound tried to insist that the word "Imagiste" should not appear on the title page of the anthology she was planning, but eventually he allowed Some Imagist Poets as a compromise, though not before he had written angrily to her: "I think you had better stop calling yourself an 'Imagist'." In all this, Aldington took Amy Lowell's side:

The change of title will rid us of Ezra, and after that 'Pride's Purge' the rest of us, loyal, open and disinterested as I believe we are, should not only make a stir in the world but, what is more important, produce work of first-rate quality.¹

It is interesting to note in this the implication that Pound's presence was somehow detrimental to the quality of the work which the Imagists were producing. Perhaps Aldington was less willing to accept editorial advice from Pound than were either Yeats or Eliot.

From 1915 onwards, Imagism became what Pound derisively termed "Amygism", and yet Aldington's influence was essentially a conservative one, aimed at maintaining the original standards which Pound had laid down. The important difference was that Aldington was not greatly concerned with aesthetic doctrines of what the Image did or did not stand for; he was primarily interested, quite rightly, in the quality of language in poetry and with the conciseness of that language:

1. Aldington to Amy Lowell, 7 December 1914. Quoted by S.K.Coffman, Imagism. A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry, Oklahoma, 1951, p.48.

The exact word. We make quite a heavy stress on that All great poetry is exact. All the dreariness of nineteenth-century poets comes from their not quite knowing what they wanted to say and filling up the gaps with portentous adjectives and idiotic similes.¹

What Aldington wanted was a diction appropriate to modern poetry. He accepted what Pound had learned from Madox Ford, that the language of poetry should be at least as efficient as the language of prose and he approved, too, Pound's insistence upon the quality of hardness in poetry.

The fullest statement of Aldington's understanding of Imagism and, in particular, of the language of Imagist poetry is to be found in the 'Credo' which prefaced Some Imagist Poets (1915) and which he wrote at Amy Lowell's request. Hitherto, the only real manifesto of the movement had been the original 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste' (1913) and the fullest discussion of the aesthetics of Imagism had been Pound's article on Vorticism (1914). Aldington's Credo, therefore, gives an indication of how far the working principles of Imagism had been consolidated or altered.

Imagist Credo

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word.
2. To create new rhythms - as the expression of new moods - and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon "free verse" as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.

1. Aldington, 'Modern Poetry and the Imagists', in The Egoist, vol.1, no.13, 1 June 1914, pp.201-213.

3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject. It is not good art to write badly about aeroplanes and automobiles; nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past. We believe passionately in the artistic value of modern life, but we wish to point out that there is nothing so uninspiring as an aeroplane of the year 1911.
4. To present an image (hence the name, imagist). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.
5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.¹

While it is true that Aldington is here following in important respects Pound's three principles of 1913, particularly in emphasising clarity, exactness and concentration, one is struck by the manner in which Aldington plays down the Image, restoring it to its original significance as 'the thing seen' and stripping it of any arcane aesthetic meaning. One suspects that, so far as Aldington was concerned, to speak of the Image as "a vortex or cluster of fused ideas ... endowed with energy"² is neither helpful nor relevant. Not surprisingly, Pound seized on this lack of emphasis on the Image as evidence that the movement had, since his departure, "gone off into froth" - sentiments which Aldington and H.D. reciprocated when they read Pound's Vorticist poetry. Coffman remarks that:

1. Aldington, 'Preface', Some Imagist Poets, 1915, pp. vi-vii.
2. Ezra Pound, 'Affirmations-IV. As for Imagisme', repr. in Cookson, Ezra Pound. Selected Prose 1909-1965, 1973, p.345.

Aldington was coming to regret his relationship with Pound and the Vorticists whose violent and erratic behaviour he thought bordered almost upon madness There was no doubt in their minds that the future of the movement lay along different lines from those Pound was pursuing.¹

What were the different lines, then, that Aldington attempted to follow? Apart from playing down the idea of the Image, he wanted to stress the value and importance of complete freedom, of subject matter and of verse form. Here he crossed swords with Pound who had temporarily convinced himself that vers libre had gone far enough and that control was necessary. Pound's attitude to metre was always ambiguous and probably he was more in sympathy with Aldington's statement than he cared to admit. Certainly he later wrote in The Cantos - "To break the pentameter, that was the first heave."²

It was Eliot, however, who took issue publicly with Aldington over the question of free verse and the distinction between prose and poetry. Eliot contended that good "so-called free verse" achieves its effect because it is underpinned by "the constant suggestion and skilful evasion of iambic pentameter."³ The Imagists showed no signs of endeavouring consciously or unconsciously either to suggest or to evade the pentameter - they ignored it. When Aldington wrote that "in poetry a new cadence means a new idea" he was apparently suggesting that the "musical phrase" was self-sufficient, that it did not need to be part of a total, regular rhythmic scheme and,

1. S.K.Coffman, Imagism. A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry, Oklahoma, 1951, p.25.
2. Ezra Pound, 'Canto LXXXI', in The Complete Cantos of Ezra Pound, Collected ed., 1964, p.553.
3. ~~T.S.Eliot in The New Statesman~~
T.S.Eliot, 'Reflections on Vers Libre', in The New Statesman, vol.8, no.204, 3 March 1917, p.518.

indeed, that it neither could nor should be so. A more detailed discussion of "cadence" is provided by F.S. Flint:

Clarity and sincerity of speech and purpose are the perennial qualities of all good poetry, and those who will strive after these qualities... are the men who will be heard and who will lift the word poetry out of the contempt in which it is held by the many who do not understand, or despise, or smile tolerantly at the meaningless rituals of verse. For the poets such as I have in mind, there are the two forms, which are really one, the first being prose and the second I have called unrhymed cadence. The one merges into the other; there is no boundary between them.¹

The logical extension of this is the "prose-poem" and, indeed, from 1915 onwards Flint, Amy Lowell and Aldington published a few such pieces in The Egoist, expecting them to be treated as valid works on their own terms. To their critics, however, they were unacceptable. Eliot led the attack in an article in The New Statement (9 May 1917) entitled 'The Borderline of Prose' in which he claimed that there is only one distinction between poetry and prose: "poetry is written in verse and prose is written in prose; or, in other words ... there is prose rhythm and verse rhythm." Of Aldington's own vers libre, he wrote in the same article: "Mr. Aldington seems to me to be avoiding the limitations of either poetry or prose; to use either when he chooses; and so to lose the necessary articulation of rhythm." Certainly Aldington laid himself open to this sort of criticism because his definitions were not so rigorous as Eliot's (the Imagist Credo was, after all,

1. F.S. Flint, Otherworld, 1920, p.xi.

primarily propaganda rather than formal criticism), but essentially the difference between the two viewpoints was that, while Aldington was prepared to point to a passage of prose and, if the rhythm of that passage met certain conditions and evoked a certain response, to call it poetry in prose, Eliot would go no further than to allow that it might be prose "shivering towards the condition of poetry".

When discussing Aldington's interpretation of Imagist principles and techniques, one must not assume that these were the views he held unchanged during his whole career as a poet. Although he maintained always his belief in the value of free verse, his writing was to move increasingly towards ~~to~~ conventional metrical forms without necessarily arriving there. After the war he steeped himself in the English poets of the seventeenth century, particularly Marvell, Rochester and Drayton, and his 'Metrical Exercises' and 'Words For Music'¹ demonstrate the skill with which he could operate within the limits of strict form. Again, the emphasis on hardness and concentration disappears completely in the twenties, largely as a reaction against the work of Eliot and, on a personal level, as a reaction against the hardness of the post-war world:

I brood on the strange unhappy lives
And the hard unhappy faces, sometimes so beautiful
But 'strangely hard.'²

The last Imagist Anthology appeared in 1917, the same year that Aldington went to France, handing over the editorship of The Egoist

1. See below, Chapter 5, pp.144-146.
2. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.283, v.5-7.

to Eliot, who continued until the magazine ceased publication in 1919. Aldington had found himself swept into Imagism in 1912 on the wave of Ezra Pound's enthusiasm; he then emerged in the centre of the group when Amy Lowell took over; after the war, separated from H.D. and with Pound's departure to Paris imminent, Aldington had no interest in reviving Imagism. He published Images of War and Images of Desire in 1919, poems written by him in France while he considered himself to be still an Imagist, but in the post-war atmosphere he had even less inclination than the others to keep up the pre-war literary coteries. He had, nevertheless, played a significant part in the evolution of Imagism, a part which has been generally under-estimated, while attention has been focussed on Pound, Hulme and Flint. As a theorist for the group, his ideas were not original but the fact is that none of the Imagists claimed that their ideas were new, only that they were re-stating certain views about the writing of poetry which were fundamental but were currently being overlooked. As Aldington himself explained:

What then is Imagism? Briefly, it is an ideal of style, an attempt to recreate in our language and for our time a poetry that shall have the qualities of the great poetry of old Imagists seek the qualities that make Sappho, Catullus, Villon, the French Symbolistes (whose influence still dominates all European poetry) great.¹

1. Aldington, 'The Imagists', in Bruno Chap Books, (Special Series), vol ii, no.5, 1915, pp.69-70.

PART 2. Chapter 3.

Images

Fool, to stand here cursing
When I might be running!¹

When Aldington's first Imagiste poems were published in November 1912 in Harriet Monroe's magazine, Poetry, the poet himself was only just twenty years old. Quite how striking these poems may have seemed to their first readers can be estimated from the fact that they were written before the first Georgian Anthology, before the appearance in London of Marinetti and the Futurists, and before the poetical ideas of T.E. Hulme were known to more than the comparatively small circle who frequented the literary circles of the time. If, therefore, Aldington's three poems published in Poetry - 'Choricos', 'To A Greek Marble' and 'Au Vieux Jardin' - already conformed to the type of an Imagiste poem, then it must be understood that Aldington arrived at these principles independently before he had ever met Ezra Pound or heard of Imagisme. The point has already been made, but needs to be emphasised, that however much he may have tried over the next few years to make his poetry conform to the stated principles of the movement, the movement itself grew out of the poetry which Aldington, H.D. and others had already written, and not vice-versa.

To accompany Aldington's poems, Harriet Monroe wrote a note on the Imagistes in which she described them as "a group of ardent young

1. 'The Faun sees Snow for the First Time', CP., p.39.

Hellenists who have been carrying out some interesting experiments in vers libre^h and described their work as an attempt "to attain in English certain subtleties of cadence of the kind which Mallarmé and his followers have studied."¹ The reference to "ardent young Hellenists" is immediately clear when one sees Aldington's choice of a classical setting appearing so frequently in his poems; the reference to Mallarmé and his followers, however, as an implied influence is misleading: according to Aldington's own comments on his early influences, the Symbolist poets were not his models, nor was he aware of any debt owed to them:

I began to write vers libre about the early part of 1911, partly because I was fatigued with rhyme and partly because of the interest I had in poetic experiment I never suspected the existence of the French vers libristes.² I got the idea from a chorus in the Hippolytus of Euripides.

The influence of Symbolism is apparent in the poetry of several of the Imagists and of their successors; for Aldington at this stage, it was the classical^s which provided the main source of inspiration.

'Choricos' is both a meditation on, and a hymn to, death. The title is appropriate, for whether one reads the poem as the words of one man speaking for many, or of many speaking together, the final impression is strongly of an acceptance of the inevitable approach of death which is at once personal and shared. Two things are immediately striking; first that, despite the effect of double distancing achieved by the use of a chorus and the setting of death

1. Harriet Monroe, 'Notes', in Poetry, Chicago, vol. i, no. 2, November 1912, p. 65.
2. Aldington, 'Modern Poetry and the Imagists', in The Egoist, vol. i, no. 13, June 1914, p. 203.

in a classical context, a real sense of a personal awareness of the end of life is conveyed; secondly, that the poet is sufficiently in control of his theme to ensure that, though the style is mannered, it does not descend into excessive sentimentality, and that the poem is not protracted beyond a length which it can sustain. The opening lines lead one into a world far removed from Aldington's own time:

The ancient songs
Pass deathward mournfully.¹

It is a world which Thomas McGreevy has called Aldington's "Greek dream",² a dream to which Aldington, throughout his career as a poet, kept returning; indeed, the impact of the classical, particularly the mythological world, was arguably the central imaginative experience on which he was to draw during the next twenty years. It was a dream world in which emotion and awareness could be expressed in sensual^{ous} terms:

Cold lips that sing no more, and withered wreathes,
Regretful eyes and drooping breasts and wings -
Symbols of ancient songs³

Although the meaning of his "Greek dream" was to undergo a subtle change (one which will be examined in this and succeeding chapters), at this stage it represents a world where the gods have control while humanity is something literally fading, a song. It is the songs, the lives of the speakers, which come

Silently winging through soft Cimmerian dusk,
To the quiet level lands
That she keeps for us all,
That she wrought for us all for sleep
In the silver days of the earth's dawning —
Perse^{ph}opina, daughter of Zeus.⁴

1. 'Choricos', CP., p.21.
2. T.McGreevy, Richard Aldington, 1931, p.18.
3. 'Choricos', CP., p.21.
4. ibid.

could have been drawn to it just because it reminded him of the poems he himself had written four years before in A Lume Spento, poems which also revealed the influence of Swinburne:

O High Priest of Iacchus
 Being now near to the border of the sands
 Where the sapphire girdle of the sea
 Encinctureth the maiden
 Prosephone, released for the spring.¹

Probably, 'Choricos' appealed particularly to Pound for two reasons: first, Aldington presents the images clearly and effectively. On the whole they are not elaborated but are allowed to stand for themselves and, collectively, to present a vivid and substantial picture of what is, almost literally, a dream world. In addition, however, if the idea of the passage of life being represented by the song is accepted, then the poem, the song, becomes itself an image of what it is expressing. At the time when he would first have seen Aldington's poem, Pound was assimilating Hulme's ideas on poetry and the Image, and adapting them to his own ideas; in 'Choricos' he may have seen a "parting of images" which "endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continually see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process."²

It must be admitted, though, that Hulme himself, with his insistence upon poetry dealing with "finite things", would probably not have been so enthusiastic:

1. Ezra Pound, 'Salve O Pontifex', in A Lume Spento, Venice, 1908, p.65.
2. T.E.Hulme, Speculations, New York, 1924, p.134.

It is the physical analogies that hold me ... not the vain decorative and verbal images of the ordinary poets The process of invention is that of gradually making solid the castles in the air.¹

It is worth noting in passing that, if Hulme is in any sense the "father of Imagism", then those who come after him never fully accepted wholeheartedly the restriction to "finite things". Of Aldington this is particularly true, as will be seen.

In certain respects 'Choricos' comes closer to a Symbolist manner than to an Imagiste (in spite of Aldington's disavowal of Symbolist influence), since it employs images to interpret and express what is essentially infinite rather than finite (man's awareness and acceptance of death) for, as F.S. Flint had written in 1909, "the Symbolist ... takes a pure emotion and translates it by eternal images which become symbolical of man's everlasting desires and questionings".² More specifically, S.K. Coffman has observed that the Symbolists

were attracted by characteristics which the Imagists ignored: a vagueness which follows up on the belief that poetry offers a mystic's escape from actuality ..., a use of words (for thin sounds and colours) to suggest an essence beyond the object for which they stand - all of which marked the romanticism of the late nineteenth century in English poetry.³

It is interesting that despite Aldington's early disclaimer of any debt to Symbolist poetry, this passage from Coffman might be a precise description of the technique of 'Choricos'.

1. T.E. Hulme, 'Notes on Language and Style', in The Criterion, vol.iii, no.12, 1925, p.489.
2. F.S. Flint, 'Verse', in The New Age, vol.v, no.23, 1909, p.413.
3. S.K.Coffman, Imagism. A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry, Oklahoma, 1951, p.91.

The second point which would have struck Ezra Pound, perhaps more forcibly than the first, on his initial reading of the poem, would have been Aldington's technical skill: what prevents the poem from being merely a skilful adaptation or imitation of Swinburne is the way Aldington handles the vers libre, producing a strong and appropriate incantatory effect, one which adheres to the rhythms of natural speech and heightens but does not distort them. The images are kept concise, as if the poet wishes to focus on them with greater clarity:

And the songs pass from the green land
Which lies upon the waves as a leaf
On the flowers of hyacinths.¹

The mood of the poem dictates a slow and deliberate rhythm which is achieved by lines whose lengths may be extended by the pauses which follow them and by the firm emphasis on the first syllable of the succeeding line. Thus:

Mournfully passing
Down to the great white surges²

The stress on "Mourn -" and on the first syllable of "passing", and the lengthened vowel sounds determine the pause before the heavily stressed "Down"; the three even stresses of "great white surges" accentuate the deliberate, slow movement of the verse at this point. The heaviness of these two lines is balanced by the following three:

1. 'Choricos', CP., p.23.
2. ibid.

Watched of none
 Save the frail sea birds
 And the lithe pale girls¹

Here the second and third lines match each other exactly: two unstressed syllables followed by two stresses on either side of a word ("sea", "pale") which is only lightly stressed. Weighing the ends of the lines against their beginnings makes them run together with a lightness nowhere repeated in the rest of the poem.

Free verse is not a modern innovation: any definition of it that could be formulated might well be applied to certain passages in Shakespeare, Donne or Arnold. Aldington claimed to have discovered it in Euripides.² Nor is it simply verse without regular metre; recently, G.S.Fraser has attempted to define it as:

verse which does not scan regularly, but always seems on the verge of scanning regularly; which is neither strictly in pure stress metre, nor pure syllabic, but which often seems to be getting near to one or other of these, perhaps attempting to fuse two of these, perhaps deliberately alternating between one and another.³

Certainly, in 'Choricos' several technical devices are used, either to complement or to counterpoint one another, but all contributing to the overall structure and progression of the poem. The first four lines of the poem may be scanned, for example, as three perfectly regular iambic pentameters, and nearly a third of the lines begin with an anapaestic foot retarded by a frequent use of unaccented syllables, whose quantitative value approximates to that

1. 'Choricos', CP., p.21.

2. See above, p.47.

3. G.S.Fraser, Metre, Rhyme and Free Verse, 1970, p.74.

of the accented syllables. This device, coupled with the formula of deliberate repetition, amounts to the use of a rhythmic constant, a technique frequently found in early Imagist poems. Thus, in the second and third stanzas, "And they pass", "And they come", "To the quiet", "That she keeps" and "That she wrought" introduce into the poem a fixed and recognizable rhythmic structure which is developed in the third stanza by the repetition of the single phrase "And we turn", which reinforces at this point the idea of turning consciously from life to death which is central to the theme of the poem. In the fourth stanza, the hymn, the rhythmic constant is again an anapaestic foot with a syllable added at the beginning: "Thou art an ´-", "Thou art the ´-"; thus the stress falls always on the following, variable word or syllable: "heat", "wind", "dusk" etc. Here the effect is almost liturgical but no sort of climax is reached, for the hymn fades to silence with the image of Death softly gathering poppies in her garden.

The climax of the poem is, in fact, carefully underplayed: Death is shown as the mistress leaning "caressingly" towards her victim, and the oncoming flow of oblivion is suggested by the cramming of syllables into the penultimate line, followed by the almost unstressed last line:

And the illimitable quietude
Comes gently upon us.¹

1. 'Choricos', CP., p.23.

I have concentrated at some length upon this first published poem by Aldington for two reasons: because it was, and remains, arguably the best known of all his poems (in the First World War it was said to be the most quoted poem after Brooke's sonnet "The Soldier"), and because it embodies at the outset of Aldington's career many of the characteristics of his later work: the use of Greek settings, the preoccupation with death, and the use of free verse which Aldington was to modify and develop over the next twenty-five years.

The other two poems published in Poetry in November 1912 - and subsequently reprinted in Images (1910 - 1915) - are also worth attention. They are 'To a Greek Marble' and 'Au Vieux Jardin' (in the collected editions of Aldington's poetry this title is given in English). 'To A Greek Marble' sets a pattern for several poems in Images (1910-1915) in which the poet complains of being neglected or deserted (cf. for example, 'Argyria', 'At Mitylene' and 'Stele'). If Aldington was very often absorbed in his Greek dream, it was by no means always a joyful one: the plea for death is repeated in 'Hermes, Leader of the Dead' and the vigour of 'Bromios' must be set against the frustration and timidity of 'Lesbia'. Only perhaps in 'Amalfi' is a sense of personal fulfilment and immersion in the classical world to be found:

We will come down to you,
 O very deep sea,
 And drift upon your pale green waves
 Like scattered petals.¹

On the other hand, 'Captive' and 'The Faun Captive' (first included in the revised edition of Images in 1919) reveal the intrusion of a nightmare world that is all too real; these two poems express Aldington's despondent reaction to the war that was just beginning.

'To a Greek Marble' relies, like 'Choricos', largely upon images which appeal to the aural as well as the visual sense. The speaker complains that Potnia, the "white grave goddess", does not listen when he talks of their lost love. He is

The lover of aforesaid crying to thee,
 And thou hearest me not.²

Her answering silence is the more intense against the background of the "fragile pipes" whose note gives way to the song of the cicada. Again in this poem, as in the previous one, it is natural objects which have substance and human presences and emotions which are shadowy and elusive: even the shepherd whose "brown fingers ... moved over slim shoulders" remains detached from the central confrontation; at the most, he existed only in the distance when the speaker whispered "of our loves in Phrygia"; and, indeed, Potnia herself can have no substance - it is inevitable that she cannot hear since she is only a marble statue, hence literally "white" and "grave". If she ever had any existence as a goddess then it is

1. 'Amalfi', CP., p.35.
2. 'To a Greek Marble', CP., p.24.

clear that she is no longer to be found where her statue stands. Who, in any case, is the speaker? Is it merely the poet himself, indulging in a whimsical fantasy, proving only the inaccessibility of the imaginative world he has tried to construct? The answer to such a question is, perhaps, less important than the realization which it provokes that Aldington has not yet reached the stage where he is under pressure from his subject matter; at present the desire to write is greater than the need and, for the time being, he is content to write verse in which he can invoke strongly-felt emotion (however illusory that emotion might be) by the use of self-indulgent imagery:

The far ecstasy of burning noons
When the fragile pipes
Ceased in the cypress shade¹

Here, as so often in the early poems, one has the impression of images being translated from the Celtic Twilight into a classical context. Nevertheless, however slight the poem, it is not without technical skill, for the lines have a balance of rhythm which indicates that Aldington was already developing the ability "to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome", the Imagist prescription for rhythm.

At this point it is necessary to insist that Aldington's liking for classical themes and situations should not be dismissed as mere adolescent fantasy for the presence of directly-felt emotion and

1. 'To a Greek Marble', CP., p.24.

experience becomes apparent in the poetry that he was writing by 1915, only three years later. What is more, Aldington's use of the classical context developed and matured so that by the time he wrote A Fool i' The Forest (1925) he was able to juxtapose ironically the world of his Greek dream with the world of post-war London:

The Evening Star that Sappho saw
 And Shelley after Plato sang
 Droops over London like a tattered flower;
 Incense of petrol and of burning coal
 Rises to the thrones of heaven,
 Sniffed and snuffled by ungrateful gods.¹

Similarly, in Aldington's first novel, Death of a Hero (1929), Aphrodite is viewed from a perspective that is deeply embittered:

If you hate Life, if you think the suffering outweighs the pleasure, if you think it the supreme crime to transmit life, then you must indeed dread her as the author of the supreme evil - Life.²

Aldington's Arcadia was destined to become a far less comfortable world into which to escape; nevertheless, at the outset, it was basically a dream land in which emotions and desires could be indulged in an atmosphere of what may be called happy melancholy:

As a bird with strong claws
 Thou woundest me,
 O beautiful sorrow. 3

'In the Old Garden' is not specifically ancient or modern in its setting; it simply expresses the speaker's private emotions experienced while sitting in the garden. He is moved not only by the beauty of what he sees in nature but, especially, by the harmony between

1. A Fool, CP., pp. 201-202, vii.26-31.
2. Death of a Hero, 1929, p.149.
3. 'Beauty, Thou hast hurt Me Overmuch', CP., p.33.

what nature and what man, civilized, can produce:

That which sets me nighest to weeping
Is the rose and white colour of the smooth flag-stones,
And the pale yellow grasses
Among them.¹

The 'Old' of the title is significant, not only because it allows the reader to make the connexion that the garden, being old, has had time to mellow and become part of the natural surroundings but because it applies indirectly as much to the poet as to his garden. Partly it is the archaic diction, partly the reference to "Late summer" and "dark clouds" which suggest age and nostalgia, but the tone of the poem is quiet and deliberate, the rhythm unobtrusive because all stresses are muted:

But though I greatly delight
In these and the water-lilies....²

This is not the speech of a young man: one has no impression of the youthful assertiveness exhibited in, for example, 'Bromios'. On the contrary, one is reminded of the poem 'Prayer' in which the poet goes a stage further than 'In the Old Garden' and actually identifies himself with a garden:

I am a garden of red tulips
And late daffodils and bay-hedges....³

Referring to himself as "shattered and brown", he prays to the "God of Gardens, dear small god of gardens" -

1. 'In the Old Garden', CP., p.34.
2. ibid.
3. 'Prayer', CP., p.67.

Grant me fair glow of sunlight,
 A last bird hopping in the quiet haze,
 Then let the night swoop swiftly¹

Although in the first poem Aldington finds in the garden beauty and tranquillity, the sense of pleasure in the old and the decaying seems to be only a prelude to the second poem with its call for extinction:

Fold round and crush out life
 For ever.²

It could be argued that in literature there is very often a close connexion between the ideas of sensual youth and those of age and death, perhaps a decadent expression of the old theme that "Whom the gods love, die young"; with Aldington, however, it is something more specific - a preoccupation with death and human insignificance and helplessness runs through all his work. In the early poems it ironically prefigures the themes of his writing after 1916 when the preoccupation gains substance from his experiences as a soldier during the first World War. There is, indeed, more than a hint of King Lear's Gloucester about Aldington:

I don't believe in God.
 I do believe in avenging gods
 Who plague us for sins we never sinned,
 But who avenge us.³

In these early poems one can find indications of the way in which Aldington's verse was to develop and one can also see tendencies which were to disappear rapidly. For example, both 'To a Greek Marble' and 'In the Old Garden' betray a certain preciousness in which passion

1. 'Prayer', CP., p.67.
 2. ibid.
 3. 'Childhood', CP., p.59, 5.1-4.

and emotion are conjured from sources so slight that one may come to question the authenticity of the emotion. Aldington himself recognized this, and the rapid disappearance from his poetry of archaic diction and over-indulgent imagery give to the later poems of his Greek dream a clarity of focus which had earlier been lacking. In a poem such as 'Lesbia', for instance, the combination of frustration, disillusion and hope can be succinctly and evocatively expressed in a single image:

You had the ivory of my life to carve¹

but here emotion is now allowed to tail off into whimsical self-pity and regrets:

And Picus of Mirandola is dead:
And all the gods they dreamed and fabled of,
Hermes and Thoth and Christ are rotten now,
Rotten and dank²

McGreevy has suggested that the reason why Aldington here dismissed Christ is that "he was so happy that he felt he could afford to dismiss all gods",³ but this is to overlook the bitterness which has gone into this poem, for although against the "Rotten and dank" gods of the past is placed the "Tenderness" which makes the poet "as eager as a little child to love", the "pale Greek face" is just another item on the list of those who are dead and decayed - a "morsel left half-cold on Caesar's plate."

The world of Aldington's Greek dream, therefore, is a complex one of great importance to the poet who was able by it to express a

1. 'Lesbia', CP., p.28.

2. ibid.

3. T.McGreevy, Richard Aldington, 1931, p.18.

wide range of human impressions and desires; (it is not without significance that Aldington called his 1919 volume Images of Desire).

It could be a world of delight and escape:

Lo!
Hear the rich laughter of the forest,
The Cymbals,
The trampling of the panisks and the centaurs ...¹

or of despair and frustration:

We who have grown weary even of music,
We who could scream behind the wild dogs of Scythia.²

Increasingly, however, the world of Aldington's Greek dream came to express the world of everyday actuality and to be the vehicle of the poet's reaction - a sense of unavoidable commitment in tension against a feeling of alienation and detachment - to this actuality.

One can see very clearly in these early poems how Aldington developed his poetry along Imagiste lines: he brought to the movement a rhythmic facility already well developed but he learnt from it a great deal about "direct treatment of the thing whether subjective or objective" and, as for using "no word which does not contribute to the presentation", it will shortly be seen how Aldington learnt the technique of allusiveness which gave maximum effect to the images by freeing them from inessential ornamentation. As has already been suggested, it is impossible to estimate with certainty the debt that Aldington owed to Ezra Pound as far as the development of his style was concerned, but the probability is that the debt was greater than Aldington himself was willing to allow.³ Whether consciously

1. 'Bromios', CP., p.36.
2. 'At Mitylene', CP., p.26.
3. cf. Aldington's harsh caricature of Pound as Mr. Upjohn in Death of a Hero.

describe, though Pound, in his use of haiku as an absolute form, tends to be more precise (and, at the same time, more allusive) in his use of the initial image:

O fan of white silk,
 clear as frost on the grass-blade,
 You also are laid aside.¹

Here, the title, 'Fan-Piece For Her Imperial Lord', supplies the clue that the poem is a lament for neglect, but the actual image, of the fan "clear as frost on the grass-blade" expands the range of meaning far beyond this: the resemblance of the silk of the fan to the frost is not only one of colour, for the point is that just as the clear frost melts quickly and is forgotten, as beautiful fans are discarded in time, and as the blade of grass withers or is cut down, so also is a woman's beauty forgotten when it fades and a man's love may likewise disappear.

Whereas Pound takes as many short cuts as possible to include the widest range of allusions and ideas, even to making the title an essential part of the poem, Aldington sometimes achieves compactness by integrating the theme and the image rather than, in Pound's way, letting the one stand in apposition to the other:

The red deer are high on the mountain,
 They are beyond the last pine trees
 And my desires have run with them.²

In the second sequence of 'Images', however, Aldington does manage to achieve something of the allusiveness, and thus of the inclusiveness, which characterizes Pound's verse of this kind:

1. Ezra Pound, 'Fan-Piece', in Collected Shorter Poems, 1952, p.118.
2. 'Image V', CP., p.38.

Through the dark pine trunks
 Silver and yellow gleam the clouds
 And the sun;
 The sea is faint purple.
My love, my love, I shall never reach you.¹

Here the two parts of the poem, image and idea, are kept completely distinct syntactically but the image suggests the idea of unattainability which is explicit in the last line. The use of colour is a common feature of all these 'Images', but here it is given a specific, rather than decorative function for the colours seen through the "dark" trunks are pale - silver, yellow and "faint purple"; in the poem the sun is isolated, given a short line to itself; the object is there, but distant and unattainable, faint as the colours.

More important, perhaps, than these two sequences of poems, (though, as examples of Imagiste poetry in its purest form, they have considerable significance) is the way in which Aldington adapts the haiku method of super-position, image and idea, to longer and more arcane poems. 'Round Pond' is an interesting example. The poem would seem to be a straightforward description of early spring in the park, the language deliberately and deceptively prosaic, almost child-like:

The starlings make their clitter-clatter;
 And the blackbirds in the grass
 Are getting as fat as the pigeons.²

but an added element is introduced after the first stanza by

The water is cold to the eye
 As the wind to the cheek.³

At first this seems no more than the introduction of a human sensation

1. 'Image I', CP., p.63.
2. 'Round Pond', CP., p.61.
3. ibid.

and reaction to the scene being described, but when the last line of the poem is reached -

Even the cold wind is seeking a new mistress.¹

- one becomes aware of a new dimension to the poem which redefines the poem's range of reference in exactly the same way that "You also are laid aside" redefines the range of Pound's 'Fan-Piece'. The description of the park in early spring becomes an image of the search for a new start; the emphasis on "Even" indicates that the search is a universal one. One is recalled to "The water is cold to the eye" and the now evident allusion to tears as well as to the spray whipped up by the wind. 'Round Pond' is in fact an extended haiku; the super-position of the new image and idea contained in the last line gives to the poem a range of allusion greater than one had expected. On the other hand, the images which, collectively, provide the image of the start of spring in the park, do not have this compression:

The shining of the sun upon the water
Is like a scattering of gold crocus petals
In a long wavering irregular flight.²

Here, therefore, the concentration on the poem's total image (the search for a new start) is balanced by the space allowed to the specific, subsidiary images.

'Round Pond' indicates that Aldington could produce an image to express a desired idea allusively but clearly. Sometimes, however, he seemed to lack the confidence to let the image work by itself and,

1. 'Round Pond', CP., p.63.

2. ibid.

in attempting to bolster it up, actually weakened the poem as a whole. An instance of this is 'Inarticulate Grief' where the imagery, as so often with Aldington, is centred on the sea. The insistent movement of the verse through the repeated anapaestic foot beginning many of the lines - "Let the sea", "Let it break", "Let it sob", "In a sharp" etc. - coupled with the violence of "beat", "Clutch", "moan", "shriek", "scream" leads forcefully to the climax:

Ah! let the sea still be mad
And crash in madness among the shaking rocks¹

The combination of violent imagery, the strong rhythm reinforced by short, hard words ("agony" is the only word in the entire poem of more than two syllables) is more than able to convey without further elucidation the idea of 'Inarticulate Grief' and so it is unfortunate but inevitable that the explicit last line - "For the sea is the cry of sorrow"² - should be not only an anticlimax but should diminish the impact of the poem as a whole. One feels that if Aldington had had, in this instance, more faith in the effectiveness of his total image, then the poem's impact need not have been so severely weakened.

It has already been suggested that Aldington's "Greek dream" ceases in his later poetry to be simply a means of escape and relief, and that a tension develops between the dream world and the world of reality. The realization of this inevitable tension is found first in an interesting poem 'Interlude' where the "tin squeals" of a "ready whistle" summon Attic dancing girls:

1. 'Inarticulate Grief', CP., p.64.
2. ibid.

on these themes are 'Cinema Exit' and 'In The Tube' both of which reveal the poet in a mood in which, confronted with the unsympathetic mass of his fellow Londoners, he finds himself articulating the question "What right have you to live?"¹ It is a question implicit in many of Aldington's poems about modern life in which he finds human existence fragmented and unsatisfactory:

Swift figures, legs, skirts, white cheeks, hats
Flicker in oblique rays of dark and light.²

He is always acutely aware of the crowd and of his detachment from it:

in 'Hampstead Heath', he looks down on a turgid sea:

The black murmuring crowd
Flows, eddies, stops, flows on ...³

and in 'Whitechapel' the crowd, in this instance people going to work, is reduced to an image of

Soot; mud;
A nation maddened with labour.⁴

In fact, Aldington's reactions to London are very ambivalent, and this ambivalence is mirrored in his tendency to present sharply contrasted images in his poems about the city. 'Church Walk, Kensington' begins with two stanzas of disturbing callousness describing the cripples going to church:

Their clothes are black, their faces peaked and mean;
Their legs are withered
Like dried bean pods.
Their eyes are as stupid as frogs'.⁵

This is the more disturbing since Aldington is referring not to physical cripples but to all those making their way to churches; another

1. 'In the Tube', CP., p.49.
2. 'Cinema Exit', CP., p.48.
3. 'Hampstead Heath', CP., p.50.
4. 'Whitechapel', CP., p.62.
5. 'Church Walk, Kensington', CP., p.47.

grotesque image of the crowd, in fact. Then, after the cripples,
comes "the god, September," who

Has paused for a moment here
Garlanded with crimson leaves.¹

In contrast to the "peaked and mean" faces of the church-goers,
September

smiled like Hermes the beautiful
Cut in marble.²

As one has come to expect, Aldington Finds beauty in nature but not
in humanity. He leaves the reader in no doubt where he finds life
and reality or, rather, which sort of life and reality he prefers.
Indeed, in the pre-war poems one can already see clearly Aldington's
disenchantment with modern life at a moral and spiritual level; in
his post-war poetry up to 1925 (notably in A Fool i' The Forest) this
turned to bitterness and cynicism, and found still fuller expression
in his first two novels, providing a more emphatically negative
answer to the question "What right have you to live?" Yet, when he
confronts London as it were privately, as a city of landscape rather
than of people, his reactions are different and he is moved by the
beauty of the city, for example by

A rose film over a pale sky
Fantastically cut by dark chimneys.³

He looks again at St. Mary Abbott's, Kensington, and this time sees
no cripples but

1. 'Church Walk, Kensington', CP., p.47.
2. ibid.
3. 'Summer', CP., p.42.

The orange plane-leaves
Rest gently on the cracked grey slabs
In the city churchyard.¹

He can even find in the city the same emotional response described in 'Au Vieux Jardin' since, in 'London':

A pear-tree, a broken white pyramid
In a dingy garden, troubles me
With ecstasy.²

However, even the vision of London which can produce such emotions in Aldington produces simultaneously a disturbing reaction: the closing lines of 'London', written in May, 1915, reveal an obsession

Among all this beauty,
With a vision of ruins,
Of walls crumbling into clay.³

This vision of the city in ruins came true for Aldington in a personal sense after the war when he found the old London which he had known so utterly vanished and himself so completely isolated, mentally and physically, by the dispersal of his friends; in 1919 he left London to live in seclusion in Berkshire and never again lived in the city for more than a few weeks at a time.

One of the hall-marks of Aldington's later work is his satire, especially apparent in the novels; in the poems of Images (1910-1915) there are two poems which contain hints of the satirical note that was later to become so strident. One of these is 'Childhood', the longest poem in the volume. On the whole it is an unsatisfactory poem, adopting the whining tone of a spoilt child in attempting to

1. 'St Mary's, Kensington', CP., p.47.
2. 'London', CP., p.51.
3. ibid.

convey the misery of his childhood:

The bitterness, the misery, the wretchedness of childhood
Put me out of love with God¹

He likens himself to a moth shut up in a matchbox:

Against whose sides I beat and beat
Until my wings were torn and faded, and dingy
As that damned little town.²

This is an effective and claustrophobic image, though weakened by being used again on two other occasions in the poem without significant variation. But the poem is overstated: everything is dingy or grey or dull, or all three together, and while one readily gains the impression that the child was bored, one also gains the impression (presumably not intended) that the child had little capacity for providing his own amusement - an impression which his autobiography refutes.³ By painting the dreariness of his childhood in such violent colours, Aldington unwittingly leads the reader to suspect that it cannot have been as bad as he is making out and that, therefore, sympathy is being sought where it is not altogether due. It is also unclear whether the poet is maintaining that childhood is intolerable for all children or just that it was intolerable for him. Though the details of the poem are specific, down to the list of contents in his attic, the implication of the last stanza in which he claims that he will 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.⁴

1. 'Childhood', CP., p.55, 1.1-2.
2. ibid., p.57, 3.57-59.
3. See Life, Chapters 1-4.
4. 'Childhood', CP., p.59, 5.6-8.

is either that Aldington would be unable to provide better conditions for his own child (he did later have a daughter of his own) or that it is an inescapable condition of childhood that one should be miserable and "shut up in a matchbox".

The poem is weak in certain respects but it is somewhat redeemed by acute social observation, ironically presented, which puts one in mind of Part One of Death of a Hero: cataloguing the dull areas of his hometown, Aldington comes to the park ("And that was damned dull, too") but, for the first time in this poem, he captures exactly the tone of an Edwardian middle-class mother or nannie lecturing a restless child:

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.¹

This is followed a few lines further on by

The parson's name was Mowbray,
'Which is a good name, but he thinks too much of it' - 2

a remark which makes its own ironic comment upon the speaker and the speaker's world. If Aldington got nothing else out of his childhood, at least he learned a good deal about social hypocrisy of which he made use in later life.

1. 'Childhood', CP., p.58, 4.11-16.
2. ibid., 4.21-22.

The other poem which looks forward to Aldington's later satiric mode is 'Eros and Psyche', another poem about London which relies for its effect upon the juxtaposition of the grimy city and an object of beauty which releases the poet's imagination. This is one of the most interesting, as well as one of the more complex, of Aldington's London poems, for in it he seems ready to accept the part that industry and commerce must play in city life, even if he wants no part in it himself. The poem is set in Camden Town where Aldington sees

an old and grimy statue,
A statue of Psyche and her lover, Eros.¹

Nearby is a statue of Cobden, "the hero of Free Trade - Or was it the Corn Laws?" The poet accepts that "England must honour its national heroes" but cannot understand what Eros and Psyche are doing in a drab London suburb:

What are they doing here in Camden Town?
And who has brought their naked beauty
And their young fresh lust to Camden Town,
Which settled long ago to toil and sweat and filth,
Forgetting - to the greater glory of Free Trade -
Young beauty and young love and youthful flesh?²

Here is a more mature sensibility: dislike is tempered by acceptance and understanding. There is no attempt to force a moral or aesthetic judgement. Aldington merely points out the incongruity of the statue's location, suggesting that its rightful home should be "a sunlit room" or "a garden leaning above Corinth." In the broadest sense, the theme is not that art must be divorced from life altogether

1. 'Eros and Psyche', CP., p.52.
2. ibid., p.53.

but that it should be allowed to exist in the context for which it was created and that it is, in a certain sense, diminished when removed from that context; there is no suggestion anywhere in the poem that the presence of a statue of Eros and Psyche does anything to make Camden Town a pleasanter place.

At the end of the poem the reference to the Greek slave who would have carved the statue "in some old Italian town" raises implicitly the question of the context of the artist himself. The difficulty that Aldington personally experienced in adjusting to London, in quite literally finding a context in which to write, is suggested not only by the ambivalent attitude displayed in the poems already noticed, but by the fact that, between the wars, Aldington travelled constantly through Europe and in America since he found himself unable to work creatively or to live happily, first in London and then anywhere else in England. He was a self-avowed European who rebelled against the Englishness of England and it is not hard to believe that the displaced statue of Eros and Psyche was an image of the displacement that Aldington personally felt, the belief that he and his view of life and art were themselves out of context.

It has already been seen that Aldington's "Greek dream" soon ceased to be merely a world of sensual escape and became instead a landscape in which the poet tried to reconcile his artistic and emotional awareness with the world in which he had, perforce, to live.

Significantly, in the poems with a classical background, the poet is often found alone, regretting the absence of a loved one or of his friends; moreover, in these poems man is at the mercy of the gods, who are often local, personal deities, only rarely at the mercy of ordinary men. Nevertheless, to conclude this study of Images with two poems inserted in the revised edition of 1919, in 'Captive' and 'The Faun Captive', it is the force of reality in the modern world which finally ensnares the poet:

I, who was free, am a slave;
The Muses have forgotten me,
The gods do not hear.¹

He is not only enslaved by his enemies but abandoned by his former friends in a place where "there are no flowers to love" and, though he may dream again of the old world, his dream is distinctly ambiguous; the "Bent poppies and the deathless asphodel" ironically prefigure the battlefields of France as vividly as they look back to the old Arcadia. McGreevy is right to comment that

'Captive' is a good-bye to all the dream loveliness of the young poet, good-bye to the boyish dream of Greek serenity which could never be as unreal as on the day that a young man put on a private soldier's uniform for the first time.²

Furthermore, for Aldington, the landscape of the new world was disintegrating as rapidly as the old: the "vision of ruins" that tormented Aldington in 'London (May 1915)' is enlarged by 'Sunsets', which evokes an image of evening as a body mutilated unmistakably like a corpse on the battlefield:

1. 'Captive', CP., p.68.
2. T. McGreevy, Richard Aldington, 1931, p.26.

The white body of the evening
 Is torn into scarlet,
 Slashed and gouged and seared
 Into crimson¹

No longer the pale colours so characteristic of Aldington's early images of evening: the violence is counterpointed by the "garlands of mist" which are hung "ironically". The beauty of these sunsets is a macabre beauty and Aldington leaves no doubt as to the source of this violence, for the wind

Blowing over London from Flanders
 Has a bitter taste.²

In this short poem, the images of sunset combine to produce the image of destruction (of repeated destruction, for the title is 'Sunsets'). The connexion between image and idea is too apparent to need to be stated explicitly; instead, it is reinforced by the super-position of the second major image, the wind, which both defines the idea and expands it to emphasise that London is not immune to the destruction taking place on the continent.

'The Faun Captive' is in a sense the final statement of regret and anger before Aldington is inextricably caught up in the war himself. There is regret because

I am weary for the freedom of free things,
 The old gay life of the half-god.³

No longer a "half-god", he is angry because he is now unable to enjoy either the old world or the new. He recalls, in lines which echo the first poem, 'Choricos':

1. 'Sunsets', CP., p.68.
2. ibid.
3. 'The Faun Captive', CP., p.69.

The solitude of the impetuous stars
 Pearlwise scattered upon the domed breast of the Great
 Mother¹

All he can anticipate is an eventual escape as violent as the violent situation in which he is presently involved, for he will "Kill, kill, kill in sharp revenge." He longs for a return to his own private world where, in culmination of what has been seen to be a recurrent theme, he can escape from the hostile crowd, where he can feel isolated but not alienated, a return to

the unploughed land no foot oppresses,
 The lands that are free, being free of man.²

1. 'The Faun Captive', CP., p.69.
2. ibid.

Chapter 4.Images of War.

'We are so few, so very few,
 Could not our fate have been more merciful?' ¹

Discussion of the literature of the Great War usually centres on the work of the "war poets", those poets who are best known for their verse written on active service and stemming from their direct experience of the war. Perhaps the label "war poet" has been a handicap on two counts: first, because it unduly distracts attention from the prose writing which emerged out of the war (although the major works of this kind, for example Blunden's Undertones of War, Robert Graves's Goodbye to All That and Aldington's Death of a Hero, were not written until a decade after the war had ended) and, secondly, because to label a man a "war poet" is implicitly to limit the scope of his writing. Sassoon, for instance, continued to write for nearly fifty years after the war but is still best known, possibly to many only known, as a war poet. With such poets as Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg the problem doesn't arise: they were killed in the war and their war poetry was their great and final achievement. For some poets, therefore, the war was the culmination of their work, while for others it was only the first, even though it may well have been the most crucial, situation in which they had to measure the limits of their perception as poets against an intense experience. Those who survived were able, in the

1. 'A Young Tree', CP., p.97.

years after 1918, to find some kind of perspective, historical and personal, on their ordeal, and it is interesting how many poets subsequently relived the events of 1914-1918 in novels and memoirs, as though poetry had been the necessary vehicle for crystallising the experiences and emotions of the moment whereas, after a period of reflection and reassessment, only prose would do to illustrate the complexity of an event which had had such overwhelming personal, social and political consequences. It is hard to imagine an epic poem on the Great War written twenty years after the event: epic poetry has always the tendency, arguably even the function, to mythologize, to depict war in heroic terms; the literature of the Great War, written after 1915, emphasises not the heroics nor the myths but the realities of the situation, and the way in which ordinary people reacted to and were affected by these realities. That there was heroism is not denied, but the point is that individual heroism was overshadowed by the magnitude of the event: the First World War produced virtually no enduring heroes, nor were there any Napoleons or Wellingtons among the generals. It is hard, if not impossible, for most people to name a single person who achieved fame for his brilliance or heroism as a fighter. (It is interesting to note, in passing, that part of Aldington's case against Lawrence of Arabia was that his reputation as a great heroic Englishman was boosted as much by the British Government, anxious to produce at any rate one hero out of the war, as by Lawrence himself).

The implication of this for a study of the literature of the Great War is a serious one: the poet writing in the trenches, involuntarily involved in a situation unparalleled in history, was concerned not to relate heroics but to survive and to try to preserve his humanity as an individual in circumstances which seemed to have nothing to do with humanity or individuality. General statements about the war were irrelevant; it was direct experience and the attempt to relate this experience to any sort of understood system of human values and perceptions which produced the finest poems of the war, and exposed so completely the hollowness of the exhortations to glory which were still being churned out in England by armchair poets, even after the calamity of the war was becoming apparent. Thus, one must be aware of the limitations and scope of war poetry, of what precisely the war poets were trying to do and what they were certainly not trying to do. C.M. Bowra had this to say about war poetry:

It provides no facts which we cannot learn better from elsewhere; it does not begin to compete on their own ground with history or with the realistic novel. But it does what nothing else can do. It not only gives a coherent form to moods which at the time were almost indiscernible in the general welter of emotions, but incidentally provides a criticism of them ... through the character of its approach and the power or insight with which it gives them shape.¹

Any discussion of Aldington's war poetry must inevitably contain some comparison of his work with that of the other war poets, but it is important to make clear the differences in literary background from which Aldington and the others emerged, if a fair exegesis is

1. C.M. Bowra, 'Poetry and the First World War', in In General and Particular, 1964, p.193.

to be made: Aldington did not go to France until the war was half over. He had tried to enlist in 1914 but had failed a medical check; by the time the need for more soldiers had become desperate, he was passed without objection. He certainly had not tried to enlist in 1914 with the enthusiasm of a young man for whom the war was to be a glorious adventure; Brigit Patmore has suggested that this was so,¹ but, since she hardly knew Aldington at that time and mistakes the date on which he entered the army, one may more readily accept Aldington's own account of his feelings as described in Life for Life's Sake,² and also recall the sense of foreboding in the later poems of Images. During the first two years of the War Aldington was very busy as assistant editor of The Egoist; he also contributed to several other journals, particularly Orage's New Age and Ford Madox Ford's English Review. He published translations: The Poems of Anyte of Tegea appeared in 1915 and Latin Poets of The Renaissance in 1916. He was very much involved in the literary and artistic avant-garde in London, being a frequent visitor at the salons of Violet Hunt and a fringe member of the Vorticist movement, though, as has been noted, he later affected to know nothing about Vorticism and certainly regarded with distrust the introduction of what seemed to him a dangerously anarchic spirit in English art. Already his outlook was cosmopolitan and he could never subscribe to the jingoistic patriotism which manifested itself in the verse of Newbolt, Chesterton

1. Brigit Patmore, My Friends When Young, 1968, p.79.
2. Life, pp. 157-159.

and Kipling, and their innumerable imitators. In this he rather resembled Rupert Brooke, who, as Robert H. Ross has indicated,¹ felt far less patriotically enthusiastic about the war than his sonnets have suggested. It is significant, indeed, that it was the Imagists who tried to preserve Brooke's reputation as a poet by attacking those who began the process of apotheosis immediately after Brooke's death. In a letter to Harriet Monroe, Pound wrote:

Now that his friends have taken to writing sentimental elegies about his prehensile toes, it might seem time for someone like myself who knew him only slightly to protect him [He] was the best of all the Georgian group.²

Sassoon, Blunden, Rosenberg and Graves may all be considered as 'Georgians': their first war poems were published in Georgian Poetry III (1917). They remained in contact throughout the war with each other (Sassoon and Graves at one time fought almost side by side) and with their literary mentor, Edward Marsh. However isolated as individuals they may therefore have felt, they were at least able to maintain some communication with fellow poets who shared and understood their experiences. For Aldington this was not so: he was the only member of the Imagist group to fight in the war (unless one counts T.E. Hulme who was killed in 1917), and the sense of estrangement he felt from his London friends is movingly implied in Death of a Hero, where George Winterbourne, returning on leave, finds that his friends have no understanding of, and little interest, in the war, treating the circumstances of the

1. Robert H. Ross, The Georgian Revolt, 1967, p.160.
2. Pound to Harriet Monroe. Reprinted in The Letters of Ezra Pound, ed. D. Paige, 1951, p.110.

soldiers at the Front as little more than a joke. They in turn find Winterbourne changed and "less interesting". That this is directly autobiographical is suggested by Hilda Doolittle's novel, Bid Me To Live (1960), in which Rafe Allen, who is only a thin disguise for Aldington himself, is similarly found to be a different person when he returns on leave: the contact he has formerly enjoyed with his artistic and literary colleagues has dissolved, leaving only the sense of incomprehension and alienation. If it is true that Aldington's war poetry suffers, as Bernard Bergonzi has claimed, from being too "self-regarding"¹, it must be remembered that the bitterness and the sense of a desperate search for some beauty and some form of life to which to cling stems from the greater feeling of isolation which Aldington experienced:

pass on, forget us:
 We, any few that are left, a remnant,
 Sit alone together in cold and darkness,
 Dare not face the light for fear we discover
 The dread woe, the agony in our faces,
 Sit alone without sound in bitter dreaming
 Of our friends²

When one reads Aldington's volume of war poems as a whole one is struck not so much by any note of hysteria, of which some critics have complained, nor by the underlying bitterness, already mentioned; what strikes one more forcibly is the poetic and emotional theme of a search for stillness and a search for belonging. Arising out of his sense of isolation and from the insecurity of the war, Aldington is

1. Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight, 1965, p.83.
2. 'The Blood of the Young Men', CP., pp. 120-121, 7.13-19.

concerned in many of the poems to persuade himself that there are some things in life which are permanent and unchanging:

Out of all this turmoil and passion,
This implacable contest,
This vast sea of effort,
I would gather something of repose,
Some intuition of the unalterable gods.¹

This "something of repose" takes many elusive forms and it is the tragedy of the war and of its aftermath for Aldington that it is never finally gathered: as one might expect, Aldington appeals to the gods of his own mythology; he appeals to beauty and to nature without ever finding a lasting security and, if he does gain "some intuition of the unalterable gods", it is only momentary:

I am so far from beauty
That a yellow daisy seems to clutch my heart
With eager searching petals,
And I am grateful even to humility
For the taste of pure clean bread.²

It has been claimed that "Aldington's war poetry seems to be poetry of 'statement', embittered and indignant, unable to achieve the detachment that gives visions but curbs one's hatreds and personal feelings."³ It is certainly true that, in dealing with the war, Aldington does often approach a poetry of direct statement, but it is also true that the tension in these poems is created by the struggle to achieve, in almost impossible circumstances, "the detachment that gives visions"; on one level this implies a basic struggle to continue to believe that life is worth living in spite of everything (it is worth recalling that George Winterbourne, in

1. 'Proem', CP., p.73.

2. 'Bondage', CP., p.76.

3. E.A.M.El-Shora, The Imagist Movement in Twentieth-Century Poetry, unpubl. thesis, Univ. Liverpool, 1957, p.140.

Death of a Hero, allows himself to be killed carelessly, precisely because he can no longer continue to believe this) and, on another level, it implies Aldington's struggle to preserve his identity as a poet, to keep his awareness sharp and his sense of life and beauty acute. It is for this reason that so often in these poems the poet longs for solitude; in 'Bondage' all this is clearly expressed:

I have been a spendthrift -
 Dropping from lazy fingers
 Quiet coloured hours
 . . .
 I have gathered sensations
 Like ripe fruit in a rich orchard¹

The life enjoyed extravagantly, but not properly appreciated, is now replaced by "a sterile, dusty waste". There is no suggestion that the poet feels any consolation in the justness of his cause or in any patriotic loyalty: the private world he has valued, though it is at risk, is not one that can be fought for on a battlefield that is "empty and threatening"; it is the sheer absence of beauty which makes that world vulnerable. Echoes of 'The Faun Captive' can be heard in the poet's frenzy and despair:

I long vainly for solitude,
 And the lapse of silent hours;
 I am frantic to throw off
 My heavy cloth and leather garments,
 To set free my feet and body.²

This is not escapist poetry, it is poetry about the longing to escape; the distinction is important, for Aldington faces up to the actuality of war and has a clear perception of how war is affecting

1. 'Bondage', CP., p.76.
2. ibid.

him. What may seem at first to be a refusal to accept the situation is, in fact, a realization of how overwhelming that situation is, and an attempt to resist being overwhelmed. This demands a degree of detachment in Aldington's war poetry which does exist and which has been insufficiently recognised. A poem like 'On The March' illustrates the point: beginning with things observed while marching -

Beauty of the morning sun
Among the red berries ...¹

- the poet daydreams of what has been left behind and indulges in a fantasy which he knows to be extravagant and absurd:

I will throw away rifle and leather belt,
Straps, khaki and heavy nailed boots,
And run naked across the dewy grass
Among the firm red berries!²

Since this is conscious fantasy, he allows himself to "sing of beauty and the women of Hellas", of "rent seas and the peace of olive gardens" and even of "keen welcome smell of London mud!" This last line indicates beyond doubt (when one recalls Aldington's ambivalent attitude to London) his awareness that the fantasy can be no more than a frivolous day-dream. It is surely not escapism but necessity which leads the poet to demand of himself that his mind should be free, even if his physical situation is inevitably constricting. It is a question of the preservation of the poet's identity in circumstances where individuality is at the bottom of any list of priorities, as the ironic juxtaposition of the poem's conclusion makes clear:

1. 'On the March', CP., p.81.
2. ibid.

I will be free
 Party - HALT! 1

Even the act of poetic creation itself is made difficult: the question implied in two poems, 'Insouciance' and 'Living Sepulchres', is how can any form of beauty or art be captured, let alone preserved, in such an environment? The poems that the poet creates

fly away like white-winged doves.²

If the dove is here a symbol of a poem, it is also the symbol of peace. Aldington tries to create images of peace and beauty but neither, he implies, can survive in the trenches. 'Living Sepulchres' poses the problem more directly:

One frosty night when the guns were still
 I leaned against the trench
 Making for myself hokku
 Of the moon and flowers and of the snow.

But the ghostly scurrying of huge rats
 Swollen with feeding upon men's flesh
 Filled me with shrinking dread.³

It is not that the crisis lies in the awareness of reality as such, but that here the poet is confronted with a grotesque reality so that not even when there is a lull in the fighting can he concentrate on a reality undisturbed by war: if the moon and flowers and snow are aspects of the beauty of nature, the "huge rats" are a reminder of another aspect, one whose impact is greater and more forceful under the circumstances in which he is writing. But the "shrinking dread" that the poet feels is not yet a permanent paralysis of thought and hope. 'In The Trenches II' attempts to put a different perspective:

1. 'On the March', CP., p.81.
2. 'Insouciance', CP., p.80.
3. 'Living Sepulchres', CP., p.86.

Impotent,
 How impotent is all this clamour,
 This destruction and contest¹

The war is impotent because it cannot obliterate the moon, "haughty and perfect", nor prevent the frost from "crumbling the hard earth" or the "patient creeping spring":

Can you stay them with your noise?
 Then kill winter with your cannon,
 Hold back Orion with your bayonets
 And crush the spring leaf with your armies.²

Even if this is no more than an attempt by the poet to keep up his spirits, one can also recognize in it a valid reaction to his predicament: the directness of the language and the mocking challenge of the last line crystallizes the absurdity, the "impotence" of war,

The chaos of battle predominates for only a limited period but the cycle of nature is unbroken. This awareness of being caught up in a violent interruption is expressed in 'Time's Changes':

Four years ago to-day in Italy
 I gathered wild flowers for a girl
 To-day in sunless barren fields
 I gather heads of shells,
 Splinters of shrapnel, cartridges³

The flowers he gathered are not just an image of time past but of the enduring world which has been abandoned - whether temporarily or permanently is the question implied by the last two lines:

What shall I gather
 Four years from today?⁴

Although one could not deny the validity of this contrast between

1. 'In the Trenches', CP., p.82, 2.1-3.
2. ibid., p.83, 2.15-18.
3. 'Times Changes', CP., p.89.
4. 'A Moment's Interlude', CP., p.80.

the fruits of peace and the fruits of war, poetically it is inadequately realised and its impact diminished by its sentimentality. What should have been artlessness is dangerously near bathos. This is not so with 'A Moment's Interlude' where one sees clearly Aldington's concern with capturing private moments of beauty and the eagerness with which he recognizes the enduring value of such experiences even while, at the title admits, he is aware that the experiences themselves are only momentary:

One night I wandered alone from my comrades' huts;
The grasshoppers chirped softly
In the warm misty evening;
Bracken fronds beckoned from the darkness
With exquisite frail green fringes;
The tree-gods muttered affectionately about me
And from the distance came the grumble of a kindly train.
I was so happy to be alone¹

What is important here is the heightened sense of pleasure from ordinary things; the language itself expresses this ordinariness: "the grasshoppers chirped softly" is neither a rare phenomenon, nor is the diction unusual, for grasshoppers conventionally chirp. It is striking, in fact, that apart from the reference to "tree-gods" and the use of free verse, these lines might be a standard later-Georgian description of the "weekend" countryside, in particular, the anthropomorphic "grumble of a kindly train" reminds one of, say, Harold Monro's 'Weekend'. But Aldington's outlook and intention is very far from Georgian, for whereas the Georgians (referring here to those poets who dominated the group after 1917 - Monro, Squire, Turner and Freeman) retreated to a cosy rural setting which they saw

1. 'A Moment's Interlude', CP., p.80.

as an ideal of the ordinary life, Aldington is drawn to the same setting precisely because, in the context of the war, it is extraordinary; more emphatically, it is life after the "death" of the trenches:

And we have come from death,
From the long weary nights and days
Out in those frozen wire-fringed ditches;
And this is life again, rich life - .¹

C.M. Bowra observed that some of the war poets found comfort and confidence

in the natural scene in which they now lived and moved, and, as they extended their contact with it, they formed a close intimacy with the earth, and, since they had lost most of their familiar supports, they developed almost a religious attitude towards natural things and felt themselves to belong to this company.²

Of no war poet is this more true than of Aldington, and at the end of 'A Moment's Interlude' he explicitly defines this close intimacy with earth. He is

So full of love for the great speechless earth,
That I could have laid my cheek in the grasses
And carressed with my lips the hard sinewy body
Of Earth, the cherishing mistress of bitter lovers.³

One is tempted to suggest that it was in the war-ravaged battlefields of France that Aldington's "Greek dream" came nearest to reality: his own awareness of this is indicated by the frequency with which he refers in these war poems to the comfort and security he derives from earth and beauty. It is his most important theme, and the relationship between man and the earth becomes the image of the

1. 'A Village', CP., p.91.
2. Bowra, In General and Particular, 1964, p.203.
3. 'A Moment's Interlude', CP., p.80.

individual's attempt in wartime to maintain contact with a reality which is not grotesque:

You get to know,
In that shell-pierced silence,
Under the unmoved ironic stars,
How good love of the earth is.¹

It is hardly surprising that the earth should have been such a potent image for the war poets who, along with all the other soldiers, had to exist in dug-out holes, and cope with mud and earth rock-hard from frost when digging new trenches or access lines. Add to this the proximity of death with its familiar connotations of "dust to dust" and one can hardly be shocked by Wilfred Owen's mocking cynicism:

'I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone',
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now,
'Pushing up daisies' is their creed, you know.²

But what Owen treats ironically, Aldington treats seriously: this involvement with the earth, with nature, is for him a way of preserving and asserting the dignity of soldiers, alive and dead. Thus, whereas Sassoon sees humiliation in the mud of the battlefield -

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.³

- Aldington sees something different, an image of affirmation and "repose":

We found, lying upon the fire-step
A dead English soldier,
His head bloodily bandaged
And his closed left hand touching the earth.⁴

1. 'A Village', CP., p.90.
2. Wilfred Owen, 'A Terre', in Men Who March Away, ed. I.M.Parsons, 1968, p.133.
3. Siegfried Sassoon, 'Glory of Women', in Parsons, op.cit., p.97.
4. 'Soliloquy II', CP., p.86.

The image here is a detail, exact but not elaborated, yet it embodies Aldington's appeal to an aesthetic and spiritual reality that war cannot destroy. It would be wrong, however, to imply that Aldington's feelings towards the earth are always so positive; as Bowra pointed out:

When a man is inextricably dependent on his circumstances, every little thing in them makes a profound impression on him. He must at all costs acclimatize himself to his strange and unaccountable world of war, and his moods will cover the whole range of which he is capable. ¹

Thus Aldington reacts, in 'Taintignies', in an utterly different way:

This land is tedious as a worn-out whore,
Faded and shabby²

In this poem the whole landscape is made an image of the destruction and exhaustion produced by war; there is no feeling of affirmation here for even the earth is used up. As the war proceeded Aldington's moods became more and more despairing and his faith in the positive life of earth less convinced when faced with the destructive reality of war. In 'Misery' this dilemma is summed up in the question "How live after this shame?" He attempts to answer by asserting:

'So that hate poison not all my days,
And I still love the earth ...
I can endure.'³

But it is a frail conviction, the more so because, in retrospect, one comes to suspect (especially when reading Death of a Hero and The Colonel's Daughter) that hate did, in fact, poison his days, at least for a long time after the war was over. Ultimately his appeal

1. Bowra, In General and Particular, 1964, p.203.
2. 'Taintignies', CP., p.108.
3. 'Misery', CP., p.85.

to earth is an aesthetic appeal and his disillusion stems from a realization that the power of beauty is less substantial than the grotesque reality of war and its aftermath:

Must we despair?
 Throw back upon the gods this taunt
 That even their loveliest is at best
 Some ineffectual lie? ¹

If one may talk of the shock to Aldington of this realization, an effect of it may be seen in a curiously moving poem included among Images of War, 'Apathy'. This poem is a monologue by the poet as he walks along a road with a silent companion. The speaker draws attention to everything he sees and his sense of observation seems unnaturally heightened:

Notice all carefully, be precise, welcome the world.
 Do I miss these things? Overlook beauty?
 Not even the shadow of a bird²

Everything is meticulously observed: the construction of a bridge, the colours of the river, the movement of flies, but the observation is clinical and utterly detached; if, adopting the Imagist method, one attempts to understand the emotion behind the pattern of images, the only emotion that can be discovered is lack of emotion: though the speaker may be right when he claims to "See beauty just as keenly", nevertheless he does not "relish things" as he claims to do except in so far as he relishes them as detached objects observed - they draw no emotional response from him. Only his sense of observation has been made more acute, the rest of his senses are dull and blank:

1. 'Doubt', CP., p.114.
2. 'Apathy', CP., p.118.

Silence fits the mood then - silence and you.¹

In his inability to respond to, or to interpret, what he sees, he resembles a type of war-time Prufrock:

can you interpret
These fragments of leaf-music ...
Can you interpret such a simple thing?²

He gives up the attempt to

Confront half-impulses, half-desires,
Grapple with lustless definitions,
Grin at my inarticulate impotence ...³

when he correctly diagnoses his malaise as apathy, for which he compensates by an obsessive attention to the natural objects he passes on his walk; but there is no longer any empathetic identification with, or even appreciation of, nature and the earth. He may "see beauty", but he cannot feel it: his attempt to welcome the world is a failure because he feels no welcoming emotion - he is unable to respond. If this is the reality that has given him "comfort and confidence" at times in the trenches, it is a reality overshadowed by

something else -
The way one corpse held its stiff yellow fingers
And pointed, pointed to the huge dark hole
Gouged between ear and jaw right to the skull.⁴

The grotesque has overwhelmed the natural, but even the grotesque has lost its power to shock; it is "just a joke they told me yesterday". The poet of 'Apathy' is very far removed from the poet of 'A Moment's Interlude', hardly identifiable as the same person. It is, indeed, one of Aldington's most valuable contributions to the literature of

1. 'Apathy', CP., p.118.
2. ibid., p.117.
3. ibid.
4. ibid., p.118.

the Great War that he should have conveyed more vividly than most the great range of human reactions to the situation of the war. 'Apathy' is one of the best and most moving of his poems because the reader is led to make the emotional response which is denied to the poet himself. Because the detachment of the speaker is so absolute, the poem seems to be located in a sort of limbo, perhaps the "profound dull tunnel" in Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting'; one is reminded also of the two walkers in Eliot's 'Little Gidding':

And so, compliant to the common wind,
 Too strange to each other for misunderstanding,
 In concord at this intersection time
 Of meeting nowhere, no before and after,¹
 We trod the pavement in a dead patrol.

If Aldington had mentally reached this state, therefore, it was not as a conscious escape from the reality of war, but as a result of his prolonged exposure to it. Most of the poems discussed so far have dealt with the poet's private reactions as they were affected by the whole experience of war, but there are a number of poems which Aldington wrote that deal directly with his experience of life in the trenches and with his feelings for his fellow soldiers; these may be described as "mainstream" war poems and are, in general, among Aldington's better-known work.

Concerning the relationship between soldiers in time of war, Bowra remarked:

1. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', in Collected Poems, 1963, p.217.

The strange, compulsive fellowship of war breaks across familiar distinctions and differences and shapes new relations for those who live in it. What binds one man to another is not some abstract cause or theoretical obligations but identity of effort and suffering, and this brings even enemies together.¹

Aldington's poems illustrate Bowra's comments exactly, just as Death of a Hero illustrates them on a broader canvas. When the hero of the novel, George Winterbourne, sees for the first time veteran troops returning from leave, he is seized by what Bernard Bergonzi describes as "an exalted sense of masculine exclusiveness and contempt for women, such [as is] observed in Sassoon and Owen":

'By God!' he said to himself, 'You're men, not boudoir rabbits and lounge lizards. I don't care a damn what your cause is - it's almost certainly a foully rotten one. But I do know You're the first real men I've looked upon. I swear you're better than the women and the half-men, and My God! I swear I'll die with you rather than live in a world without you.'²

Although it would of course be rash to assume that Winterbourne is here expressing exactly Aldington's own feelings under similar circumstances, the passage is still revealing for it points to the root of the "strange, compulsive fellowship of war": the soldiers are not so much united by a common cause as by a common predicament and a common involvement, and the sense of loyalty to each other is a personal one, not one dependent in any (except the most perfunctory) way upon military discipline. However isolated Aldington may have felt as a poet and as an individual, and since he joined up as a private he must have felt the lack of contact in common outlook and interests the more acutely, his poems show how strongly he was aware

1. Bowra, In General and Particular, 1964, p.211.
2. Aldington, Death of a Hero, 1929, pp.253-254.

of the elemental relationship that existed between men in battle. The poem 'Machine Guns' describes the moment of a machine gun attack: a wounded man is being attended by stretcher-bearers whilst others "cower shrinkingly against the ground":

Only we two stand upright;
All differences of life and character smoothed out
And nothing left
Save that one foolish tie of caste
That will not let us shrink.¹

It is at the moment when there is "nothing left" that the "foolish tie" is strongest. In such circumstances - and it is quite evident that this caste is not a social one - the poet claims no special awareness; he merely articulates a universal phenomenon, the bond between men in a moment of shared danger. With hindsight it is apparent that one of the main contributions of the poets of the Great War was to articulate the different reactions and emotions of ordinary serving soldiers. It was, in a certain sense, their special achievement that they made universally accessible these reactions and situations, thereby creating a far greater understanding of the reality of war. So successfully did they achieve this, indeed, that poets in the Second World War had to write for a public who knew already a great deal about what war was like for the soldier, and what its implications were; faced with this situation, the poets of 1939-45 wrote more reflective and introspective poetry which was inevitably to lack the power and the direct appeal which the poetry

1. 'Machine Guns', CP., p.93.

of 1914-18 continues to exercise.

Another dimension of the "foolish tie of caste" to which the poets drew attention was the recognition that suffering and death drew together all who were directly involved in the war. There can be few lines which match the pathos of this recognition as expressed by Wilfred Owen:

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.¹

Aldington's poem 'Battlefield' also implies this recognition in the image of a cross erected by French soldiers over the body of a German:

Ci-gît, ci-gît, ci-gît ...
'Ci-gît l' soldat Allemand,
Priez pour lui.'²

In two other poems, 'Three Little Girls' and 'A Ruined House', Aldington extends this recognition to the civilians caught up in the fighting. There is restraint in these poems and no attempt is made to sentimentalize or to demand retribution. The casualties of war are a fact of war as well as a tragedy; the poet has no need to embroider the fact to evoke a response. In 'A Ruined House', he presents the disappearance of a family who happened to live on a battlefield:

Of all their life here nothing remains
Except their trampled dirtied clothes
Among the dusty bricks,
Their marriage bed, rusty and bent,
Thrown down aside as useless;
And a broken toy left by their child³

1. Owen, 'Strange Meeting', in Men Who March Away, ed. I.M.Parsons, 1968, p.120.
2. 'Battlefield', CP., p.93.
3. 'A Ruined House', CP., p.94.

The poem breaks off for the image is complete and needs no elaboration. It may well be true, as Jon Silkin claims, that "resentment is Aldington's strongest mode"¹; but, in dealing with his direct experiences, the poet implies, by presenting the observed facts without comment, that resentment is an inadequate response to a universal tragedy compounded by numberless personal tragedies. The resentment that Aldington exhibits in 'The Blood of The Young Men' is admittedly very powerful but, unlike Sassoon, whose resentment reached breaking point in the middle of the war, Aldington's only finds explicit expression at the end of the war, when achievement can be measured against waste.

As a counterpoint to this mode of resentment, there is also a conscious attempt to be detached: partly, as has been suggested, this derives from the effort to create and preserve a reality apart from the horror of the poet's overwhelming and immediate environment; partly, as in 'Apathy', it is a psychological consequence of exposure to war. But the mode of detachment is also used to deliberately create conditions in which the poet can produce "Direct treatment of the Thing", to create an image that will speak for itself. In this sense the mode of detachment is essential to the Imagist poet. 'Trench Idyll' shows Aldington using the Imagist technique unobtrusively but effectively:

1. Jon Silkin, Out of Battle, 1972, p.188.

We sat together in the trench,
 He on a lump of frozen earth
 Blown in the night before,
 I on an unexploded shell;
 And smoked and talked, like exiles,
 Of how pleasant London was¹

The reader is presented with the details that set the scene as though they were stage directions; the contingent location and props of war are recorded without comment, as though it were perfectly natural for a lump of frozen earth to have been blown in the night before and as if an unexploded shell were as usual a seat as an arm-chair. The whole situation, in fact, seems bizarre and unreal, as indeed in normal life it would be. By contrast, the conversation is ordinary, almost banal (though significantly Aldington drops the parenthetical hint that the two speakers talk "like exiles", suggesting once again the sense of isolation) until there is an interruption:

Then we sat silent for a while
 As a machine-gun swept the parapet.²

There is no reaction, just silence until the gunfire has ceased; any expected reaction of fear or alarm is absent or, at any rate, unreported. The only consequence of this interruption is that the subject of conversation changes to death: one speaker describes how he witnessed the killing of a soldier and the other, the poet, merely replies "That's odd", and "Good Lord, how terrible!". But his interest is forced and the replies merely mechanical. Thus the first speaker's account of a man's death elicits an ambiguous response since,

1. 'Trench Idyll', CP., p.88.
2. ibid.

in the light of the listener's apparent uninterest, the reader is uncertain how to respond: should he feel horror, distress or revulsion, or should he, like the poet, take the event as commonplace? There is another uncertainty which complicates the response still further: is the poet really immune to the fact of death, having observed it so frequently, or is he trying to conceal a fear as great as any normal person's? Whatever the reaction, the first speaker is intent upon telling his macabre story and seems unconcerned about his companion's response; he describes how he once had to collect identity discs from corpses which had hung on the barbed wire for six months:

'The worst of all was
They fell to pieces at a touch.
Thank God we couldn't see their faces;
They had gas helmets on'¹

Here is an image that should, in any circumstances, be horrifying - rotted corpses which disintegrate when handled - and yet the poet has deliberately made it impossible for the reader to respond fully to the image. To begin with, there is little sense of deeply-felt horror on the part of the speaker himself; it was merely "the nastiest job I've had". Secondly, the full impact never even struck him: he could not come literally face-to-face with the corpses because of their gas helmets; (it is significant how frequently the war poets draw attention to the face, especially to the eyes, when they wish to emphasize the horror and suffering of war - as, for example, in

1. 'Trench Idyll', CP., p.88.

Rosenberg's 'Break Of Day In The Trenches', Herbert Read's 'The Happy Warrior' and Owen's 'The Sentry'). Thirdly, this is not the poet's own reaction to direct experience, only the reported account of somebody else's; in other words, the poet has detached himself from the focal image of the poem to elicit from the reader not a response of pity and horror but of unease, a response which echoes the poet's own final uneasiness: he does not respond directly, but simply tries to change the subject:

I shivered,
'It's rather cold here, Sir, suppose we move?'¹

To some extent it is inevitable that such poetry, poetry which tries to report the actual experience of being involved in the war, should sometimes seem to lack intensity (dramatic, if not poetic): the images of war which Aldington projects do not always cohere. The difference between Owen's 'The Sentry', for instance, and Aldington's 'Bombardment' is like that between a film and a set of magic lantern slides, the one inviting continuous involvement and the other a set of dissociated responses which may or may not have a cumulative effect. This is not to forget that Aldington's intention may well differ from Owen's, nor to dismiss 'Bombardment' as an inferior poem.

The three stanzas of the poem describe a Bombardment, the last night of the Bombardment, and the day after it is over; in terms of human reaction, they describe waiting, sleeping and waking, for those

1. 'Trench Idyll', CP., p.88.

involved are involved entirely passively:

Three nights we dared not sleep,
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash
Which meant our death.¹

The description of the bombardment itself is minimal:

Four days the earth was rent and torn
By bursting steel,
The houses fell about us²

The diction is so low-key, so conventional, that one begins to wonder whether the poem might not have been written as well by somebody who had never witnessed a bombardment. D.H. Lawrence wrote a poem with the same title:

The town has opened to the sun.
Like a flat red lily with a million petals
She unfolds, she comes undone.³

Reading Lawrence's poem helps one to understand Aldington's technique: Lawrence's image, intricately pursued through four stanzas, could only, one feels, have been produced by a poet who had never actually lived through a bombardment. Such a person would think that he could not get away with the simple, direct presentation that Aldington has employed. The concentration of the soldiers in Aldington's poem is directed wholly towards "listening for the imminent crash", and everything else is secondary to this concentration. In the aftermath of this bombardment the physical reaction of the soldiers, "Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion", is to sleep, and their sleep is set against the continuing din of the shelling. In the last stanza, however, this too has ceased:

1. 'Bombardment', CP., p.105.
2. ibid.
3. D.H.Lawrence, 'Bombardment', in Men Who March Away, ed. I.M.Parsons, 1968, p.117.

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.¹

Perhaps Aldington comes close to sentimentality when he contrasts the "wreckage of the earth" with the "untroubled blue" but, remembering the sometimes desperate attachment which he and others in the war felt to beauty and nature, it is hard to imagine how the sense of relief at emerging from a sub-human situation ("We left our holes") to discover that something at least has been unaffected ("untroubled") by the bombardment could have been expressed in any other way. What the soldiers' reactions actually were is not stated; had we been told, then the danger of sentimentality would have been greater, but the emotional reaction is strongly implicit in the last stanza and needs no elaboration.

The feeling of dislocation in this poem which arises from the three clear-cut stages is muted by the final realization that the three stanzas cohere into a single image, that the aftermath of the bombardment is as much a part of the experience as the bombing itself. But whereas for the poet, as participant, this is an experiential realization, for the reader it is an intellectual one, and the emotion has been formalised before the reader receives it.

This gap between poet and reader is possibly most marked in the war poetry where Aldington is concerned with his own direct experience as a soldier: the Imagist technique allows him to convey vividly what

1. 'Bombardment', CP., p.105.

happened and how he and his fellow soldiers reacted to what happened but makes it hard for the reader to share this reaction. Sympathy between poet and reader is in fact greatest when Aldington is least the soldier and most aware of his incongruity in the situation of the war. On such occasions the reader is better able to share and to sympathise with the sense of being out of place, the feeling of unreality which the poet expresses.

A poem which illustrates this well is 'Field Manoeuvres'. The poet is on outpost duty but finds the reality of the countryside in which he is hiding far more attractive as well as more immediate than the reality of the war he is supposed to be fighting. In no other poem is Aldington's affinity with the earth more acutely expressed and the sensual opening lines of the poem draw one back to the earliest poems of his first volume:

The long autumn grass under my body
Soaks my skin with its dew;
Where my knees press into the ground
I can feel the damp earth.¹

It is as though he has forgotten the war altogether, and even when it is finally brought into the poem, Aldington's detachment from it is total:

I am 'to fire at the enemy column
After it has passed' -
But my obsolete rifle, loaded with 'blank',
Lies untouched before me²

The "obsolete rifle, loaded with 'blank'" lends the same touch of ironic absurdity which, twenty five years later, was to colour the

1. 'Field Manoeuvres', CP., p.77.

2. ibid.

been a satisfactory environment before the war, but once separated from his fellow citizens of this artistic Lilliput, Aldington felt an isolation which was both personal and artistic: he had had to relinquish the editorship of The Egoist and, when he finally returned to England in 1919, it was to live in almost total seclusion in a cottage lent to him by D.H. Lawrence, Aldington's closest friend at this time and perhaps the only young writer more isolated, though for different reasons, than Aldington himself.

These factors were bound to have an effect on Aldington's poetry and may to some extent explain the criticism that his poetry of this period is too self-regarding. They may also go some way towards answering it: as Bowra commented, "Most men struggle against its [war's] tyrannical claims and create some private refuge for their thoughts and fancies and dreams".¹ It is good to know this and good to know that there should have been a poet who could reveal in his poetry this private refuge since -

What is true of soldiers is, in a special degree, true of poets, who know all too well the struggle between their secret selves and the enforced exactions of war, and, because this is clearer to them than to others, they speak for others with a greater authority.²

Whereas the major war poets were primarily concerned with expressing the reactions of soldiers to the external conditions of war, Aldington was primarily concerned with the internal conditions, the effect of an individual's involvement in the total situation of war. It must be admitted that his war poems are by no means always

1. Bowra, In General and Particular, 1964, p.211.
2. ibid.

successful; as has been indicated, his detachment as a poet and as a person sometimes creates too great a distance between poet and reader. By contrast, it is sometimes the lack of detachment, either in the obsessive search for a reality to counteract the grotesque reality of war, or in the overwhelming force of such emotions as bitterness and resentment, which may destroy the balance of a particular poem. Again, there is sometimes an uncertainty of voice, as if Aldington had decided that he would, after all, try to speak to anyone who wanted to listen, but was unsure how to go about it. Indeed, in the Preface to the American edition of his war poetry he said that the poems had been written "less for myself and others interested in subtleties, and more for the kind of men I lived with in the camp and in the line";¹ with a few exceptions, however, Aldington's aesthetic and literary approach made it impossible for him to aim successfully at any audience other than one "interested in subtleties". It is not without interest, though, that an English Army officer wrote to Poetry that, in the middle of a barrage attack, he had overheard soldiers reciting 'Choricos' to themselves.

Aldington's achievement as a war poet was to articulate the whole range of private responses of a man wholly and involuntarily involved in the process of war. The very range that he covered precluded any dominant and unifying image that would express the total experience, and the fragmentation which resulted, the lack of

1. Aldington, Love and War, Boston, 1919, p.vii.

emotional and artistic cohesion, affected Aldington's whole psychological and poetic personality. He came out of the war uncertain whether to be hopeful for the future or resentful of the past which had jeopardised his future; he was unsure whether it was better after all to have survived than to have been killed; his sense of isolation had become embittered and sent him deeper into his private world. One of his first publications after the war was a translation of Voltaire's Candide, concerning which McGreevy commented:

It is obvious to see why Richard Aldington should have been drawn to the study of Voltaire at this time. Voltaire's scepticism, his distrust of the vested interests, his humanity, and his often malicious fancy were bound to appeal to the disillusionment and sense of pity of the returned soldier.¹

The war was the great crisis of Aldington's life, but so it was also for those other poets who survived; as G.S. Fraser has pointed out, Blunden, Graves, Sassoon and Aldington all returned from the trenches "with war neuroses which it would take the rest of their lives to cure and resolve into art."² At the end of the war it was too soon to begin the difficult process of resolution (Aldington began to write a war novel on Armistice Day, but never completed it and destroyed the manuscript), and the poet returned to England suffering from gas and shell shock, and conscious only of the paralysis of his creative and personal life:

Each day I grow more restless,
See the austere shape elude me,
Gaze impotently upon a thousand miseries
And still am dumb.³

1. T. McGreevy, Richard Aldington, 1931, p.39.
2. G.S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and his World, 1964, p.280.
3. 'Proem', CP., p.61.

Chapter 5.Images of Desire (1919); Exile and Other Poems (1923)

As a soldier weary of fighting
 Turns for peace to some golden city,
 So do I turn to you, beloved.¹

When Aldington returned to England after the war one of his immediate worries was to get back into print as soon as he could before the small reputation which he had begun to establish was forgotten altogether. To his surprise, he found that editors were more willing than before to accept work from him and before long he had a relatively steady source of income from his reviews of French literature for The Times Literary Supplement, and from his articles for other journals. Most important, however, there was still a market for his poetry, and in 1919 no fewer than three volumes were published in England: a revised edition of Images, together with Images of War and Images of Desire, the last two being also published jointly in the United States as War and Love. Although the titles of these volumes imply Aldington's continuing allegiance to Imagism, the movement as such had come to an end in 1917 after Amy Lowell had announced:

There will be no more volumes of Some Imagist Poets. The collection has done its work. These three little books are the germ, the nucleus of the school; its spreading out, its amplifications, must be sought in the unpublished work of the individual members of the group.²

1. 'Images of Desire, 5', CP., p.135.
2. Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, New York, 1917, p.255.

It is, indeed, true that the individual members of the group were left very much on their own, for the war had effectively disrupted almost all the literary cliques and friendships which had been flourishing in 1914, and the post-war literary atmosphere was to be quite different. Vorticism had petered out in 1915, after the second edition of BLAST; The Egoist continued until December 1919, but its successor (in as much as T.S. Eliot transferred from editorship of one to the other), The Criterion, did not appear until October 1922. Although a number of little magazines managed to run for a while, such as Edith Sitwell's Wheels, Harold Monro's Chapbook, and Coterie, none of them was at all committed to Imagism; they were all short-lived and not one commanded such a wide readership as J.C. Squire's conservative Mercury, which fiercely attacked progressive poets and poetry while encouraging the enervated sub-Georgian poetry for which the original Georgian movement (launched at almost exactly the same time as Imagisme) is nowadays chiefly remembered and unfairly condemned. The post-war years, in other words, were a confusing time for poetry; there was no-one left to give a lead. Hulme was dead, Sir Edward Marsh had given up editorship of the Georgian anthologies and Pound had abandoned London for Paris. This confusion is neatly expressed in a poem by Douglas Goldring entitled 'Post-Georgian Poet In Search of a Master':

Are Sitwells really safe? Is Iris Tree
 A certain guide to higher poesy?
 Can Nichols be relied on, for a lead;
 Or should I thump it with Sassoon and Read?
 Or would it not be vastly better fun
 To write of nymphs with Richard Aldington?
 Or shall I train, and nervously aspire
 To join with Edward Shanks and J.C. Squire
 - A modest 'chorus' in a well-paid choir? ¹

In such a situation as this, it is not surprising that the overwhelming sense of isolation which Aldington had experienced as a soldier should have found no relief in a London where his sense of isolation was just as great, and it is significant that the first volume of his poems actually written after his return to England should have been called Exile (1923). Before this, however, Aldington published Images of Desire, a collection of love poems written while on active service. This is the least satisfactory of all his volumes: many of the poems are repetitive - a soldier's day-dreams of a highly fantasized love which will restore to him the life that the war has destroyed. The theme of physical contact is obsessive and finally tedious, and too few of the poems show the technical skill and control which Aldington had developed in Images of War. Again, one is faced with the problem of detachment and involvement; too rarely is the poet in control of the man, too frequently is the result prosaic and banal:

Kiss my lips with your mouth that is wet with wine,
 Wine that is only less keen than your lips are;
 Slip from under your fragile garments as a white rose
 Slips from under her leaves to the naked sunlight.²

1. Douglas Goldring, 'Post-Georgian Poet in Search of a Master', repr. in Ross, The Georgian Revolt, 1967, p.215.
2. 'Before Parting', CP., p.137.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of some of these poems which are important in the context of the war: the hopes and fears of a soldier who knows that he may be killed before seeing again those whom he loves, and the thoughts and fantasies of such a man. These are undoubtedly legitimate subjects for a war poet and one does not blame Aldington for tackling them, but too often he fails to distance himself adequately from the problem, and from the problem as it involves him personally. The result is poetry that is flat and uninteresting because it is overstated and unoriginal. The poem 'Before Parting' from which the above four lines were taken, is a typical example of a legitimate theme receiving poor treatment:

Though I return once more to the battle,
 Though perhaps I shall be lost to you forever -
 Give me, O love, your love for this last brief season,
 Be mine indeed as I am yours.¹

Here the crisis is stated, formally but simply, only to be undermined by the banality of "Be mine indeed as I am yours", a feeble line which makes the sincerity of the emotion suspect. This suspicion is only heightened by such phrases as "drawn-out agony of hope", "a sudden glory of infinite delight", "an infinite yearning" or "stabbing heart-beats". These clichés are the stock-in-trade of cheap romantic fiction and nothing about this poem gives them any special validity; there is, for example, no suggestion that these are the sentiments of the ordinary soldier who is only able to articulate his emotional states of mind in conventional phrases -

1. 'Before Parting', CP., p.137.

indeed, it is depressingly clear (from the frequency with which they recur in other poems) that the emotions are Aldington's own. He is obsessed by the need for physical contact, to be made immortal with a kiss : in 'An Interlude' he longs for his beloved to "breathe wild love into my mouth"¹, and in "Her Mouth",

She has but to turn her head
And lay her lips to mine
For all my blood to throb tumultuously.²

In 'Daybreak' he cries, "Ah! slay me with your lips"³, while in 'Absence' he complains:

I have not your lips to burn me
Awake to a great delight.⁴

In 'Meditation' he dreams of "Her mouth drawing the blood to my lips"⁵. When finally he asks "Have I spoken too much or not enough of love?"⁶ one is tempted to reply that he has, indeed, spoken too much and repeated himself too often, and to wonder whether anything so overwhelmingly concerned with self can be described as love. The failure of such poems is the more apparent when they are contrasted with others (also in Images of Desire) where Aldington does achieve a measure of detachment at the welcome expense of self-dramatization. One such poem, 'A Soldier's Song', states in universal terms and in an effective lyric form the crisis for the soldier cut off from his loved one:

1. 'An Interlude', CP., p.129.
2. 'Her Mouth', CP., p.131.
3. 'Daybreak', CP., p.133.
4. 'Absence', CP., p.141.
5. 'Meditation', CP., p.145.
6. 'Epilogue', CP., p.148.

How sadly for how many nights
 My dear will lie alone,
 Or lie in other arms than mine
 While I lie like a stone.¹

This one stanza encapsulates the whole dilemma: the soldier's lack of certainty and his inability to act; his knowledge that his loved one will also suffer, but that she has a remedy of which he dare not think:

I would not have her pine and weep,
 I would not have her love again.²

He hopes to be killed so that he will not have to learn the truth he cannot bear to face. How much better is this poem, as a piece of verse and as an expression of a human dilemma, than any number of pseudo-metaphysical laments. In a curious way, it is partly a question of dignity: one feels a far greater respect and sympathy for the anonymous speaker in 'A Soldier's Song' than for the self-absorbed man who is

fierce, indignant, humiliated -
 To be chained away from you
 When I desire you above all things.³

Only in one poem does the poet show any sympathy for the feelings of the woman concerned: 'Portrait' creates a picture of a woman who might have been a Helen of Troy or a Cleopatra, a classic femme fatale:

For such as you
 Kings have laid down their diadems,
 And brave men have shed tears,
 And gentle men done secret murder.⁴

1. 'A Soldier's Song', CP., p.140.
2. ibid.
3. 'Absence', CP., p.141.
4. 'Portrait', CP., p.132.

But the poet sees that she is surrounded by a "mist of lust", not her own, but of those who desire her, and he perceives that, through this mist, she is searching

For one face clear with love,
Your lips parch for one kiss of tenderness.¹

Here the poet has put himself in the position of the passive spectator; for once he is not thinking of himself and so the depth of his sympathy and of his perception is considerably greater. Again, this is a poem which one reads with a certain sense of relief after the outpouring of so much egotistical frustration. It has to be remembered, though, that these are all war poems in so far as they were all written by a soldier at war, and that Aldington himself was aware (as his Images of War has indicated) that the inhumanity of the fighting, and prolonged exposure to it, threatened the individual's capacity for sympathy and human response, and that this capacity had to be preserved at all costs.

In Images of Desire he is not less aware of the threat to the individual's spiritual life and to his humanity:

Here life is but a phantom of himself
And limps and mutters by these war-torn paths²

The poet sees himself as "A deserted temple with no god"³ and here, at least, one can begin to understand the desperation behind the desire expressed in the greater number of these poems but, of course, no amount of desperation can by itself produce good poetry. On the other

1. 'Portrait', CP., p.132.
2. 'Cynthia', CP., p.143.
3. 'Odelette', CP., p.133.

hand, where Aldington admits the fate of others in the war, where his sympathies rather than his obsessions are engaged, the verse which results is marked by a degree of control which sharpens both the poetry and the emotion. Thus, in the four lines of 'Reserve', the poet's experience of war crucially affects his feelings of desire as the image of the lovers lying together recalls to his mind the bodies of his dead comrades. Description or evocation are not necessary here - the poem is the more effective because the reader is left to make the visual analogy for himself. The poet's physical restraint is mirrored by the restraint of the poem:

Though you desire me, I will still feign sleep
 And check my eyes from opening to the day,
 For as I lie, thrilled by your gold-dark flesh,
 I think of how the dead, my dead, once lay.¹

One of the most interesting poems in Images of Desire is 'Meditation', set in the moment of relief and realization when the war has ended. It is a poem written through self-awareness but without any overwhelming self-absorption. The speaker, and this is a deliberately personal poem, is reflecting on what the end of the war will mean to him. He begins optimistically: the silence, now that the guns are quiet, is already "Purging out bitterness, effacing miseries"; he looks forward to returning to his wife, knowing he is at last "free"; he looks forward to travelling, to meeting old friends, to taking up his old life again, but then he pauses to ask himself the question posed in 'A Soldier's Song': is any woman both

1. 'Reserve', CP., p.134.

beautiful and faithful? This makes him reconsider and he decides that he has become "too restless ... Too contemptuous ... Too sick at heart ... Too impatient ..." to return to his old life. Thus Aldington finds himself at a turning point:

Perhaps, then, this is my happiest moment,
 Here in this cold little Belgian house,
 Remembering harsh years past,
 Plotting gold years to come,
 Trusting so blithely in a Woman's faith;
 In the quiet night,
 In the silence.¹

This, one feels, is the kind of self-awareness one should ask of a poet, and though the poem is clearly personal, its theme can be connected with the thoughts of any soldier at the moment of realising that the war is over and that he has survived. However, what is missing from this poem is a presiding image to express this awareness of being at a turning point. The poem is a meditation, a monologue of the poet's train of thought; surely here, if anywhere, Aldington should have remembered the Imagist definition that "the Image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"? In the poem there is the intellectual and emotional complex and there is, literally, the instant of time, but there is no clear image. True, there is the poet sitting "alone in a small Belgian house" which could have been used, but which is inadequately focussed; there are the visual images of the moon "Like the face of a six days' corpse" and of the silence, like the sea,

1. 'Meditation', CP., p.146.

washing away bitterness and misery. These, though, are only elements of what should have been an image that would unite all the elements of the experience around which the poem is developed. As it stands, 'Meditation' is an interesting and thoughtful piece of writing, but perhaps it is no more a complete poem than a soliloquy from a Shakespeare play is a complete poem. This may be no more than to indicate that Aldington was, by this time, moving rapidly away from formal acceptance of Imagist method; it may just be an illustration of the belief, sometimes proposed, that there can be no such thing as a long Imagist poem. However, even if Aldington had never been an Imagist, this reservation would still obtain: the poem lacks a focal point which would resolve it as a poem, not simply as a train of thought.

Technically, Images of Desire represents a transition in Aldington's work; the experiments with the new verse forms, the growing dissatisfaction with free verse, prepare the ground for further exploration and for the longer poems which he was to write in the following two decades. Again, these experiments may suggest a dissatisfaction with the limitations of Imagism, but their chief importance is to show Aldington attempting to impose a greater degree of control on the material he is using. (It is notable that the really poor poems discussed above are written in precisely that flabby free verse with which Aldington elsewhere shows dissatisfaction). Remembering Eliot's caution that "no vers is libre for the man who wants to do a

good job", it is perhaps sufficient to say of these poems that Aldington simply did not do a good job on them. This unevenness of quality in Images of Desire is more strikingly apparent when one contrasts, for example, 'Absence' with 'Ella', one of the most interesting and successful poems in the volume, and one which shows that Aldington undoubtedly had, even in his love poems, the capacity for control - when he chose to exercise it. Again, the poem is a meditation but, this time, it is centred on a clear image: the woman who embodies everything valuable and desirable. There is no hint of physical urgency; indeed, the tone might be described as serene:

If I should pass my life
 Dead to the beauty of the world,
 Not knowing the glint of sunlight,
 Wind rustling among deep grasses,

...

Dead to Homer, dead to Dante, dead to Villon,
 Dead to all things save her loveliness,
 To all beauty but her body's glory,
 To all music but her voice speaking,
 To all knowledge save of her¹

The style is mannered but not precious, formal but intimate since it reveals both the poet and the woman he loves. The poem has a strong conclusion in which the image is summarised and focussed:

Oh then, I should have all things amply,
 She containing in herself all virtue
 Of every fair thing worthy of loving.²

'Ella' illustrates that restraint can carry sincerity and depth of emotion far more effectively than excess. The success of the poem

1. 'Ella', CP., p.130.
2. ibid.

is largely due to the balance of its construction; the concentration of the last three lines balances what has gone before, and the poet's admiration balances her qualities - he has "all things amply" because she contains "in herself all virtue".

If, however, there are signs in Images of Desire that Aldington was searching for new styles to take him beyond Imagism, there are also poems in this volume which indicate that the essential concentration of Imagism still appealed to him. The two 'Epigrams' and the 'Images of Desire' themselves are cameos, counterparts of many of the 'Medallions' (translations from the Greek poets Anyte, Meleager and Anacreon which Aldington began to publish from 1915 onwards) and suggest strongly the influence of the French Symbolists in whose work Aldington was becoming increasingly interested. In particular, he had read the poems of Théophile Gautier, whose Emaux et Camées gave Aldington the title 'Medallions' for his classical translations:

Et la médaille austère
 Que trouve un laboureur
 Sous terre
 Révèle un empereur
 ...
 Sculpte, lime, chisèle;
 Que ton rêve flottant
 Se scelle
 Dans le bloc résistant! ¹

"Let your hazy dream be sealed in the hard block!" This defines very well what Aldington was trying to do in these short poems: the "rêve flottant" is the poet's vision of the woman to whom he speaks and the poems then encapsulate and clarify this vision, or a detail of it:

1. T. Gautier, 'L'Art', in The Penguin Book of French Verse, The Nineteenth Century, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957, p.139.

Your mouth is fragrant as an orange-grove
 In April, and your lips are hyacinths,
 Dark, dew-wet, folded, petalled hyacinths
 Which my tongue pierces like an amorous bee.¹

Here the indulgence and the escape into exotic imagery, both vivid and sensual, is balanced by the concentration of the essential picture of the mouth which the poet desires. This is precisely the manner of the prose-poem translations in Medallions which could also, equally well, be entitled 'Images of Desire':

Love flays me with a hyacinth rod and bids me to run
with him.
 I dash through the sharp torrents, the forests and the
valleys, and my sweat exhausts me.
 My heart leaps to my mouth and I desire death.
 But love brushes my brow with soft wings and whispers:
'Can you not kiss?' ²

One is aware in the translations of a directness and unself-consciousness which is reflected to some extent in the 'Epigrams' and 'Images of Desire'; in sealing the "hazy dream" inside the "hard block" the poet is forced to speak with a clarity which allows no time for frustrated self-pity, and these miniatures therefore express the completeness of love and possession, not the absence:

I do not even scorn your lovers -
 They clasped an image of you, a cloud,³
 Not the whole life of you that's mine.³

The influence of classical verse on his style has been acknowledged by Aldington himself,⁴ and by critics of his work. René Taupin, in his valuable study of Imagism, pinpointed its importance thus:

1. 'Epigrams. 1', CP., p.127.
2. Aldington, Medallions, 1930, pp.71-72.
3. 'Images of Desire', CP., p.135.
4. See above p.47.

Ses modèles grecs lui montraient la nécessité de la concision, d'une image poétique qui fût concrète et directe, d'une forme poétique souple, émancipée de la rime et de la tyrannie métrique.¹

As always, however, one must remember that while conciseness, concrete and direct imagery, suppleness and free verse may be components of Imagism and may, indeed, have been the valuable components which the movement bequeathed to posterity, by themselves they will not create an Imagist poem. What is fundamentally important is the way that the image works, what effect it has in the poem, and what impact it makes upon the reader; in the lines quoted above, the image of the cloud is easily understood and almost conventional in its reference. It is scarcely original and extends the reader's response to the poem so little that it seems superfluous. One is not altogether surprised, therefore, by the following:

Let it be your flesh and only your flesh
That fashions for me a child
Whose beauty shall be only less than yours.²

One begins to suspect a poetic reductio ad absurdum: here are three lines that are a poem, an 'Image' which (in the sense in which the word has been applied to Aldington's poetry) isn't there. Taken together, all the nine 'Images of Desire' are linked by a single theme and form a kind of meditation, but they never become a poem; they merely remain a sequence of nine indifferent images. The fourth, however, is an interestingly-contrived adaptation of the haiku verse form:

1. R.Taupin, L'Influence du Symbolisme Français sur la Poésie Américaine, Paris, 1929, p.130.
2. 'Images of Desire. 7', CP., p.136.

Like a dark princess whose beauty
 Many have sung, you wear me,
 The one jewel that is warmed by your breast.¹

Here two images are superimposed on each other and linked by the pivotal clause "you wear me"; this is technically quite neat but the haiku fails to become an image of what it is trying to present, since there is no logical or imaginative connexion between the fact that the man and the woman are as close as if he were a jewel on her necklace and the image of the woman as "a dark princess whose beauty many have sung" - this is only exotic ornament which tends to diminish what intensity the image might otherwise possess. The whole point of the haiku is its concentration and the way that it focuses the second image on the first, thereby defining and expanding it. Allusiveness is essential to this process but it must be an allusiveness which is centred on the prime image, and not merely tagged on as, here, the "dark princess whose beauty many have sung" is merely tagged on.

The concluding poem in the sequence of 'Images of Desire' reintroduces a theme that featured prominently in Images of War:

Earth of the earth, body of the earth,
 Flesh of our mother, life of all things,
 A flower, a bird, a rock, a tree,
 Thus I love you, sister and lover,
 Would that we had one mother indeed
 That we might be bound closer by shame.²

Reading this, one recalls the great desire for a tangible relationship with the earth that seemed to stand for Aldington as an

1. 'Images of Desire. 4', CP., p.135.
2. ibid., 9, p.136.

enduring hope in the midst of the destructiveness of war. In the context of the other eight 'Images of Desire', however, this return to the imagery of earth is interesting and suggests again tangibility—contrasting the idealized images that have gone before with the reality of the poet's feeling for nature. One is tempted at first to dismiss these feelings as no less sentimental than others of these 'Images' and, certainly, "Thus I love you, sister and lover" suggests sentimentality, but the last two lines, introducing the desire for an incestuous relationship, oblige one to ask whether 'sentimentality' is the right word. Granted that Aldington wants to state, as explicitly as he can, the urgency of the desired contact, there is something distasteful in this desire "to be bound closer by shame", and the distaste is critical as much as moral for it indicates once again Aldington's lack of proportion in handling strongly-felt emotion. Confronted in these 'Images' with what seems almost a parody or a pale imitation of D.H. Lawrence, one is left, finally, with the impression that these Images of Desire are fantasies which have nothing to do with authentic reality and very little with genuine emotion, and are inferior in every way to the majority of poems in Images of War, written at exactly the same time and under the same circumstances. In Images of War, Aldington demonstrates his ability to come to terms with reality, albeit the grotesque reality of war, and at the same time to define and defend another, more lasting and more personal, reality whereas, in Images of Desire, reality is in full flight,

leaving behind a bundle of fantasies, most of which are sadly lacking in imagination, originality and poetic control. Fortunately, by 1923, when he published Exile and Other Poems, Aldington had gone a long way towards recapturing those lost qualities.

In August 1919, almost simultaneously with the publication of his poetry written during the war, Aldington published an article in Poetry which is worth noticing since it was a kind of prospectus for the work that must be done now that the war had ended:

Now that the war is over, the world's youth is approaching freedom again, still weary perhaps with struggle, but with an intense eagerness for life. And out of this intensity should grow poetry not, perhaps, large in bulk but yet enough for us to be able to say to future generations: 'We hooligans who fought for those long years in the mud and in spiritual darkness could yet make a few songs to test your emulation!'¹

Having sounded such an optimistic note of introduction, Aldington went on to list the qualities he would look for in the new poetry: he wanted a poetry that would be "aristocratic ... the expression of distinguished minds in a distinguished manner" (by this apparently meaning good writing of any kind from anywhere, not writing emanating only from cliques and coteries). Secondly, he urged poetry to be "human":

I want to see human nature expressed by people who are sensitive enough to sympathise with it and talented enough to express it. I am so utterly weary of the little person who has never lived, never loved passionately, never hated, never seen death, never known anguish or gaiety or any real emotion - so weary of that little person's rhymes and vers libre.²

1. Aldington, 'The Poetry of the Future', in Poetry, Chicago, vol.xiv, 1919, p.216.
2. ibid.

Here was the egoist in Aldington re-emerging, implying that he had done all these things and that he, at any rate, knew real emotion. In his third demand he called for competent technique, although here he seemed more concerned with how to avoid writing badly than how to write well; in particular, he warned against eccentricity and gimmicks (he had no desire to repeat anything like the experience of Pound's heady Imagisme). He admitted that there has always been "that indefinable thing we call 'genius' to begin with, but there was also the conscious work, the conception of poetry as an art."¹ The three other qualities which he then listed for the future were "individuality", further exploration of the possibilities of free verse and closer links between poetry and music; finally, "the impossible", audiences with enough taste, liberality and generosity to acknowledge and reward the future writers of good poems.

This article was clearly not a closely-argued defence of poetry as Aldington saw it, and it is wrong perhaps to set too much store by some of its statements. Nevertheless, it is revealing in that it allows some comparisons to be made between Aldington's approach to poetry at this time, and that of some of his contemporaries, and it is also revealing because it provides a yardstick by which Aldington's own future poetry can be measured against the criteria he set down in 1919. Possibly the most significant statement in the whole article is that concerned with individuality:

1. Aldington, 'The Poetry of the Future', in Poetry, Chicago, vol.xiv, 1919, p.216.

I want to see this poetry 'individual'. I want about it that personal flavour which is a guarantee of sincerity. If we hear someone read Swinburne or Heine we know at once that no master could have written this, we know it by the 'feel' of the thing, the music, the personality behind it.¹

What Aldington meant by "personal flavour" is ambiguous: on the one hand it suggests simply a style so individual that one would immediately recognize the author from it; on the other hand, it implies writing which so clearly stems from personal experience that the author must be sincere in what he is saying. The equation of personal experience with sincerity in poetry is always a dangerous one: it is dangerous because it is inexact and potentially misleading, and inexact because it does not make clear what is meant by sincerity in poetry. It also begs the question: must poetry be sincere to be good? Aldington's position seems to be that the poet should put as much of his personality and his personal experience as possible into his poetry, and that this will then guarantee the sincerity of the poem, without which the poem cannot be good. The approach to poetry through personality is always dubious because it makes secondary the creative and technical aspects of writing; it is, in a certain sense, an appeal to spontaneity which allows small place for the element of craft. This, in turn, prevents the writer (or any kind of artist) from achieving the necessary degree of detachment from his work, the ability to stand outside it, without which no significant measure of control can be exercised. Form and content

1. Aldington, 'The Poetry of the Future', in Poetry, Chicago, vol.xiv, 1919, p.216.

must always be in a state of tension, defining and controlling each other; but to sacrifice form to the overwhelming interests of content is a recipe for what (in Ezra Pound's terminology) will be a work of second intensity and, looking back at the majority of poems in Images of Desire, it is a recipe for what Aldington himself frequently achieved. Indeed, these very poems throw into question the whole "personal flavour = sincerity" assumption for, as has been suggested, it is difficult to accept the sincerity of emotion expressed in, for example, 'Her Mouth' or 'Daybreak'. "Personal flavour" does not automatically confer sincerity; nor is sincerity, by itself, a guarantee of a good poem.

It is instructive to contrast briefly Aldington's ideas, as expressed in this article, with those expressed by T.S. Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1917), the essay in which, in complete contradiction of Aldington, he proposes that "the progress of an artist is continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."¹ He attacks the "semi-ethical criterion of 'sublimity'" at which Aldington, in his references to Swinburne and Heine, seems to be hinting. Eliot implies in his essay that this sublimity is indeed a quality looked for in poetry where the "personal flavour" is most marked, but, he goes on:

It is not the "greatness", the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts My meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular

1. T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in The Sacred Wood, 1920, p.53.

medium, which is only a medium and not a personality Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.¹

By comparing Eliot and Aldington at this point in their development one gains a clue as to why Eliot's approach was to place him in a pre-eminent position in English poetry, while Aldington's was to take him eventually out of poetry into the novel and then into biography. The "intensity of the artistic process" upon which Eliot laid such stress was something which Aldington did not fully understand; at least, he does not show that he understood it. In his work this intensity is found only sporadically and is never sustained, except in A Fool i' The Forest, a poem whose significance is almost totally overlooked today but in which the pressure of experience and emotion and the pressure of poetic form really do produce a fusion by which a fine poem is created. A Dream in the Luxembourg, Aldington's most popular (i.e. best-selling) poem, is of much less poetic interest. By 1930, when it was written, the poet in Aldington was already giving way to the novelist.

To return to 1919; what strikes one most about the tone, as distinct from the content, of 'The Poetry of the Future' is its optimism, its hope that the poets of that time will write poetry to express their "intense eagerness for life". It is remarkable, therefore, that in 1923 the one thing missing from Exile and Other Poems is any sign of "eagerness for life":

1. T.S.Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in The Sacred Wood, 1920, pp. 55-56.

I do not need the ticking of my watch
 To tell me I am mortal;
 I have lived with, fed upon death
 As happier generations feed on life.¹

Not surprisingly, the disillusion and the inability to come to terms with the war and its aftermath which made Aldington write such lines as these, also made him revise his view of the poet:

The new poet is the "poète contumace" of Laforgue. His indocility is extreme His thought is pessimistic and disillusioned; his modes of expression sarcastic and his chief weapon an acid wit. He is psychologically subtle and intellectually acute; his culture is extensive. He is not a democrat through he observes popular habits.²

This is the description that fits: the Aldington of Exile and of A Fool in The Forest is the "poète contumace". It is interesting, however, that Aldington had intended this description of the new poet to fit T.S. Eliot, even though he clearly wished to fit himself into the picture also. Aldington has often been accused of being jealous of Eliot, and more will be said later about the relationship between the two men,³ but it is worth remembering at this stage that Aldington never denied Eliot his status as a major figure in modern literature, and must take some credit for promoting his reputation. Even before the publication of The Waste Land Aldington had said that "Mr. Eliot is to be honoured as a poet who has brought new vigour to the intellectual tradition of English poetry."⁴ After his Imagist phase was over (and by 1923 Aldington had abandoned Imagism altogether) he did not pretend to be a pace-setter in English poetry any longer: although, like Pound,

1. 'Eumenides', CP., p.152.
2. Aldington, 'The Poetry of T.S.Eliot', 1921.Repr. in Literary Studies and Reviews, 1924, p. 182.
3. See below, pp.148-151.
4. Aldington, 'The Poetry of T.S.Eliot', loc.cit.

he experimented with the traditional forms and metres of English poetry - and the sequence of lyrics in Words for Music and the sustained writing of 'Metrical Exercises' show how adept he was in their manipulation - his experiments lack the pungency of Pound's use of the quatrain in 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' or of Eliot's use of the mock heroic in parts of The Waste Land.

Why 'Exile'? After all, Aldington had returned from the war to find that his reputation was still growing and that his work was more than ever in demand; he was, in the early twenties, developing and maintaining valuable friendships with people such as D.H. Lawrence, Herbert Read, Eliot and Rebecca West. It is true that at the end of the war his marriage had collapsed, but outwardly he seemed buoyant enough as his own memoirs and those of his contemporaries suggest. However, his poetry and, later, his novels, paint a very different picture and reveal a man full of self-doubt and disenchantment who bitterly resented the war and its demoralizing aftermath. Several of his poems published in 1923 (and even one or two from 1919) anticipate the themes and even the images of A Fool in The Forest, published in 1925. Thus, the exile to which Aldington refers is both an exile from his old pre-war life and, more important, an exile from his old self:

What is it I agonize for?
 The dead? They are quiet;
 They can have no complaint.
 No, it is my own murdered self - 1

1. 'Eumenides', CP., p.154.

The poet tries to confront himself, to analyse his present situation, but his efforts are frustrated by his persistent memories of the war:

O the thousand images I see
 And struggle with and cannot kill -
 That boot I kicked
 (It had a mouldy foot in it)¹

These memories seem to be Aldington's Eumenides and yet he realizes that he is not unique in his suffering; as he admits, "It has all been said a thousand times." In fact, what really haunts him is not just these recollections but the memory of his "Murdered self" which he feels he should, but cannot, avenge:

It is myself that is the Eumenides,
 That will not be appeased, about my bed;
 It is the wrong that has been done me
 Which none has atoned for, none repented of,
 Which rises before me, demanding atonement.²

At this distance in time it is not easy to react to these lines; we can objectively understand the First World War and its historical implications, but the individual human implications are now becoming inaccessible to us. One would like to know, for example, how the ordinary survivors of 1918 reacted to their treatment on returning to civilian life. Was it just Aldington's greater sensitivity (or his greater egotism) which led him to reflect so bitterly upon the war and upon its consequences both for himself and for civilisation? Some indication of the extent of Aldington's bitterness may be found in his preoccupation with death. Death, as it happens, is one of the

1. 'Eumenides', CP., p.153.
2. ibid., p.154.

few subjects which he can treat with detachment, even with macabre humour:

What quaint adventures may there be
For my unneeded skeleton?¹

The romantic and aesthetic image of death presented in his pre-war verse has given way to a familiar, observed reality; the luxury of a self-indulgent morbidity will no longer do. In 'Having Seen Men Killed', the poet passes a graveyard where a grave is being dug, and smiles at "all the poor apparatus of death"²; he wonders for a moment "if Einstein proves or disproves God" but is very soon "cheerfully humming a tune". He has, the poem implies, become immune to the physical shock of death, and the sight of it no longer induces sober thoughts of his own mortality. There is a strong element of cynicism as well as an underlying sadness in the recognition that his senses have been blunted by his experiences. It is important to recognize this if one is to understand how and why Aldington began to suggest in his writing that it might have been better if he had been killed himself before the war had ended. There is surely a trace of envy in

The dead? They are quiet;
They can have no complaint.³

Repeatedly Aldington implies that it would have been better to have died than to have survived to face the misery of now. This misery is not a simple unhappiness on remembering the life from which he is 'exiled'; it is as if he actually feels guilty at being still

1. 'Bones', CP., p.156.
2. 'Having Seen Men Killed', CP., p.168.
3. 'Eumenides', CP., p.154.

alive. This is expressed most clearly in 'In the Palace Garden'.

Here at first the poet is happy and elated by his surroundings;

life seems to be good:

It was enough not to be dead,
Not to be a black spongy mass of decay
Half-buried on the edge of a trench,
More than enough to be young and gay¹

On one level this could be typical of any soldier readjusting to post-war life - trees, sky, river, everything "Became me, built me up" - but the elation is not enduring:

But gradually my golden mood tarnished,
Happiness hissed into nothing -
Metal under a fierce acid -
And I was whispering:
'The happiness is not yours;
It is stolen from other men.
Coward! You have shirked your fate'.²

The idea that his happiness is "stolen" because it is only possible as a result of a war in which men died - men who had as much right to the happiness which the poet still enjoys - is a complex one which suggests something of the inner disturbance that the war left with Aldington. With this disturbance comes some confusion: what was this "fate" that he shirked? To be killed? Deliberately to get himself killed? (One is reminded of George Winterbourne in Death of a Hero).

Or merely to have fought harder and to have taken more risks?

Perhaps it is that the poet identifies more closely with those who died than with those who survived - this being another expression of

1. 'In the Palace Garden', CP., p.160.

2. ibid.

the sense of exile. To point to this confusion is not to imply here a criticism of the poem: the confusion and disturbance in the poet's mind are largely responsible for driving away his happiness. What makes these concluding lines so effective is, first, the image of the transformation from happiness to bitterness - the "golden mood" tarnishes (gradually), then "metal" dissolves under acid, the process of dissolution becoming fiercer; secondly, there is the poet's own consciousness of the cause of this change; he confronts himself as the cause of his misery since he has "shirked" his fate.

This tormented consciousness of having survived the war is expressed in another way in 'Epitaph in Ballade Form', a translation of the famous 'Ballade of the Gibbet' by François Villon. The effect that this poem achieves is a subtle and remarkable one: superficially the reader is presented with a good, unpretentious translation of a familiar poem which has often passed through the hands of the translators. On this level the poem presents few problems of interpretation: the narrator, knowing that he and his companions are about to be hanged, and vividly realising the physical processes of such a way of dying, acknowledges their sins and asks the onlookers not to be scornful but to pray to God for their forgiveness. Aldington's version of the poem is faithful to the original; it does not take liberties with the text and it does not (as Pound's 'Villonaud' does) take liberties with Villon. Initially, therefore, it appears to be a straightforward translation, quite out of place in

a collection of otherwise original verse - indeed, the only translation in the whole of Aldington's Complete Poems (1948) - yet it is perhaps the most telling poem in Exile. This is because Aldington has taken Villon as a persona and thereby re-orientated the entire poem: if, instead of reading it as the last words of a fifteenth-century brigand, one approaches the poem as the statement of a soldier who realises that he is about to be judged for his part in a murderous war, then a completely new perspective on the poem is opened up. The robber-poet committed murder of his own free-will; the soldier-poet acquiesced in committing murder:

As to our flesh, which we fed wantonly,
Rotten, devoured, it hangeth mournfully;
And we, the bones, to dust and ash are riven,
Let none make scorn of our infirmity,
But pray to God that all we be forgiven.¹

'Epitaph in Ballade Form' becomes, in fact, the central statement of this whole sequence of poems. Like the brigand who suffers the ultimate censure of society, the soldier who has survived the war also becomes an outcast from society (hence 'exile'). Again and again this poem echoes the themes and images of other poems: our flesh which we fed wantonly" recalls "I have lived with, fed upon death" in 'Eumenides',² while "We, the bones, to dust and ash are riven" echoes

in the end, the bones go too,
And drift about as dust which hangs
In a long sun-shaft.³

1. 'Epitaph in Ballade Form', CP., p.161.
2. 'Eumenides', CP., p.152.
3. 'Bones', CP., p.157.

Further on in the poem, the decomposition of the bodies on the gibbet parallels the fate of the soldier:

The rain does weaken all our strength and lave
 Us, the sun blackens us again and dries;
 Our eyes the ravens hollow like a grave;
 Our beards and eyebrows are plucked off by pies.
 Never rest comes to us in any wise;¹

This brings one back to 'Le Maudit' in which the cursed man unable to sleep, slowly decays -

Looking over a barren space
 Awaiting the tardy finish.²

The image of the criminal rotting on the gallows thus becomes the focal image of the soldier who has fought and survived, only to die a spiritual death. Once again, one cannot escape the implication that it were better to die in battle than to have seen out the war and returned to civilian life. In this light, 'Epitaph in Ballade Form' becomes one of the most chilling and most moving of all Aldington's war poems. Here content and form are indeed fused. The rhetoric is dignified but subdued: there is no trace of self-dramatization or self-pity because self-knowledge is complete and detached.

Now here, now there, as the wind sways, sway we;
 Swung at the winds high pleasure ceaselessly³

Villon was one of the poets whom Aldington most admired, and it is perhaps fitting that he should have been the source of one of the finest poems about the war and its effect that Aldington ever wrote.

1. 'Epitaph in Ballade Form', CP., p.161.
2. 'Le Maudit', CP., p.155.
3. 'Epitaph in Ballade Form', CP., p.161.

Any study of the poetry of the early part of this century must take account of the use of the persona or mask. 'Epitaph in Ballade Form' deserves special mention in this category, first because the poem takes on a wholly new context while remaining a faithful translation of the original and, secondly, because Aldington adopts the persona not for himself alone but for all soldiers; the persona of Villon becomes an image of a different kind of unknown warrior, one whose death was not upon a battlefield and whose grave was not a cenotaph.

During the period when most of the 1923 poems were written, Aldington was living in seclusion in Berkshire, away from the life of London which he was to attack so bitterly in A Fool i' The Forest. In a way this was a deliberate withdrawal on his part as well as a necessary convalescence (he had been badly gassed and shell-shocked in the trenches). But this physical withdrawal into a countryside with which Aldington came to feel a strong affinity could not at first diminish the persistent agonizing:

O friend, why is it that the fields have peace
 And we have none?
 I know I live only because I suffer,
 I know of truth only because I seek,
 Only because I need it know I love. ¹

The poem from which these lines come, 'At a Gate by the Way', expresses both the continuing suffering of the war, that continuing search for a permanent reality which dominated Images of War and, now, a sense of resignation and understanding of what has happened:

1. 'At a Gate by the Way', CP., p.163.

For what we seized breathless with joy
 Turned rotten in our hands and what we missed
 Seemed ever the one quarry that we sought.¹

The sense of resignation is achieved by the poet's awareness of the rich countryside which surrounds him and by the dominant pentameter lines of the poem. The stillness the poet evokes in contrast to his own restlessness is the essence of the traditional (one may say traditionally English) countryside:

when the autumn comes
 And heavy carts sway loaded to the barns,
 And swallows gather to be gone, and rooks
 Flock to the fields for scattered grain²

In such a landscape the poet tries to find reassurance but, instead, finds only "musing and mistrust" because the richness of the harvest and the peace of the surroundings draw attention to his own inner poverty and restlessness which he tries, unsuccessfully, to forget by turning to reading and study - "Come, what were you saying of Lucretius?"

In effect, however, this is a retreat into indifference, a withdrawal into a voluntary isolation that is mental and imaginative as much as it is physical. The poem 'Apathy' (Images of War), in which the speaker observed and reacted to his suddenly quiet surroundings with clinical detachment and precision because all response and emotion were exhausted, was an earlier visit to the same mental wilderness reached in 'Freedom':

1. 'At a Gate by the Way', CP., p.163.
2. ibid.

At last, after many years, I am saturated
 With pity and agony and tears;
 At last I have reached indifference;
 Now I am almost free-
 A gold pellet of sunlight
 Dropped, curdling, into green water.¹

As in 'Apathy', the indifference here is to thought and emotion, not to sensation:

The dead may be myriad,
 But my nostrils are sweet with crushed leaves.²

The dismissive tone of "The dead may be myriad" and the receptiveness to physical sensation indicate a progress towards an inner cleansing that the poet feels himself to be undergoing in his indifference.

The retreat into indifference is also a retreat, fleetingly, back into the world of the "Greek dream" ("Over harsh slopes the centaurs gallop"³) and thence into a kind of oblivion:

Let us cleanse ourselves from the sweat and dirt,
 Let us be hushed, let us breathe
 The cold sterile wind from colourless space.⁴

In the same year that Aldington published Exile, he also produced a sequence of poems entitled Words for Music and two poems under the title of 'Metrical Exercises'. Words for Music is divided into two sections, 'Songs for Puritans' and 'Songs for Sensualists'; the first of these contains ten short lyrics extolling sensuality, while the four 'Songs for Sensualists' are in less frivolous mood. These poems are all essentially lighthearted, however; as skilfully written imitations of Horatian odes and metaphysical lyrics they indicate Aldington's agility with, and his enjoyment of, the stricter measures

1. 'Freedom', CP., p.166.
2. ibid.
3. ibid.
4. 'Retreat', CP., p.167.

of English poetry. They are also essentially escapist verse, written for pleasure and practice, but none the less readable for that:

Pulvis et umbra! Chloë, why
 Quench my desire with ill-bred gloom,
 Since many an amorous death we die
 Ere we are born to lie
 Loveless and chilly in th' uncomely tomb?¹

These 'Songs for Puritans' are the most genuinely lighthearted that Aldington ever published; their humour is not ironic or satirical and they represent an escape from the poet's 'exile' into a temporary new world of non-serious indulgence. The 'Songs for Sensualists' belong to almost the same new world, but hints of the old are not far below the surface:

Come, thrust your hands in the warm earth
 And feel her strength through all your veins,
 Breathe her full odours, taste her mirth
 That laughs away imagined pains.
 Touch here life's very womb, but know
 This substance makes your grave also. ²

This is the clearest expression in Aldington's poetry of the physical presence and power of earth: the images of the earth as "life's very womb" and as that which "makes your grave also" suggest very clearly the physical, mystical and emotional force in which Aldington so much wanted to believe. Here he contemplates earth as substance and symbol, but its importance is felt also in the contemplation of the ordinary countryside, as is seen in 'The Berkshire Kennet', an evocation and celebration of the life Aldington was leading in the

1. 'Songs for Puritans. 6', CP., p.179.
2. 'A Garden Homily', CP., p.181.

seclusion of his Berkshire village. The poem is written throughout in iambic tetrameter couplets and the style is unselfconsciously in pastoral idiom. From the first lines onwards, however, many of Aldington's persistent themes reappear:

Turn from the city's poisoned air
And dwell with me a little where
The Kennet, gently flowing, speeds
His scent of green and bruised reeds¹

The tone throughout is completely personal, an unselfconscious expression of the poet's pleasure in the countryside around him.

Unlike ⁱⁿ 'Apathy' or 'Freedom', the poet here is not merely observing and recording in a mood of complete detachment; although the style is almost sentimental, the pleasure derived by the poet from his subject is genuine, for his sympathies, as well as his sensations, are engaged. The mood is nostalgic but it is the nostalgia of fulfilment. He has recaptured the "greatest riches" which are

hard to find and ill to praise
In noisy and mechanic days!
Yet in these humble meadows they
Have cleansed the wounds of war away.²

The purity of the rhythm echoes the English rhythms of the seventeenth century and one can point to such a poem as Marvell's 'Bermudas' as a possible model. Throughout, one is aware that resignation no longer implies pessimism; the poet has come to terms with, even (significantly) begun to relish, his isolation. 'A Winter Night', the second 'Metrical Exercise', maintains the tone and rhythm of the first and again there is a close echo from the seventeenth century to

1. 'The Berkshire Kennet', CP., p.183, ll.1-4.

2. ibid., p.184, ll.51-54.

be heard (from Abraham Cowley's 'The Wish') in the closing lines:

Grant me to live still undisturbed;
 Keep this proud spirit yet uncurbed;
 Leave me my books and peace and health
 And heavier wits may plod for wealth;
 Let me ne'er lose an honest friend
 And keep me free until the end.¹

The few poems of Words For Music and 'Metrical Exercises' are, however, only a cul-de-sac in Aldington's work. He had turned to the most 'English' period of English literature for relief and reassurance when both were badly needed. He was lulled, temporarily, into a mood of apparent contentment. But such contentment could not last; by the time these poems were published, Aldington was already at work on A Fool i' The Forest. The "proud spirit" was too self-questioning to remain at rest; the "poète contumace" soon reasserted himself.

1. 'A Winter Night', CP., p.188, ll.69-74.

Chapter 6.A Fool i' The Forest. (1925)

"They say I am bitter. The trouble is that I am not
bitter enough." ¹

A Fool i' The Forest is arguably Aldington's most important and best poem; at the time of its publication, 13th January 1925, it was certainly the most important work of any kind that Aldington had published. The reasons for its significance are various: technically and stylistically it is both a maturing of, and a departure from, Aldington's Imagist style: thematically it prefigures Aldington's early novels; in a wider context, it is one of the most interesting literary documents of the post-war years and invites comparison with other poems written in the same period. Professor Glenn Hughes, drawing attention to the fact that several critics noted how A Fool i' The Forest owed much to The Waste Land, quoted Humbert Wolfe's judgement that Aldington "could only see life darkly in T.S. Eliot's looking glass ... but that half-glimpse was worth the whole of the Imagist philanderings with verse."² A Fool i' The Forest, however, is by no means an imitation and must be judged on its own terms; what is significant is that it provides evidence of how certain preoccupations were shared by writers and artists at this time.

With the advantage of fifty years' hindsight, it is not difficult to discern Aldington's debt to Eliot and Pound, but this debt might not have been so readily noticed when the poem was first published

1. Life, p.173.

2. Glenn Hughes, Imagism and the Imagists, 2nd.ed., 1960, p.100.

for, ironically, Aldington's reputation probably stood higher in 1925 than Pound's, and Eliot was still regarded with great suspicion outside his small circle of admirers; he was, for example, described by the literary editor of The Times as "a wild man", and by another critic as a "drunken helot".¹ Pound had shaken the dust of England from his feet in 1919 and was by 1925 settling down in Rapallo. Aldington himself wrote that "there can be no doubt that at this time appreciation of Ezra's works had diminished to a pinpoint".² It is quite likely, also, that Aldington would not have been too pleased to hear Pound's name linked with his first major poem because, ever since the early Imagiste days, he had been trying to establish his own individual reputation and his friendship with Pound had cooled somewhat by the end of the war. Nevertheless, connections with Pound's poetry and ideas may be drawn from A Fool i' The Forest and these will be noted in due course.

The debt to Eliot was greater and more complex but, curiously, Aldington would probably have acknowledged it more readily at this time. Since, in discussing A Fool i' The Forest, reference will be made more than once to The Waste Land, it will be appropriate at this point to clarify the relations between Aldington and Eliot in an attempt to understand how two men, apparently so different in character and temperament, became close friends and wrote poems which have strong similarities.

1. Quoted by Aldington in Life, p.200.
2. ibid., p.198.

For reasons for which psychologists may have an answer, Aldington succeeded in the course of his lifetime in alienating a great many of his friends, often by attacking them or their work in a harsh, and sometimes vitriolic way that amazed those who remembered how cordial Aldington's friendships used to be. This is particularly true of Aldington's friendship with Eliot; in 1954 he published a pamphlet entitled Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot¹ which contained strong attacks on the work of both his former friends and led critics to accuse Aldington of jealousy, an accusation which others, who knew him personally, have tended to substantiate. Derek Patmore, writing after Aldington's death, has commented that "fired with the ambition to be a poet, he had seen some of his contemporaries succeed where he had failed He was particularly jealous of T.S. Eliot, whom he had known well as a young man, and resented his fame. Hence the cruel portrait of Eliot in his short story Stepping Heavenward."² Sir Herbert Read remarked similarly:

The tragedy of Richard was that he wanted to be a great poet like T.S. Eliot. Despite the success of Death of a Hero, he was not a born novelist and this proved his ultimate misfortune.³

Perhaps it was because Aldington admired Eliot's work and was once a close friend that certain similarities between The Waste Land and A Fool in The Forest are so easily recognized. Charitably, we may attribute here a wish to show respect at least as much as a desire to emulate, for whatever bitterness may eventually have clouded their

1. Aldington, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, Reading:Peacock Press, 1954.
2. Brigit Patmore, My Friends When Young, ed. Derek Patmore, 1968, p.25.
3. ibid., p.26.

relationship, until 1940 at least Aldington was at pains to record his friendship with Eliot, and the fact that Eliot read the manuscript of The Waste Land to Aldington before its publication perhaps indicates that the respect, and certainly the friendship, was mutual.

Aldington first came to admire Eliot because his character was so completely the reverse of Pound's (a curious fact considering that the friendship between Eliot and Pound was one of the most significant literary friendships of this century; Pound did much to promote Eliot's early career and, notably, assisted in the composition of The Waste Land, while Eliot was instrumental in securing Pound's release from Santa Elizabeth Institution in 1958). Aldington's assessment of the difference between the two men is fascinating:

Tom Eliot's career in England has been exactly the reverse of Ezra's. Ezra started out in a time of peace and prosperity with everything in his favour, and muffed his chances of becoming literary dictator of London ... by his own conceit, folly and bad manners. Eliot started in the enormous confusion of war and post-war England, handicapped in every way. Yet by merit, tact, prudence, and pertinacity he succeeded in doing what no other American has ever done - imposing his personality, taste, and even his literary opinions on literary England.¹

After the publication of Eliot's Poems (1920) Aldington "wrote reviews of that book for every periodical to which I had the entry, with the exception of The Times where I didn't even dare mention Eliot's name at that time."² In common with many critics, what he admired in Eliot's poetry was "his insistence that writers could not afford to overthrow the European tradition ... and the intellectual

1. Life, p.199.
2. ibid., p.200.

concentration which so effectively conceals Eliot's emotional sterility."¹ What one detects in A Fool i' The Forest is rather less emotional sterility than emotional exhaustion (a feature already noticed in Exile) but it is not concealed in Aldington's work by any significant degree of "intellectual concentration"; on the contrary, one is struck in A Fool i' The Forest by the fulness, not by the concentration of the poet's conception and technique: the narrator is determined to narrate and, where necessary, to explain everything so that there shall be no uncertainties in the reader's mind about what inferences he is expected to draw. In The Waste Land there is no narrator and Tiresias, who (as Eliot explains in a note) is supposed to unite all the characters and to provide the substance of the poem by what he sees, is a less than satisfactory commentator. Eliot proceeds by building a pattern of themes and images which more or less interconnect. Aldington, on the other hand, creates what is essentially a narrative framework - a phantasmagoric progress through the scenes of the narrator's early life and thought, an ironic 'sentimental' journey, and this framework is essentially uncomplex, although it is underpinned by the theme of the growth of commercialism which runs through the poem. Whereas Eliot's poem creates its form internally, the form of Aldington's is primarily imposed by the ^{narrator} poet. No superior merit attaches to either method per se; what counts is the degree to which the poet succeeds in using his chosen form to the best advantage of the poem.

1. Life, p.203.

A Fool i' The Forest opens with the narrator conducting a rambling monologue, summoning, rather like a classical poet, not his muse exactly, but a fool:

I want a fool,
A true, a bitter fool, who's looked at life
And sees it's nought ...¹

a companion, in fact, who will confirm his own pessimistic view of life. Having at last decided upon Mezzetin, and having also acquired 'the Conjuror', the narrator sets sail with his two new companions for Greece. Before embarking with them, however, it is necessary to notice two certain comments which Aldington himself makes about the trio:

The trio are one person split into three.
'I' is intended to be typical of a man of our own time, one who is by temperament more fitted for an art than a scientific civilization
Mezzetin comes from the Commedia dell' Arte. He symbolises here the imaginative faculties - art, youth, satire, irresponsible gaiety, liberty. He is one of these by turns and all together. In a similar manner the Conjuror symbolises the intellectual faculties - age, science, righteous cant, solemnity, authority - which is why I make him so malicious.²

In the course of the poem the characters of the trio are so clearly defined that one may feel this note to be superfluous, almost as if Aldington did not have enough confidence that his poem could do the job it was intended to do. Nevertheless, it is interesting to have Aldington's intentions, his definitions of the protagonists, made so explicit, because the Narrator's relations with Mezzetin and the Conjuror are ambiguous: the companions he acquires are partly of

1. A Fool, CP., p.194, i.35-37.
2. ibid., Note, p.190.

his own choosing (after all, he rejects Scaramouch, who is the first fool to offer his services) but in part they are also two faces of his doppelgänger, and in this sense inescapable. In spite of this, though, the narrator remains an individual; the one, indeed, about whom the reader naturally learns most.

He is essentially an isolated figure, an outsider both from the world at large and from his own personality (inevitably, since his imagination and intellect are personified by two separate characters). This isolation seems to stem largely from the narrator's awareness that his past, his roots and values, have vanished and not been replaced: the dream journey is a return to that past and, at the same time, an image of his present isolation; it is an attempt to reconstruct the poet's creative and intellectual background and to understand how his disenchantment came to match the disenchantment of "an age that lacks a king". He wants a jester to take his mind off these present thoughts of the past:

When I sit alone
Thoughts of ten thousand perished gods
Tease like a letter I forgot to write. ¹

As we shall discover later, the poet's dilemma is that he values the Fool and hates the Conjuror but needs them both if his personality is to remain intact and buoyant. That he finally loses both and becomes submerged in a bogus suburban respectability (for him the ultimate and permanent isolation) is the justification of his cry:

1. A Fool, CP., p.193, i.10-12.

If I lose one of you, I'm incomplete;
If both, it's mental death.¹

This dilemma is the crux of the whole poem.

Not until the opening of the third section does the dream properly begin:

We three set sail for Athens,
Mezzetin, the Conjuror and I.²

On their arrival, they picnic on the Acropolis, Mezzetin providing the food and drink, and the Conjuror acting as cultural guide to the party:

He would keep talking of Thucydides
And frightening me with all he knew of Pheidias;³
I could't interrupt because he'd paid our fares.³

As evening approaches, Mezzetin sings, the Conjuror dozes and the narrator meditates on the ancient Greeks and their civilisation, contrasting it with twentieth-century culture:

'Yet this Parthenon is harmony,
Science and beauty reconciled with health.
We have beauty that's disguised and wanton,
Art that plays with ugliness and fantasy,
Science heavy, technical and mystic' ⁴

This leads the poet on to a vision of a modern Hell dedicated to finance, commerce and "Holy, Blessed, Glorious Mass Production". He speaks with a deep resentment and a despairing futility about modern life in England. Mezzetin takes up the theme with an attack on the American debasement of culture:

1. A Fool, CP., pp.223-224, xxiii.65-66.
2. ibid., p.196, iii.1-3.
3. ibid., p.198, iv.9-11.
4. ibid., p.206, ix.47-51.

O Pall Athena
Amurica lo-oves you
O Pall Athena
Here's a Han' to you-ou ¹

Suddenly, however, the evening is interrupted by the appearance of Pallas herself which terrifies Mezzetin and the narrator, who breaks out, in French, into a diatribe against death and God. The tone and the imagery of disgust are savage enough to remind one of Swift, and the appeal to death echoes the theme of some of Aldington's earliest poems. But this time the sense that death is a welcome release - "libératrice bénigne havre fleur du néant"² - is offset by the bitterness against the conventional promise of everlasting life at peace with God:

pensez donc on peut s'y ennuyer en seigneur
per omnia saecula saeculorum ... ³

and he has his reply to the angels at the Last Judgment all ready:

je leur flanquerais un bon coup au cul
de mes pieds osseux
d'une voix caverneuse je hurlerais
'Chiens savants de l'Eternal
Voulez-vous bien me foutre la paix?' ⁴

It will be the last futile gesture against everyone and everything which has conspired to deny him the only thing left to anticipate with certain pleasure - oblivion. But the Conjuror breaks in once more, dismissing the vision of Pallas as "superstition" and trying to illustrate his theory that in ancient Greece art was inferior to science - "The glory of Hellas is her thinkers, / Not her poets and artists".⁵

1. A Fool, CP., p.213, xvi.20-23.
2. ibid., p.214, xviii.5.
3. ibid., xviii.27-28.
4. ibid., xviii.33-37.
5. ibid., p.217, xxi.10-11.

He argues that classical art was degenerate, at root no better than "an orgy of the senses", to which the narrator replies:

The renouncing of all limit is itself a truth,
 This boundless orgy, this release of the senses,
 This wine-drenched ecstasy,
 These priapic monsters,
 Are but a type and figure of human life,
 The sensual needs that hold us to the earth.¹

One recognizes the weight of Aldington's belief behind that last line.

This part of the poem, the Greek episode (which may be seen as, in a certain sense, a return to the landscape of the "Greek dream") is the most discursive, but it maintains a dynamism, because of its picaresque construction and the combination of forceful language and intermittent passages of relaxed narration, which the weight of the argument does not impede. On one level a serious debate, humanity versus science, is carried on, but the heat of the antagonism is generated by the personal antagonism between the narrator and the Conjuror. The latter's characteristics, prejudices and mannerisms are neatly counterpointed by the rascal Mezzetin who becomes, in Aldington's hands, a far more fluid and vivacious character than his Commedia dell' Arte original. In particular, he cannot be described as an essentially bitter fool: he is a merry and very human rascal who gives the narrator hope and encouragement while revealing to him the truth about his predicament whereas, ironically, it is the Conjuror who shows most clearly that

1. A Fool, CP., p.218, xxi.54-59,

the world's an idiot jest,¹
Cloud-Cuckoo-land without a Socrates.

After Athens the party find themselves bewilderingly translated to the Egyptian desert with a speed which frightens both Mezzetin and the Narrator:

I wished I had gone to Athens care of Cook,
For under his large and brooding wings
The timid tourist is sheltered from all surprise.²

Their dream journey is interminable - "We wandered for another century" - and they eventually arrive, like Faustus led by Mephistophilis, at Rome, where they find themselves gazing, with a great crowd, at the Pope; however, the mere mention of the name of Lorenzo Valla (a fifteenth-century radical scholar, known as Praecursor Lutheri, whose appointment to the Curia was hailed as the triumph of humanism over orthodoxy and tradition) is enough to land the travellers in Northern France where the narrator quarrels with the Conjuror, accusing him of eroding the gaiety and high spirits with which they had begun their journey:

you've destroyed my verve
And I'm as dull and solemn as a tired reviewer.³

Realizing his failure to reconcile the positive aspects of Mezzetin and the Conjuror, the narrator becomes depressed again and, in a soliloquy which clearly has Hamlet in mind, he reflects upon the individual's inability to understand life at all and, worse still, to express adequately his awareness of his own confusion:

1. A Fool, CP., p.193, i.8-9.
2. ibid., p.219, xxii.8-10.
3. ibid., p.223, xxiii, 8-9.

We cheat ourselves with words
And only think we think.¹

Again, he wishes he were dead and intimates that, earlier in his life, he was given the opportunity to die, but had been too cowardly to accept the offer. Here one is reminded of Aldington's own experiences in the First World War and of his later recollections in Life for Life's Sake that on three or four occasions he narrowly escaped being killed:

Thrice Death clutched me, thrice my will repelled her;
Then the gods abandoned me.²

What terrifies the narrator now is the prospect of growing old, of empty years ahead; a moving elegy follows which echoes Aldington's earlier poem 'Apathy', and which, from its opening "We grow old ..." onwards, reminds one of Prufrock:

When the flame goes, man's a husk, a ghost,
Herding miserably with other ghosts,
Sunk in apathy or shrieking at his memories.
That is Dante's 'Maggior dolore'.³

Inevitably, for the whole poem has been leading to this, the party now find themselves once again in the war, fighting in the trenches. Mezzetin is killed and, instantly, the narrator realizes exactly where his loyalties have always lain. The Conjuror's pleasure in the Fool's death, for which he was indirectly responsible, makes him the narrator's enemy; the uneasy truce between them is over and from this point onwards the Conjuror takes control:

Now he's gone, we'll make a man of you.⁴

1. A Fool, CP., p.224, xxiv.10-11.
2. ibid., xxiv.58-59.
3. ibid., xxiv.65-68.
4. ibid., p.230, xxvi.84.

Together they return to post-war London and the poet finds that the old London he had known has been turned into a city where only the wealthy and dishonest prosper and where 'society' is vapid and hypocritical. In Life for Life's Sake Aldington was to write on the same theme:

London had become more than ever a city for the well-to-do, where life was for those who had two thousand a year upwards. The old, easy, Bohemian society seemed to be riddled with affectations.¹

In A Fool i' The Forest the narrator and the Conjuror drift from party to party where all they hear is the giggled refrain, "Oh, isn't he too silly?" They spend their time in the British Museum or listening to hard-luck stories from a mine owner who complains bitterly that during the war he was rationed to one ton a week of his own coal. The narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with the monotony and ugliness of life in London:

London before dawn is not uninteresting,
A city given up to sleep and criminals
And slow Policemen;
But it's flat and ugly, tiring.²

His evocation of the city asleep, waiting for the morning return of the businessmen, clerks and typists, besides containing some of the best verse in the whole poem, recalls strongly to mind similar passages from The Waste Land. While the Conjuror talks incessantly, the narrator reflects that

Behind those dismal house fronts
Lies a honeycomb of silent cells;
All is motionless, frozen to a seeming death³

1. Life, p.207.
2. A Fool, CP., p.234, xxxi.14-17.
3. ibid., xxxi.21-23.

Both the tone of this, and its underlying implication, have surely more than a coincidental resemblance to Eliot's "unreal City" where

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.¹

Finally reaching the end of his tether, the narrator can stand the Conjuror no longer and throws him off Waterloo Bridge:

Splashed him headlong in the river,
Down among the dead dogs and the Roman coins.²

He returns home, "Went to bed, and slept a heavy sleep." The narrator's phantasmagoria is over and he re-awakens to find himself back with wife, family, and his job at the office. This is clearly how his life is to be hereafter, undisturbed except for the occasional unwelcome intrusion of "miserably mocking voices"; then

Memories of Athens and of Naples,
Of a life once vowed to truth and beauty,
Pierce me till I start and gasp in anguish.³

The poem ends with a Valediction, a song which echoes the sense of futility that has been implicit throughout; here, however, the tone of resentment which has so heavily underpinned the poem is replaced by resignation and a deliberate refusal to plead once more with the rejected and rejecting gods, or to indulge in a final outburst of bitterness:

Now for ever shall my lips be still
And forever my hands be at rest.

I flatter no gods with prayer,
They are subject and mortal as we,
Crushed by inscrutable Fate.⁴

1. T.S.Eliot, The Waste Land, in Collected Poems, 1963, p.65.
2. A Fool, CP., p.236, xxxii.36-37.
3. ibid., p.238, xxxiii.43-45.
4. ibid., p.239, xxxiv.13-17.

On first encountering A Fool in The Forest, the identity of the narrator seems puzzling. It is not an autobiographical poem, yet certain sections draw directly upon Aldington's own experience - of the war, and of post-war London, for example. The narrator, the 'I' of the poem, is almost Aldington, but not quite:

'I' is intended to be typical of a man of our own time, one who is by temperament more fitted for an art than a scientific civilisation. He is shown at a moment of crisis, and the phantasmagoria is the mirror of his mind's turmoil as he struggles to attain a harmony between himself and the exterior world.¹

This describes Aldington's own situation too exactly for one to fail to notice the resemblance, and attention has already been drawn to passages in the poem which reveal the poet himself. Yet the end of the poem indicates that the narrator has subsided into a middle-class, English respectability (a niche into which Aldington never fitted):

Everything I do is wise and orderly;
My will is made, my life's insured,
The house is slowly being purchased;
Yesterday I bought a family grave.²

Within the framework of the poem, this comes after the phantasmagoria is over, when Mezzetin and the Conjuror are dead; this should be the narrator as he really is, yet clearly, it is still a part of Aldington's own nightmare and so it is still necessary to distinguish between narrator and poet, however strongly one suspects they are one and the same person. For the narrator, life as a "loyal English husband", as a London commuter and as a weekend golfer is a grotesque

1. A Fool, Note, CP., p.190.

2. ibid., p.238, xxxiii.20-23.

reality, but for Aldington it remained no more than a grotesque possibility.

The phantasmagoria is intelligently controlled: events follow and evaporate with the dislocated logic of dreams: a chance reference to a sergeant-major is enough to change the scene instantly to the trenches of the Great War and, as is the way with dreams, one arrives without travelling or travels without arriving:

The boat made no advance,
But the pointed seas kept running past,
Monotonous foam churned through the green;
I towed the seagulls on elastic threads.¹

The dream, the phantasmagoria, has already been described as the external framework of the poem. This is not, of course, an uncommon literary device: one has only to remember the technique of, for instance, Chaucer's Book of the Duchess or Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress to be aware of the opportunities that the dream framework provides. Chaucer achieved his effect initially by making the narrator awake into the dream:

Loo, thus hyt was, thys was my sweven
I was waked
With smale foules a gret hep
That had affrayed me out of my slep²

This dreamworld into which the sleeper awakes takes on a reality more vivid than the actual world, a common phenomenon when the dream framework is employed: Bunyan's Christian finds the dream world of his progress a far more real and lively place than the "wilderness of this world" in which he has fallen asleep. Moreover, at least a

1. A Fool, CP., pp.196-197, iii.16-19.
2. The Book of the Duchess, ll. 290,294-296, in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Robinson, 2nd.ed., 1957, p.270.

part of the effect which both Chaucer and Bunyan achieve is due to their ability to create a plausible landscape out of fantasy. Thus Chaucer's dreamer depicts in great detail the room in which he awakes with its murals representing the Romance of the Rose, and Bunyan's topography sometimes assumes a surrealistic dimension by the juxtaposition of the solid seventeenth-century landscape with such improbable terrain as the "wide field full of dark mountains" in which Hypocrisy stumbles and falls.

In a similar way the dreamworld of A Fool i' The Forest is depicted as a more vivid place than the 'real' world of the narrator's bourgeois life at the end of the poem. But Aldington varies the dream technique: the narrator does not introduce himself, as Chaucer's does, nor does he make it clear that he is going to present a dream phantasmagoria. Indeed, it is not clear at once, when the poem opens, whether we are taken straight into the dream or not - we can only say that we are in the confused limbo of the poet's mind as he sets about choosing a fool for himself; the disjointed tone of the monologue and the sudden appearance and disappearance of Scaramouch both suggest that the narrator might almost be sleep-talking, or at any rate talking to himself while he tries to go to sleep. Nor is it clear whether the poem is set initially and finally in the present with the dream sections recounted as reminiscence or whether the whole poem is set in the present, or whether, indeed, the time scale of the poem evolves conventionally. These are all possibilities, and

the fact that they remain possibilities and are never resolved is another feature of the phantasmagoria.

A persistent snatch of song turns the narrator's thoughts to Venice, and nostalgic and romantic incidents of his youth:

Nights of Venice! Nights of Venice!
Drifting along the still canals of Venice
Hand-in-Hand with Death -
She had red cherries in her hat.¹

The reference to death here is allusive in a vague, inconsequential way and suggests that contingent associativeness which is a part of the experience of dreaming. The narrator may be thinking of the coffin-like shapes of the gondolas or of Browning's famous poem 'In a Gondola' where the lover is stabbed to death on the canal. Mention of death also puts him in mind of Gargamelle, the mother of Gargantua, for no reason that is explained. Then after a parody verse of song, the narrator murmurs "Now lies she there ..." and drifts off to sleep to begin his dream journey.

Aldington uses various devices to keep the reader aware that he is being presented with a dream, for though the narrative flow is, as has been seen, approximately chronological, there are various interruptions to it, as the narrator's mind jumps from one association to another. Events occur which do not seem justified by their apparent cause; even the narrator is indignant, for instance, that his mere mention of the name of Lorenzo Valla is sufficient to project the party from Rome to northern France. He vents his

1. A Fool, CP., p.195, ii.44-47.

indignation on the Conjuror, whom he holds responsible:

What right had you to spoil our holiday
 Simply because you paid our fares?
 You knew I wanted to be happy
 And make fun of solemnities with Mezzetin.¹

Sometimes there is nonsense reminiscent of Lewis Carroll, which again reinforces the dream-fantasy: the Conjuror's hat which changes into a hedgehog and runs off surely belongs to the world in which croquet is played with flamingoes and babies are transformed into squealing piglets. In one sense this is perhaps no more than a comic touch, of no great importance; but it is almost a standard part of the dream convention in literature for there to be comic incident and the real significance lies in pointing to the confusion which exists between appearance and reality, for it is quite clearly a part of Aldington's intention in the poem to demonstrate the difficulty of distinguishing between real and apparent values. This is at the root of the narrator's dilemma in having to choose between Mezzetin and the Conjuror, about which more will shortly be said.

A final comment on Aldington's use of the dream technique: the dream journey ends with the narrator, having killed the Conjuror, falling asleep out of his dream and returning to the 'reality' of life as a suburban commuter. This device is as effective as Chaucer's trick of having his dreamer awake into his dream, for it allows the distinction to be drawn between the narrator and the poet; Aldington distances himself from his narrator and, therefore, from the dream also. Thus there are, in a sense, two phantasmagoria: the narrator's,

1. A Fool, CP., p.222, xxiii.18-21.

where fantasy stops short of his existence as a suburban commuter, and Aldington's own, which embraces the narrator and all that he stands for, inside and outside of the poem.

At this point, attention may be drawn to the use of songs, and snatches of song, which punctuate the poem and often counterpoint the prevailing tenor of the narrative. (This is particularly true if the song is a satirical interruption by Mezzetin). Three of the songs stand out as a group, like the appearance of a Chorus or of another speaker: these are the 'Lament for Lord Byron', the section entitled 'The Gods' and the final 'Valediction'. All three deal implicitly or directly with death and the gods. Ostensibly the first of these is spoken by the Conjuror but with its direct emotional appeal and its imagery strikingly reminiscent of Ophelia's mad songs, it has an emotional impact that one does not associate with the Conjuror:

O tread upon the violet and the rose,
Lay waste the hyacinths among the rocks;
He will not come again.¹

Correspondingly, the depth of meditation in the second of these three songs seems almost too penetrating for the narrator; following upon the plea for oblivion, it expresses, in a tone of resignation, the helplessness of man in a seemingly futile universe where life is a process of progressive debasement:

I have worn all servitudes
Have drunk all shames.²

1. A Fool, CP., p.198, iv.28-30
2. ibid., p.215, xix.1-2.

The implications of this section, and of the 'Valediction', will be further discussed below; at present it is sufficient to draw attention to their existence and to suggest that they have a function distinct from the main narrative direction of the poem, and that they add another dimension to the phantasmagoria.

It has already been said that the central crisis faced by the narrator is to try to reconcile Mezzetin and the Conjuror, imagination and intellect, with each other and with himself: ("Others have reconciled you, Why not I?"¹) This dilemma, personified by the characters, is the dramatic pivot of the poem, and, in this sense, A Fool in The Forest is clearly allegorical. But it is not possible to say that Mezzetin represents the good, or positive, impulses of the mind and that the Conjuror represents the bad, or negative, impulses. Nor is it sufficient (as Aldington's own Note implies) to refine the equation down to imagination and intellect alone: there is no doubt where the narrator's sympathies lie, but he is forced to acknowledge the value of the Conjuror, however much he dislikes him. It is, in fact, Mezzetin who characterises the negative impulses of the mind: in spite of his gaiety, he is nonetheless a rogue and a fool, whereas the Conjuror, for all his cant and hypocrisy, does still represent and appreciate culture, and though the narrator disagrees with him over the interpretation of culture he is forced to admit that he needs the Conjuror:

It's true I like Mezzetin more than you,
But one can't spend one's life only in mocking dullards

1. A Fool, CP., p.224, xxiii.67.

Or even in gaiety and music;
 One must have something positive
 And that you seem to give me.
 If I lose one of you, I'm incomplete;
 If both, it's mental death.¹

The two, therefore, cannot be considered properly only as opposites, but should complement one another and, together, give to the poet the wholeness and harmony he seeks. The poet recognizes this but cannot avoid reacting to Mezzetin and the Conjuror as extremes: as they wander "through winding earthly passages" he is led first by one and then by the other:

When my arm was held by Mezzetin
 I heard sounds of distant singing,
 Monotonous and poignant,
 ...
 But when the Conjuror led me
 The gloom raged with contending voices.²

Curiously, Mezzetin's main contribution to the narrator is that in spite of all his supposed bitterness, and his songs "pungent to the mouth like pepper", he helps him to see a way through the narrator's own bitterness and resentment. In this he fulfils the proper rôle of the wise fool in bringing at least the possibility of peace of mind to his master, for not only does the narrator hear "distant singing" but -

I was touched to tears by a strange suavity
 Compact of resignation, hushed desire,
 And eager hope for some unknown good.³

This is the first mention by the narrator himself of that resignation which he never achieves but which is the key-note of the 'Valediction'.

1. A Fool, CP., pp.223-224, xxiii.60-66.
2. ibid., p.220, xxii.27-29,34-35.
3. ibid., xxii.31-33.

The "unknown good" is acknowledged as a hope but remains mysterious and out of reach, perhaps because, failing to find harmony, the narrator is unable to attain the calmness which may lead to resignation. The quest for harmony is, fundamentally, what most concerns all three characters in the Greek episode of the poem, although of course it concerns the narrator throughout. The life of the ancient Greeks provides a model of this harmony for, as Mezzetin says;

Lacking harmony, art's a grotesque.
They took the heavy wine of the imagination
And tempered it with snow-clad science.¹

While the Conjuror is asleep, Mezzetin attempts to construct a synthesis for poetry and science, observing "how poetry obeys the laws of science, / How science sways to the rule of poetry", but the narrator's dilemma is not simply to achieve this harmony, but to understand it at all. Harmony has become a concept without meaning; if it ever had one, it has been almost forgotten:

Stability, perfection, harmony -
Words that have no meaning for us,
Or a far-off, sentimental sound
Like waltzes of the 'eighties.²

The vision of Pallas is a turning point in the relationship between the narrator, Mezzetin and the Conjuror: the Conjuror sleeps through the whole experience in spite of the hooting of an owl and the earth "shaking beneath a mighty tread"; for him the event never took place and he refuses to believe in it. Thus, when he wakes up

1. A Fool, CP., p.206, ix.53-55.
2. ibid., p.211, xv.18-21.

to find the others cowering behind a pillar, he rebukes them for being childlike and superstitious; further, as if to prove his point, he drags the narrator and Mezzetin into the "tomb-like temple" where, of course, there is no longer anything to be seen. For the narrator it is a crucial moment, a test of his belief in imagination and the gods; he prays to Pallas to reappear, but she does not and the Conjuror revels in his moment of triumph:

What are these myths but half-truths, quarter-truths,
 Dreams of semi-barbarous children
 With an exquisite aesthetic tact? ¹

That the gods should have abandoned the narrator and Mezzetin is humiliation enough, but to abandon them to the Conjuror's anthropological rationalism only increases their sense of rejection and isolation. The art of classical Greece which the narrator so much admires (and which Aldington, "the ardent Hellenist", himself cherished) is dismissed by the Conjuror as

an art of death,
 A stimulus to perverse and jaded senses ...²

which leads the narrator to retort that science, when the senses are despised, is "a vain and arid thing", and he warns that, if one tries to crush the senses,

they take a terrible revenge
 And waste men's lives, destroy even the earth's beauty.³

This waste of life and destruction of natural beauty lies at the heart of the poet's despair. Again, one cannot escape the comparison with The Waste Land and especially with 'The Hollow Men', where the

1. A Fool, CP., p.217, xxi.3-5.
2. ibid., p.218, xxi.32-33.
3. ibid., p.219, xxi.69-70.

vision of the dead land and the interminable waiting for
 "death's twilight kingdom" which is -

The hope only
 Of empty men - 1

reflect an attitude to existence apparently shared at this time
 by both Eliot and Aldington.

One of the keys to understanding how these two poets adopted
 such similar positions in their post-war poetry is an examination
 of their attitude to the power of money and commercialism as a
 corrupting and destructive influence in the modern world. This
 theme runs through A Fool in The Forest so coherently that, structurally,
 it acts as an internal support to the poem's narrative framework.

Much could be said about the significant fact that poets were
 among the first in the inter-war years to draw attention to the
 importance of money and commerce and to their potential influence
 in the particular social conditions of the period. It is as though
 Pound's outbursts against usury in The Cantos and Eliot's portrayal
 of Phlebas, the drowned Phoenician sailor, in The Waste Land, anticipate
 the financial depression which was to spread from America to Europe
 in the wake of the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Aldington's own
 anxiety about this subject made him include it as part of his night-
 mare and comment on it in a manner no less penetrating than Pound or
 Eliot. From the start he satirizes the idea of money as the universal
 elixir:

1. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', in Collected Poems, 1963, p.91.

But I've a plan to buy the stars;
 We'll form a company, we'll buy the sky
 And let it out for advertising.¹

In his thoughts he imagines Arlequin become a bank director, and Helen of Troy married to a Guggenheim. What Aldington is really pointing to, once more, is the prevailing confusion of values in which money confers a spurious respectability:

Once they start raking in a man's affairs
 God knows what they may find,
 Arson, incest, theft, charity and beauty,
 Most desperate crimes.²

Aldington had good reason to be suspicious of money which, he believed, merely tended to conceal moral and aesthetic bankruptcy; his own father had lost all the family's modest wealth by ill-advised speculation, and the husband of Brigit Patmore, one of Aldington's closest friends, had been ruined in a financial scandal. It is scarcely surprising, then, if he believed that wealth, and the desire to gain wealth, involved exploitation and sharp-practice, and if he was depressed by the whole world of commerce and business which seemed to him to diminish man's humanity and sensibility:

O Evening Star,
You bring the Evening News,
You bring the tired business man
Back to his tired spouse;
Sappho and Shelley you no longer bring. ³

Confronted, therefore, with a state of affairs which induces physical and spiritual exhaustion, Aldington attacks the whole apparatus of business and commerce in his bitterly-mocking vision of a Hell presided

1. A Fool, CP., p.194, ii.13-15.
2. ibid., p.196, iii.8-11.
3. ibid., p.202, vii.38-42.

over by "God the tradesman"; Aldington's Hell is a crematorium which daily consumes the millions of people who are controlled by, or who control, big business:

All the Dominations played on Remingtons:
 'Glory, glory be to banking!'
 All the pawns with Linotypes sang:
 'Glory to the laws of commerce' 1

At the heart of this bitterness are two things: Aldington's fear that he might himself be drawn into this Hell, and his resentment at what seems to him the debasement of culture by technology and commercialism. He complains that "Mechanics have devoured our art" and suggests that a culture is now judged by its technical achievements and no longer by its artists :

Shakespeare's an ocean-liner,
 Donne an aeroplane ...
 Our Parthenon's a Jew Hotel. 2

Not surprisingly, it is Mezzetin who mocks commercialism most bitterly: he makes a speech announcing that the Parthenon has been bought by a "syndicate of our most cultured business men", and will be restored to make it "as large and weatherproof"

As the Capitol at Washington, D.C.
 This, ladies and gentlemen, fellow-citizens,
 Is another proof of the hearty co-operation
 And goodwill of the New World to old Eurrup.³

Then follows the 'Culture Hymn', a parody which firmly nails down the coffin of American culture. The balance between humour and seriousness, and the use of the one to highlight the other is one of the main achievements of A Fool i' The Forest. Although parts of

1. A Fool, CP., pp.208-209, x.21-24.
2. ibid., p.207, ix.69-72.
3. ibid., p.213, xvi.16-19.

the poem are clearly polemical, Aldington only overstates where he is justified in so doing and it is a part of his effect to make the reader wonder whether some of the apparent overstatements are not, in fact, closer to the truth than he cares to imagine. What is more, Aldington does not allow his dislike of the new philosophy of competing greed to obscure the fact that he owes something to the modern world:

Few have loved Athens more than we -
 The pure clear light of Attic thought -
 But do not think we always hate New York and London.¹

The ambivalent attitude to London which featured in Aldington's early poetry clearly grew more, not less, intense; this is shown not only in his poetry but in his personal life during the twenties for at the same time that he chose to live in isolation in the country he was nevertheless a prominent figure in the social Bohemia of the capital. The final evocation of London in A Fool i' The Forest is the more poignant because the poet's vision of a city in slow decay is modified by a sense of attachment, perhaps of nostalgia, which he controls but does not conceal: one detects a note of genuine regret when the narrator, having observed the various details of the sleeping city, says:

Time glides over them, but does not touch;
 Does not touch? Look closer, listen ...
 There a fissure opened in the brick-work,
 There a broken fibre of wood creaked,
 There a road-block tilted, oh so slightly,
 But it tilted.
 There old papers grew a little yellower,
 Imperceptibly, but Time is patient.²

1. A Fool, CP., p.212, xv.30-33.
2. ibid., p.235, xxxi,46-53.

Aldington's narrator is moved in the same way as Eliot, writing in the 'Preludes' of the same city at the same time of night:

by fancies that are curled
Around these images and cling,
The notion of some infinitely gentle,
Infinitely suffering thing.¹

This is an insight into the "tragedy of things" with which the Conjuror is so unconcerned that the narrator, driven to exasperation, throws him over Waterloo Bridge. By thus disposing of his unwanted companion, the narrator hopes to be free at last to face "the shock and stab of truth" but, instead, he is merely sucked into the whirlpool of the commercial world he so detests. His prediction that life without Mezzetin and the Conjuror would be "mental death" turns out to be only too true.

By now it should be clear that the narrator's reactions to life and to the experiences of his dream expedition are primarily determined by his underlying mode of resentment. It is worth noting how, in this pattern of reactions, Aldington seems to prefigure two literary-cum-philosophical 'types' who have by now become a part of the history of the twentieth century. There is about the resentful narrator something of the 'angry young man' who was to feature so prominently in the fifties with his strident attacks which, although only moderately coherent, sometimes succeeded in denting the outwardly impenetrable façade of the establishment. In the narrator, overwhelmed by a feeling of futility, there is also a hint of the 'outsider', the

1. Eliot, 'Preludes. IV', in Collected Poems, 1963, pp.24-25.

detached and articulate existentialist, who emerged properly only during and after the Second World War. Certainly, there are times when the narrator seems to revel in his resentment -

O pour un moment
que je laisse couler
tout le flot de ma (si belle) amertume - 1

and there are times when he seems to abandon himself to futility:

O miserable condition of humanity,
 Coming from nothing, into nothing going,
 Striving with princes and with powers for nothing
 Who indeed would sweat and fardels bear for nothing?
 What's a man? ²

It is the inability to provide positive answers to these fundamental questions - "What's a man?", "What is reality?", "Why should the universe be rational?" - which induces in the poet this sense of frustration and futility, driving him in upon himself as he withdraws from anything that might bring these questions before him again:

We start from ourselves,
 We return to ourselves;
 Each inhabits a narrow chrysalis
 He calls reality because it fits his logic;
 Outside his universe is the expanse of mystery.³

However, the artist, conceiving this futility, does not have the power of forgetfulness, and not being god-like, cannot alter or improve his predicament - he can only observe and record it. He will not give in wholly to the intellect, and he cannot give in to "the sensual needs that hold us to the Earth":

1. A Fool, CP., p.214, xviii.1-3.
2. ibid., p.224, xxiv.1-5.
3. ibid., xxiv.18-19.

I do not shrink from those mad orgies;
 Share them I cannot,
 For I am barred from them
 By iron habits of race and training;
 Neither do I condemn them, but observe.¹

One of the most moving passages in A Fool in The Forest is the elegy on London at night, to which reference has been made already. This passage, in which the sharpness of observation is offset by the sense of the poet's attachment to his subject, shows the narrator feeling towards some measure of acceptance of the limitations and mortality of man, a theme which had been introduced earlier in the poem:

On Earth it is better to enact Earth;
 We must be men before we're gods or devils.²

Now, accepting this humanity, the poet observes the city waiting for the awakening of its sleeping occupants, and he observes the barely perceptible physical decay of London, of its fabric, its environment and its people. His resentment diminishes as he comes to recognize the inevitability of this decay, and the gradual running-down which is emphasised at this stage in the poem by the repetition of the line "But Time is patient". Once more, one is reminded of 'The Hollow Men' and the concluding lines of that poem,

This is the way the world ends:
Not with a bang but a whimper. ³

This may be compared with the narrator's reflection after the death of Mezzetin:

1. A Fool, CP., p.219, xxi.71-75.
2. ibid., p.210, xi.15-16.
3. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', in Collected Poems, 1963, p.92.

Life is seldom logical;
 It flows on and on and on,
 Growing a little dingier every year,
 Until it peters out¹

It is the narrator as poet who, with the Conjuror still at his shoulder and Mezzetin still uppermost in his mind, reflects on life and observes it in this way; it is the narrator as suburban businessman, however, who has no such anxiety for he has no such consciousness. He faces the future with smug confidence, knowing that his life is insured and that the mortgage on his house is being paid off. It is the final and perhaps the fundamental irony of the poem that one understands that the poet's anguish is preferable to the business man's complacency.

The 'Valediction' is spoken not by the narrator but by someone of whom one has become half-aware, a voice which is a part of the dream but from a deeper layer of the dream. This speaker is the quintessential dream-figure, undefined and mysterious; his is the voice of the earlier section, 'The Gods'; he seems to speak on behalf of all men against the "cruel humour" of the gods and to denounce them as a delusion:

They play with loaded dice
And when we find it out
And draw upon them -
Lo! They are not. 2

The final valediction, therefore, is not addressed to the gods; they, no less than men, are "Crushed by inscrutable Fate". The speaker identifies himself as being

1. A Fool, CP., p.231, xxviii.4-7.
2. ibid., p.215, xix.8-11.

but a murmur of words,
I am but a dark vision,¹
A dream in the night.

It is at first tempting to assume that here Aldington is taking on himself the mantle of prophecy, but such an assumption is too superficial, for the impact created by this final section of the poem suggests that it is spoken by someone detached from both the narrator and the poet; it is, in a certain sense, a universal voice, the voice of a Tiresias who has foresuffered all, and in that role¹, it acknowledges that existence is mysterious and speaks the valediction:

Farewell, mysterious earth,
Farewell, impregnable sea,
Farewell,
Farewell.²

This acknowledgment that the earth keeps her mysteries is a final reaffirmation of the narrator's struggle to reach an awareness and acceptance of man's limitations, and in this final acknowledgment the traces of resentment disappear.

Since A Fool in The Forest was the first poem in which Aldington had attempted to treat a complex theme at considerable length, it was inevitable that he should have had to extend his technical range in order to cope with the demands of his material. It may be said fairly that with this poem Aldington finally grows out of Imagism. This is not to imply, however, that he abandoned his old allegiance entirely, for its influence may be seen in several passages; it would have been strange indeed if a poet who had trained himself so

1. A Fool, CP., p.239, xxxiv.4-6.
2. ibid., xxxiv.18-21.

thoroughly in certain verse principles which he himself had helped to formulate should have forgotten them altogether in the writing of a single, albeit a long, poem. A critic has claimed that "from the point of technique, A Fool i' The Forest records a break with the Imagist 'commandments', specifically that Aldington has written in this long poem descriptive and philosophical poetry. He does not present his thought by evoking images."¹ This assessment is not wholly accurate, for while it is true that the poem is discursive - a good deal of it is taken up with argument and discussion - the poet does evoke images to present his thoughts, even if he no longer completely abides by the definition of an image as that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. The whole phantasmagoria is, in a sense, an image of the intellectual and emotional crisis of a man at a psychological and historical point in his life, and the images which the poet evokes to convey to the reader some sense of a dream fantasy all serve to expand this overall image. Moreover, one still finds that Aldington is capable of using to good effect a single image to crystallise, at the same time as it magnifies, a single detail:

The moon rose out of Asia -
 Anadyomene from the sea.
 She wrung the water from her streaming hair.²

What one finds in A Fool i' The Forest is the ability to sustain this effect and to use it in a cumulative way: the evocation of London creates a subtle effect provoking, as has been found, a complex

1. E.A.M.El-Shora, The Imagist Movement in Twentieth-Century Poetry, unpubl. thesis, Univ. Liverpool, 1957, p.154.
2. A Fool, CP., p.202, viii.1-3.

response, and this is achieved by the overlaying of images on top of others so that a cumulative pattern is built up in which the image of the city in decay is created out of a wealth of observed detail directly presented.

The main problem of technique which faced Aldington was to sustain interest in such a long and diffuse narrative. On the whole, he succeeded by bringing together a variety of voices and moods which modulate the pace of the poem and prevent it from lapsing into monotony. To begin with, all three characters have distinctive voices and only the Conjuror lacks a sense of humour, though his speeches are often perversely humorous on account of their aridity. Mezzetin speaks least but is responsible for the parody songs, while the narrator's function is to guide the reader through the phantasmagoria. The narrator has two clearly-distinguished voices: first, his narrative voice in which he reports events and conversations, and, secondly, his reflective voice in which he articulates the thoughts and arguments which have arisen in his own mind. Apart from varying the tempo, these passages have another, more important function for they suggest most strongly Aldington's own voice in the poem. It is as though at these moments the mask slips and the poet is no longer hidden behind the narrator. Thus it is the poet unmasked who reflects:

We grow old, the sun grows tarnished;
Life becomes an autumn twilight;
From a lifeless sky rain settles ... ¹

1. A Fool, CP., p.226, xxiv.60-62.

but it is the poet as narrator (and the narrator at his most sarcastic) who can say:

I've sometimes thought I'd like to be an artist;
I'm told they make a lot of money,
Not a cubist, of course, but a real artist.¹

One technique which Aldington employs throughout the poem is that of juxtaposition both of themes and ideas (for example, of science and art, as has already been discussed) and of images and mood. Sometimes this will be a matter of a couple of lines, as in the vision of Verdi swimming in the Venetian lagoon:

A thousand years of garbage underneath
And soft arpeggios overhead ...²

while at other times whole sections are juxtaposed as the narrator plays the Conjuror off against Mezzetin. This happens, for instance, when, after the Conjuror has "droned out" a lengthy translation from Homer which the narrator later condemns as "watered down William Morris dashed with Swinburne", one turns immediately to Mezzetin:

Mezzetin came sweating
And yo-ho-ing up the hill³

The mood is at once broken and all the Conjuror's pompous oratory deflated.

Recognizing that A Fool i' The Forest is a long way from pure Imagism, and that it was a turning-point in Aldington's career as a poet, one may nevertheless still find in it links with his earlier poetry. One recognizes the same precision of detail and the same ability to evoke in the reader's mind impressions and sensations which

1. A Fool, CP., p.227, xxv.26-28.
2. ibid., p.195, ii.51-52.
3. ibid., p.201, vii.1-2.

are an expansion of the image presented, not simply a close definition of it. At the same time it is clear that when he came to write A Fool in The Forest, Aldington was no longer willing to accept the limitations of Imagism in dealing with the themes and material which now concerned him. It is significant that all the themes contained in this poem are elaborated in Death of a Hero, which suggests that Aldington found that the kind of poetry he could write was no longer adequate for his material. It is a moot point, however, whether he succeeds better in the novel than in the poem for, although Death of a Hero is a powerfully-written novel, Aldington is sometimes overwhelmed by the pressure of his material and the authorial intrusions which, in the poem, can be at least partly masked by the persona of the narrator, are in the novel sometimes merely intrusive and slacken the tension which gives undoubted power to most of the rest of the book. Nor, in Death of a Hero, is Aldington always successful in conveying the fragmentation of feeling and thought, the sense of the uncertainty of knowledge, which underlies the narrator's dilemma in the poem and from which stemmed also the persistent tone of desperation and searching which one finds so frequently just beneath the surface of works by the writers and artists of this period:

Your minds are broken mirrors
 And you see the world in inchoate fragments;
 You startle at a thousand false reflections,
 Children, children! ¹

1. A Fool, CP., p.215, xx.6-9.

With these words the Conjuror accuses the narrator and Mezzetin; thus, too, the poet accuses himself and his generation. Aldington, however, was not the first to draw attention to this fragmentation: even before the end of the First World War, Ezra Pound had written a poem, 'Near Perigord', which dealt with the difficulty of establishing the truth about events and their implications; the final line of this poem - "A broken bundle of mirrors ...!"¹ - should be taken as an image of the fragmentation and distortion of events as people attempt to interpret them. Six years later, in The Waste Land, Eliot was to write:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images²

Whether or not it was only a coincidence that Pound, Eliot and Aldington should all have chosen an almost identical image, one cannot fail to be impressed that all three were so forcefully struck by this crisis of vision, this imaginative and intellectual uncertainty in the twentieth-century world. The quest for a harmony and a wholeness of vision which is never achieved is, as has been indicated, a theme running throughout A Fool in The Forest; the violent image of the broken mirror in which ideas, beliefs, and knowledge are shattered and seemingly cannot be reconciled is perhaps the most important single image in the whole poem. No less important is the clarity and honesty of Aldington's diagnosis

1. Ezra Pound, 'Near Perigord', in Collected Shorter Poems, 1952, p.177.
2. Eliot, The Waste Land, in Collected Poems, 1963, p.63.

of the reasons for the contemporary dilemma. One feels that he had exactly understood the temper of the time when he wrote:

We are too nervous, too impatient,
Too inconsistent (if you will),
To seek or hold perfection;
What we build today we smash tomorrow. ¹

The final impression of A Fool i' The Forest is that Aldington has attempted, without wholly succeeding, to come to terms with the isolation of an artist in a world where the values he has cherished have eroded or are under threat. The poem is always personal and yet, at the same time, what it attempts to say is universal and important; in his effort to believe in his own appeal to man's awareness of his limitations and imperfections, Aldington struck a note which is still insistent even fifty years after A Fool i' The Forest was published:

Praise and a crown of glory to the race
Which first shall say: 'We have enough,
 . . .
Now let us live as men'. ²

1. A Fool, CP., p.211, xv.14-17.
2. ibid., p.210, xiii.1-2,5.

Chapter 7.Poems of 1929 and 1930

They who were children when you played a man's part
Smile at your memories, never knew your dead.¹

A Fool i' The Forest was a turning point in Aldington's poetry; technically it stands apart from anything he had hitherto published: the directness of narration, the narrative scheme of the phantasmagoria, the use of literary and historical allusions, of parody and pastiche - all these represent a significant advance. Although, admittedly, some of the themes and techniques of the poem had been previously attempted in his earlier post-war poetry, it was in A Fool i' The Forest that Aldington managed, for the first time, to combine them and handle them with authority. In the previous chapter, certain parallels were drawn with The Waste Land and a distinction made between the different structures adopted by Aldington and Eliot. This distinction is crucial, for it underlies a shift in Aldington's poetic ideas and attitudes which was to lead him right out of the modernist movement of twentieth-century poetry which, as an Imagist, he had either deliberately or unconsciously helped to establish. In a letter to Herbert Read, written shortly after the publication of A Fool i' The Forest, Aldington said:

If the Fool strikes you as loose in structure, texture and idea, I reply that you call 'loose' what I call ease, fluidity, clarity Ten years, five years ago, I should have said Amen to your denunciation. Now I take it as a compliment. I abandon, cast off, utterly deny the virtue of 'extreme compression and essential significance of every

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.279, iii.28-29.

word'. I say it is the narrow path that leadeth to sterility. It makes a desert and you call it art. ¹

Ten years previously, in Some Imagist Poets (1915), Aldington had written in the Imagist Credo which prefaced the volume that the first and last principles of Imagism are "to use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly exact" and had maintained that "concentration is of the very essence of poetry".² Now he had turned his back on these principles. In the same letter to Read, Aldington wrote:

I say, pox on your intensities and essences; know what you know, feel what you feel, think what you think, and put it down, write, write, write! ³

It is clear that Aldington has in mind the poetry of Eliot for, in a letter of January 1925, he defined his objections more explicitly:

I am rebelling against a poetry which I think too self-conscious, too intellectual, too elliptic and alembique. This poetry is (selon moi) distinguished by over-elaboration of thought and expression and by a costiveness of production I don't profess to know what Eliot's influence on me has been; I suspect that, like Pound's of old, it is rather negative than positive, warning me off, rather than luring me on. ⁴

The strenuousness of this criticism is the more interesting in the light of a very different assessment of Eliot which Aldington had made in 1921:

The poetry of Mr. T.S. Eliot is a healthy reaction against the merely pretty and agreeable, against shallowness and against that affectation of simplicity which verged on dotage. Mr. Eliot is to be honoured as a poet who has brought new

1. Aldington to Read, 23 December 1924. Quoted in Richard Aldington, An Intimate Portrait, ed. Kershaw and Temple, Carbondale, S. Illinois, 1965, p.125.
2. Some Imagist Poets, 1915, p.vi.
3. Aldington to Read, loc. cit.
4. Aldington to Read, 9 January 1925. Quoted in 'Richard Aldington's Letters to Herbert Read', ed. Thatcher, in Malahat Review, Univ. Victoria, B.C., no.15, July 1970, p.16.

vigour to the intellectual tradition of English poetry.¹

This assessment was written before the publication of The Waste Land, the only poem of Eliot's to appear between the time that Aldington praised him for bringing "new vigour to the intellectual tradition" and condemned him for "over-elaboration of thought". One may reasonably deduce from this that it was at least partly The Waste Land which led to Aldington's change of heart about Eliot's achievements even though, as has been seen, The Waste Land and A Fool in The Forest are at least as remarkable for their similarities as for their differences. (It must also be supposed, however, that Aldington's attack on Eliot owed something to an unfortunate quarrel between the two poets in 1923 - a misunderstanding over a publishing contract - which brought their personal friendship to an end).

In view of Aldington's repudiation of Imagism, his later poetry has to be approached from a rather different angle; there is, though, another reason why a new perspective is necessary: after 1925, Aldington began to turn his attention to the writing of fiction. At the end of the War he had begun to write a novel, but had abandoned it because he was too close to the events about which he wanted to write. In his poetry after 1919 he attempted to come to terms with the effects of the war upon himself and upon the society of which he was a part but from which he felt alienated. This being so, it is not surprising that his first novel should have been a biting evocation of English society before and during the First World War, and that his next two novels should have been equally bitter assessments of

1. 'The Poetry of T.S.Eliot', 1921, in Aldington, Literary Studies and Reviews, 1924, p.191.

English middle-class life after the war. Particularly in All Men Are Enemies (1933) one finds the same crisis that underlay A Fool in The Forest: the man of sensibility in a commercial world, uneasy in the society to which he belongs but whose values he despises. In the poem, Aldington envisages the nightmare of a man whose imaginative and intellectual spirit is broken and who succumbs to the routine of a dull bourgeois life; in Death of a Hero, the hero gets himself killed in the war as a way of escape, while, in All Men Are Enemies, the hero also escapes, but saves himself. He finds his salvation in a love which the war frustrated and interrupted but could not destroy. The theme of love is entirely absent from A Fool in The Forest and it is not until The Eaten Heart that Aldington begins to discuss in his post-war poetry the idea of love as a means to personal salvation.

The Eaten Heart was first published in a limited edition in Paris by Nancy Cunard's Hours Press in 1929 and reprinted the following year in Imagist Anthology 1930. (This anthology was in no sense an attempt to revive Imagism, it was simply an informal collection of poems by the former members of the movement. Aldington acted as editor and Ford Madox Ford contributed a nostalgic preface. The only former Imagists who did not contribute were Amy Lowell, who had died in 1925, and Ezra Pound who was, according to Ford, "sulky".) The Eaten Heart is a free verse poem of some three hundred lines, divided into nine sections. Remembering Aldington's strictures

"against a poetry which I think too self-conscious, too intellectual, too elliptic and alembique", it is somewhat ironic to find that this poem makes not a few demands upon the reader's intellect and knowledge of literature and mythology. Aldington takes for his two major images the outcast Philoctetes and the Provençal story of Guilhe^m de Cabestanh, and while the former may be well enough known, the latter is comparatively obscure; yet, as will be seen, Aldington makes no concessions to the reader's probable unfamiliarity. The structure of the poem is quite different from A Fool i' The Forest for here Aldington is presenting an argument, not a narrative. It is also a meditation in which the poet contemplates the facts of loneliness and of overwhelming love, trying to face their implications and consequences. Thus the tone of the poem is mainly conversational; but such a conversation as a man might have with himself, for the audience whom Aldington is trying to convince is his own mind. "What do we know of love?", "But I say there is more in this than ...", "It is true, of course, as Euripides says ...", "But was it this I meant to say?"; such link lines as these ensure that the poem is pitched primarily at the level of internal argument and set up a tension between the emotional impact of the poem's images and the rationalising voice of the poet himself. It is important to stress this at the outset rather than at the conclusion, for the extent to which Aldington is successful in balancing argument and emotion, discourse and poetry, is the yardstick by which the success of The Eaten Heart, as a poem, needs to be measured.

The poem begins in Aldington's now familiar territory -
commercial, post-war England:

Under the reign of Mr. Bloom
When the loud machines beat on our minds,
We, that are children of despair,
Who see or think we see so clearly
Through Philoctetes' pain and Timon's rage
How all hope's vain, all effort null;
We that tremble between two worlds,
Half-regretting the old dead Europe
Crumbling and melancholy as a deserted palace
When the last king of the line has long been dead,
Frightened yet moulded by the cold hard patterns
Beaten upon life by the loud machines -
What do we know of love? ¹

Commerce (Mr. Bloom) and Industry (the loud machines) induce despair ("All hope's vain, all effort null"); it is a theme that might have come straight from Blake. Aldington finds that he and his generation "tremble between two worlds" - the pre-war that is dead and the post-war that is being beaten into a world of "cold hard patterns". The two products of this new age are loneliness and false emotion (or perhaps more accurately the inability to discern true emotion) implied in the question, "What do we know of love?" Throughout the first five sections of the poem, Philoctetes personifies for Aldington the extremes of isolation and loneliness; in the last four sections the ideas of total sacrifice and total fulfilment are exemplified by the story of the Eaten Heart. The sufferings of Philoctetes are a symbol of the stresses of alienation: in Greek mythology, Philoctetes possessed a magic bow and arrow given to him by Heracles. On his way to the Trojan War he was bitten by a serpent which caused him

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.277, i.1-13.

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Arnold

such pain and produced such a fetid wound that his companions abandoned him on the deserted island of Lemnos. After several years Odysseus and Neoptolemus arrived to steal the magic bow and arrow by means of which they hoped to capture Troy. At Odysseus's instigation, Neoptolemus befriended Philoctetes and tricked him into handing over the weapons, but was overcome by remorse and handed them back again. Philoctetes tried to kill Odysseus but, after seeing a vision in which Heracles told him to go to Troy, he surrendered the bow and arrow and left Lemnos with Odysseus and Neoptolemus.

Philoctetes is an apt symbol for Aldington to have chosen to express the crisis of isolation by which a man can be overwhelmed. In part this crisis, in Aldington's terms, is a crisis of lack of faith, the lack of any ideal which is worth pursuing:

A man or woman might die for love
And be glad in dying,
But who would die for sex?
Die for food or drink?¹

In a world where the poet finds the whole quality of life debased, emotions too are cheapened and love reduced to mere animal impulse:

Will you die for a blind hot instinct,
The rut of insect and beast ...? ²

One recalls a similar attitude in The Waste Land, but whereas Eliot seemed to express only revulsion in the squalid liaison of the typist and the house agent's clerk, or in the pathetic undertone of the line "What you get married for if you don't want children?"³ Aldington is attempting to define a love which will be ennobling rather than debasing:

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.277, i.14-17.
2. ibid., i.22-23.
3. Eliot, The Waste Land, in Collected Poems, 1963, p.69.

Yet women have loved, and men have died for them.¹

He argues that love is more "than the delicate friction of two skins", and wants to see it as a means of freeing the "mysterious unconscious or half-conscious you" in each individual. At this point the poem achieves a particular power, since the experience of the loneliness of man within society -

All through the years you move among men and women,
And you are imprisoned away from them, and they from you.²

- is clearly an intimate part of Aldington's own experience expressed with feeling and with the control essential to prevent the poem from lapsing into sentimentality. In fact he achieves an objectivity which gives considerable weight to the poem. The poetry here is vivid and intense, the rhythmic control heightening the impact of the imagery:

Sun after sun rolls from dawn to setting,
Inhuman constellations wheel above you,
A generation of buds points the bare spring branches,
A generation of dying leaves drifts past you;
They who were children when you played a man's part
Smile at your memories, never knew your dead,
And lonely, lonely is the spirit within you.³

The irony of "When you played a man's part" creates the context in which these lines should be read. The poet and his generation have grown into the generation of the middle-aged; a catastrophe has catapulted them out of youth and out of any future 'normal' world to which they might eventually have returned. After eleven years the effect of the war is now seen in perspective: the spirit is "Lonelier than a barren Aegean islet" - again, the allusion to Philoctetes

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.277, i.28.
2. ibid., p.278, iii.15-16.
3. ibid., p.279, iii.24-29.

extends the range of meaning, for just as he was abandoned because his screams of agony and foul wound made him unendurable, the generation of the war, Aldington implies, are also unendurable, even though their agony may be unheard and their wounds not always visible. The dynamic of The Eaten Heart at this point is the same as that of Exile: Aldington sees the result of war as corruption, a profound moral and physical corruption affecting both the individual and society at every level. In The Eaten Heart, he describes the characteristics of modern life as coldness and hardness: the "loud machines" beat "cold hard patterns upon life". Looking around him the poet sees

the hard unhappy faces, sometimes so beautiful
But strangely hard.¹

He tries to applaud this hardness as being appropriate to the age, thinking it best to uncover "horrors politely forgotten",

And facing them too,
Making ourselves hard for the hard age of machines.²

But beyond this hardness there remains always the essential if indefinable loneliness, "the cold despair of the mind", until

Suddenly, unawares, there is a meeting of eyes³

One might have expected here the introduction of the story of the Eaten Heart but, instead, the poet resumes his private meditation, trying to define the nature of desire:

It is true of course, as Euripides says,
That what enters by the eyes is desire,
But desire for what?⁴

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.283, v.5-7.
2. ibid., v.24-25.
3. ibid., p.279, iii.39.
4. ibid., iv..1-3.

He believes in a desire both spiritual and physical, "Both civilised and primitive", and, specifically, he believes in a desire which strikes in an instant - "and in a flash all life is changed" - it is the moment when "the whole nature is set free" and again Aldington draws the parallel with Philoctetes:

a tumult of pain and joy
Such as I think Philoctetes felt
When he grasped the hand of Neoptolemus,
A friend, and the son of a friend, a saviour,
The breaker of bonds,
Releaser from a ten years prison. 1

Taking the parallel still further, Aldington sees in the Sophoclean play of Philoctetes,

The tragedy of real pain and bitterness
When the hope vanishes before human treachery
And human incomprehension and indifference
The tragedy which only a god could undo 2

The disillusion and despair which Philoctetes suffered when he realised that he had been deceived is that which Aldington finds in the experience of a love that is unreturned, the despair "if the response is null or inadequate". Here is introduced the theme of the second half of The Eaten Heart: that if love is to be the true escape from profound loneliness, the response must be total; if it is only partial then the result may be "a poignant memory, a dream - Laura or Beatrice"; if absent altogether, "blind despair and apathy". Aldington is talking primarily of a spiritual and emotional response, the complex and "civilised" response. For him (and in this one can see how far he has moved from Images of Desire) the sexual response

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.280, iv.38-40.
2. ibid., p.281, iv.49-52.

is secondary:

I do not deny the body, I praise it -
 That is where Petrarch and Dante err-
 But the tragedy of thwarted sexual desire is nothing,
 The true tragedy is that of inner loneliness,¹
 Philoctetes agonising on his lonely isle ...¹

The distinctive word "agonising" recalls the lines from 'Eumenides' in which the poet asks "What is it I agonise for?" and decides "It is my murdered self".² Philoctetes, too, agonises for his murdered self and The Eaten Heart may be read as a poem in which Aldington tries to revive, or at least to suggest a means of reviving, the murdered self.

Although the concern with the aftermath and the effects of war is prominent in all Aldington's poetry after 1919, one must guard against interpreting all his work in terms of the war alone. He himself argues in The Eaten Heart that such an interpretation is too simplistic:

Of course, you can say it is the War,
 But you cannot put everything down to the War³

The "coldness", the "hardness" which he recognizes and admires but which also depresses him is not just the inevitable consequence of 1914-1918; rather it is the consequence, Aldington implies, of the negative mood of the post-war year:

We have looked too closely
 Or too deeply into realities
 And know, or think we know, that nothing is worth achieving.⁴

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.282, iv.101-105.
2. 'Eumenides', CP., p.154.
3. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.284, v.35-36.
4. ibid., v.45-47.

Such intellectual and self-conscious pessimism is a characteristic of one aspect of the nineteen-twenties, but it is not the only aspect, and Aldington specifically rejects this idea that nothing is worth achieving:

Escape the fate of Philoctetes, the essential solitude,
Achieve release, so that one's total nature
At all points meets another's
Whereby life becomes positive and immeasurably enriched.¹

If Aldington is saying that only by a deep and lasting relationship can one escape from "the essential solitude", one must notice that he also suggests that the release must be achieved before "one's total nature" can "at all points meet another". One understands, therefore, that this two-way movement of release into involvement and of release through involvement happens in the instant of meeting:

This is what happens to men and women
When we see they are suddenly changed
And are surprised at the change.²

Aldington's ideal is an unashamedly romantic one; the relationship he envisages as affording this release is one "so precious one would gladly die for it", a thought which brings to his mind the Provençal story of the Eaten Heart.

If a certain amount of special knowledge was required to understand the allusions to Philoctetes, how much more is this true of the story of the Eaten Heart. There are various versions of the tale,³ and Aldington takes details from each of them to fit into his poem. The story is apparently based on authentic characters and occurred in twelfth-century Provence where a troubadour, Guilhem de Cabestanh,

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.284, v.50-53.
2. ibid., p.282, iv.28-30.
3. cf. A.Langfors, Guilhem de Cabestanh, Les Chansons, Paris, 1924, pp.30ff.

loved the wife of En Raimon de Castel Rousillon. In some versions the lady's name is Seremonde, in others Margarida; Aldington uses the latter. Guilhem composed songs to his mistress and seven of these Chansons are all that remain of his work. Raimon, overhearing Guilhem singing to his wife, killed the young knight in a fit of jealousy and tore out his heart. This was then cooked and served to the unsuspecting Margarida at dinner. Afterwards, her husband asked her if she realised what she had been eating and told her that it was the heart of her lover. She replied that it was so delicious that she never wanted to eat any other man's heart, whereupon Raimon drew his sword to kill her but she ran to the top of the Castle and leapt from a parapet to her death.

The most authentic versions of the story end here, but Aldington uses a sequel which gives the tale a satisfactory conclusion even though it belongs more properly to the realm of historical fantasy.

A. Jeanfroy provides a summary, paraphrased from the Provençal:

L'horreur excitée par ce forfait se porte à la connaissance du roi d'Aragon, suzerain des deux seigneurs, qui vient à Perpignan, fait « dessiner sur leur tombeau la façon dont ils étaient morts » et fonde en leur honneur un service annuel auquel il convie les chevaliers et les dames de la région. Quant à Raimon, il mourut dans la prison du roi. ¹

This, then, is the story which Aldington claims has a "profound meaning, if you can see it." There is no attempt to adopt Guilhem as a persona or to use the story as a dramatic image of the total response of love which Aldington believes so important. It is used as an example of this total response but is not presented as a

1. A. Jeanfroy, La Poesie Lyrique des Troubadours, Paris, 1934, vol.1, p.119.

"If life is not a tragedy it is nothing"? What Aldington implies in his idea of tragedy is now much wider and less distinct, perhaps even suggesting something as vague as that life is a cruel misfortune simply because one is born against one's will and has no prospect of final, complete happiness:

the fundamental, essential tragedy perhaps
(Some say 'of course')
Is not death, but birth. ¹

With such fatalism as this, neither very original nor very profound, one feels that Aldington is losing the threads of his argument. The symbol of the eaten heart illustrates dramatically one kind of tragedy but it is the tragedy of death as the inevitable consequence of the end of a deep and passionate relationship. (Although one says inevitable, it must be remembered that this is a conventional and idealised inevitability; one should perhaps question its relevance to real everyday life.) What the symbol does not illustrate is the much more sweeping view that all life is essentially tragic. That, however, is what Aldington seems to be asking the reader to accept. He appears to be putting forward the vague concept that man is at the mercy of an un pitying and unmindful Fate and that, ironically, it is only those whose lives are not mere monologues, those who perfectly experience "the dialogue of the two natures", who really suffer:

None of those chosen can escape the escort of woe
And the harrying beyond the strength of a man. ²

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.285, vi.25-27.
2. ibid., vi.30-31.

There follows a curious plea to the gods, reminiscent of the songs in A Fool i' The Forest, in which the speaker, who is not readily identifiable, begs to be spared from death "in a vortex of confusion".¹ He invites instead the "Swift steel of despair" and warns the gods never to pity man. The effect of this short section is not inconsiderable: up to this point the speaker has been meditating in a rather rambling monologue, lacking almost entirely any sustained poetic intensity. It is as though Aldington has deliberately avoided such a thing. The symbol of the eaten heart is potentially a very powerful one, but the poet denies it any symbolic function as an integral part of the poem. The reader is merely told that it is to be taken as a symbol - and then that seems to be that. But there follows this plea, accepting death yet begging to be allowed to die defiantly -

Not under roofs of acquiescence
Guide us O moon
Bright face averted though loved ²

and then follows the ironic epilogue of the poem which begins with the poet assessing his argument, questioning what he has said and, indeed, questioning the very possibility of poetic argument. His "weak squabble with despair",³ ambiguously suggesting either that he has failed to come to terms with despair or that despair does not deserve serious discussion, has failed because he has said too much and still not said the right thing. Here Aldington is facing the problem of how to deal honestly and accurately in poetry with matters

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.286, vii.1.
2. ibid., vii.5-7.
3. ibid., viii.3.

which are not superficial, and to resist the temptation merely to produce work which is polished but empty, acceptable and not disquieting:

Watch me drown and afterwards
 Tell me if I did it gracefully.
 Ah, that's the thing, just do it gracefully
 And listen to the grateful loud applause.
 But, above all things, let it not discompose you,
 Let not your earnestness appear¹

Here, the pun on the word "discompose" prepares for the appearance of the dead Guilhem de Cabestanh, unable even to remember who ate his heart, and yet anxious that the details of his story should not have been altered. The speaker reassures the knight that all is as it should be:

Hush you dead man, hush, be at rest;
 The lettered slab is firm above you,
 Solid the effigy, fixed the shield. ²

He has resolved to accept the tragedy and this un-quiet ghost disturbs his resolution. It is now seen that the tragedy implies, in its wider sense, ultimate isolation and defeat in death, for though the knight of the Eaten Heart embodied in his relationship with Margarida the ideal of "total gift and response", that ideal was not enough to save him, and his ghostly presence is an uncomfortable reminder of this fact. The poet tells Guilhem's ghost to

act a dead man's part
 And leave to the living the life you lost.
 You shall have prayers and masses,
 All things we choose to give the dead,
 But the things you ask for you shall not have. ³

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.286, viii.11-16.
2. ibid., p.287, viii.32-34.
3. ibid., viii.37-41.

In certain respects this last sequence is the most effective part of the poem, the point at which Aldington subsumes the arguments with which he has been dealing into the dramatic image of the encounter between dead knight and living poet. Suddenly the rhythm of the lines gains an assurance which has hitherto been lacking and is allowed to make a genuine contribution to the poem as a whole. It must be admitted that only in parts is The Eaten Heart successful as poetry: the symbol of the isolated Philoctetes has a certain force, and there is no denying the note of desperation underlying the epilogue; these are handled with a certain poetic skill and maturity. For the rest, it is almost as though Aldington was so determined to discard the last vestiges of Imagism that he chose to write in a style which fails to do justice either to his themes or to his symbols. Yet, finally, the reader is left with a sense of the poet's struggle to come to terms with himself, to accept the "tragedy" of isolation. The concluding lines,

Pray for the soul of Guilhem de Cabestanh,
Pray for the knight of the Eaten Heart¹

are a plea for quiet, not just for the dead knight but for the poet himself, who does not wish to be reminded of his "self-prison" since, like Philoctetes, he has "exiled himself" and is only too conscious of his isolation.

There is one direction in which The Eaten Heart may be seen as a development beyond A Fool i' The Forest: in the earlier poem the 'I' was protagonist and victim; in the latter he is the commentator, the voice of a man coming to terms with disillusion. The consistent

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.287, ix.1-2.

presence of the poet's own voice, arguing, puzzling, reconsidering, by turns assertive and tentative, is a sort of continuo, a structural link which further sustains and unites these nine sections of the poem into a coherent whole. Essentially, though, the first person of both poems represents the same figure - the man of feeling and intensity who is out of place in his own world. What The Eaten Heart exhibits is a growth in Aldington's maturity and perception, unmatched by a corresponding growth in technical ability and in the handling of his material.

When Aldington published The Eaten Heart in the Imagist Anthology (1930) he followed it with a sequence entitled 'Passages Toward A Long Poem'. Whether or not he actually intended a long poem to be based on this material, no such poem was ever written, for in the Complete Poems (1948) all but two of these passages reappear under the simple heading of 'Short Poems', to which are added a couple more poems and 'In Memory of Wilfred Owen' as well as 'Epilogue to Death of a Hero'. It may be idle to speculate on what form the long poem might have taken, and how its main themes would have been developed, but the evidence of those 'Short Poems' suggests that Aldington was still dwelling on the themes of The Eaten Heart - release, love, despair and death. The poems as they stand are mostly fragmentary, pieces that would have fitted in perhaps to an overall design but which force the reader to grope uncertainly towards some kind of coherence:

that "The old gods are the most living" and in his celebration of
 the Dionysiac tearing of the flesh
 and crushing of the grape-clusters¹

Aldington is once again approaching the release of the senses for which Mezzetin and the narrator had sought in spite of the Conjuror's ridicule. Looming over all these passages, however, is an image of failure and despair, the image of Electra as an old woman, introduced in the first poem of the sequence. "An old woman nods in the sun"² - Electra is reflecting on her mother Clytemnestra whose death she and her brother Orestes had contrived in revenge for the murder of

Agamemnon:

She with her eyes, and hair
 red as the blood on her slender hands,
 and swift eddy of passions,
 dust in the rock-tomb under the gold garments.³

The impact of the imagery and diction here contrasts strikingly with the old woman who speaks these lines. She had hated her mother, but admits to herself that at least Clytemnestra had had passion, and had provoked passion; she had had violence too, and had provoked violence. Now she may be only "dust in the rock-tomb" but, even so, Electra cannot remember her life without reflecting upon her own lifelessness:

But who has loved me,
 what man shed blood for my sake?⁴

As an image of bitterness and regret, as an image of a soul which never found release, Electra might have been the dominant figure of the long poem which Aldington never wrote. As it is,

1. 'Short Poems, 3', CP., p.295.

2. ibid., 1, p.291.

3. ibid.

4. ibid.

she remains the most powerful image in this sequence of passages for in all of them there is, beyond the fragmentation of experience and effort already noticed, the sense of violence and hopelessness, and the suspicion that every solution is a confidence trick:

I forgot the blood
ran stumbling upwards too eagerly
then the mask changed
and yes there is no way out. ¹

In the last three of these 'Short Poems' the poet's mood changes: the shift is from culmination - final release or final despair - to continuation, in particular continuation through love which may not provide a dramatic release but which should grow "river-like tree-like yes".² To concentrate on the moment and to find fulfilment in what is real and tangible, to find the rhythm of the present; it is in this direction that Aldington points. The shadow of Electra is replaced by an acceptance which implies none of the defeat of resignation:

grey smoke drifts through the grey-green olives
voices of children playing
broken rhythms of people passing
soft roll of the noon-blue sea
now
now
and the turn of your head
a new softening of old pride.³

The fallen city of Troy, against which background sat the old embittered Electra, is also the setting of 'Epilogue to Death of a Hero'. This poem was indeed originally published at the end of Aldington's first novel and its impact as an epilogue is due to the startling note of objectivity and silent resignation which is in

1. 'Short Poems, 8', CP., p.300.
2. ibid., 9, p.300.
3. ibid., 11, p.301.

such marked contrast to the strident immediacy of the last part of the novel itself. In the poem, Troy's fall parallels the devastation of Europe at the end of the Great War and gives a perspective, relegating the war to past history, becoming mythology; Troy also enables Aldington to locate his speaker in a hot, mediterranean setting:

We, the old men - some of us nearly forty -
Met and talked on the sunny rampart
Over our wine, while the lizards scuttled
In dusty grass, and the crickets chirred.¹

The setting is as far removed from the Europe of 1914 - 1918 as one could imagine and the activity - a group of old men talking and drinking - is a timeless one. Only the speaker's parenthesis - "some of us nearly forty" - suggests by its irony anything out of the ordinary but, as the reader is taken closer to the group in the second stanza, any sense of normality evaporates for the men are showing their wounds and discussing the fear and suffering that war brings. Nevertheless, the reader has none of this described to him in detail; he simply learns that "some spoke of intolerable sufferings". The speaker withdraws, and the reader withdraws with him. A young man draws away a girl who has been listening to the old men:

'Why should they bore us for ever
With an old quarrel and the names of dead men
We never knew, and dull forgotten battles?'²

For the young man, the sufferings of the old are not interesting. There was a war; men died in battle; it ended a long time ago. It

1. 'Epilogue to Death of a Hero', CP., p.303.
2. ibid.

all seems of no importance to the young couple who wander off, absorbed in each other, leaving the speaker to his memoirs of young men dead, of the suffering and "of how useless it all was". These memories live for him as they never could for the young man. There is an uncrossable gap between the two generations. The recollection of why the old men are hollow-cheeked, weary-eyed and grey-haired and not yet forty drives the speaker away also, not laughing like the young people but "in an agony of helpless grief and pity."

Thus the poem reads like the scenario of a film, a sequence of observed actions and responses, centred on a group of old men in a hazy, indeterminate landscape. 'Epilogue to Death of a Hero' is a profoundly moving war poem written eleven years after the end of the Great War; it is remarkable for its spareness and yet its richness of perception, and remarkable, too, for the breadth of its sympathy.

And he drew her away,
 And she looked back and laughed
 As he spoke more contempt of us,
 Being now out of hearing.¹

The young man's contempt, so well expressed in the control of that last line, is understood by the speaker, but not shared, whereas he both understands and shares the suffering of the old men. Bitterness, anger and shame are all present in the poem but they are implied rather than made explicit, and the pity the speaker feels is not self-pity. The grief and pity are for those who are

1. 'Epilogue to Death of a Hero', CP., p.303.

dead and for those who have survived to suffer. The speaker, as one of the old men himself, shares in this but makes no appeal for special sympathy. Rather, he detaches himself from the old men and joins the reader as another spectator of the aftermath of war. One is left with the image of the group of old men in the distance, and with the thought of "the graves by desolate Troy". In an earlier poem, 'In the Palace Garden', Aldington had expressed a feeling of guilt at having survived the war and at enjoying the freedom bought by the deaths of his fellow soldiers. ("Coward! You have shirked your fate!"¹); now the feeling of guilt has been overtaken and instead there is underlying 'Epilogue to Death of a Hero' and explicitly in 'In Memory of Wilfred Owen' a suggestion that those who died won the more precious freedom of forgetfulness:

Do you remember ... but why should you remember?
Have you not given all you had, to forget?
Oh, blessed, blessed be death! They can no more vex you,
You for whom memory and forgetfulness are one.²

Finally, A Dream in the Luxembourg. Of all Aldington's poems, this was the most popular; that comparatively rare phenomenon, a poetry best-seller. Today, when Aldington is remembered as a poet he is generally remembered as the author of this one long poem, published in 1930, towards the end of his career as a poet. When it was first published, its reviews were, on the whole, very enthusiastic. One critic said of it that, as a long narrative poem, it had "no equal of its kind in recent poetry." He continued:

1. 'In the Palace Garden', CP., p.160.
2. 'In Memory of Wilfred Owen', CP., p.301.

It is a love poem as well as a love poem, and though presented in the figure of a dream it achieves intensity of clear passion ... and intensity in lesser emotions too. Passion is rare in present-day poetry, intensity less rare, but rarest of all is controlled intensity of passion communicated in language of a plain sufficiency which is always sufficient at its plainest.¹

The Times, in its obituary of Aldington, made an interesting comment on the poem: "He wrote at least one poem, A Dream in the Luxembourg, which was perhaps more evocative of the 1920s than much more pretentious poetry."²

It would certainly be interesting to put this poem alongside The Waste Land or even A Fool in The Forest, and attempt to discern which was the most evocative of the 1920s, but the comparison would be misleading for the life, the lifestyle and the whole outlook of A Dream in the Luxembourg is quite different. On the level at which the poem is most immediately readable and enjoyable ('charming' was the reaction of most of the reviewers) it is simply a love poem, a story - almost a fairy tale - of a short-lived, but ecstatic affair: the poet, secretly in love with a beautiful woman, is suddenly invited by her to come and visit her in France. He abandons his work, hurries to her, discovers that she is pleased he loves her, and for a while they live happily and by no means chastely in an isolated house overlooking the sea. The "plain sufficiency" of the language enables, and indeed encourages, one to read the poem as a short story, and the dream framework within which the story is told leaves the reader to ask whether or not the affair really happened or was just a dream. (In fact, it is based on Aldington's relationship with

1. A.C.Ward, The Nineteen Twenties, 1930, pp.50-51.
2. The Times, 30 July 1962, p.12.

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Brigit Patmore.¹⁾ Perhaps, with hindsight and a modicum of cynicism, one may suggest that it is the dream-like quality of the poem which made it so evocative of the twenties - sunshine and freedom, no hint of war past or to come, of austerity or restriction - but, however that may be, there is another side to A Dream in the Luxembourg. The poet fears that his dream will be only an illusion and that the happiness it brings him will not be permanent:

But what is the present, past and future?
 If it did not happen, it will happen.
 Oh, promise me it shall happen,
 For when I assert that it must happen
 Either now or in many millions of years,
 I do not quite believe my own assertion.²

As the story proceeds and as the poet's hopes are fulfilled and his happiness grows, his fears increase until he is overwhelmed by them and the dream collapses like the jet of the fountain in the Gardens of the Luxembourg:

At that moment the tall white fountain jet
 Fell from its height, crumbled like dust of water;
 Like dust of water it fell to a faint bubbling.
 Light faded from the Luxembourg
 As a heavy cloud from the north engulfed the sun,
 And a chill breeze ran over me.³

The symbolism is obvious and hardly original, yet it is appropriate in the context of the poem since it is consistent with the unsophisticated tone which the poet has deliberately adopted. This may be a clue to the alleged charm of A Dream in the Luxembourg; it is an 'adult' story of adultery told with a blend of candour and adolescent naivety:

1. Brigit Patmore, My Friends When Young, 1968, p.23.
2. A Dream, CP., p.256, vi.26-31.
3. ibid., p. 273, xiv.1-6.

I could not speak, I could not speak one word;
 Just dropped my bag, and kissed her hand,
 For in France you may kiss the hand of a married woman.¹

The poet bewails "that infernal reticence" which overcomes him when he meets his mistress at the station and reduces his conversation to complete banality - "That's dear of you", "It makes me quite happy to be near you" - but he blames his shyness on "those imbecile public schools" (one of Aldington's pet hates) "which destroy all immediate response".² When he is reticent with the reader, the tone becomes coy and self-conscious as, for example, when he says that he walked slowly up the drive "to (shall I call it 'our'?) house."³ When he warns that he could bore us with a long description of the bedroom, he proceeds to do so:

There was a good Vlaminck over the hearth
 With just those large red smears I like,
 And one of those Surréaliste pictures
 She thinks she likes
 And I try to think I like because she thinks so.⁴

Again, one cannot escape the self-consciousness of this: the avant-garde taste and patronising attitude which implies "I know what I like; she only thinks she knows." The reader may or may not find such lines trite and irritating. He may or may not also be irritated by the way that Aldington (perhaps inevitably) refers to his mistress as a wood-nymph or fantasises their relationship as that between troubadour and midons:

1. A Dream, CP., p.251, v.115-117.
2. ibid., p.253, v.198.
3. ibid., p.258, vii.2.
4. ibid., p.259, vii.15-19.

Yet if she is like a lady of old Provence,
 Why do I say she is a supple wood-nymph?
 But how do you know that those noble women
 ... were not wood and hill nymphs ...?¹

This, though, is a way by which the poet balances the fairy-tale with the actual, and this balance is essential to the total effect of the poem. It is a balance between an actuality that is too good to be true, and a dream which awakens into a bitter reality; a balance between optimism and despair, between unselfishness and self-indulgence.

At the beginning of the poem, the poet explains why he is reconstructing his dream - "Desire put into words may control reality"² - and by the end of the poem one may conclude that desire put into words also controls fantasy since, finally, the dream fades and the poet is reawakened to "the bitterness and drabness of the real."³ However, against his despair that the dream cannot last forever, one must set four lines from the earlier part of the poem:

What is there in life that endures?
 Why do we assume that love must last for ever?
 Why can we not be wise like the Epicureans
 Who thought not of possession but of enjoyment?⁴

Throughout the poem there is a fundamental tension between the poet's happiness now and his fears for happiness in the future. Indeed, he is only free from foreboding when he is so absorbed in the present that he forgets everything else. However, though the poem ends on a note of bitterness, the dominant impression is of fulfilment and not of despair; to the reader it seems that the sum of his happiness is greater than the sum of his bitterness and despair, as if Aldington did indeed succeed in being "wise like the Epicureans". Perhaps the

1. A Dream, CP., pp.257-258, vi.68-70,73.
2. ibid., p.247, iv.21.
3. ibid., p.273, xiv.19.
4. ibid., p.245, iii.1-4.

clue to Aldington's developing attitude here is to be found in his admiration for the work of Rémy de Gourmont (1858-1915). His respect for the Frenchman's writings, especially those on aesthetics and philosophy, was critical but sincere. Although de Gourmont, for reasons of health and personal taste, lived most of his life as a recluse, there was a strong vein of the Epicurean in his philosophical outlook. He once wrote that "Human wisdom is to live as if we should never die and to pluck the present minute as if it were to be eternal."¹ It is, of course, just possible that the fact that this declaration comes from a short story entitled A Night in the Luxembourg, written by de Gourmont in 1906 and subsequently translated by Aldington, is no more than a coincidence, but Aldington surely had this story in mind when writing his poem, for the poet responds to the moment, and finds fulfilment in the moment even while he is oppressed by the future. In de Gourmont's terms, he is oppressed by the desire for an immortality which is only illusory:

To know that there is only one life and that it is limited!
There is an hour, and only one, to harvest the grape; in the
morning it is sharp, in the evening it is too sweet. Do not
waste your days either in weeping for the past or weeping for
the future. Live your hours, live your minutes. Joys are
flowers which the rain will tarnish or whose petals will be
scattered by the wind.²

This passage from A Night in the Luxembourg is at the heart of A Dream in the Luxembourg. When one recalls the trend of Aldington's poetry after 1919 - Exile, 'Metrical Exercises', A Fool in The Forest,

1. Rémy de Gourmont, Selections, trans. Richard Aldington, 1932, p.234.
2. ibid., p.210.

The Eaten Heart and A Dream in the Luxembourg one can understand the appeal of such a philosophy. For eleven years, Aldington had tried to come to terms with his life in the aftermath of war; to move from bitterness, to resignation, to acceptance. Bitterness is never far from the surface of these poems; sometimes it overflows, as it also overflows in the novels, Death of a Hero and The Colonel's Daughter. Yet, in contrast to this bitterness there is always the sense that Aldington is pursuing something more positive, trying to achieve a fullness and expressing this fullness in terms of a love that is "the complete exchange of two natures."¹ The resolution of this theme came eventually not in a poem but in Aldington's third novel, All Men Are Enemies. The two main characters, Tony and Katha, meet and fall in love before the war and are then separated for thirteen years during which time they both suffer greatly as a result of their separation and the lives they are forced to lead. When finally reunited, their happiness is so great that Katha fears it may not last. Tony tries to put her mind at rest:

'Don't let's look forward too far, my Katha. If we do, we must look to an invisible end we can't bear to see. We've been apart and unhappy; now we're together and happy. Today and today, that must be enough. It is enough. Our hardest task will be to guard our love from the world of men. May they pardon us the happiness we have made for ourselves, as we pardon them the misery they have laid upon us. Now let us go.'²

To abandon resentment, and to forgive those who have provoked it; throughout Aldington's career as a poet, one traces a concern always to come to terms with life, and not to retreat from it. The lapses into near-despair are ominous but never permanent and

1. The Eaten Heart, CP., p.285, vi.5.
2. All Men Are Enemies, 1933, p.495.

the degree to which Aldington succeeded in coming to terms with life is reflected in the title of his volume of autobiography, Life For Life's Sake, which is not intended ironically. He would not have been displeased to be called an Epicurean.

Chapter 8.Life Quest, 'New Poems' and The Crystal World

Mourn not for the wreckage, but as the moon fades
 In the quick dawn, break from the ruins,
 For life goes on.¹

The remaining poems to be discussed represent in a positive way the culmination of Aldington's work as a poet, not in the sense that they are necessarily his best poetry, but because they contain the conclusions which he reached about the problems that had most concerned him throughout his whole career as a poet. Indeed, as will be seen, there are some specific and clear references back to his earliest verse. The previous chapters have already indicated how Aldington had tried to write his way out of the despair which had engulfed him at the end of the First World War; how he had reached the stage of believing both that life could be positive and enriching and that fulfilment in life could best be gained through the experience of passionate love. Stated thus baldly, neither belief strikes one as very startling or original, and it is undoubtedly true that very many, perhaps the majority of, writers and artists at all times have reached similar conclusions. What matters may be not so much the conclusions themselves as the stages by which they are reached and the circumstances in which the artist has had to undergo this process of self-discovery. For Aldington, the circumstances were the post-war aftermath and the 'between-the-wars' period as experienced by a poet who had undergone, and severely suffered from, the trauma of fighting

1. 'Life Goes On', CP., p.340.

on the Western Front. It is interesting to recall that T.S. Eliot (although he never fought in the war) was undergoing the same process at the same time and at almost the same pace as Aldington. The two men reached different conclusions, and in doing so, Eliot wrote usually the better poetry, but the circumstances and conditions under which they wrote are not very dissimilar. The same could also be said of other poets - for example, of Graves and Herbert Read who, like Aldington, had also fought - but there is no other poet of the period who recorded this journey of self-discovery (one might say, of self-recovery) as openly and personally as Aldington did.

Unlike Eliot, Aldington arrived at an essentially romantic view of life. This must be remembered when describing him as a poet who rejected modernism, for the modernist aesthetic is resolutely anti-romantic, as it had been ever since T.E. Hulme provided the aesthetic dynamic for the literary and artistic movements which flourished prior to 1914. Attention has already been drawn to Aldington's objections to modernism on the basis of its technical practice, its hall-marks of intellectualism, obscurity and dry concentration. From these characteristics, particularly the first two, Aldington himself did not altogether escape; and unlike other poets, such as Graves, who also rejected modernism, he continued to write in free verse. Thus, it is important to be clear that Aldington's antipathy to modernism was temperamental as well as technical. Whatever his opinions may originally have been when he supported and publicised the theory and

practice of Imagism, by the time he wrote the poems now to be discussed, he had come to reject explicitly, and from personal conviction, both the aesthetic and technical principles underlying modernist poetry in England.

Life Quest (1935) is a long poem in twenty sections, which culminates in a vision of the essence of life at the end of the quest itself. In the course of the poem we learn about Aldington's attitude to religious belief, to science, to modern life, and we come to realise that the kind of life he values is one which has not been trampled by man. He may have learned to appreciate the value of love, but he shows no sign of having come to love humanity as a whole. In a sense the poem is an intellectual exercise exploring his philosophy of life, although, as he stressed:

In its unsystematic way this poem expressed my views - I will not try to dignify them with the term 'philosophy' - on the subject of life for life's sake. Far from considering this life as a painful test of worthiness for future lives, we should look on it as a short holiday from nothingness, a unique opportunity to enjoy the singular prerogative of consciousness.¹

The poem is, indeed, unsystematic. There is no attempt at narrative or at consistent exposition, although there is a consistent movement from the opening sections, with their pessimistic anticipation of the impending void which Aldington sees in death, to the conclusion in which the poet achieves what may be described as the consciousness of "the singular prerogative of consciousness". In between, Aldington rejects emphatically the possibility of any life after death and comes

1. Life, p.399.

to realise and to accept the creative reality of life itself. The poem contains no presiding image as, for example, A Dream in the Luxembourg contained the image of the fountain, but several of the sections are linked by their association with settings in Spain and Italy (Aldington had travelled widely in Spain and Portugal during 1933-4 and was no stranger to Italy). Those sections dealing with the implications of belief in life after death are marked by their use of ancient Egyptian, mythological and religious imagery. This fact provides an interesting approach to the poem; during 1929-30 Aldington had spent several weeks with D.H. Lawrence, and was with him until a few weeks before the latter's death. One of Lawrence's last, and most important, poetical writings was a sequence of poems entitled 'The Ship of Death' in which he looked forward to, and evoked, the journey of the soul after death. In Portrait of a Genius, But ..., his biography of Lawrence, Aldington recalls Lawrence's state of mind while 'The Ship of Death' was in the writing:

But now all other themes faded from him, his dreams of the ancient gods, imaginings of Cretans and men of Tiryns who sailed the Mediterranean forty centuries ago, his delight in morning and evening, in sun and moon, gentian and geranium and mignonette, his grief at the greyness of the evil world of mechanical living - all faded in the vision of death, for which he prepared and comforted himself with the ancient Egyptian symbolism of 'The Ship of Death':

'And it is time to go, to bid farewell
to one's own self, and find an exit
from the fallen self.'¹

1. Aldington, Portrait of a Genius, But..., 1950, p.350.

Aldington's Life Quest is exactly the reverse; far from wishing to escape his "fallen self", he greets his newly-discovered self, discarding instead his soul in which he has no interest. Lawrence saw the Ship of Death taking the soul on its journey to peace -

Now launch the small ship, now as the body dies
and life departs, launch out, the fragile soul
in the fragile ship of courage - ¹

And he anticipated eagerly the end of the voyage to oblivion when
the frail soul steps out, into her house again
filling the heart with peace.²

But it is precisely this which Aldington rejects: at the outset of Life Quest he evokes the sense of the fear of death. In the woods of Roncesvalles he can think only of the loneliness, of "the blackness of pilgrim shadows",³ and of Ponce de Leon, the Spanish poet and preacher, rotting in his tomb. He is afraid of the omnipresence of death:

'Adios' - but once more, only once more
Let me hear my friend's voice, once more
Let me see his shape in the blackness,
'Adios' - but let me touch him once more,
'Oh, let me know we are not dead in the dead night.'⁴

He cannot believe in the soul's preservation: to him, Osiris, the ancient Egyptian god of the dead, is as dead as any mortal, and he asks "O Isis, Mother Isis, was it worth the quest?" He rejects Lawrence's idea that the ship of death will finally reach its destination, in oblivion or anywhere else, for, as he says:

1. D.H. Lawrence, 'The Ship of Death', in Selected Poems, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p.254.
2. ibid.
3. Life Quest, CP., p.307, i.16.
4. ibid., p.309, iii.8-12.

We shall not see, we shall never see
 Gold islands of the blest in sweeter air
 Where all are young and happy and there is peace.

The Ship of the Dead has never come to port,
 It never started.¹

This leads Aldington to dismiss all beliefs in gods, shrines, "dead bibles" and "Many a saviour who never saved". He proposes ironically that new gods be appointed so that men can worship the new religion of science and technology: "Skoal to the deathless proton!"²

In the sections following, the poet returns to Spain and finds yet more evidence of the desperate wish to believe in life after death. In Escoril

There I have seen and you may see
 Osiris - worship after all these ages,
 Still the old frantic fear of the natural end,
 Still the old dream of life beyond the grave,
 Still the old magic charms of stones and gold,
 Incense and muttered words of power.³

Up to this point, though the language of the poem has revealed a mature power and none of the carping tone sometimes heard before, the mood of the poem has seemed predominantly pessimistic; the sections have followed one another at random, linked only by the underlying theme of ever-present death. Moreover, as his scorn for the new worship of science indicates, Aldington is not only disenchanted with the afterlife; he is scarcely better disposed towards his fellow men:

Must I love my fellow neighbours,
 Must I palpitate in sickly earnest
 For two million spiteful apes?

1. Life Quest, CP., p.311, vii.1-5.
2. ibid., p.312, viii.15.
3. ibid., p.313, x.2-7.

Bring me the lowest-browed gorilla,
 Introduce me to the cheerful chimpanzee;
 Arm-in-arm we'll chant the People's Flag,
 Take degrees in proletarian culture
 And be analysed by Doctor Jung 1

These lines, when written, had a certain topical interest: the references they contain are intended as a jibe at the themes beloved of the new generation of poets emerging in the 1930s. Aldington was never overtly political in his poetry and was sceptical of psycho-analysis (although he indulged in it rather clumsily in his biographies of D.H. and T.E. Lawrence), but the mood of the thirties poets was predominantly left-wing and several of them expressed interest in the theories of Freud and Jung. One can reasonably infer from these lines that Aldington was not sympathetic to the new poetry - again, one notices that he objects to the content and ideas as much as to the technique - but it is unlikely that his antipathy worried the new poets very much: he had, on his own admission, declared himself against modernism and so the modernists, at least the new generation, responded by ignoring him altogether. The Faber Book of Modern Verse (1936), edited by Michael Roberts and the most representative anthology of the poetical tastes of the Thirties, contains no work by Aldington.

In Life Quest Aldington personalises the argument, trying to answer his own questions: "Is it so hard for men to live together?" It is that same technique that he used in The Eaten Heart, in which the poet places himself in the poem:

1. Life Quest, p.314, xi.14-18.

- No, I won't go home and open a bottle of port;
I'll have this out with Fate - ¹

He has a vision of a "mist ghost" which destroys everything that civilisation has achieved, thereby leaving the world free for "a nobler growth"; this makes him wonder whether the gods merely love evil and ugliness, or whether:

strife is harmony and everything
Lives through its opposite -
So men must live their eras as lizard-fishes
To learn in time - or is it, to re-learn? -
The wisdom and grace of nobler creatures,
Bulls and deer and horses.²

He derides the idea that earlier ages strove to create and hand on a life fit for their descendents; rather, he suggests they died not for our sake but "that they should live again in us"³ once more, the attempt to create some form of future Life.

Aldington presents a very telling image to demonstrate the irony and futility of man's hopes for life after death: this is the image of Tutankhamen interred alive in his tomb, conscious of his 'death' for thirty centuries until eventually:

he heard the muffled picks
And the cool killing air stabbed in
And he knew he could die at last,
Die from the living death at last,
At last be dissolved and flow back....⁴

This Tutankhamen passage is one of the most effective in the whole of Life Quest. The image is powerful in its own right (for instance, the horror of reawakening inside the sealed tomb is vividly expressed by "Blinking new baby eyes in the muffled tomb")

1. Life Quest, p.314, xi.4-5.
2. ibid., p.315, xii.29-34.
3. ibid., p.316, xiii.13.
4. ibid., p.318, xiv.31-35.

and powerful, too, in the way in which it focuses sharply the ideas with which the poem has been concerned hitherto. The image is sustained through seventeen lines and is the climax to the first half of the poem, representing the "Horrible shuddering end of the life quest", the more horrible and ironic because the image and religious rites designed to prepare the body for its future life have succeeded only too well, but in the most grotesque, unimaginable manner. Suddenly the poem has vitality and the urgency of Aldington's theme is powerfully communicated. Surprisingly, therefore, the next lines follow without warning and without even beginning a new section:

In art we know that achievement
Is not to work much but to work well,
And it is so with life -
Not to live long but to live greatly.¹

Here, quite unexpectedly, Aldington introduces his key to success in the "Life quest". Although he does not explain what he means by "to live greatly", it may be inferred from -

Sweet life, kiss her now, sweet, sweet
On the lips, oh now, don't wait ...²

- that, for Aldington, to live greatly is to live passionately and to live in the present. However, no further reference is made to this in the poem.

There follows a section in which the poet returns to the theme of his old ambivalence towards London; a theme which, as has been found, runs throughout his work from the earliest verse onwards.

1. Life Quest, CP., p.318, xiv.36-39.
2. ibid., p.319, xiv.55-56.

Almost as if he, too, recognises this, Aldington returns also to his early Imagist styles:

Sharp-lined and glinting
The traffic clots go curdling
Through the dark veins of the town
In sharp mechanistic spasms¹

The sensations of the city which he records are fragmentary and random, reflecting the decay of life within it:

Like a huge grey leach
The city sucks our lives.²

From London he moves to Provence, dreaming of love and "yearning for life, more life", but his dream is shattered when he sees floating in a river the body of a dead snake and is reminded of the corpses of dead soldiers from the war (again, the old obsessions return), and now he sees his own body dead on a battlefield:

Belly turned to the sun
Gently swaying in the water
Under the sunlight where the snake lay
With all the queer taut snake-life gone limp and lost.

I was not afraid, it was a great peace. ³

Behind these lines, and particularly in "the queer taut-snake-life", one can surely hear an echo of D.H. Lawrence. It is significant, here, as elsewhere in his post-war poetry, that when Aldington has a strong visual image the intensity and the effectiveness as poetry of his verse is greater and more assured. Too often in his later work he is prolix and clumsy, but in such a passage as this there is an assurance about his handling of rhythm and about his sensitivity to

1. Life Quest, CP., p.319, xv.5-8.
2. ibid., p.320, xv.24-25.
3. ibid., p.322, xvi.32-35.

language which must stem from his early training in Imagism and must lead one to regret in some measure his abandonment of the technical, if not of the aesthetic principles, which he himself had helped to develop.

Next, the poet goes to Sicily and is dismayed by the destruction of the "old sacred places", sacred not only because of their associations with particular deities but because of their genius loci; once again, faced with an emotional and spiritual crisis, as during the war, Aldington seeks reassurance in the physical world itself: standing now "on the last mountains of Europe", he is suddenly overwhelmed by the sight of the sunlight on the sea below him and has found at last "A sacred place still holy and unprofaned".¹ There he has an insight into a life completely divorced from humanity and from any human aspirations towards life after death:

I was swept speechless
By a huge choking wave of life.
I knew it was folly and wickedness
To worship Christs and abstractions
And never to revere the real holy ones
Sun Sea and Earth.²

The fulfilment that comes to him, the consciousness of the "singular prerogative of consciousness", though profound, is elemental; it is the response of a man who places himself outside any form of human conditioning to achieve a harmony with nature in which he will be utterly absorbed:

1. Life Quest, CP., p.324, xix.18.
2. ibid., xix.24-29.

In a touch beyond prayer I ask
 That my life quest go on till I die,
 Oh, let the Sun still be mine
 And the undying Sea
 And the Holy Earth! 1

One is taken right back to Aldington's earliest poems, particularly to 'Choricos', where the idea of the discovery of the self through harmony with the physical world was first expressed. In a sense, Aldington's life quest, as pursued in his poetry, has come full circle.

How effective, taken as a whole, is the poem? Although the sections, and even passages within the sections, are only loosely connected, there is an internal logic to the poem as the poet discusses and analyses his attitude, and that of others, to the idea of life after death; the geographical locations go some way to suggesting the sense of a journey. Except, however, for the striking Tutankhamen passage and the image of the snake dead in the river, the ideas are rarely focussed dramatically and poetically. What makes the poem disturbing is that it is so firmly rooted in the personal: there is no "persona" to conceal a poet testing a hypothesis, or attempting to detach himself in order to present his ideas with the greater clarity of objectivity. The life quest is clearly and intentionally Aldington's own. This is both the poem's strength and its weakness, for there is a quality of honesty in it which strengthens the poetic structure: if the poem succeeds in making the reader respond to the culminating vision of the poet standing

not on the world's edge
 But in the real centre of the earth. 2

1. Life Quest, CP., p.327, xx.28-32.
2. ibid., p.325, xix.34.

it does so largely because of Aldington's own controlling presence in the poem. Against this, it is perhaps the poet's habit of arguing with himself in his poetry which produces passages that are repetitive and contribute little to the whole. As always, his best poetry stems directly from his vivid imaginative and visual senses; when these are brought to bear on the central themes of the poem, then the result is writing of a controlled intensity one does not always expect from Aldington:

Under the Guadarrama in the spring
 I heard the nightingales in the ragged park
 Where no queens walk as once they walked
 Thinking with the silent tears queens dare not shed
 Of childhood and a distant gayer land.
 But shrieking jays silenced the nightingales,
 And drunken reds came shouting from the futbol
 Tearing down blossoms and rooting up the flowers,
 And I never learned what the dead queens tried to say.
 But I think the Hapsburg queens were glad to die.¹

Such a passage as this, with its firm and careful balance between the imagined past and the violent present, powerfully evoked and linked by the presence of the poet himself, is worth far more than longer passages of querulous exposition. However, one must not forget that, despite everything, his thought and vision is ultimately positive: the mood of acquiescent despair which characterised his poetry in the early post-war years gives way to a creative affirmation. While other poets were advocating the pursuit of the Socialist millenium, Aldington was suggesting a more fundamental and less violent alternative:

1. Life Quest, CP., p.313, ix.1-10.

But there is deep and delicate life
 If only you can seek in patience
 For the moment, and let it come to you
 From Sun Earth and Sea. ¹

He was, of course, deliberately out of step with his times, for whatever else the new generation of poets of the thirties were concerned with, they were not looking for "deep and delicate life". They were more attracted to the 'Magnetic Mountain'.

The last individual poem which Aldington published in volume form was The Crystal World (1937) but when his Complete Poems (1948) appeared he included nine 'New Poems' which had not previously been collected. These were written mainly between 1930-1937 and may be considered briefly at this point. Only two of them, 'Death of Another Hero' and '1933', betray Aldington in angry or aggressive mood; the others are essentially meditative and restrained. The first of the nine, 'A Place of Young Pines', deserves to rank as one of the best of his short poems: it contrasts the mood of restlessness and inner conflict which the poet experiences in his house with the peace and harmony which he finds when he walks out among the trees. In the house he is oppressed by

voices and passions,
 All that would urge me against myself
 And draw out the perpetual conflict.
 All that is uncertain, all that is unhappy,
 All that is noisy, assault me here.²

One is struck by the reserve shown in these lines; there is no hint of the often-heard anger in "uncertain", "unhappy", or "noisy".

It is as if Aldington is aware that the "perpetual conflict" is one

1. Life Quest, CP., p.326, xx, 18-21.
2. 'A Place of Young Pines', CP., p.331.

for which he himself is responsible - hence the deliberate and level tone of "All that would urge me against myself". To escape from the "battlefield" he leaves the house and goes to stand among the trees. The peace which he finds there is expressed both in the description of the pines and, particularly, in the controlled and well-judged rhythm of the long lines:

They are so still, they live so contentedly,
Holding the hard rock, going down into darkness,
And lifting such gay green plumes to the sun.
They do not argue, they do not talk of success,
And if they want to excel it is only in growing.¹

The poise of each line suggests a peace to which the poet gladly responds. The young pines do not complicate their existence, as men do, by argument and ambition, but concentrate only on growing. Again, one notices Aldington finding comfort in a world divorced from human feelings, which he once described as "the ecstasy of things untouched by man",² so that when he says "There I am at peace, there I am at one with all things",³ it is a peace which excludes the demands of society: when he returns to the house, to civilisation, he is "Never truly and wholly at one with all things". This inability to accept and to be accepted, as he feels himself to be accepted among the pines, leads on to the poem's conclusion where he asks himself whether

What I seek is not rather the peace of death,
The lapse, the going forth, the peace
After all the waters have passed under the young pines?⁴

1. 'A Place of Young Pines', CP., p.331.
2. Aldington, Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot, Reading:Peacock Press, 1954, p.12.
3. 'A Place of Young Pines', CP., p.331.
4. ibid., p.332.

Here, not only in the rhythm, but also in the diction, one cannot help noticing the resemblance to the poetic style of D.H. Lawrence ("lapse", in this context, is a peculiarly Lawrentian word) and this is not inappropriate, for the next short poem, 'A Grave', was written by Aldington after visiting Lawrence's burial place at Vence, a village above Cannes (his body being subsequently exhumed and reburied near to his ranch at Taos).

The poem is both a farewell and a tribute to Lawrence - "the most interesting human being I have known", as Aldington later described him. It opens with the simplest description:

No name, but wild flowers
And the emblem which you chose
And now is yours for ever¹

The emblem refers of course to the Phoenix, a mosaic of which Frieda Lawrence laid at the head of the grave. After speculating on the thousands of visitors who would come to visit the grave, "Led by the memory of your glowing spirit", Aldington records, with complete frankness, his own impressions:

Nothing I see, but blind and choked with tears,
Hurt by the wrongs and agonies you suffered,
I stumble from your grave, but through the pain
Feel the high triumph that you lived and died
Humble and noble and august and poor.²

Here the tone is less reminiscent of Lawrence himself than of Yeats: "the high triumph" and the dignified list of adjectives in the last line give to the poem a formality to balance the extreme simplicity of the opening lines.

1. 'A Grave', CP., p.332.
2. ibid.

In direct contrast to the mood of 'A Grave' is the following poem, 'To One Dead': whoever it is that is dead, Aldington is glad "to know that I have done with you".¹ There is a good deal of feeling in the poem, yet it is controlled, so that one cannot accuse Aldington of vindictiveness, and the reader is left not feeling disgusted but intrigued by the last lines:

Nevertheless, I am glad to be done with you,
To say: 'It is all finished',
And to wave a last, but never indifferent farewell.²

'Dilemma', the next poem, takes up again the mood of 'A Place of Young Pines': the poet is asked by a friend whether he should continue to travel or whether he should "sit down quietly" and take stock of all he has experienced so far, "Letting each day pass without comment".³ Aldington, himself an almost obsessive traveller, is surprisingly at a loss for a firm answer; there is a suggestion of weariness, almost of dismay, in "How could I answer in words?" One is particularly conscious in these poems that the voice of Aldington is not only more mature, but older; no longer is the delight in nature a young man's delight - the poet takes his friend to the window and shows him the twilight. The description of the scene below contains some fine writing: what they see is described with a moving simplicity which seems to reflect the poet's rueful helplessness to provide an answer to his friend's question:

1. 'To One Dead', CP., p.333.
2. ibid.
3. 'Dilemma', CP., p.334.

The last swifts dashed screaming over the roofs
 While the first bats swerved noiselessly across the square,
 There was a murmur of talk and of moving feet
 As people strolled and met after work,
 A peasant's cart went by with a man driving
 And a girl holding a candle in a paper shade,
 And someone played a mandoline.¹

The poem is couched as a recollection, and this heightens the sense of wistfulness: in the end the poet still does not know what answer he ought to have given; nor does he know, even now, how his friend, who made no comment, reacted or how he understood the answer. The Aldington of Exile, still less of Images, could not have written 'Dilemma'; then, the answer would have been certain and immediate. Now, the poet is only too conscious of his uncertainty. The impact of 'Dilemma' is the result of the combination of emotional and technical control, and both are impressive. Like 'A Place of Young Pines', it is a very good poem.

The last of the 'New Poems' returns to the theme of Life Quest and is in fact a sort of coda to it, although 'Life Goes On', as its title implies, is less exultant in tone than the closing sections of Life Quest. Aldington returns to the image of the buried Tutankhamen:

Let not your life become a Pharaoh's tomb
 Of buried memories, hopes embalmed,
 Shut in hot airless silence
 Where day by day nothing stirs, nothing lives²

When life becomes so lifeless, Aldington suggests, the "lively palace" of the king is as "dark and sullen and a tomb"; he paints a vivid, if somewhat melodramatic, picture of the palace being wrecked by

1. 'Dilemma', CP., p.334.
2. 'Life Goes On', CP., p.340.

"lightning of despair" but, such is his determination not to come to terms with routine, monotonous life that he insists that one should not attempt to reconstruct the palace but "break from the ruins" and

Tread humbly on the sacred breast of earth,
And grasp revered water's touch.¹

It is remarkable, really, that at the end of his career as a poet, Aldington should still adhere to his faith in "the sacred breast of earth" which he had proclaimed in his earliest verse. The old Greek dream has faded, but it will be remembered that in Images, the poet had from the first felt more at home in his private world than in the unwelcoming world of London and, twenty five years later, it is still to the private world that he turns. The difference, however, is that whereas at first Aldington's response was essentially an aesthetic one, now it is deeper, having been more severely tested.

The Crystal World is both a love poem and a poem about being a poet writing about love. It is in twenty two sections, the first twenty one tracing, though not in a consecutive narrative, the development of a love affair, while the twenty-second is an expansion of, and a commentary upon what has gone before. One can abstract from the poem a basic story-line in which at first the lovers are together, then separated (apparently for good) but, after telegrams and trans-atlantic crossings, they are finally brought together again. The 'story' as such is not of great importance and would hardly be worth mentioning, were it not that Aldington, in the last long section of the poem, gives it prominence and provides a commentary

1. 'Life Goes On', CP., p.340.

upon it. The bulk of The Crystal World is, however, more a sequence of poems than one long poem.

In the first three, stylised sections the poet meditates upon his mistress:

Nile-lotus among women, dear flower of girls,
Exquisite as a slender hibiscus,
Take my head on your young breasts, beloved,
Touch my cheek with your delicate hands
And - break, O my heart, break with longing.¹

For Aldington, as we have so often been reminded, the experience of love is as life-affirming as his experience of oneness with nature. Leaving behind the ideal, Egyptian setting in which they have been introduced, the lovers are now "in a great city of many men",² the very place against which, in his poetry, we have so often heard him complain. But now:

Out of our love we have built a crystal refuge
Unseen but very strong and ours,
Only we can enter it and be safe.
We dwell at the very heart of life³

In the next section the lovers speak with complete confidence to the "world of strange and violent men",⁴ claiming that in time they will enrich "your children's children" yet promising that for now they will be unobtrusive:

You will never know that we have gone away
Into that crystal world we make together.⁵

Their confidence is short-lived, however, and the speaker finds himself suddenly back in the harsh world (this time, New York) that he has just so happily renounced. His crystal world seems to have

1. The Crystal World, CP., p.343, One.
2. ibid., p.345, Five.
3. ibid.
4. ibid., p.346, Six.
5. ibid.

been shattered and he is alone again. This section begins well with an unsentimental evocation of the sordid city, but then the tension is destroyed by flaccid, bad writing:

It seems I also have to learn
Undreamed of pain, having so lately learned
Undreamed of happiness. This room's my School.
For what? For Scandal? No, for breaking hearts
And learning how to like it.¹

It is precisely this irritating rambling which so often diminishes the impact of Aldington's long poems: "For what? For Scandal?" is feeble and unnecessary. Again, it is primarily a matter of lack of control, as if every random association is worth recording, or will do as well as any other. It is one thing to object to the tendency to extreme compression in modern poetry, but there is no justification for the opposite tendency either. It is a fault which Aldington eliminated almost entirely from his short poems, but it recurs too frequently in the long poems.

In spite of his despair at the loss of his mistress, the speaker tries to find some consolation; in so doing a familiar theme returns:

Your sun of life goes flaming to its doom;
Be thankful for it; think, you might have died
Like common men who deal in pounds and stocks,
Poor sensual men who never came alive.²

He tells himself that he should not complain, because "you have lived, have known the ecstasy", and he turns for comfort to the mountains and sea. The following sections express all the poet's anguish and regret as he tries to accept that he will never see his love again.

1. The Crystal World, CP., p.347, Seven.

2. ibid., Eight.

Meditations on a theme may be worthwhile when they each contribute something new, but these are repetitive and uninspiring, too full of cliché to hold one's interest or sympathy, and once again the poem loses its momentum. If The Crystal World is in any sense an autobiographical poem, one cannot escape the conclusion that Aldington is unable or unwilling to distance himself sufficiently from a deeply-felt and private situation to turn it into good poetry. Nevertheless, some passages are striking, both on their own account as verse and for the ideas which they contain: section sixteen is addressed to the child who will now never be born. The result (on the evidence of what has gone before in this poem) could have been a morbid failure: in fact it is disturbingly effective and the image of the unborn child at last brings together all the strands of the poet's despair:

I shall not need to mourn that you must die,
 For you will never live, poor nameless phantom,
 Dreamed out of nothing by a foolish heart.
 My paper children, stored on silent shelves,
 Shall - live for ever? - crumble into dust. ¹

The thought that he will die childless suddenly reminds him of his contemporaries who also died childless, his comrades in the Great War; once more Aldington feels a close affinity with them, as if at last he is about to suffer in the same way:

O comrades lying in the fields of France,
 Strange is our fate; childless like me you died;
 For us the coloured flame of love fades out,
 The million generations have an end,
 The ship of life sinks in a dusky sea. ²

1. The Crystal World, CP., p.352, Sixteen.
2. ibid.

Another sudden transition follows: without warning he is happy again; he has been summoned back by his mistress and is "on the brink of joy". The first part of the poem accordingly ends as he crosses the Atlantic to be reunited; oblivious to the "cruel innumerable waves", all his despair has vanished - "Beloved I go to her I love" ¹

The second part of The Crystal World is a further sequence of short poems, some of which comment on what has gone before while others continue the 'story'. The first thing we notice, however, is that Aldington no longer adopts the role of lover but now joins the reader in reacting to and in contemplating the situation and behaviour of the lovers:

Now whether these two I write of really lived
Or whether I 'made them up' as I walked
And dawdled under the cypress and arbutus
Listening to the nightingales
And the lap of a crystal sea -
Does it matter?²

If the characters are fictitious, does it make the poet's involvement in, and understanding of, their behaviour greater or less? To what extent could he and should he detach himself from them? As we have seen, Aldington's writing is very often largely autobiographical; this applies to his novels as much as to his poetry and a parallel may at this point be drawn between The Crystal World and All Men Are Enemies. In the author's note to his novel, Aldington explained that the two main characters, Katha and Tony, had become as real to him as if they were real people; not, of course, a unique experience for an author, but it does imply, and Aldington admits, that it makes detachment

1. The Crystal World, CP., p.354, Twenty-one.
2. ibid., p.356, Twenty-two.iii.

difficult. This is not to suggest that detachment is in itself a necessary virtue in a novelist or poet - there are, in any case, degrees of detachment - but it has been seen that Aldington's poetry has often faltered for want of sufficient control, lacking because the pressure of his material is not balanced by any (or any sufficient) corresponding pressure of artist control. In The Crystal World, Aldington makes the same point as he made about the characters of his novel:

They are mine. I have brought them
To whatever life-in-words they have.
They are part of me, yet part of the changing world,
Me and Not-me. ¹

Having assumed, with some justification, such a possessive stance, the poet takes it upon himself to analyse the reasons why two people should fall in love at all and, in so doing, he fills in the details, by hints and explanations, of what occurred to make the lovers separate and then reunite, in the first part of the poem. But the verse is weak and irritating, the tone alternately ingratiating and admonishing:

You must not confuse these little poems,
The attempt to express these feelings,
With the feelings themselves.
You must believe them to be utterly sincere
And flowering from the whole nature of both. ²

We cannot help feeling that "these little poems" ought to carry their own sincerity implicitly without requiring any special pleading by their author. What, in any case, is meant here by "flowering from the whole nature of both"? We learn that there were obstacles, moral and social, in the lovers' way, since

1. The Crystal World, CP., p.356, Twenty-two.iii.
2. ibid., p.358, Twenty-two.v.

'The Bishops and the Bench would not approve,
Nor would the T.U.C. nor Mrs. Grundy,
Nor Mr. Grundy putting on the green.'¹

We are told that only their "misery and agony" were more real to them (and to Aldington?) while "All about them was unreal".² The poet even suggests that the reader will be so impressed by his description of their misery that he will think:

These are not mere words of a writer
But the clumsy stammerings of pain,
It really was like that, it did happen,
That misery and agony were real.³

Well, perhaps. But these interjections of author to reader really serve no purpose. The question whether or not The Crystal World embodies a true story has already been asked, and Aldington's predilections for putting to the reader questions he will not answer, for suggesting what the reader's response ought to be, and for adopting a story-teller's hackneyed cues - "How could it end?", "You must imagine that ...", "What happened next?" - have the dubious effect of turning the last sections of the poem into a less-than-satisfactory imitation of A Dream in the Luxembourg. They turn the whole poem into an extended cliché, so that such lines as

You must imagine that he turns pale, icy pale,
As if his blood were frozen with the shock of joy ...⁴

throw doubt upon the artistic integrity of the poem as a whole.

("And love? In shilling magazines?"⁵) There is no doubt that Aldington attached importance to his 'Crystal World', nor that it is potentially a good poetic symbol but, ultimately, one is led to the

1. The Crystal World, CP., p.359, Twenty-two.vi.
2. ibid., p.361, Twenty-two.viii.
3. ibid.
4. ibid., p.364, Twenty-two.x.
5. ibid., p.355, Twenty-two.i.

conclusion that the poem's prolixity and its inconsistencies in poetic technique and, above all, Aldington's own part in the poem so weaken it that, when the coda is reached at last, its impact has already been severely undermined:

'Give us our world.'
 It will not be given; you must make it.
 Only from the purity of extreme passion,
 And, alas, the purity of extreme pain,
 Can you build the crystal world.¹

Not all critics have judged The Crystal World unfavourably.

C.P. Snow, for example, declared that the poem

convinced many of what they had gradually been suspecting for a long time: that Aldington has written some of the best love poetry in English. Most of us are not over-willing to commit ourselves to a literary judgement on a contemporary, but that statement I would make without feeling I was risking anything at all.²

It is mildly ironical that those critics who have praised Aldington's poetry have usually singled out those poems which do him less than justice. The Crystal World, is very far from being Aldington's best poem, even though it is not without some passages of good poetry. Images of Desire with which it has certain points in common, has been probably the most appreciated of the individual volumes of his verse, though it is also his worst. A Dream in the Luxembourg was, in terms of its popularity, the most successful poem he ever wrote, yet to-day, despite its faults, A Fool in The Forest strikes one as a far more considerable work. One might be forgiven for suspecting that one reason why Aldington's poetry has so rapidly fallen into obscurity is that when, in the past, people praised it, they chose to

1. The Crystal World, CP., p.366, Twenty-two.xi.
2. C.P.Snow, 'Richard Aldington: An Appreciation', in Richard Aldington, An Intimate Portrait, ed. Kershaw and Temple, Carbondale, S.Illinois, 1965, p.140.

applaud the weaker poems and thereby discouraged others from reading further, and discovering the poems of real value.

I began this study by saying that its chief aim was to show why, and to what extent, Aldington's work as a poet remains of interest and significance; in discussing the various stages of his career as a poet I have tried always to put this poetry in the context of contemporary verse as a whole, and this has revealed the way in which Aldington contributed, both knowingly and unknowingly, to the evolution of the modernist movement in poetry. It was his good fortune to begin his career under the aegis of Ezra Pound and the circle of writers and artists who gave to the years immediately before the First World War their peculiar importance; whatever reservations he later had about Pound, and, indeed, about modernism as a whole, his involvement in Imagism launched his career and significantly affected the whole development of his poetic style. When, in his later verse - especially the long poems written after 1929 - Aldington produced work which lacked the vitality and impact of his earlier work, the cause of this decline can be traced in no small degree to his abandonment of the principles of Imagism. "Direct treatment" gave way to a diffuse and distracting discursive method, with the result that Aldington failed to make effective use of his powerful visual and imaginative sense, and tended to produce work which was, ultimately, trivial. We have already seen this happen in The Crystal World: the theme and the 'story' would have been better

presented as a short-story or novel (as indeed they were in All Men Are Enemies), and no real attempt was made to explore the possibilities of what could have been an effective poetic image - the crystal world itself. A Dream in the Luxembourg, similarly, is closer to success as a short-story rather than as a narrative poem. His best poetry, on the whole, is contained in the short poems, those which spring most directly from his formative experience as an Imagist. The label of 'Imagist poet' became an encumbrance for Aldington, as it did for other members of the group, but his rôle as an influential member of the Imagist movement has been underestimated and deserves wider recognition. He deserves much of the credit for keeping the movement intact with a coherent poetic standpoint after Pound's interests had begun to express themselves, with gathering idiosyncrasy, elsewhere. On his own admission, Aldington was not primarily interested in theories of poetry, and he was certainly not a creative or original theorist; during the very difficult period of 1914-1917, however, he did more than anyone to consolidate the principles of Imagism so that to-day, while the extent of their influence on subsequent trends is still a matter on which argument is possible, the fact of their influence cannot be ignored.

While stressing Aldington's contribution to modernism, however, it is important to remember that, in the twenties, he lost faith in

the direction of modernist poetry and began consciously to oppose and attack it. This is significant for it illustrates the degree of pressure which modernist ideas exerted on writers of the period. In particular, Aldington's personal reaction attests the influence which Eliot's poetry exercised: it was impossible for Eliot's contemporaries to ignore his work and its implications, and it is interesting to notice that, while Aldington objected to the tendency to obscurity and compression in Eliot's writing, his own poetry was never wholly freed from these characteristics. Ultimately, though, it is Aldington's romantic belief in "Life for Life's sake" which reveals just how far he came to isolate himself from the modernists. Difference of attitude, more than difference of poetic technique, was what led Aldington out of the mainstream of English poetry in the 1920s and 1930s. This, and the discovery that he could write successful novels which won him considerable acclaim, and his disinclination to be an active member of any literary movement, were, I believe, the three principal reasons why Aldington eventually abandoned poetry. Quite simply, what he still wished to say, he no longer wished to say in poetry.

In studying Aldington's career as a poet we have seen certain themes recur throughout his work: of these the most prominent are his awareness of the enriching power of the physical world, his disbelief in life after death, his disgust with modern commercial and industrial life, and his belief in the importance of love. None of these is an

original theme, nor was Aldington the only poet of his time to concern himself with them. In one respect, however, he was unique among his contemporaries: all these themes were introduced in his earliest volume of verse, Images, where they were expressed as the fairly conventional themes to be found in the work of any young writer. Subsequently, though, they were all restated, more seriously and more urgently under the pressure of direct experience - that experience being Aldington's direct involvement in the First World War. It was as if the early poetry had been a preparatory exploration of ideas which the war, and its aftermath, clarified and confirmed. As we have found, memories of the war still featured in Aldington's poetic imagination nearly twenty years after the war had ended, and some of his most important war poems are those which reflect the consequences of war long after the events themselves have become past history. If his poems of war, written on active service, have been undervalued, how much more true is this of his poems of war (for example those in Exile, 'Short Poems I' and 'Epilogue to Death of a Hero') written several years later? In no other poet who underwent the experience of fighting in the Great War is this concern with the effect of war on those who survived expressed so fully and with such penetration. With Aldington it was a powerful preoccupation, the one preoccupation which he learned fully to control and resolve in verse.

In other contexts, I have referred to Aldington's lack of detachment and control as a factor contributing to the weakness of

some of his poetry. Good poetry is always personal, in a certain sense, even when presented behind a mask of impersonality. What I have objected to, therefore, is not the fact that Aldington's poetry is so deeply rooted in his own personal feelings and experiences, but that sometimes he fails to bring his objectivity as a poet to bear in controlling the flow of personal content, of subjective involvement, which endangers, even when it does not swamp, the creative and artistic potential of the verse. This, above all, is the reason why Aldington was not a consistent poet: when his poetry fails to arouse a sympathetic imaginative and critical response, it fails badly and betrays unimpressive thought and dull craftsmanship. Nevertheless, as I have tried to show, Aldington was capable of very good craftsmanship, and his themes still deserve attention. It was his misfortune, perhaps, that as a poet he was overshadowed by the achievements of his more illustrious contemporaries; certainly, it would be foolish to make any claims for Aldington as a neglected genius. For a time he was an influential and popular poet until his reputation as a novelist overtook his poetry. In the end the reputation he achieved (greatly exaggerated) as an acrimonious and embittered biographer led to a rapid decline in interest in all his work. However, if one approaches his poetry without initial prejudice, then Aldington emerges as a poet who played a small, but by no means unimportant part in the development of twentieth-century poetry, and whose own poetry is worth reading, not only for the light it sheds

on the times in which it was written, but for its own sake.

The state of poetry at any given time depends not only on the achievement of the very few figures who set standards and determine bearings; it depends also on others whose work may be seen not as landmarks but as contours, who contribute the details which enable one to read the landscape of poetry with greater understanding and appreciation. To this latter category Aldington, as poet, belongs, and his contribution, as this study has attempted to demonstrate, does not deserve the almost total neglect into which it has fallen.

Appendix: Aldington as translator.

Since the foregoing chapters have taken the form of a survey of Aldington's role in Imagism and of his poetry from 1912 to 1937, it was felt that an extended discussion of his work as a translator would expand the scope of the thesis beyond that intended. There can be no doubt, however, that this aspect of his work had an influence on his career as a poet, and it is hoped that the several references at appropriate points in the text will be sufficient to indicate this.¹ Introducing The Complete Poems of Richard Aldington, Aldington himself explained that he was deliberately separating his translations from his original poetry,² and the same policy has been adopted here except where reference to the former helps specifically to elucidate the latter.

Apart from the initial impetus to write free verse, which he claimed to have derived from Euripides, Aldington's knowledge of European literature had more effect on the attitudes of mind behind his poetry than on the technical styles he was to evolve. It is no coincidence that, while in his pre-1915 poetry he was exploring for the first time the world of his "Greek dream", he was simultaneously involved in his translations of late Greek and Latin verse. Again, although he took pains to avoid what he called "the 'highbrow' fallacy"³ that he felt Eliot's extensive use of foreign quotation in The Waste Land betrayed (he adopted a similar technique himself, however, in A Fool in the Forest), he did share with Eliot an awareness of the importance of considering literature in a European, not a narrowly English context. In this he was also very much at one with

1. See above, for example, pp. 20, 47-52, 69, 123-125, 138-140, 215.
2. 'Introduction', CP., p.16.
3. ibid., p.14.

Pound, and it is interesting to see Aldington, like Pound, using Provençal material, Greek legend and Egyptian settings in his poems, though often in rather different ways.

It must be admitted that, to some extent, his French literary criticism was routine bread-and-butter work: his position as chief French reviewer for The Times Literary Supplement after the First World War was, perhaps, the steadiest source of income that he ever enjoyed. Nevertheless, France came to be first a cultural, and eventually an actual home for him and the influence on his ^{writing and thought} of, for example, Remy de Gourmont, discussed in Chapter 7, was a significant and lasting one. The breadth of his interests, though, was considerable, and an idea of this may be gained from some of his essays in Literary Studies and Reviews (1924), Voltaire (1925), French Studies and Reviews (1926), and Mistral (1956).

BIBLIOGRAPHYThe texts of Aldington's poetry.

Aldington's poems tended, in the early part of his career, to be published first in magazines, then in anthologies and, finally, in his own volumes. These, unusually for so young a poet, appeared simultaneously in England and the U.S.A., though under different titles. After the First World War, he relied much less on magazine publication, so one must usually look to commercial or private-press editions for the first appearance of the post-war poems. Faced with so wide a range of sources, and with the virtual inaccessibility of most of the private-press editions, I took as the working text for this thesis The Complete Poems of Richard Aldington (1948), and all the footnotes locating Aldington's poems refer to this edition, except where otherwise directed. Aldington himself oversaw the editing and publication of this complete edition, and from it no poem previously published in any other volume was omitted. What he did leave out was the collection of translations from the Greek and Latin, which were published separately, and a few uncollected poems, mainly parodies. Except where specifically indicated, therefore, this study of Aldington's poetry is limited to the work collected in the 1948 edition.

Norman T. Gates, in a painstaking bibliographical investigation into Aldington's poetry,¹ has shown that the textual emendations in The Complete Poems of Richard Aldington are minimal and concern, in nearly every case, relatively small details of punctuation and capitalisation. Of greater importance is Aldington's rearrangement of

1. Norman T. Gates, 'The Poetry of Richard Aldington: a Survey of the Individual Volumes, The Complete Poems and the Uncollected Poems', unpubl. dissertation, Univ. Pennsylvania, 1969.

the order of some of his poems: in 1948 he put 'Choricos' first in the 'Images' section, but in Images (1910-1915) it had been seventh. One feels, however, that it entirely deserves to be first, having been the first poem which Aldington published as an Imagiste. Similarly, 'The Faun Captive' did not appear at all in Images (1910-1915) but was included in Images (1919), the revised edition. Thematically it belongs to the first volume, even though it was written after 1915, and consequently it is considered in that position.

Having adhered to Aldington's revised order in these instances, I must explain why, elsewhere, I have diverged from it. In 1948 Aldington placed A Dream in the Luxembourg before The Eaten Heart; in fact, the latter was published first (privately in Paris in 1929), while the former did not appear until 1930. Since, as I have implied in Chapters 7 and 8, there is a thematic development from The Eaten Heart to A Dream in the Luxembourg and from there to Life Quest and The Crystal World, I have adhered to the chronological order of publication here, not to Aldington's subsequent rearrangement.

In the Bibliography the following conventions have been adopted: the place of publication is assumed to be London unless otherwise stated; the publisher's name is only given if the book was privately printed. The first section of the Bibliography lists works by and about Aldington, including all his poetry and translations of poetry up to 1937; novels and short stories up to 1937; criticism and biography up to 1937, plus later works referred to in the text of the thesis. The second section contains material relating to Imagism, and the third contains miscellaneous books and articles. These two latter sections list only material cited in the thesis.

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