

## 7. The Soldier

1916

*But O thou old and very cruel god,  
Take, if thou will, this bitter cup from us*  
(Richard Aldington, 'Vicarious Atonement', 1916)

On Saturday 24 June 1916 Aldington and Fallas set off for the 11<sup>th</sup> Devonshire regimental base at Worgret Camp near Wareham in Dorset. H.D. remained at Woodland Cottage – with Cournos, who would later write in his autobiography:

Psychically wrought up, immediately after his departure, [H.D.] impetuously walked over to me in the sitting-room we all jointly occupied, and kissed me. This revelation of confidence and its implication of the two of us being left to maintain the thinning thread of spirit in growing chaos, touched me, and I resolved to help her breach the emptiness of the days immediately before her. . . .

An extraordinary thing happened a day or two after Richard left. We were in the sitting-room having afternoon tea, when suddenly we looked at each other strangely.

'Did you hear it?' she asked me. 'He called you!'

'Yes,' I said. 'Isn't it strange?'

And, indeed, what we both heard, distinctly and unmistakably was Richard's voice calling me: 'Korshoon!'

. . . It seemed to come out of the very air out of doors. We looked out, but saw nothing.<sup>1</sup>

This story also figures in Cournos's *roman à clef*, *Miranda Masters*, where the voice 'numbed his sense of action, wove itself into his devotion to Miranda, into the words of tenderness he spoke to her, into the very texture of the pages he was writing.'<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely, given H.D.'s fear of

sex during this period, as well as Cournos's conscience with regard to his friend, that there was a full-blown affair, but his obvious attraction to her at a time when her sense of her own physical attractiveness and sexual appeal (never robust) was particularly low, seems to have led her into behaviour which encouraged his hopes and was certainly unwise, if not self-indulgent. Perhaps each exploited the other's vulnerability, but it seems clear that Cournos was genuinely in love with H.D. at this time.

Meanwhile, in Company E, Hut 8, private 24965 was finding army life tougher than even he could have anticipated. His initial letters to Flint attempted to make light of matters: 'Here I am in a "gun-fodder" regiment! We will be at the front in two weeks';<sup>3</sup> and 'If I haven't written to you it is only due to inoculation, vaccination and general exploitation.'<sup>4</sup> Only days later, however, his tone is utterly depressed and he complains of the 'obscene and offensive' nature of the men's language, the vileness of the NCOs, the filthy tasks, such as the scrubbing of a stone floor in the kitchen of the officers' mess, and the rigours of a day that lasts from 5.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. Aware that all this sounds like 'whining', he remarks that his life is 'made up of tiny things important enough to ruin your whole life'.<sup>5</sup>

To poor Cournos, fast becoming the emotional refuse bin for both Aldingtons, he allowed himself more self-pity. His more explicit account of the scrubbing of the kitchen floor (he only tells Flint that the task made him 'retch') runs: 'Yesterday I had a horrible experience, which please don't tell H.D. . . . I was put to scrub the stone floor of one of the filthiest kitchens I ever saw in my life. It was deep with grease, soot and mess of all kinds. The bucket was greasy & the scrubbing rags so unspeakably filthy and slimy that it made me nauseated to touch them and I shuddered every time I had to plunge my hand into the pail of loathsome, greasy water. For a while it broke me, old chap, and I'm not too ashamed to tell you that for a moment or two I just bent my head & sobbed. It was so bitter a humiliation, so sordid a Golgotha.'<sup>6</sup> How much of his misery he did reveal to H.D. we shall never know: in late 1920 he would destroy all the letters she had ever written to him, along with his letters to her prior to late March 1918, the date when she left their London flat for Cornwall, leaving behind all their correspondence.

On Sunday 23 July H.D. joined him. She had taken lodgings in the village of Corfe Castle. In a letter to Cournos she spoke of falling out of the train 'into the salute of a very tall, strange person whom my mind told me must, of all his majesty's many, be only One!' She continues: 'It was R.A. – looking very well, taller, tremendously full chested with a cropped but not disfigured head.'<sup>7</sup> However, she saw more profound changes in her husband than his military demeanour, as she revealed in a letter to



Aldington the soldier, Autumn 1916

Flint: while he had 'changed superficially in to the "nice, clean young Englishman" type', what made her 'desperate' was 'the tragic eyes . . . the absolute foredoomed look'. She begged Flint to write 'silly, cheerful superficial anythings' to him as often as he could.<sup>8</sup>

She asked much the same of Lowell and Cournos. Lowell would manage to infuriate as much as console, writing: 'I cannot bear to have your brains and beautiful imagination knocked here and there in the rough duties of a private soldier's life.' Aldington clearly shared that sentiment, but the tones of the Boston patrician must have made him feel perversely that – for now at least – he would not attempt to join the officer class. She did not help matters by adding that, nevertheless, the war might prove 'a splendid experience' which would enlarge not only his 'outlook on life' but his 'suggestions for poetry'.<sup>9</sup>

Like H.D., Aldington wrote to Flint the day after her arrival, telling him how deeply affecting their reunion had been; but being with her had made life in the camp all the more difficult to cope with and his letter becomes an outburst of anger and disgust. 'This army life is stupid, boring and demoralising. The young ones learn to drink, and fornicate with disgusting whores – the old ones quickly become animals with an obscene tongue. . . . In all truth humanity is something disgusting. When I think about it I want to die.'<sup>10</sup> For all his sensuality, Aldington was a romantic and an idealist; his social world had also been very limited. (A few months later the young Wilfred Owen would react in a very similar way to his first close contact with 'other ranks' of men.)<sup>11</sup> And yet there were moments when his fellow soldiers surprised Aldington: only a week before the above letter he had written to Flint commenting on how touching he found it that on Saturdays they went looking for 'poppies, yellow and white daisies, and wild flowers' with which to decorate their tables. 'That's a simple act, which I'm very proud of. This love for flowers in the English lower classes is quite remarkable', he told Flint. We may find his remarks a little patronising, but they do reveal a genuine delight in his fellow men.<sup>12</sup>

*Death of a Hero* gives us a fuller picture not only of Aldington's experience of army training, but of the impact it had on him: 'It was not the physical fatigue Winterbourne minded. . . . He suffered mentally; suffered from the shock of the abrupt change from surroundings where the things of the mind chiefly were valued, to surroundings where they were ignorantly despised.'<sup>13</sup>

In 1919 Aldington would publish an article entitled 'Culture in the Army', which opens: 'Strictly speaking, there wasn't any.' It continues: 'The mind of the ordinary Englishman seems to be compounded of brutishness for which he can make no excuse and of sentimentality for

which he can give no reason.<sup>14</sup> Once in the front line, he would find (again like Wilfred Owen) other, perhaps compensating, qualities in his fellow soldiers. For now, however, the cultural desert that was army life and the minds of his companions appalled him.

His reactions both to the army regime and to the mass of civilian recruits were not unique or even unusual, particularly amongst those educated men who enlisted as private soldiers. The memoirs of Stephen Graham, the journalist and travel writer, another late volunteer, echo Aldington's letters and *Death of a Hero*. Graham tells us: 'We must not forget that for many the greatest ordeal was not the field of battle but the field of training, where men, infinitely diverse in character, originality and expression were standardised to become interchangeable parts in the fighting machine.'<sup>15</sup> He also recalls the ordeal of a fellow recruit who was a well-known composer: 'I don't think . . . anyone realised the strain and torture of the mind in a man whose heart and soul is given to Art, given long since, and the mind and body suddenly given to the army.' Like Aldington, Graham was also shocked to discover the level of education and culture in his fellow recruits.

In some ways ignorance and lack of imagination were a protection: 'those who could think most suffered most', Graham reflects.<sup>16</sup> The war itself continued to horrify Aldington – on moral, political and personal grounds. *Death of a Hero* again: 'The very apparatus of killing revolted him, took on a sort of sinister deadness. There was something in the very look of his rifle and equipment which filled him with depression. And then, in the imagination, he was already facing the existence for which this was but a preparation, already confronting the agony of his own death. . . . It was, perhaps, selfish . . . to worry about his own extinction when so many better men had already been obliterated. He felt rather ashamed and apologetic about it himself. But it is human to recoil from a violent death, even at twenty-two or three.'<sup>17</sup>

It is, perhaps, surprising to find how isolated Aldington felt. Although his childhood had been a lonely one, as an adult he had been universally regarded – almost from the time when he had gone to university and first found like-minded people – as lively, cheerful and companionable. Of course, there were no like-minded people here, and his obvious contempt for his companions must have alienated them. However, there was Carl Fallas. In *Life for Life's Sake* Aldington speaks of the two friends going out to tea at Corfe Castle on Sunday afternoons; they were to remain together right through their service at the front in 1917. Yet Aldington's letters to Flint and Cournos stress his loneliness and make little mention of Fallas. Of course, H.D. arrived only four weeks into the two men's training, after

which point Aldington spent every moment of his precious Saturday and Sunday afternoons in her company. It is also probable that the two men had been assigned to different units. Since, according to *Life for Life's Sake*, they enjoyed nights out together once they were at base camp in Calais at the end of the year, it seems unlikely that Aldington's affair with Flo estranged the two men, or even that Fallas ever came to know of it.

Poet Aldington may have been, but he was also a robust and healthy young man: 'Winterbourne bore it better than most. His long walks and love for swimming had kept him supple. He did not raise weights like the draymen or dig like the navvies, but he could out-march and out-run them all, learn every new movement in half the time, dismount [*sic*] a Lewis gun while they were wondering which way the handle came off, score four bulls out of five, and saw immediately why you made head-cover first when digging in.'<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Aldington soon worked out that his only hope of escaping departure for the front within a few weeks was to show himself a quick learner and adept with a rifle, thus procuring a place on NCO training. He even tried to enlist Flint's help in this project, asking him to obtain copies of army manuals to send to him.

H.D. was not well-placed to help her husband through his ordeal. Not only was she called upon to provide him with emotional support just at the time when she felt hurt and betrayed, but their relationship continued to be drenched in deception. Putting his needs before her own, she tried to conceal both her own misery and her alarm at his state of mind. 'I feel so weak in the face of all this startling and horrible Hell! But don't think I give way when R. is with me!' she wrote to Flint.<sup>19</sup> Nor did they yet discuss his affair with Flo Fallas. His despair at his present and future circumstances must have been compounded by feelings of remorse and guilt. In any case he felt bound, as always, to protect H.D., and only revealed the depths of his anguish to Flint and to Cournos.

Meanwhile Cournos was also the confidant for H.D., who wrote him thirty-two letters during her three months at Corfe Castle. A reading of the Aldingtons' letters to him in this period shows us two people out of control, the one sinking into an almost clinical state of depression, the other spiralling into hysteria, a hysteria which would lead to disastrous misunderstandings in her relationships both with Cournos and with D.H. Lawrence, with whom she corresponded in the autumn in order to compile the next Imagist anthology. (Lawrence was as cynical as ever in his assessment of his friends: 'I can tell that the glamour is getting hold of [Aldington]: the 'now we're all men together' business', he wrote to Lowell.)<sup>20</sup>

Flint did more than send Aldington 'silly, cheerful superficial anythings': in early August he sent him a poem:

*Soldiers*

To R.A.

Brother,  
 I saw you on a muddy road  
 In France  
 Pass by with your battalion,  
 Rifle at the slope, full marching order,  
 Arm swinging;  
 And I stood at ease,  
 Folding my hands over my rifle,  
 With my battalion.  
 You passed by me and our eyes met.  
 We had not seen each other since the days  
 We climbed the Devon hills together;  
 Our eyes met, startled;  
 And, because the order was Silence,  
 We dared not speak.  
 O face of my friend,  
 Alone distinct of all that company,  
 You went on, you went on,  
 Into the darkness;  
 And I sit here at my table,  
 Holding back my tears,  
 With my jaw set and my teeth clenched,  
 Knowing I shall not be  
 Even so near you as I saw you  
 In my dream.<sup>21</sup>

Aldington, who had commanded his friend to send him everything he wrote, adding, 'Je veux souvenir que j'ai rêvé d'être poète', was moved to tears and told Flint, 'You are a good friend, old boy.'<sup>22</sup>

Quite soon, however, the tensions at Corfe Castle created a misunderstanding with Flint as well. Towards the end of the summer his wife and children were camping at Swanage, on the coast only four miles from Corfe Castle, and Flint was joining them at weekends. On the weekend of 2 September they came over to see the Aldingtons and Flint wrote afterwards to H.D. to ask if they might come again the following weekend. She felt that their visit had been rather overwhelming for her husband and suggested that it would be better if they didn't. She was also frustrated by her need for time to discuss the Flo Fallas affair with him. Flint was shocked by her letter and suggested in his reply that the



fuss H.D. was making over her husband's circumstances and state of mind was not helpful for him. This was a response that tapped immediately into H.D.'s insecurity, and, as usual, she turned to Cournos: 'I am often unhappy to think that my complicated nature has led R. to think I am unhappy. That was why Frank's remark hurt me to the heart. I think of it and wonder if perhaps it would be best for me to leave England as R. first begged me to do. I wonder if I am not causing him pain by staying here.'<sup>23</sup>

Reconciliation with Flint was soon effected. Aldington valued his few loyal friends; he wrote to Cournos in August: 'I wish I could tell you how much I appreciate your devotion and that of Frank and Alec [Randall]. H.D. and you three seem to be all that are really left to me of my world; other people fade, become phantoms, vanish from one's life.'<sup>24</sup>

However, there were moments of calm. H.D.'s lodgings in Corfe Castle, beneath the crumbling ruins of the eleventh century castle itself, were a peaceful weekend retreat. For both of them the spot was a romantic one. Writing to Bubb in 1917, Aldington recalled: 'Last summer when I was at Wareham I had to get up at 4:30 (3:30 by the sun!) to get back from Corfe by reveille. In the autumn dawn when the wind moaned round that huge old ruin I used to scurry along in dread of the ghosts of Saxon kings.'<sup>25</sup> The distance between Worgret Camp and H.D.'s lodgings was about four miles; from Corfe it was only another five miles to the Dorset coast. This was the countryside Aldington had explored as a teenager on his walking expedition with William Hilbery.<sup>26</sup> He took H.D. to visit the tiny St. Adhelm's Chapel, knowing that its austerity and its isolated position above the sea would appeal to her.

And, as always, he responded hungrily to nature around him, as we see in poems like 'Field Manoeuvres: Outpost Duty' and 'A Moment's Interlude':

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 fingers;  
 The tree-gods muttered affectionately about me  
 And from the distance came the grumble of a friendly train.

I was so happy to be alone  
 So full of love for the great speechless earth,  
 That I could have laid my cheek in the grasses  
 And caressed with my lips the hard sinewy body  
 Of Earth, the cherishing mistress of bitter lovers.  
 ('A Moment's Interlude')



In 'Leave-Taking', however, nature takes on the attributes of the war – even perhaps the death – that awaited him on the other side of the Channel:

Will the world still live for you  
 When I am gone?  
 Will the straight garden poppy  
 Still spout blood from its green throat  
 Before your feet?  
 Will the five cleft petals of the campion  
 Still be rose-coloured,  
 Like five murdered senses, for you?

In 'Vicarious Atonement', he saw himself in the role of a martyr – even of Christ.

At the end of August when the draft was due to embark for France, both Aldington and Fallas were promoted to lance corporal, which meant three months' N.C.O. training, just as Aldington had hoped. Their service in the 11<sup>th</sup> Devonshires was also at an end: from September 1916 all regimental reserve battalions were amalgamated into a 'Training Reserve', a pool from which individuals could be posted to any regiment needing new drafts.

No sooner were H.D.'s fears for her husband's safety eased, than she discovered in the *Poetry Review of America* 'two beautiful and intense poems' that convinced her that Aldington's feelings for Flo Fallas ran deep.<sup>27</sup> 'Images' and 'Inarticulate Grief' are both expressions of anguish, and clearly located in North Devon where they had been composed. That H.D. had seen neither poem before and had not known that they had been sent to the journal suggests that the two poets had ceased to share their creative lives. 'Images' is a poem of frustrated love, beginning:

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.

H.D. wrote to Cournos that these poems had made her realise that what he and she had seen as 'a mild and distracting flirtation' was in fact 'a very intense passion.' She was, she wrote, convinced that Aldington

was still in love with Flo and wished he would talk to her about it, so that she could 'help more'. She even asked if she should invite Flo to come and stay at Corfe Castle. Her letter finishes dramatically: 'I am ready to give my own life away to him, to give my soul and the peace of my spirit that he may have beauty, that he may see and feel beauty so that he may write – as that is the ultimate desire of all of us.'<sup>28</sup>

We may find such self-abnegation remarkable. Helen Carr suggests that H.D. tried to live 'by the standards of unselfish womanly goodness and kindness she had learnt from her Moravian mother.' Carr also points out that, idealising each other, husband and wife constantly tried to live up to each other's image of themselves.<sup>29</sup> H.D. also clung to her conception of the artist as set apart from the rest of humanity and attempted to use this notion to justify both Aldington's affair (as a quest for beauty) and her own suffering (out of which poetry would arise). 'The hurt I suffered has freed my song – this is most precious to me', she wrote to Cournos in her next letter, only a few days later.<sup>30</sup> It is clear from this letter that she has at last been able to communicate with Aldington about the affair, as she tells Cournos: 'R. writes – "Hang Flo & damn Carl. . . . For God's sake, love your Faun & don't be nobile [sic]."'

However, so fixated is she on her notion of the primacy of love that she also advises Cournos: 'And you – do not you deny your fate. If love of me – absolute and terrible and hopeless love – is going to help you to write – then *love* me. Do not let *ought* and *ought not*, two evil sprites, torment you.' Small wonder that Cournos was bewildered – and eventually bitter. Indeed, H.D. found herself having to back-track in her next two letters, telling him, 'When I said I could love you, you know what I meant. I meant if it would help R.' and, 'I do love you, Florentine, but you know the great and tender and bitter Greek love is beyond my love for you. . . . At the same time, one does not preclude the other.'<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile in her poetry we find a more complex, less 'schematic' – and more human – response to her situation. Its publication history is revealing. Three poems, 'Amaranth', 'Eros' and 'Envy', were never published in their complete form in her lifetime; instead, portions of them, pruned of their most personal content, appeared in *Heliodora* in 1924, masked as expansions of fragments of Sappho.<sup>32</sup> Even purged of these personal references, the poems are strikingly different from those of *Sea Garden*: they are longer and, despite the Greek framework, more anguished and intimate. In all three the speaker has been rejected by her lover for a new love. In 'Amaranth' she tells her lover:

I was not dull and dead when I fell back on our couch at night.  
I was not indifferent though I turned

And lay quiet.  
I was not dead in my sleep.

and in the two withheld closing sections she wrestles with conflicting emotions: the self-sacrifice that H.D. expressed in her letters to Cournos:

life is his if he take it,  
right. then let him take beauty  
as his

her anger and hurt pride:

But I,  
how I hate you for this,  
how I despise and hate,  
was my beauty so slight a gift,  
so soon, so soon forgot?

and her desire for him to return to her:

Turn for I love you yet,  
though you are not worthy my love,  
though you are not equal to it.

At the end of the poem, the goddess of love herself warns the fickle lover:

Turn if you will from her path  
for one moment seek  
a lesser beauty  
and a lesser grace,  
but you will find  
no peace in the end  
save in her presence.

Here indeed is the poet as prophet! In 'Eros' she questions the very nature of love and loss:

Is it bitter to give back  
love to your lover if he wish it  
for a new favourite,

who can say,  
or is it sweet?

is it sweet to possess utterly,  
or is it bitter,  
bitter as ash?

and she concludes:

What need of a lamp  
when day lightens us,  
what need to bind love  
when love stands  
with such radiant wings over us?

what need –  
yet to sing love,  
love must first shatter us.

The most harrowing of the three poems is 'Envy', which opens and closes: 'I envy you your chance of death' and asks, 'What can death mar in me/ that you have not?' The speaker recalls her lover's former tenderness in a passage which clearly refers to Aldington's visit to H.D. in the nursing home after the stillbirth of their child:

You gathered violets,  
you spoke:  
'your hair is not less black  
nor less fragrant,  
not in your eyes is less light,  
your hair is not less sweet  
with purple in the lift of locks;  
why were those slight words  
and the violets you gathered  
of such worth?

and the with-held section of the poem contrasts this gentleness with his subsequent masculine physicality:

Could I have known  
you were more male than the sun-god,

more hot, more intense,  
 could I have known?  
 for your glance all-enfolding,  
 sympathetic, was selfless  
 as a girl's glance.

concluding poignantly:  
 Could I have known?  
 I whose heart,  
 being rent, cared nothing,  
 was unspeakably indifferent.

So in poems that, ironically, her husband would never read in their entirety and certainly did not see at the time of their composition, H.D. disclosed – and wrestled with – feelings that she refused, out of both pride and concern for his well-being, to reveal to him. Perhaps the outcome for their relationship would have been different had there been greater honesty between them. H.D. would eventually, although painfully, accomplish a capacity for openness through the writing of her novels and through psychoanalysis; Aldington's path would be harder.

Meanwhile, she was writing in a white heat: indeed, this is the image she uses to Cournos: 'you know I am living a curious imaginative life now. Everything burns me and everything seems to have become significant. . . . This is wonderful, this life for me – but I am torn and burnt out physically.'<sup>33</sup> In another letter she makes explicit the notion that runs like an undercurrent through the poems: that the personal suffering was the fuel for her creativity and therefore to be welcomed: 'I love Richard with a searing, burning intensity. I love him and have come to this torture of my free will. I could have forgotten my pride broken and my beauty as it were, unappreciated. I could have found peace with you. But of my own will I have allowed this fire to burn me. Of my own will I have come to this Hell. But beauty is never Hell. I believe this flame is my very Daemon driving me to write.'<sup>34</sup> In these weeks she also wrote 'The Islands', 'The God', 'Adonis' and 'Eurydice'.<sup>35</sup> She told Cournos that this work was 'a series that all runs on continuously but can be read as single poems' and that it would be 'very far ahead' of all her other work, if she could find the strength to go on with it.<sup>36</sup> Alone all week in her lodgings, she also busied herself with her new duties as assistant editor of *The Egoist*, commissioning and writing material, and with her translation of Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

On 20 September, Aldington was given six days' leave before beginning his NCO training and the couple went straight to London to resume

something resembling their former literary life. Cournos was back in town, having initially stayed with the Randalls until he could again occupy one of the small attic rooms at 44 Mecklenburgh Square; and, after an absence of nearly two years, Fletcher had returned to England in July to marry his now-divorced mistress, Daisy Arbuthnot. He, Flint, H.D. and Aldington dined together in Soho. Flint wrote to Lowell that it was a ‘comprehensive gathering of the clan . . . the absent ones being yourself on the bay where the tea was spoiled and Lawrence on some little bay in Cornwall.’<sup>37</sup> Fletcher told her how well Aldington looked: ‘You would scarcely know he is the same, so completely has the army changed him. I find him much more human than he used to be and much more modest.’ But he wrote of H.D.: ‘I was shocked at the change; she looked so absolutely frail and wasted.’<sup>38</sup> He assumed, of course, that this was entirely attributable to Aldington’s enlistment.

After his leave, Aldington returned to Wareham, leaving H.D. alone again at Corfe Castle. Her subsequent correspondence with Lawrence, which has not survived, has excited much curiosity, and her later elliptical and enigmatic references to her relationship with him (in ‘Advent’ and, in fictionalised form, in *Bid Me To Live*) have fuelled speculation. At the end of October she wrote to Cournos that she had started to see people as colours and that, while Cournos was blue and Aldington red: ‘There is a yellow flame! bright, hard, clear, terrible, cruel . . . that sees in me its *exact* compliment [*sic*].’ She tells Cournos: ‘There is a power in this person to kill me. I mean literally. For the spiritual vision, his thoughts, his distant passion has given me, I thank God. . . . But . . . there is yet another side – if he comes too near I am afraid for myself. . . . You, no doubt, know in your heart of whom I write as a cruel-fire! I do not want that person to die. He has a great gift. He is ill! – But I must be protected!’<sup>39</sup> H.D. was by this time unwell herself and in a highly nervous state; but there must have been something in Lawrence’s letters to excite this response.

In *Bid Me To Live* ‘Julia’ describes ‘Rico’s’ letters as ‘just ordinary letters that you could chuck across a breakfast-tray to any husband, but that yet held the flame and the fire, the burning, the believing’.<sup>40</sup> It seems clear that H.D. was sending Lawrence her work – work which she was not showing to Aldington and which was not destined for the anthology.<sup>41</sup> Although she probably did not tell him of her husband’s affair, her poems would have left Lawrence in little doubt. They were poems of which he would have approved – much more subjective and intense than her *Sea Garden*. Indeed in January 1917, when ‘The God’ and ‘Adonis’ appeared in *The Egoist*, he wrote to Edward Marsh: ‘Don’t you think H.D. – Mrs Aldington – writes some good poetry? I send you an ‘Egoist’ for this month. It’s nothing of a paper – but H.D. is good, without doubt.’<sup>42</sup>

Yet something about his letters frightened her, certainly confused her. *Bid Me To Live* again: ‘That was funny about Rico, he shouted at her, “Kick over your tiresome house of life,” he wrote, “our languid lily of virtue nods perilously near the pit;” yet when it came to one, any one, of her broken stark metres, he had no criticism to make.’<sup>43</sup>

Lawrence could never resist the opportunity to lecture his friends, and his view of the mass of humanity at the period of his retreat to Cornwall was savage. Paul Delany observes that: ‘Misanthropy, sometimes to the point of mania, became Lawrence’s predominant mood during 1916.’<sup>44</sup> H.D. may simply have been alarmed by his ranting. *Bid Me To Live* suggests, however, that he was offering her some kind of close relationship: ‘He



John Gould Fletcher

‘He had written about love, about her frozen altars . . . “come away where the angels come down to earth”; “crucible” he had called her, “burning slightly blue of flame”; “love-adept,” he had written, “you are a living spirit in a living spirit city.”’<sup>45</sup> The invitation to ‘come away where the angels come down to earth’ seems to be an allusion to Lawrence’s continuing plans for ‘Ranamin’, a community of like-minded people; H.D. was now one of those to be included. In a letter to Cecil Gray a year later Lawrence would write: ‘. . . my “women”, Esther Andrews, Hilda Aldington etc. represent . . . the threshold of a new world, or underworld, of knowledge and being.’<sup>46</sup>

The reference to an ‘underworld of knowledge and being’ links directly both to Lawrence’s own preoccupation with the Orpheus myth and to H.D.’s poem, ‘Eurydice’, which she had sent him. However, the kind of relationship that Lawrence offered ‘his women’ was invariably that of disciples; it is not surprising that H.D. was terrified. (‘Frederico, for all his acceptance of her verses, had shouted his man-is-man, his woman-is-woman at her; his shrill peacock-cry sounded a love-cry, death-cry for their generation’, Julia realises.)<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the Aldingtons’ marriage



had been one of equality and mutual respect, founded on a belief in each other as poet and as human being. Now, with the equilibrium destroyed by Aldington's infidelity and his enlistment so soon afterwards, H.D. had lost her sense of personal worth: 'I have all faith in my work. What I want at times is to feel faith in my self, in my mere physical presence in the world, in my personality, I feel my work is beautiful, I have a deep faith in it, an absolute faith. But sometimes I have no faith in my own self', she wrote in a touching postscript to Cournos.<sup>48</sup>

For his part, overwhelmed by the bleakness of his present life and by his fear of what was to come, Aldington was losing faith, if not in his powers as a poet, at least in the possibility of his ever again having the time – or the life – in which to write. Perhaps this was another reason why H.D. did not share with him the work she was producing. 'R. seems to double his concern for my "career" not [*sic*] that his has been more or less invalidated', she wrote to Flint.<sup>49</sup> But her successes were all too apparent. *Sea Garden* was published in September and in August her Clerk's Press edition of *Iphigenia in Aulis* arrived. 'It will be an inspiration to us to go on with our work', she wrote to Bubb, knowing that she had no need of inspiration and that it would not be enough to inspire her husband, although he must have been pleased for her.

Her next poem was a further departure. 'The Tribute', published in the November issue of *The Egoist*, is, despite its archetypal setting, a poem about the war, a political critique of the commercialism, ugliness and godlessness dominating society, and a tribute to the young men who have been sent to war. It is also a tribute to all those who seek for the old gods of beauty to replace the 'god of the lance' who reigns unchallenged over the city.

Meanwhile, Aldington's next published work – in November's *The Little Review* – was also a departure: sixteen short prose poems, the first of *The Love Poems of Myrrhine and Konallis*, a cycle of thirty-two such poems 'in the Greek manner' celebrating the love between a goat-girl and a hetaira, which would be published by the Clerk's Press in June 1917: heavily sensuous, Grecian, neo-Decadent pieces. He would describe them to Bubb as 'sterile and passionate and lovely and melancholy' and, tellingly, inform him that 'in those poems I have expressed more of myself than in *Images*, which is tinged with influences foreign to myself.'<sup>50</sup> The last of those published in *The Little Review*, 'The Last Song', gives some indication of his state of mind at the time:

Along the shorn fields stand the last brown wheat-  
sheaves, casting long shadows in the autumn  
sunset.

White were the horses of Helios at dawn, golden at  
 noon, blood-red at night – and all too brief the day.  
 So was my life and even so brief; night comes; I rise  
 from the glad feast, drink to the gods of Life, cast  
 incense to the gods of Death, to Love a shattered  
 rose; and turn away.  
 Hail, all! Laugh, this is the bitter end of life.

So, ironically, while he was turning away from contemporary reality, H.D. whom he saw so often as in need of protection, was engaging with it, finding for herself a purpose in the wartime world, though no less appalled by it. She dedicated her poem to her husband, and had Bubb publish it in book form for him in February 1917. Meanwhile, he was heartened to receive from Bubb towards the end of October copies of his *Latin Poems of the Renaissance*.

There was a new crisis in mid October. With Aldington transferred some twenty-five miles west to Westham Camp at Weymouth, H.D. fell ill. Aldington became concerned once again about her vulnerability, not only because she would soon be alone – perhaps permanently – but because, he argued in a letter to Flint, he anticipated that all women under thirty without children would soon be industrially conscripted. His plan for her to go back to America was revived; H.D. booked her passage and even asked Cournos to accompany her. By late November, however, she had first delayed her plans and then abandoned them. Instead, she moved back to London on 12 November, to their room at 44 Mecklenburgh Square.

Aldington's anxiety was compounded by his own miserable circumstances. In mid November he was transferred to Verne Citadel, Portland. A letter to Flint a few days after his arrival starts, 'My dear lad/ I feel rather depressed tonight, so you must pardon it if my letter is depressing.'

And indeed it is. He paints a stark picture of his new surroundings, 'a wild desolate spot with dispiriting associations'.<sup>51</sup> He speaks of the icy November wind, which 'shoots, as if through a tunnel, across the parade-ground and freezes face, hands and feet until we almost weep with the pain.' As for the surrounding landscape: 'Everywhere there are desolate quarries, everywhere the traces of the unhappy convicts in the prison here.'

As so often, he becomes aware that, when others are suffering far worse in France, his complaints must seem self-indulgent, but, rising to a crescendo, the letter continues: 'my pity explodes into hate for those imbeciles who pretend that there is anything fine and enobling or romantic in soldiering. It is simply dreary routine, dreary endurance, dreary 'heroism' of dying at

the word of command! Somehow some of us will endure to the end, but what shall we be worth?'<sup>52</sup> By December, he was writing more cheerful letters, but the underlying pessimism remains: 'I would prefer to die than exist in this appalling postwar world. Europe is ruined – that is the definite truth.'<sup>53</sup>

On 20 December he was notified for the draft. He and Fallas were to go to the Leicestershire Regiment, with no guarantee that they would be NCOs, despite their training. Furthermore, they were to depart the next day; there would be no embarkation leave. Aldington and H.D. had a hurried farewell at Waterloo Station, as his train passed through.

And so to France. In *Death of a Hero* it is on board ship that Winterbourne starts to feel 'almost happy' for the first time since war was declared. The cause of this uplifting sensation is his sight of the 'real soldiers', the men going back to the front from leave. Listening to their conversations, he discovers that they have no more delusions about the war than he has, but that they 'went on with the business . . . because they had been told that it had to be done and believed what they had been told.'<sup>54</sup> That voyage seems to have been the starting point for Aldington's later conviction that those who went to war became a race apart.

He spent the last week of 1916 under canvas at a base camp near Calais. He told Flint that they were sixteen to a tent; by the time he came to write *Life for Life's Sake* it had become twenty-two to an eight man tent. They were to stay there, freezing cold and usually hungry, for almost three weeks, with little to do, apart from 'a little floundering about in marching order, going through the gas chamber, and throwing a couple of Mills bombs apiece.'<sup>55</sup>

On 9 January both men joined a draft of 106 other ranks sent to 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment, the Pioneer battalion of 6<sup>th</sup> Division, currently situated at the Cambrin-Hohenzollern Quarries front, south of La Bassée and north of Loos. Aldington's war had begun.