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Brief Encounter: Richard Aldington and the *Englishwoman*

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WHEN, in 1974, Norman T. Gates published an edition of Richard Aldington's uncollected poems, he commented on the difficulty of recovering the whole of an author's corpus. "It is probable," Gates acknowledged, "that other poems not included in *The Complete Poems* are buried in obscure 'little' magazines and remain to be recovered. This is especially so since Aldington habitually published in French and American periodicals as well as in those of his own country."¹ The era in which early modernists such as Aldington (1892–1962) wrote was notable for an explosion of "obscure" magazines and papers, not only devoted to the artistic ferment of the time but to radical political and social thought. Some crossed disciplines; many were ephemeral. This quantity and diversity of outlets is a challenge to the bibliographer's and the anthologist's task. Authors' own recollections of their magazine credits may choose to highlight the more prestigious publications and to gloss over vanished allegiances. Resources like the *Little Magazines Index* and the indices of newspapers offer valuable information, but these do not cover all outlets, particularly those that fall outside the clear-cut categories of arts magazine or newspaper. Judging where "else" an author may have published requires not a little detective work or luck. Mining one more journal may, or may not, turn up a poem. This is true even for an author such as Aldington, who published relatively little juvenilia in obscure outlets before finding his mature poetic voice and an established position in the literary press.

I have learned of three uncollected poems by Aldington that can now supplement Professor Gates's edition. These poems were published in 1912 in a London monthly journal, the *Englishwoman*, one of the many contemporary magazines dedicated to promoting women's suffrage.

Aldington's contributions to the journal consisted of an original verse, "Night," in February 1912, a translation, "Greek Epigram," in May 1912, and a second original verse, "Hélas!," in July 1912. Aside from their interest as some of Aldington's earliest surviving publications, what is particularly noteworthy about these works is that Aldington is not otherwise known to have published in the suffrage press. This fact may explain why they have long been overlooked; the context in which they appeared was not one with which Aldington is commonly associated.

In 1912, Aldington's career was at a nascent stage in which he was just beginning to experience semi-regular freelance sales. He was then nineteen years old. The previous year, financial troubles had forced him prematurely to abandon a classics degree at University College, London. Dismissing proposals by well-meaning friends that he turn to clerking for a living, he determined to follow his vocation as a writer, and sought to earn money through a combination of poetry, literary articles and hack journalism. From February 1912, his poems and translations of poems began to appear in London newspapers. By November of the same year, a few months after his brief association with the *Englishwoman* ended, his first original works in free verse had appeared in the Chicago magazine *Poetry*, with a note identifying the author as "one of the *Imagistes*." Aldington had written poetry seriously from his early teens. At the time he left university he had assembled, according to his 1941 autobiography, "a portfolio containing among other things twenty or thirty of my poems and translations of poems."² Some of these were free verse based on readings in Greek literature and represented what he would call his "first real poem[s]."³ Others were formal verse in the derivative mode of the period. The translations, particularly those that were renderings of Greek poetry, suggest the transition from the latter mode to the former. Aldington hawked the contents of this "portfolio" around editorial offices, finding a market for the formal verses and the freer translations but, until *Poetry* was founded late in 1912, none for the free verse that more accurately reflected his found style. Most of the editorial contacts subsequently recorded in his memoirs were with newspapers; the *Englishwoman* was not mentioned. His autobiography describes working as a sports journalist for one London paper and selling poems to another.⁴ Gates's edition of the uncollected poems notes ten publications (seven of them translations) in the London *Evening Standard*, *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Westminster Gazette* between February and June 1912. During the same period, Aldington was also writing

criticism for Harold Monro's *Poetry Review*. His involvement with the *Englishwoman* belongs, therefore, to a pattern of regular attempts at breaking into the London press, using the resources of the "portfolio" as well as new work on which he was intensely engaged at that time.

Perhaps one reason for the obscurity of Aldington's involvement with the *Englishwoman* is that his association with the *New Freewoman* (later the *Egoist*), of which he became assistant editor in late 1913, is by contrast well known. The *New Freewoman/Egoist* was a journal of a very different type to the *Englishwoman*. Launched in June 1913, it was successor to an earlier, folded magazine venture, the *Freewoman*, which had been founded by the former suffragette Dora Marsden and which ran from 1911 to 1912. Marsden remained chief editor of the journal through its successive incarnations until mid-1914. The *Freewoman* was explicitly intended as a counter to the suffrage press. It provided a forum for discussing a range of political, social and sexual issues relating to women (and men), in contrast to what Marsden saw as the suffrage press's myopic focus on the vote. It also showcased a fundamentally different approach to such matters as equality, freedom and power. As her thought developed, Marsden, a writer influenced by the egoistic philosophy of Max Stirner, came to reject the whole concept of a feminist "movement" in favour of a radical individualism unbounded by gender. She dismissed the issue of the vote as a chimera, arguing that power inhered simply in the autonomy of the individual self. The *Freewoman's* radical outlook created a good many enemies. Its combative editorials and candid discussion of sexuality caused it to be regarded with horror in the conservative press, while it alienated many mainstream feminists by its critique of suffragist politics. In 1912, while the *Freewoman* was still very much alive, it represented an ideological rival to the *Englishwoman*, a magazine devoted to constitutional suffrage and responsive to middle-class sensibilities.

When, at the end of 1913, Marsden's developing philosophy was reflected in the expunging of "woman" from the magazine's name and its rebranding as the *Egoist*, Aldington was one of several (male) authors who bolstered her controversial decision by signing a staged "letter to the editor." The letter praised Marsden's paper as "an organ of individualists of both sexes," distinguishing it clearly from the suffrage papers which were, by contrast, termed "organs devoted solely to the advocacy of an unimportant reform in an obsolete political institution."⁵ Staged as this letter was, Aldington's personal political development was similar to Marsden's in at least one key aspect: that early

statist convictions (in his case, for socialism) matured into radical individualism and a distrust in state-sponsored solutions for human problems. Therefore, although he believed in gender equality, the issue of suffrage was not one of supreme concern. The view of suffrage prevalent at the *Freewoman / New Freewoman / Egoist* can be seen reflected in Aldington's first novel, *Death of a Hero* (1929). In a scene set circa 1912, the novel's antihero George Winterbourne shares his doubts on the subject with his girlfriend:

You want women to be free to lead more interesting lives. So do I. Any man who isn't an abject moron would rather see women becoming more intelligent and magnanimous instead of having them kept ignorant and timid and repressed and meekly acquiescent.... But you won't achieve that with Suffrage. Of course, let women have votes if they want them. But who the devil wants a vote? I'd gladly give you mine if I had one.⁶

Reading such a passage, it takes an effort to project backwards and realize that in the historical 1912 its author had not yet subscribed publicly to similar views, and was supporting and being supported by a suffragist journal.

The *Englishwoman* was based in Kensington, the London borough that more than any other was associated with the circle of Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Ford and the Imagists. The journal was connected to the London Society for Women's Suffrage (LSWS), Britain's largest regional suffrage organization. Its editorial board circa 1912 included prominent suffragettes who combined political activism with artistic reputation and interests: Lady Frances Balfour, Mary Lowndes and Cicely Hamilton. Lady Frances, one of the most socially elevated activists of the women's movement, was president of the LSWS as well as a long-standing committee member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). After being widowed in 1911, she turned seriously to writing as a career, eventually becoming the author of several non-fiction works. Lowndes, a successful glass artist, served as chairperson of the Artists' Suffrage Society and, like Lady Frances, sat on the governing bodies of the LSWS and NUWSS; she was a frequent contributor to the *Englishwoman*. Cicely Hamilton, playwright, novelist and former actress, was cofounder of the Women Writers' Suffrage League and of the Actresses' Franchise League.

Under these high-profile leaders, the *Englishwoman* was oriented towards a middle/upper-class readership (one of its regular advertisers was a manufacturer of "Court Gowns"), and away from the more violent and anarchistic manifestations of its cause. Lady Frances, who

came from a Liberal background, believed in activism through constitutional means and was opposed to the militant wing of the suffragette movement. The magazine was intended as a tool to win hearts and minds to the suffrage cause in a nonthreatening way. It used general articles and original writing, alongside the primary political content, as hooks to draw in the intelligent reader who might not be interested in suffrage *per se*. To quote its introductory blurb from 1912:

The ENGLISHWOMAN is intended to reach the cultured public and bring before it, in a convincing and moderate form, the case for the Enfranchisement of Women. No support will be given to any particular party in politics.

The magazine will be inspired from the first page to the last by one continuous policy, which is to further the Enfranchisement of Women. It will try to do so, first by securing the sympathy and holding the attention of that public which is interested in letters, art, and culture generally, and by an impartial statement of facts. Its chief features will be:

Articles dealing with the Women's Movement at home and abroad.

Notes on Parliamentary Bills as affecting women and children.

Articles on Women's Work in Professions and Trades.

Sociological questions and their influence on the status of women.

Stories, poems, scientific articles, and short plays.

Criticisms of music, painting, sculpture, and current literature.

Typically, the lead article in a given issue would be devoted to the status of the suffrage question, and this would then be followed by more broadly focused articles on such topics as women's education, by critical or travel essays, by poetry and short fiction, and by book and theatre reviews. For example, the February 1912 number, in which the first of Aldington's poems appeared, featured a leader assessing the chances of a franchise reform bill passing Parliament, an open letter on "Women's Suffrage and the Referendum" by NUWSS president Millicent Garrett Fawcett, articles on "The Position of Women in Hindu Society" and "The Women of George Meredith," a story by Mary Lowndes and reviews of plays being staged in London. Sometimes, as the title of the Meredith essay indicates, there was a political subtext to the critical articles, demonstrating the blurb's claim that suffrage inspired the magazine "from the first page to the last."

Poetry was a regular feature of the magazine, with two or more poems often appearing in a single issue. For the most part, these were conventional, stanzaic in form and innocuous in sentiment, meeting a general middle-class readership's expectation of what magazine verse should be. That did not mean, however, that the featured poets were negligible: among the better-known names published in 1911–1912 were Frances Cornford, John Drinkwater, Charlotte Mew, Dollie Radford, Lady Margaret Sackville and Katharine Tynan. As would be expected of a suffrage journal, women writers outnumbered men, but this list indicates nonetheless that the journal's special interest did not freeze its choice of contributors; as it hoped to pull in readers interested in art, and not necessarily suffrage, so it attracted contributors who were recognized as poets independently of a specific political context.

How Aldington became connected to the *Englishwoman* is unknown. Word of mouth and personal recommendation were key inroads into the marginal magazine market in this period. Although the *Englishwoman* fell outside the channels of influence that facilitated Aldington's contacts with purely literary magazines, a connection that may have been significant was his friendship with Brigit Patmore. Patmore, an aspiring writer, had married into the family of the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore, and partly through the cachet of this association, and partly through her own personality and remarkable beauty, was a popular hostess whose London home provided a space for writers to meet and mingle. Aldington and Patmore met circa 1911 and it was she who, most famously, introduced him to Ezra Pound and H.D. Patmore's circle of friends also included a number of writers who belonged to Cicely Hamilton's Women Writers' Suffrage League, notably the novelists Violet Hunt and May Sinclair and the poet Alice Meynell. Hunt and Sinclair were well known as advocates for suffrage. In her memoir, *My Friends When Young*, Patmore recalled that her friendship with Hunt drew her, too, into involvement with suffragism and resulted in her selling the paper *Votes for Women* on the streets of London.⁷ It may have been through this circle that Aldington was induced to try the city's suffrage press as a potential literary market.

Aldington's publications in the *Englishwoman*, like those in other London periodicals during 1912, matched the general-interest nature of the magazine in their traditional subjects and mode. His first contribution was a forty-line poem, "Night," published in the issue of February 1912. This piece is among the earliest known published works by Aldington. Gates records only two poems that appeared earlier,

in 1910 and 1911, and two that appeared during the same month in the *Evening Standard*—these latter probably representing what Aldington, in his autobiography, described as his first serious attempt at pitching work on spec to a newspaper editor.⁸ “Night” is also one of Aldington’s most formal compositions to have survived, being written to a strict plan of eight-line stanzas rhymed *aaabcccb*, of which the fourth and eighth lines are iambic trimeter and the rest tetrameter.

Night

Amid the purple floods of night
 Which surge across the the [*sic*] sands of light
 The pearl-moon glimmered faint and white,
 And all the winds had died;
 The half-hid stars seemed cold and still,
 And silence, gliding o’er the hill,
 Made dim the dreams of life, until
 The gates of dawn swung wide.

The ripples crept along the bay
 And set the yellow weed a-sway;
 The moonbeams built a silken way
 Across the darkened sea;
 But in my soul lay hid the pain
 Of all the stars and moons that wane,
 Of all the worlds that Time hath slain,
 Of all the hours that flee.

Who knows what strong, portentous hand
 Hath wrought the bastion of the strand,
 And lit the red sun’s flaming brand,
 And winged the stars with fire?

Who knows what sad, unsleeping eyes
 Saw Nineveh in pomp arise,
 Saw Karnak’s towers reflect the skies,
 And saw the ships of Tyre?

Who gave the goodly benison
 Of life, and stirred men’s blood to run
 Like sun-fire from the rising sun,
 Then breathed the curse of death?

Who said that man should find full sweet
 The golden Aphrodite’s feet,
 That love with love should closely meet
 To vanish like a breath?

Old gods have passed; new gods are born:
 No Artemis with ringing horn
 Answers the chanting of the morn
 And hears his golden rhyme;
 No Ishtar dares the might of hell,
 No priest salutes the name of Bel;
 And Death with shaking hands doth tell
 The linkéd beads of time.⁹

“Night” shares some elements in common with better-known poems by Aldington. In particular, its preoccupation with a vanished pagan world and its decadent evocation of a personified Death call to mind his first “Imagist” work, “Choricos.”¹⁰ However, it lacks the assuredness as well as the free rhythm of the latter poem, and its set form and classical references were the stuff of which commercial magazine verse was made. Notwithstanding the faults of “Night,” Aldington was sufficiently interested in its fate to canvass an opinion from poet and editor Harold Monro. In a letter written early in 1912, he offered a realistic assessment of the poem while enquiring of Monro: “How did you like *The Hymn at Night*; I like it; two other people don’t, which seems rather hopeless.”¹¹

The same heavy Romantic tone, saturated with the 1890s, was present in the second of Aldington’s original poems in the *Englishwoman*, “Hélas! [Alas!],” printed in July 1912. This time, however, the sentimentality was self-referentially undercut by a twist curious for a periodical dedicated to “the enfranchisement of women”:

Hélas!

She comes no more by noon or night,
 Delight
 I may not taste, I may not see.
 To me
 The twilight eve, the moon, whose frail
 Thin veil
 Of cloud as pallid as the dawn
 Was drawn
 Adown the languid West, the slow
 Sad glow
 Of fading sunset-green, and trees
 The breeze
 Kissed not, nor fondled, and the dew
 Stars strew

Over the misty pyre of day,
 Are gay
 No more, no more; delight is dead.
 We twain are wed.¹²

Here, the diction is entirely that of conventional Romanticism (even to the rhyming of “trees” with “breeze”), but the title in overwrought French and the bathos of the final line surround it with a frame of satire.¹³ The poem creates humour by playing on the reader’s expectations that some tragedy will be revealed as the emotion builds. The stop-start monometer lines—more reminiscent of Charles Stuart Calverley than of the Romantics—enhance the comic effect, it being difficult to read the poem aloud without falling into exaggeration of the rhythm.

Perhaps the most interesting of the three poems, from the perspective of Aldington’s developing mature style, was the translation, “Greek Epigram (Theaetetus).” This piece, published in the *Englishwoman* in May 1912, was characteristic of Aldington’s work in translation at that time. Two earlier “Greek Epigrams,” translations of Rufinus and Meleager, had appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the preceding months. These poems were the first published (although not the first written) works by Aldington that were not in formal rhyme and metre. Each of the “Epigrams,” which varied in length from six to fourteen lines, was written as a single stanza. Their rhythm was based on iambic pentameter but relaxed into the more natural cadence of speech, and the poems did not use full rhyme, although they did employ partial rhymes, assonance and discernable sound patterns. Despite archaisms and Victorian echoes, these Greek translations are more indicative of Aldington’s found voice in poetry than those original works that had thus far made their way into print. Aldington claimed Greek poetry as the primary influence on his experiments in free verse, and through the greater latitude allowed by most editors to poetic form in translations, it was also the medium through which those experiments gained a first, tentative airing. (Not that the latitude should be overstated—a far freer translation of Sappho, published in Ezra Pound’s 1914 anthology *Des Imagistes*, also dates from 1912 and did not secure publication in any magazine.)

Greek Epigram

(Theaetetus)

Now do the flowers of the chaliced roses
 Abundantly bloom on the fair-leav’d trees;

Now the cicada in the cypress boughs
 Enchains the binder-of-sheaves with music;
 Now the child-loving swallow in the eaves
 Of the homesteads buildeth couches of clay;
 And the ocean's ship-bearing ridges sleep,
 Calm, loved o' the west-wind, spreading afar,
 And neither do they roar at the ship's stern
 Nor crash into foam on the rugged strand;
 Sailors, upon the altar casting fish,
 Cuttles, or flower-bright mullets, to the god,
 Priapos, lord of havens and the sea,
 Traverse the far Ionian unafraid.¹⁴

From the summer of 1912 until the summer of 1913, Aldington travelled extensively in Europe, and his efforts at placing his poetry in London periodicals inevitably slackened. When Aldington began to publish concertedly again in late 1913, the magazine market had been altered by the founding of *Poetry*, to which Ezra Pound as foreign agent promoted his friend's free verse, and by his own appointment to the *New Freewoman*. The phase of which the *Englishwoman* was a part was largely over, and the journal fades from the history of Aldington's career.

This brief involvement with the suffrage press was perhaps not, however, entirely unrelated to Aldington's subsequent and more lasting relationship with the *New Freewoman/Egoist*. Dora Marsden followed the suffrage press, and it may be that Aldington's name first came to her notice in the pages of the *Englishwoman*. More generally, it is possible to speculate that the cross-discipline format of the *Englishwoman*, and its use of literary material to entice readers, helped to influence the revived *New Freewoman*. The *Freewoman* had been explicitly political and had not seriously featured creative literature. When its re-launch was being planned in 1913, the then-assistant editor Rebecca West advocated a stronger literary side in terms similar to the *Englishwoman*'s aim of "securing the sympathy and holding the attention of that public which is interested in letters, art, and culture." "A literary side," West wrote to Marsden, "would be a bribe to the frivolous minded in London, and I don't see why a movement towards freedom of expression in literature should not be associated with and inspired by your gospel."¹⁵ This marketing strategy uniting the two divergent magazines would eventually grant Aldington his editorial job on the *Egoist* and the opportunity to promote stylistically as well as ideologically challenging writing.

Notes

Acknowledgment: Permission to reprint Richard Aldington's poems was granted by The Estate of Richard Aldington.

1. Norman T. Gates, *The Poetry of Richard Aldington: A Critical Evaluation and an Anthology of Uncollected Poems* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974), 166–67.
2. Richard Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake* (London: Cassell, 1968), 76.
3. *Ibid.*, 279–80. Scattered pieces of evidence support the contention that Aldington had already written some of his more characteristic free verse poems at a time when his published credits comprised only conventional “magazine verse.” In 1917, he told Amy Lowell that he “began to write vers libre about the early part of 1911,” under the influence Greek literature (which he was then reading at university), and that his earliest poems published as “Imagist” were written at the age of eighteen (*Richard Aldington: An Autobiography in Letters*, Norman T. Gates, ed. [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992], 28). Although Aldington's dating in letters is not always one hundred percent accurate, this early date for the poems is supported by the subtitle *1910–1915* given to his first collection, *Images* (1915).
4. Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake*, 72–77.
5. “Views and Comments,” *New Freewoman*, 15 December 1913, 244.
6. Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London: Hogarth, 1984), 159.
7. Brigit Patmore, *My Friends When Young: The Memoirs of Brigit Patmore* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 52.
8. Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake*, 76–77.
9. Richard Aldington, “Night,” *Englishwoman*, February 1912, 155–56. Copyright © The Estate of Richard Aldington.
10. Richard Aldington, *The Complete Poems of Richard Aldington* (London: Allen Wingate, 1948), 21–23.
11. *Richard Aldington: An Autobiography in Letters*, 9. Since “Night” was unknown to him, Gates glossed this as a reference to “Night Piece,” a prose poem included in Aldington's first book, *Images* (1915). The congruity of dates and the description of the poem as a “hymn,” however, more satisfactorily fit “Night.”
12. Richard Aldington, “Hélas!,” *Englishwoman*, July 1912, 67. Copyright © The Estate of Richard Aldington. The original title's incorrect circumflex accent, instead of the acute, is a typesetting error.
13. The title is perhaps also a deliberate allusion to Oscar Wilde's poem of the same name, published in 1881.
14. Richard Aldington, “Greek Epigram,” *Englishwoman*, May 1912, 151. Copyright © The Estate of Richard Aldington.
15. Bruce Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism: Gender, Individualism, Science* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 95–96.