

## Darkened Lands.

### A Post-pastoral Reading of Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*

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#### ABSTRACT

Co-founder of imagism with Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Richard Aldington was also a bestseller war novelist who described and denounced the horrors of World War I in his first novel *Death of a Hero*, which recently received new recognition thanks to its re-issue in the Penguin Classics (2013).

Although written well before the ecocritical turn, the novel actually makes use of complex-pastoral features in order to explore issues connected to war. This paper thus aims to present *Death of a Hero* as a novel containing not only the 'three general strands of usage' of the Pastoral literary convention (Gifford 1999), but also a treatment of the war, 'the ultimate anti-pastoral' (Fussell 1975), through literary devices which can be read as characteristic of a Post-pastoral novel.

*Keywords:* Richard Aldington, War, Ecocriticism, Pastoral, Post-pastoral, Terry Gifford

#### Introduction

Despite having been considered by many as 'a war to preserve and restore' (Eksteins 1989, 133), World War I, the world's first industrial war, counts among the most destructive human interventions on landscapes. Kate McLoughlin describes warfare as 'a perverse kind of planting that transforms the country physically as well as politically' (2011, 87), irrevocably altering 'the space on and within which it occurs' (83). A key example of this are the more than 150 kilometres of trenches dug during the Great War, extending from the Belgian coast to the Swiss Alps and contributing to the 'new nature' of the Anthropocene, where 'every part of the planet's surface contains traces, whether microscopic or massively structural, of anthropogenic activity' (Sullivan 2015).

Yet, evidently, landscapes are not the only elements to be transformed and destroyed in a war. McLoughlin argues that 'Frequently encountered in war writing is the proposition that war defeats language, as though words themselves have been blasted to smithereens or else suffer from combat fatigue' (2009, 15). To experience such 'language fatigue' was, among others, Richard Aldington, co-founder of imagism with Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle, author of several collections of poems, and, not least, front-line soldier in World War I, an experience that left him so shattered that for nearly ten years he found it impossible to do creative work (see Bolchi 2016). Aldington was not the only artist that needed some years to recover from the war before being able to write again; this time-lag and the difficulty artists faced in finding the right words to narrate such an experience possibly resulted in it taking "some time for the shocking reality of the worst of the war experience to be known to British civilians"<sup>1</sup> (Tate 2009, 171). A good part of that knowledge came through literature in what can be considered the *annus mirabilis* of First World War writing: 1929. This year actually saw the appearance of Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, praised by George Orwell as 'much the best of the English war books' (quoted in Whelpton 2014, 12), but also of Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Charles Carrington's *A Subaltern's War*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone*, Rudolf Binding's *A Fatalist at War*

and Ludwig Renn's *War*. Many of the authors who finally managed to write about the conflict 'drew upon a long tradition of pastoral to try to describe the devastation of the First World War' (Tate 2009, Ch. 15), mourning the land to witness the effects of the war upon human beings. In his *Goodbye to All That*, for instance, Robert Graves tells about how he and Siegfried Sassoon defined the war in their poems 'by making contrasted definitions of peace', which for Sassoon mainly meant 'hunting, nature, music, and pastoral scenes' (2011 [1929], 241).

Pastoral elements are also recognisable in *Death of a Hero*, and this text is particularly interesting to study because of Aldington being one of the founders of imagism. In fact, in accordance with imagist poetics presented in the *Preface* to the 1916 collection *Some Imagist Poets*, he had been used to searching for 'the exact word which brings the effect of that object before the reader as it presented itself to the poet's mind' (1916, vi). As an imagist poet, he paid particular attention 'to the manner of presentation' of a subject (1916, v), and to the use of a very metaphorical poetry, it is thus worth examining how nature is represented in his narration in order to understand the role nature fulfils in this war-novel. For instance, Aldington's metaphorical use of flower images will here be shown to be part of a rhetorical strategy to create a strong chromatic contrast between the first two parts of the novel, characterised by a profusion of colours, and a third part on No Man's Land, where colours seem to fade away into an almost black and white effect. Such a peculiar attention to nature, offering the reader almost taxonomic descriptions of flowers and insects, which are not to be found in any of the above-mentioned Great War narrations, makes this war-novel an interesting case study of a work shifting between all three modes of pastoral, anti-pastoral and post-pastoral. This allows acceptance of what Terry Gifford calls 'the obvious challenge to the contemporary reader of literature that refers to nature in whatever forms', that is, 'to distinguish between the pastoral, the anti-pastoral, and the post-pastoral' (2012: 60).

I therefore intended to read *Death of a Hero* in accordance with Gifford's reading strategies to see if, and how, the novel raises the six questions of post-pastoral texts that Gifford proposed in 2014. I here aim to show how, in spite of having been written well before the 'ecocritical turn', Aldington's novel presents at least five of the six post-pastoral features proposed by Gifford, thus confirming his claim that: 'a post-pastoral theory of fiction is not only needed to account for certain narratives that engage with our current environmental anxieties, but [...] a post-pastoral narrative is being enacted by the storytellers who respond to the deepest anxieties of our age' (2013: 48). And what greater cause of anxiety can there be than a world war?

### **From the Pastoral Countryside to the Artists' City Life**

In his foundational book *Pastoral*, Gifford explains how the term pastoral is used 'in three broadly different ways' (1999, 1). First, it is a literary convention involving 'some form of retreat and return' (1), that is, a retreat to an idealised countryside and return to the city. Second, there is a broader use of pastoral, the one referring

to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban [...] A delight in the natural is assumed in describing these texts as pastorals. Here a pastoral is usually associated with a celebratory attitude towards what it describes, however superficially bleak it might appear to be. (2)

The simple celebration of nature 'comes under scrutiny' in the third use of pastoral, which entails a 'sceptical' and 'pejorative' use of the term, 'implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country' (2). The strongest accusation towards this kind of pastoral is that it created 'a false ideology that served to endorse a comfortable status quo for the landowning class who had been the reading public before the nineteenth century' (7).

All these three uses of pastoral are present in *Death of a Hero*, where Aldington moves from a traditional pastoral vision to a more sceptical one, by passing from the contrast between the country and the city. The book, telling the story of a young artist, George Winterbourne, who enlists in World War I and is eventually killed, is divided into three parts. In Part I, set in the countryside, we are introduced to George's parents falling in love and getting married; George is born and brought up as a patriotic British young man, although he fails to succeed as a lawyer and moves to the city. Part II is thus set in London, where George tries to become a painter and where he makes Fabian friendships, entertaining long philosophical talks with them. He falls in love with Elizabeth, whom he marries, even though neither of the two truly believes in the sacredness of marriage. When World War I breaks out, George decides to enlist; Part III therefore takes place in the No Man's Land of the French trenches and is 'written for the most part in a flatter, more restrained mode, producing a more strictly controlled, even documentary narrative' (Copp 2002, 21).

In the first part of the novel Aldington often presents detailed and scientifically accurate natural descriptions which are part of a typical English novelistic apparatus that began in the early seventeenth century, when Linnaean taxonomy described and ordered the natural world, becoming 'a tool and a system of naming the observed world' and, more figuratively, 'a way to linguistically represent and provide a mimetic account of the natural world and its organic objects' (King 2003, 74). This nature was throughout a sexualised one, because flowers were described, and understood, 'as the sexual part of the plant' (King 2003, 74), where stamens and pistils were associated with concepts such as courtship, marriage and, not least, sex. Not alien to such novelistic apparatus, Aldington uses the natural setting, an almost Arcadian countryside, to introduce George Winterbourne's first sensual passion. George's real delight was, in fact, not only the 'lush countryside,' but also Priscilla, a 'very golden and pretty' girl with an 'English-garden fragrance'; the first girl with whom he falls in love. Their adolescent love is bucolic as well: they 'went fishing in the brook, picked flowers in the rich water-meadows, hunted bird-nests along the hedges' (Part I, ch. 4).

In this first part the protagonist is actually said to be 'really happy' only during his summer holidays, which he spent in a 'country inland from Martin's Point' that, although barren, had a character 'like all the non-industrialised parts of England' (Part I, ch. 4). Faithful to one of the oldest British traditions, which brought Sir Kenneth Clark to affirm that every single English man connects the idea of beauty with that of landscape (1955, 132), Aldington indulges in the description of a rather idealised countryside:

From the crest of one of the high ridges, it had a kind of silvery-grey, very old quality, with its great, bare, treeless fields making faint chequer-patterns on the long, gentle slopes, with always a fringe of silvery-grey sea in the far distance. [...] The ridges became more abrupt and violent near the coast, and ended in a long, irregular wall of silvery-grey chalk, poised like a huge wave of rock-foam for ever motionless and for ever silent, while for ever at its base lapped the petty waves of the mobile and whispering sea. The sheep-and-wind-nipped turf of the downs grew dwarf bee-orchis, blue-purple bugloss, tall ragged knapweed, and frail harebells [...] Certain nooks were curiously rich with wild-flowers mixed with deep rich-red clover and marguerite-daisies. In the summer these little flowery patches—so precious and conspicuous in the surrounding barrenness—were a flicker of butterfly wings: the creamy Marbled Whites, electric blue of the Chalkhill Blue, sky-blue of the Common and Holly Blue, rich tawny of the Fritillaries, metallic gleam of the Coppers, cool drab of the Meadow Browns. The Peacock, the Red Admiral, the Painted Lady, the Tortoiseshell wheeled over the nettles and thistles, poised on the flowers, fanning their rich mottled wings. (Part I, ch. 4)

More than just a bucolic description, this passage represents a struggle to convey a pastoral feeling and the perception of a nature absolutely alive and vibrant, emphasized by the use of metaphor. Here the sea is 'whispering', the butterflies are everywhere 'fanning' their wings, while the flowery patches are described as 'precious and conspicuous', two adjectives holding a nostalgic sense, suggesting that this abundance should not lead us astray, as abundant is not synonymous with unworthy.

Yet, alongside this nostalgic description of the countryside, Aldington presents a contrast between the country and the urban that can be identified as the second kind of pastoral proposed by Gifford, described as ‘Romantic pastoral’ by Garrard (2012: 38). The landscape he describes is actually separated from the ‘pretentious suburbanity’ by approximately three miles, which ‘might have been three hundred, so unmoved, so untouched were they by its fold and its idleness and tea-party scandals and even its increasing number of “cars”’. Early on, George is fascinated by this countryside because it seems to help him improve his painting skills as he ‘tried to absorb ... the peculiar quality of the country’ (Part I, ch. 4). But as his consciousness as an artist starts to take shape, he feels that in the country he is ‘too literal’ and ‘too minutely interested’ in superfluous details: ‘He saw the poetry of the land but didn’t express it in form and colour’ (Part I, ch. 4). Nature is no longer enough to George, who ‘knew what he wanted to say in paint, but couldn’t say it’. He thus has to search for life far from the country, in the context of a more lively city: ‘In one way George loved the grey sea and barrenness, in another way he hated them. To get away to the lush inland country was a release, an ecstasy, the more precious in that it happened so rarely’ (Part I, ch. 4). The inland country is precious to George as long as it represents a brief escape from the city life, and not a permanent condition. Such a consideration anticipates, and in some way justifies, George’s desire and need to move to the city in Part II. Once he has finally become a painter, a young artist living in what he calls ‘the dream-city of a race of artists’ (Part I, ch. 5), he no longer attempts to paint ‘the picturesque landscape’, because he wants ‘his painting to be urban, contemporary, and hard’. He himself admits that all English suffer from a ‘peculiar desire to be in a town and the country simultaneously’, as they ‘don’t seem able to live the purely urban life of the Latins’, while when he is ‘in town’ he likes to be ‘in the middle of it’ (Part II, ch. 6).

Nonetheless, George reproduces this peculiar English desire in his encounter with Elizabeth, the woman who will become his wife. They meet during a party in the city centre, but their first date is at Hampton Court, to look at the flowers, an activity which will become their leisure-time ritual. George’s invitation to Elizabeth becomes an excuse to introduce the first philosophical consideration on nature, which leads us to the third use of pastoral, the unidealised, sceptical use. Speaking about Hampton Court, George mentions the fact that he would love ‘to live in King William’s summer-house’, while Elizabeth admits preferring ‘wilder and more primitive country’. George thus confesses to be

rather in revolt against mere country – ‘Nature,’ as they used to call it. Nature-worship is a sort of Narcissus-worship, holding up Nature’s mirror to ourselves. And how abominably selfish these Nature-worshippers are! Why! they want a whole landscape to themselves, and they complain bitterly when farm-labourers want modern grocery stores and w.c.s. Whole communities apparently are to live in static ignorance and picturesque decay in order to gratify their false ideas of what is beautiful. (Part II, ch. 3)

George’s consideration is overtly against those ‘simple-lifers’ (MacCarthy 1981, 12) invoking a simple, uncritical pastoral. He criticises Nature-worship as a way to preach an acceptance of the status quo, attacking, in Gifford’s words, this pastoral vision as ‘too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country’ (1999, 2). This idea that the natural world can no longer be considered as a sort of idealised heaven is of course not a new one; it is part of a modern pastoral tradition that is deeply examined by Raymond Williams in his *The Country and the City* and that had been explored by poets such as Oliver Goldsmith, John Clare, William Blake, Matthew Arnold up to Richard Jefferies (Gifford 1999, 120). The latter, in particular, expressed his ideas very clearly in his 1892 work *The Toilers of the Field*, where he pronounced that ‘in the life of the English agricultural labourers there is absolutely no poetry, no colour’, so as to show to his middle-class reader that their urban nostalgia for a rural Arcadia was just a mystification of the truth.

Aldington’s attack towards these ‘sentimental kinds of pastoralism’ (Marx [1964] 2000: 25) will ultimately lead to anti-pastoral descriptions of the No Man’s Land, where the shock he experi-

enced, provoked by the ‘desolation of war where nothing lived: the rats had been gassed, and the birds had died from drinking the foul water in shell holes’ (Copp 2002, 31), is clearly presented. The writer gets to these anti-pastoral feelings by displaying a sense of the immanence of nature through the narration of the Great War, which Paul Fussell famously called ‘the ultimate anti-pastoral’ (1975, 231). This sense of radical immanence not only is the first of what Gifford in 1999 identified as ‘the six constituents’ of the definition of post-pastoral literature, but also is at the core of the material turn in ecocriticism (Iovino and Opperman 2012). It thus represents a fundamental element in this analysis as it implies an ecocritical turn from the anthropocentric position of the traditional pastoral to the ecocentric view of the post-pastoral.

### Post-pastoral and the war

As Gifford repeatedly affirmed: ‘the story of the reception and transformations of pastoral in the relatively brief history of ecocriticism is a roller-coaster ride that in some ways echoes the critical history of pastoral before ecocriticism’ (2014, 17). In his chapter of the *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Environment* dedicated to pastoral, he explains how ‘pastoral’ had become a ‘pejorative term in English literary criticism’ (2014, 26) and had come to be considered an ‘outmoded model’ by ecocritics (see Garrard 2012), yet he claims the pastoral tradition is ‘not dead, but vigorous in its transformation of the tradition’ (2014, 26). Gifford himself put his own theories under examination, so much so that what he called in 1999 the ‘six constituents’ of the definition of post-pastoral are, by 2014, turned into ‘the six questions typically raised for readers to some degree by post-pastoral texts’ (26-27). In following Gifford’s suggestion to regard pastoral as a ‘cultural function’ rather than a genre of canonical texts, and bearing in mind that the prefix in post-pastoral does not mean ‘after’ but “reaching beyond” the limitations of pastoral while being recognisably in the pastoral tradition’, so that it can refer ‘to a work in any time period’ (2014, 26), I will then try to understand which of the six features of post-pastoral suggested by Gifford can be found in *Death of a Hero*.

The first of the six questions raised by post-pastoral texts according to Gifford is: ‘Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?’ (2014, 27). *Death of a Hero* undoubtedly raise such a question, as proved by the great attention paid to the natural world and to its metaphorical role in the narration, of which the previously mentioned long taxonomic descriptions of nature are good examples. Gifford explains how respect towards everything that is nonhuman derives ‘from a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things’ (1999, 152). To stress this sense of immanence, one episode in the novel is particularly relevant: George Winterbourne’s first leave, which offers him the opportunity to pause the non-life of war and reflect upon himself. After all the horrors George had experienced at the front, and although willing to go back to England, ‘his chief feeling’ in discovering himself free and off duty for the first time is ‘that of apathy’ (1929, Part III, Ch. 11). As mentioned above, Aldington had been likewise shocked by the ‘desolation of war where nothing lived’ (Copp 2002, 31); far from being what Friedrich von Bernhardi had called ‘a life-giving principle’ and ‘a biological necessity of the first importance, a regulative element in the life of mankind’ (1914), war was, to Aldington, a deprivation of life. Yet, during an unexpected leave, the writer had been surprised by the ‘beautiful carved Renaissance designs’ still visible on the ‘charred fragments of Flemish houses’ (Copp 2002, 33). In his novel Aldington chooses to represent this perception of the beauty of life in the middle of desolation not through a trace of the permanence of art, as had happened to him, but through a trace of the resilience of nature. In his wandering along French roads, George finds ‘a little hedgeless field of poppies and yellow daisies’ (Part III, ch. 11). He sits down there and it suddenly seems to him that looking at nature is the only thing worth doing: ‘If he had been told there and then that he was discharged from the Army and could go, he wouldn’t have known what to do except to stay there and stare at the poppies and daisies.’ The symbolic relevance is underlined by the types of flowers he sees: the daisy is,

in fact, ‘probably the flower most often mentioned by poets’ after the rose and the lily, and countless poets ‘referred to this simple but adored flower’ in their verses (Ward and Lovejoy 1999, 122). While daisies might thus be considered as a metaphor for poets, poppies are, of course, a metaphor for soldiers, having been the symbol of war remembrance since 1921.<sup>2</sup> After all the death and devastation, the resilience of flowers growing despite the war surprises him with a sense of immanence, a reconnection to nature which gives him interior peace and balance; he feels part of something wider, where the beauty of nature still exists and can heal his sense of annihilation.

George’s take on nature is also an example of the idea suggested by Iovino and Oppermann that ‘the world’s phenomena are segments of a conversation between human and manifold nonhuman beings’ (2014, 4). In discussing Hans Jonas’ *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (1979), Serenella Iovino stresses how, for the German philosopher, ‘l’umano si inverte nel non umano, e il non umano ci aiuta a ritrovare l’integrità e l’integralità del nostro essere umano’ (2016, in print), which is something that happens to George in the novel. After having felt so much ‘self-indifference’ after having thought that ‘he merely wasn’t interested’ in himself any longer, it is indeed the sight of trees and flowers that opens up a conversation with the world around him, a conversation that had been impossible on the battlefield. This brings him back to when he cared for himself, to that time when ‘he had been extremely interested in himself and the things he wanted to do’, although ‘an immense effort of imagination was needed to link himself now with himself then’ (Part III, ch. 11).

I will skip for a moment the second of the questions suggested by Gifford, which will be analysed in later paragraphs, because such a vision of nature, which links him to his human self, represents the third question raised by post-pastoral texts: ‘If the processes of our inner nature echo those in outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?’ (2014, 27). In the novel, this question is suggested not only through the already-mentioned rediscovery of flowers far from the battlefield, underlying how cyclic nature continues despite the horrible number of young soldiers being killed, it is also suggested through the symbolism of summer flowers, which enable a connection between George’s old and new self. In the second part of the novel Elizabeth is often described painting flowers, but one event becomes particularly significant to stress the passage between life before and life after the war. One afternoon, after reading the news that Russia is mobilising, George goes home and tries to paint, but finds himself unable to concentrate. He thus enters Elizabeth’s room while she is ‘delicately painting a large blue bowl of variegated summer flowers’. Suddenly a wasp comes in and flies around a ‘bunch of grapes on a Spanish plate’ (Part II, ch. 7). The situation is ‘so peaceful, so secure’ that it makes George’s agitation seem absurd and unmotivated. He will remember this afternoon on a period of leave from the war, when, trying to sketch something on paper, he is astonished to discover that ‘his hand, once as steady as the table itself, shook very slightly but perceptibly’ and so, unable to draw – a creative inability obviously recalling the one suffered by Aldington himself – he goes to Elizabeth’s room where he again finds ‘summer flowers in the large blue bowl, and fruit on the beautiful Spanish plate’ (Part III, ch. 12). He thus remembers how ‘the wasp had come through the window’ almost exactly three years ago, and tears come to his eyes.

This connection of flowers with artists and soldiers, where summer flowers assume a redeeming role and become ‘signifiers of poetic productivity’ (Zapf 2014, 61), is particularly relevant in the novel,<sup>3</sup> and the complex meanings of such an association represent the fourth and fifth questions of post-pastoral texts.

### Flowers, poets and the colours of life

‘In a war story the flowers must be at the end and not at the beginning’, says Ivy Spang, the protagonist of Edith Wharton’s *Writing a War Story* ([1919] 2001, 250). Yet, as we have seen, in Aldington’s *Death of a Hero* flowers represent a leitmotiv present from the beginning of the novel, eventually symbolising both poets and soldiers, and thus leading us to the fourth of Gifford’s questions:

‘If nature is culture, is culture nature?’ The idea is not a new one, as Iovino points out when she states that it is the very aim of ecocriticism to consider culture ‘not as apart from “nature,” but to see nature and culture, world and text, as mutually permeable’ (forthcoming), and underlining how this permeability ‘suggests that the world’s complexity can be seen as a story emerging from the process of becoming-together of nature and culture—and that it is only thinkable as their inextricable co-emergence: *natureculture*’ (forthcoming). This becoming-together of nature and culture, complying with Gifford’s fourth post-pastoral feature, is interestingly displayed in Aldington’s novel, as it emerges through the identification of culture with nature that Aldington makes thanks to his metaphorical use of poets and flowers during the War. The idea that flowers die together with soldiers and poets is a recurring one in the novel: both flowers and soldiers are the victims of gas attacks, such as when George complains about his first Spring spent without seeing a flower because ‘the little yellow coltsfoot he had liked so much were all dead with phosgene’ (Part III, ch. 8); and flowers are used as an extended metaphor when the narrator, commenting on the bombings, rhetorically asks ‘will the conqueror think regretfully and tenderly of the flowers and the poets?’ (Part I, ch. 4). Indeed, soldiers, and soldiers’ corpses, take the place of flowers on the land of the battlefield: ‘In war, bodies and land become very close’, writes McLoughlin, because soldiers are ‘camouflaged to match their environs’ (2011, 90). In Aldington’s novel the two images of soldiers and flowers juxtapose in an anti-pastoral objective correlative of soldiers’ dead bodies contrasting with the poetic beauty of flowers. The novel thus presents an identification not only of poets with soldiers, as was the case for Aldington himself, but also of soldiers with flowers, so that the agents of culture – poets – become *ipso facto* nature. Moreover, dead soldiers actually become part of the ground itself, and their bones take what should be the place of the roots:

He lived among smashed bodies and human remains in an infernal cemetery. If he scratched his stick idly and nervously in the side of a trench, he pulled out human ribs. He ordered a new latrine to be dug out from the trench, and thrice the digging had to be abandoned because they came upon terrible black masses of decomposing bodies. (Part III, ch. 13)

In her beautiful essay ‘*Rat’s Alley*’: *The Great War, Modernism and the (Anti) Pastoral Elegy*, Sandra Gilbert underlines the ambivalence of the war landscape: ‘The battlefield was “empty of men” and yet it was saturated with men, producing a sinister sense of what Freud called the *unheimlich*, the uncanny’ (1999, 184), and this leads to the fact that ‘the very word “pastoral” takes on an ironic cast in the context of the wasteland of No Man’s Land’ (184) because, being filled by ‘decomposing bodies’ and human remains ‘the landscape of the war was barely a *landscape* in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather a gigantic charnel house’ where ‘what once was the regenerative maternal earth’ has become ‘merely a nihilistic pollutant’ (184).

This brings us back to the second question raised by post-pastoral texts, namely: ‘What are the implications of recognising that we are part of that creative-destructive process?’ When George eventually looks around himself from the top of a hill, as he had done years before at Martin’s Point, the reader is presented with the results of the destructive process of war: a desolate wasteland completely deprived of colours and life, where corpses, instead of flowers and insects, cover the earth:

The ground was a desert of shell-holes and torn rusty wire, and everywhere lay skeletons in steel helmets, still clothed in the rags of sodden khaki of field grey. Here a fleshless hand still clutched a broken rusty rifle; there a gaping, decaying boot showed the thin, knotty foot-bones. (Part III, ch. 13)<sup>4</sup>

Such a description of the land strikes the reader, who is reminded of the ‘ecstasy of delight’ offered by the landscape visions before the war. One of these descriptions is worth recalling: the one taken from George and Elizabeth’s first date at Hampton Court to enjoy the flowers. The park is described

as ‘the Wilderness, or old English garden’ because it is ‘both a garden and a “wilderness,” in the sense that it is planted with innumerable bulbs (which are thinned and renewed from time to time), but otherwise allowed to run wild’ (Part II, ch. 4). Aldington gives here another taxonomic description of nature, not dissimilar from the one he presented in Part I:

Great secular trees, better protected than those in the outer Park, held up vast fans of glittering green-and-gold foliage which trembled in the light wind and formed moving patterns on the tender blue sky. The lilacs had just unfolded their pale hearts, showing the slim stalk of closed buds which would break open later in a foam of white and blue blossoms. Underfoot was the stouter green of wild plants, spread out like an evening sky of verdure for the thick-clustered constellations of flowers. There shone the soft, slim yellow trumpet of the wild daffodil; the daffodil which has a pointed ruff of white petals to display its gold head; and the more opulent double daffodil which, compared with the other two, is like an ostentatious merchant between Florizel and Perdita. There were the many headed jonquils, creamy and thick-scented; the starry narcissus, so alert on its long, slender, stiff stem, so sharp-eyed, so unlike a languid youth gazing into a pool; the hyacinth-blue frail squilla almost lost in the lush herbs; and the hyacinth, blue and white and red, with its firm, thick-set stem and innumerable bells curling back their open points. Among them stood tulips—the red, like thin blown bubbles of dark wine; the yellow, more cup-like, more sensually open to the soft furry entry of the eager bees; the large particoloured gold and red, noble and sombre like the royal banner of Spain. (Part II, ch. 4)

The prodigal presence of colours in this page is quite evident. Green, white, blue, yellow: all colours of the iris are present here, thus enhancing the ‘sensory perception’ in the reader, where the ‘visual, auditory, tactile, taste, and smell sensory processes’ become ‘bodily interactions with our material environment’ (Sullivan 2014a, 80). It comes as no surprise that, to define his theory about ‘coloured objects’ in his treaty *Theory of Colours*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe takes flowers as an example of objects capable of emitting a ‘temporary light’, stating that if one observes a bright flower and immediately after looks ‘on the gravel path’, the sight will be ‘studded with spots of the opposite colour’ (1840, 24), thus presenting flowers as the perfect means to obtain the vision of a multitude of colours.

The reason I am putting such emphasis on this aspect is that, as I have already anticipated, *Death of a Hero* is characterised by a strong chromatic contrast. The reader almost has the impression that the first two parts of the novel are ‘in colour’ while the third is in black and white – or sepia, if we think of the khaki of the uniforms and the mud covering practically everything in the trenches. Although this technique is quite common in movies, it is certainly uncommon in novels. Yet it is the author himself who suggests such an idea in the third part of the novel when, after a few months in the army, George feels ‘a rapid fall of spirits to a depth of depression he had never before experienced’, so that while up to that moment he had ‘remained hopeful’ now he senses the change, he understands that his life has lost all its colours: ‘Now something within him was just beginning to give way, now for the first time the last faint hues of lovely iris of youth faded, and in horror he faced the grey realities’ (Part III, ch. 4). This idea is further emphasised by the fact that George is no longer able to paint when the war breaks out.

Landscapes as well lose their light together with their life, and colours seem to fade away. Even a plain lexical analysis shows a clear passage from life/colour in the first two parts of the novel, where the word ‘colour’ appears twenty times, almost always associated with nature in art and painting, to war/grey in the third part, where the word ‘colour’ appears only once, in association with weapons, as the ‘Germans filled the night with Verey lights and coloured rockets’ (Part III, ch. 13). Examples are everywhere in the novel: the blue skies of the English countryside and of London turn grey in the last part of the novel; the ‘columns of men’ are likewise ‘greyish’, always dressed in grey flannel shirts or in field-grey uniforms. The No Man’s Land and the trenches are described only through the chromatism of the black soil, of khaki uniforms, of rusty thorny wire, a desolate flat land ‘littered with debris’ where the only green to be seen is not that of trees or grass, but the



grey-green of the acrid smoke of gas. Such a distortion of the adjective ‘green’ also reminds us of Siegfried Sassoon’s poem *Counter-Attack*, where the colour green does not refer to nature but to gangrene, when he describes the land as a place

rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud. (1949, 68)<sup>5</sup>

The explosion of colours that Aldington presents in the first two parts of his novel therefore acts as a counterbalance to what will come next. The relevant role of flowers is also presented from the beginning of the novel, in a passage that sounds like an ode to English flowers:

English spring flowers! What an answer to our ridiculous “cosmic woe”, how salutary, what a soft reproach to bitterness and avarice and despair, what balm to hurt minds! The lovely bulb-flowers, loveliest of the year, so unpretentious, so cordial, so unconscious, so free from the striving after originality of the gardener’s tamed pets! The spring flowers of the English woods, so surprising under those bleak skies, and the flowers the English love so much and tend so skilfully in the cleanly wantonness of their gardens, as surprisingly beautiful as the poets of that bleak race! When the inevitable ‘fruit Ilium’ resounds mournfully over London among the appalling crash of huge bombs and the foul reek of deadly gases while the planes roar overhead, will the conqueror think regretfully and tenderly of the flowers and the poets? ... (Part I, ch. 4)

This almost elegiac passage set in Part I anticipates an important concept that will be explored by Aldington later on: the idea that the land of the battlefield is not the only one to be devastated. Nature ‘at home’ becomes compromised both because of the air raids, and because there is no one left to attend to it. This notion is presented via a letter from Elizabeth that George receives at the front, in which she tells him that she has ‘just been to Hampton Court to look at the flowers’, commenting that ‘The gardens were rather neglected’ and that there were ‘no flowers in the Long Border’ because ‘the gardeners were at the War, and there was no money in England now for flowers’ (Part III, ch. 8). Aldington seems to imply that nature needs to be taken care of, not only physically, by gardeners, but by governments as well, which would be better investing money in nature instead of just turning the beauty of flowers into another victim of the war. Such a concept might, I believe, be identified as the fifth quality of post-pastoral literature, which raises the question ‘How, then can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?’ (Gifford 2014, 27). The suggestion is present also in a passage I mentioned before, when Elizabeth asks George if he remembered

how they had walked there in April five year ago? Yes, he remembered, and thought too with a pang of surprise that this was the first Spring he had ever spent without seeing a flower, not even a primrose. The little yellow coltsfoot he had liked so much were all dead with phosgene. (Part III, ch. 8)

The landscapes that, at the beginning of the novel, were picturesquely covered with flowery patches ‘rich with wild-flowers mixed with deep rich-red clover and marguerite-daisies’ and with the fanning of butterflies wings, are thus, at the end of the novel, ‘a litter of overcoats, shaggy leather packs, rifles, water-bottles, gas-masks, steel helmets, bombs, entrenching tools, cast away in the panic of flight’. The detailed, taxonomic list of plants and butterflies of Part I is, in this way, turned into a macabre inventory of soldiers’ remains at the end of the novel. Going back to the second question raised by post-pastoral texts, asking what are the ‘implications of recognising that we are part of that creative-destructive process’, such implications might be represented here by the suicide that George Winterbourne commits while observing the ‘*unheimlich*’ of the nightmarish landscape of No Man’s Land, that ‘uncanny’ defined by Aldington, with bitter irony, as ‘the last achievements of civilized men’ (Part III, ch. 13).

## Conclusions

Aldington's *Death of a Hero* can be read as a post-pastoral novel because it avoids 'the traps of idealisation in seeking to find a discourse that can both celebrate *and* take some responsibility for nature without false consciousness' (Gifford 1999, 148). Moreover, in presenting pastoral and post-pastoral as reading strategies, Gifford claims that 'post-pastoral literature might be seen as nature's way of offering us imaginative challenges to conceptions that are leading to our extinction' (2012, 59). A novel like *Death of a Hero*, set in the self-destructive, apocalyptic context of World War I, thus offers a good opportunity to reflect upon such imaginative challenges. Aldington once wrote to his wife H.D. that, in the future, mankind would have only two prospects: 'it would either manage somehow to save itself from annihilation, or would allow greed, distrust, and malice to have a divisive effect' (Copp 2002, 37). His literary work shows his attempt at answering such menaces through a deeper and more conscious understanding of the human soul, and human beings' relationship to nature.

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<sup>1</sup> Fussell will ironically underline how it was only in the 1970s, 'when those who remember the events [were] almost all dead, that the literary means for adequate remembering and interpreting [were] finally publicly accessible' (1975, 334).

<sup>2</sup> The use was first inspired by John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*, published in December 1915 in the *Punch*, which referred to the many poppies that were the first flowers to grow in the churned-up earth of soldiers' graves in Flanders. Despite their delicate appearance, poppies are actually resilient flowers, flourishing even in the mud and destruction of the battlefield. Their red colour is also symbolic of the blood of the soldiers buried in the land from where poppies spring.

<sup>3</sup> It is also present in the short story *Farewell to Memories*, where Aldington personifies the wild flowers as 'sisters' and the protagonist, on his return to England, 'hopes to find flowers and young women as equally consolatory' (Copp 2002, 26).

<sup>4</sup> It would be very interesting to study the presence of dirt, waste, debris and remains, both human and non-human, in the frame of Heather Sullivan's *Dirt Theories*. But, quoting Michael Ende, 'that is another story and shall be told another time'.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough analysis of this image, see Gilbert 1999, 185 and Silkin [1972] 1998, 156.