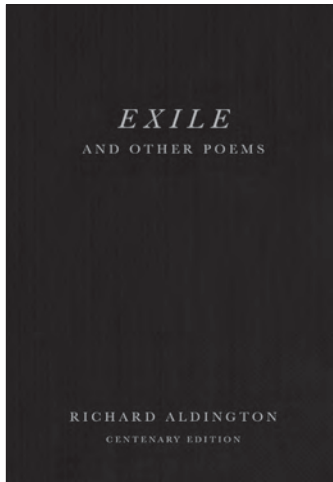


## A Gesture of Disgust



Richard Aldington, *Exile and Other Poems*, with introduction and notes by Elizabeth Vandiver and Vivien Whelpton (Renard Press) £10  
Reviewed by John Greening

Richard Aldington (1892–1962) is most often remembered for his biographies and memoirs or for his relationship with the poet H.D.; his own poetry tends to be overlooked by critics and anthologists, something he lamented in a characteristically crotchety introduction to his 1948 *Complete Poems*. He certainly wouldn't have been pleased to find himself excluded from Tim Kendall's landmark *Poetry of the First World War* (Oxford, 2013). If he has lacked a popular following, it may be because the work has yet to reach enough readers; or perhaps because – witness the title poem of *Exile* (1923) – it still betrays that intrusive 'anger and bitterness' noted by Edmund Blunden (in a *TLS* review quoted by the editors) which leads him into 'gestures of disgust which do not belong to the poet in him'. Although he had published a good deal before this collection, according to his editors it is his 'first substantial attempt to process the trauma of his experience in poetry'. That trauma was chiefly the First World War, which shaped and marred both the man and the work, but it is also a dysfunctional family background and the stillbirth of the child he had with Hilda. This new edition, beautifully produced by Renard for Aldington's centenary, would be worth having just for the first-rate introduction and the detailed background notes which give a very clear summary of his troubles.

Setting those aside, the poetry is enjoyable within the limitations of Aldington's self-obsessed and determinedly unlyrical style. There is an arresting realism and his lines on nature have a Lawrentian drive (he wrote significant biographies of both D.H. and T.E.) but it is strange that this Imagist should be so ill-attuned to imagery. Nevertheless, the stark, journalistic manner can be effective and might be regarded as more truthful:

Loos, that horrible night in Hart's Crater,  
The damp cellars of Maroc,  
The frozen ghostly streets of Vermelles,  
That first night-long gas bombardment –

O the thousand images I see  
And struggle with and cannot kill –  
That boot I kicked  
(It had a mouldy foot in it)  
The night K.'s head was smashed  
Like a rotten pear by a mortar [...]  
(from 'Eumenides')

But then one thinks of what Isaac Rosenberg or Robert Graves did with similar scenes – or indeed of Wilfrid Gibson's home-spun (and wholly imagined) battle verse. *Exile* is not all about war, but its presence looms. 'Rhapsody in a Third-Class Carriage', for instance, is a snapshot of an ungrateful and 'mediocre' post-war England of pianolas and hobnails.

By contrast, the book's unexpected and refreshing second part, 'Words for Music', consists of some rather brilliant homages to seventeenth-century love poets along with two pastoral 'Metrical Exercises'. *Exile* in fact features several formal pieces, including a version of Villon and epigrammatic squibs such as 'Those Who Played for Safety in Life'. It has to be said that Richard Aldington feels more at home here and is evidently enjoying the chance to sing. Perhaps he was never really an Imagist at all.

## Contact with the Now



Hélio Oiticica, *Secret Poetics*, translated by Rebecca Kosick with essays by Rebecca Kosick and Pedro Erber (Sobercove Press and Winter Editions) \$24  
Reviewed by Greg Thomas

One of the most charming of the 'secret poems' by the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–80) included in this new edition of translations by Rebecca Kosick reads as follows:

Water,  
glassy surface,  
plunge.

The reader put in mind of Bashō's famous 'frog/pond/plop' haiku (that hyper-compact translation from Dom

Sylvester Houédard) might well be on the money. As Kosick points out in her introduction, '[w]e don't know for sure that a reference to Bashō was deliberate, but we know haiku is a form Oiticica was working with at this time'.

However, as Kosick goes on to note, readers familiar with Oiticica's oeuvre might also sense in this poem from 1964 a pre-emptive linguistic rendering of his artwork *Plunge of the Body* (1966–7). Reproduced in Kosick's book, this consists of a water-filled basin with the title-words 'Mergulho do corpo' inscribed on its bottom-surface, facing the viewer like an invitation to a physical act. (Many of Oiticica's 1960s artworks solicited physical interaction.)

Then again, there is a level of abstraction to Oiticica's language that resists both readings just offered. The absence of any tangible, naturalistic subject matter (like a frog and a pond, say, or a body and a basin) almost seems to nudge it into the realms of metaphysical speculation. It's as if the unbounded, unlocated body of water, and the plunge undertaken by an unnamed subject or object, are metaphors for more general states of being, feeling or knowing.

These divergent readings give a flavour of the manifold resonances of Oiticica's *Secret Poetics*, a sequence created irregularly during 1964–6. Kosick discovered the little cache of verses during research for an earlier book, fronted by two prose pieces that offered hints of method and motive: 'I am not a poet, although an urgent necessity leads me to poetic expression'; '[t]he true lyric is immediate, that is, immediacy that becomes eternal in lyrical poetic expression'.

The period when *Secret Poetics* was written was one of violent transition for Brazil. A right-wing military dictatorship seized power in 1964 and maintained it for the next twenty-one years. It was also a time of transformation in Oiticica's personal life. He was coming to terms with his sexuality, and his first gay romantic encounters date to this period, possibly to 1964 when, as Pedro Erber notes in a second essay included in the book, 'he took up dancing and started participating in the samba scene in Mangueira, a favela on the northern side of Rio [de Janeiro, Oiticica's home city]'.

Oiticica is internationally recognised as an artist but not as a poet: so what is the value and function of these works? Partly, as Kosick points out, they appeal as 'documents of a contemporary artist's developing ideas and thinking'. There is also a strongly phenomenological bent to the writing which gives an interesting sense of the intellectual discourse within the neo-concrete art movement to which Oiticica was attached. Passages such as 'The smell, / new touch, / restarting of the senses, / absorption, / memory, / oh!' suggest an attempt to somehow immaculately transcribe or preserve the felt moment of writing, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty a particular reference-point, as Erber states.

But most engagingly, as records of the embodied moment, these poems encode the feelings of desire, lust, pain and confusion animating the writing sensorium: 'Black skin, / contact with the now, / vision of the always, / love; // dark, / vision of the tactile, contact. // velvet, / caress of the touch, / the always in the always, / embrace // the arm, / body and I interlace, / lip'. These secret

poems are documents of a mind and body realising themselves in loving and lustful relation to others at a time of personal and sociopolitical turmoil.

## Living through the Fire



Marjorie Lotfi, *The Wrong Person To Ask* (Bloodaxe)

£10.99

Reviewed by Verak Yuen

*The Wrong Person To Ask* is Marjorie Lotfi's debut poetry collection. These tender and intricate poems chart a journey across continents, chronicling a childhood of unrest and violence in Iran and the nuances of relocation to America and Scotland. Lotfi's work interweaves the personal with the national, illuminating past and present tragedies through the quotidian rhythms of a new existence abroad.

Lotfi's verse is filled with directives, as if to guide readers through a terrain crowded with exploding mortars and crumbling buildings. Nothing is too sacred to be destroyed in an instant, and resistance could seem futile, evident in 'Refuge', an ekphrastic poem:

Take out  
his thighs, but leave  
his knees to buckle  
at kindness, and the lack  
of it. Don't loosen his grip  
on the suitcase; it holds  
all he owns. Instead, nail  
his feet to the planks  
of the pier and let him try  
to take another step.

The poem takes its inspiration from Frances Bruno Catalanano's *Les Voyageurs* sculpture, and the verse, too, has a hollowed-out quality. The line breaks are choppy but decisive and the brevity of Lotfi's diction conveys an immense sense of loss. *What more can this poem be alluding to? What more is left unsaid?* The plosives of 'take', 'buckle', 'grip' and 'planks' hammer into listeners' ears and jolt them into alertness. 'Hope' is written in a similar style to 'Refuge', both of which are generous with