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Connection between the isolation of the individual identity and the
lost value of life and death in *Farewell to Memories* by Richard
Aldington



„Hear the Air Screaming“: Death and Modernism in the Great War

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Connection between the isolation of the individual identity and the lost value of life and death in *Farewell to Memories* by Richard Aldington

In the short story *Farewell to Memories* by Richard Aldington it will be analysed how war experiences, especially death experiences at the front, lead to fragmentation and transformation of the soldier's identity. It will be analysed for which reasons language becomes inadequate to convey reality and in what ways this inadequacy contributes to the isolation of the individual identity. Afterwards the dependency between collective identity and individual identity in war will be analysed. It will be shown that the collective identity poses a threat to the individual identity, which leads to the ungrievability of the individual death. The lost value of death transforms the soldiers perception of life and death, thus it will be shown how this transforms the soldiers identity and in what ways those lost values are connected to the soldiers becoming indifferent. Having analysed the transformation of the individual identity through war, ultimately the transformation of the collective identity will be analyzed. In order to present the argument a close-reading analysis will be applied, however the analysis does not throughout follow a page by page structure. Furthermore are theoretical and analytical parts combined and not presented in separate paragraphs.

In this paragraph the relation between language and reality and their influence for the soldier's identity will be analyzed. The beginning of the short story presents the inability of language to convey reality. The schematic manner by which the speaker presents his thoughts implies this inability. Each point is introduced by “As a symbol of ... I think” (257). This

schematic organisation indicates the speaker's difficulty to express his thought via language. The schematic use of language implies that the speaker tries to categorize distinguish and create his reality. Language enables to communicate with to others and as Gillespie explains in his book *Becoming Other*: “Because we hear our-selves speak, Mead argues, so we can react to our own words in the sameway that we react to the words of others. Thus we become other to our-selves in the act of speaking” (208). If language becomes inadequate, the medium of expressing and defining oneself is lost, thus ones identity fragments. In the short story the theme of expressing oneself via language is shown by the ambiguous word choice. On page 258 the italic part uses a poetical style of language and the ambiguous choice of words create the atmosphere of a never-never land, not filled with beauty but horror. “My thoughts are stifling – heavy grey dust from a scorched road” (258). The ideas of stifling thoughts evoke the image of depression, despair and grief. Then the content of the thoughts that preoccupy the mind of the speaker are described as ‘heavy grey dust from a scorched road’. This description is ambiguous it contains multiple meanings. It could be seen as a biblical allusion of a lost soul searching for salvation in a desert, or it could describe the landscape at the front, that is deserted. But it is presciently this ambiguity that mirrors the inability of language to stipulate clearly and precisely the speakers suffering. This sentence reappears when the reader is introduced to a soldier named Brandon. The first characterisation received about Brandon is that “... his thoughts were stifling, like heavy grey dust” (259). The same set of words is used before. This cross reference back to the poetical section implies that these poetical sections represent Brandon's inner world. The internal perspective is describing his personal struggle with language and identity. The content of it presumably mirrors what the characters would say, if they spoke their minds. But, looking at the conversations the characters are having, one can see that the dialogues are on a very superficial basis. Indeed very little of the content of their inner word is communicated between individuals. This implies that the individual in war is 'alone in the crowd'. This isolation from the outside world is one reason why soldiers, for

example Brandon, could feel deceived by life and former beliefs. The deception of life and former beliefs is more directly presented on page 262-264, where the scent of hay stirred old poignant memories. The use of the word poignant has a similar meaning as stifling. On the one hand there are stifling thoughts and on the other poignant memories. Both of these expressions are indications to the fragmentation of former beliefs and values. The reference to the fields of England stand for the rich promises life offers to the young man. “Cinquefoil and clover, buttercups, fennel, thistle and rue, daisy and ragged robin, wild rose from the hedge, shepherd's purse, and long sweet nodding stalks of grass” (262). The word choice sounds melodious and soothing, which evokes the feeling of harmony. The speaker recalls the pastoral idea of rural England. But as it continues an ironic tone appears: “Here are bundles from Somerset, from Wales, from Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester – names we must love ...” (262). In this sentence the critique about the ideal England is presented. In opposition to that the landscape that Brandon and the other soldiers find themselves at the moment, is one where the presence of death is dominant: “The shattered trees gleamed sadly with hoar-frost in the evening twilight, the ditches were frozen hard, the drab grass crouched under the weight of cold” (263). This description emphasizes the decay of life and the omnipresence of death in their lives. It becomes even more obvious as the shot story continues: “To his left, beyond the ruined village, he could see rows of little crosses black against the frosty earth” (263). The little crosses remind of the huge loss of men in war. This opposition of two different landscapes illustrates the promise of war and on the other hand the reality of war. Just after the description of the harsh conditions of winter Brandon recalls a letter from a woman that ironically describes “... the loveliness of winter twilight over the quiet meadows” (263). Again the pastoral ideal of a rural England by the mentioning of meadows comes up. In response to this the poetical perspective offers an alternative approach to war. “The poetry of winter – yes, that is indeed poetry, the breath of the gods, light glowing and changing, motionless tress, clear air ... From the depths I cry it, from the depths which echo with the

ironic phrase ‘the poetry of winter,’ from the depths I cry it” (264). The description of winter in this part does not match with the soldier’s reality and by crying from the depth his despair and the realization of the whole futility of war/winter comes up. But again the expression ‘depths’ can refer to different meanings. Here the ambiguity of language is presented again. The depths could refer to the trenches or to the depths of knowledge, as one who has experienced war, realizes the futility of it or the depths of feelings as an outcry of his inner desperation, grief and despair. It has been shown that language becomes inadequate to convey reality, by the use of ambiguous meanings. This also indicates that the same words can have different meaning for different people. But precisely because the inner world cannot be expressed by language anymore the individual becomes isolated, which evokes a feeling of deception.

The feeling of isolation is also caused by the deception of the individual identity during war. Therefore, in this paragraph the interaction between collective identity and individual identity will be analyzed. By elaborating how the change of pronouns I, we, and they collude it will be illustrated on a different level how the individual becomes isolated and also threatened. At the beginning of the short story there is a shift from “I” and “we”. As argued above, that reality is expressed through language, it follows that each individual has its own language, thus its unique reality. Although each individual has a unique perception of reality, their reality is based on events experienced with others. Accordingly, the shift from “I” to “we” illustrates this phenomenon of individual perception of reality based on collective experience of events. It is precisely this interrelation between the two that poses a threat to the individual identity. Considering the description on page 264: “Number 2 section lived together, marched together, ate together, worked together, fought together, endured exactly the same experiences” (264), illustrates the anonymity of a single person, which could be seen as a threat to the individual reality. As the short story proceeds different ways how Perks,

Huxtable, Holme and Brandon deal with the situations are presented. “... where Perks swore or joked, where Huxtable plodded, and Holme pettily wangled, Brandon suffered “ (265). The different ways to deal with their situations indicates that it evoked in each individual a different reaction; accordingly it had a different impact on each mind. This poses two problems for the individual identity, as explained by Mead in *The Individual and the Social Self*: “... the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings” (5). Firstly, as has been argued, the shared experiences have a different meaning to each of them as follows there is no shared meaning. Secondly in order to create a shared meaning the tool used is language. But as argued before language is inadequate to express thoughts and feelings which ultimately lead to the isolation of the individual mind. If the individual mind remains unspoken one could argue that it is meaningless which leads to another point, namely the insignificance of the individual identity in war. As soldiers, being part of the anonymous mass, they are not asked to be unique rather to be one unity. Indeed, military functions become the defining feature for the soldier’s identity. Apart from Brandon, Huxtable, Perks and Holme people are introduced by their military function. “A corporal” (260). “the officer” (261), “The N.C.O's”(261). And at another stage in the short story it is also described in military functional way where Brandon, Huxtable, Perks and Holme belong to: “They became part of Number 2 section of Number 3 platoon of 'A' Company. Part of the great anonymous mass” (262-263). The use of ‘they’ as in ‘they became part of’ underlines the image of an unity sharing the same features as well does ‘number 2’ ‘section number 3’ ‘platoon of ‘A’ Company’. This idea of unity represents a threat to the individual identity because one becomes a section, a number eventually anonymous. So what impact does becoming anonymous have for the soldier’s life? Or rather how does it change the value of the soldier’s death? This is addressed in the short story on page 267:

“They were thrown into a local attack, and the battalion lost about two hundred officers and men” here the high numbers of death in a short time is illustrated and then it is for what

reasons those soldiers died: “They had only two hundred yards to go, and lost a sixth of their number.” (267)

In this text example the soldier’s death is directly addressed, yet by the use of ‘they’ the losses remain anonymous. Reading this part it is difficult to value their death. The only identity feature revealed about them is their military function, which makes them in a way non-human. This phenomenon of non-humanity and how this relates to the value of death is explained by in Judith Butler in *Frames of War*:

“This field of perceptible reality is one in which the notion of the recognizable human is formed and maintained over and against what cannot be named or regarded as the human - a figure of the non-human that negatively determines and potentially unsettles the recognizably human.” (64)

Because those deaths do not appear to be recognizably human, they lose their value. As follows, the deaths of some individuals do not matter so their life becomes futile. As Butler in *Frames of war* explains:

“Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live. Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters ... Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, "there is a life that will never have been lived," sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost.” (14 - 15)

It is precisely the question of grievability that composes the value of life and death. This shows that life and death are interrelated. What lives must die and what died must have lived. Thus the identity depends on caring for each life and death, if this care is suspended the individual life carries no meaning. Non-caring is what happens in war, thus what happens is the soldier’s becoming indifferent to his own life and death. The state of indifference is addressed on page 275 where it says that the armies “... were now utterly indifferent to victory

or defeat ... The war had lasted long enough to show the inanity of war. All that terrific effort had resulted in nothing but indifference” (274 – 275). The lack of emotional reaction and interest shows a state of being alive but dead at the same time. In a way indifference transforms the soldier from human to inhuman: “If a man can become a robot, Brandon had done so. His mind was a chaos of confusion, agony, and despair; his body ate, slept, marched, fought, at the bidding of his superiors” (275). What this implies is that Brandon feels forgotten, exiled from human memory, abandoned by his nation, hence he surrenders his own humanity and with it his identity. This thus shows that war has destroyed him, even though he is still alive. Even if the state of indifference is suspended the soldier does not become fully human again. This is indicated on page 276 where the speaker refers to ancient myth of Greek mythology: “Those who have passed through hell need only to pass through Lethe to become sane once more” (276). Lethe is according to OED an imaginary river whose water, when drunk, was thought to make the dead forget their life on Earth. This reference implies that the speaker wishes to forget the horrors of war, which because of regaining his emotion and feelings, result in trauma. The definition of trauma according to OED: “A psychic injury, esp. one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed; an internal injury, esp. to the brain, which may result in a behavioural disorder of organic origin.” The inability to forget those experiences and to deal with the emotions and feelings leads to the soldier’s insanity which outcasts him from society, which links back to the isolation of the individual. This is indicated in the short story: “I beseech one draught of Lethe to purge my spirit of horror, to make me worthy to mingle with sane men once more” (276). Considering that the speaker addresses his wish to an ancient Greek deity, gods whom one believes are dead, indicates it is not possible to reintegrate in society. This wish to forget also conveys this total destruction of men at war, for they went strong and glad to war and are returning reduced to the level of helpless children, broken psychologically, begging for healing.

Having elaborated how war experiences traumatized the soldier and for that reason changed his individual identity, it will now be analyzed how the collective identity was affected by the outcome war. At first participating in the war was advertised with positive abstracts ideal but as the war ended none of them came true which lead to the disappointments of war. It is precisely those disappointments that constitute the belief of the futility of war. In the short story those disappointments are presented in the last part of the story. They are presented with the concept of symbols, which was also used in the beginning of the story. “Nothing can express that pitiable frozen silence, that awful symbol of the hatred of men for men” what the speaker suggest are two main disappointment war caused, which Freud illustrates in his essay *Reflection on War and Death*:

“Two things have roused our disappointment in this war: the feeble morality of states in their external relations which have inwardly acted as guardians of moral standards, and the brutal behaviour of individuals of the highest culture of whom one would not have believed any such thing possible.”(3)

This indicates that the outcome of war made people doubt the concept of civilization and the people lost self-confidence. This point addressed both side the home front ant the soldiers whereas the next disappointment only focuses on the collective identity of the soldiers. In this case not only the losses of young men are addressed but also what impact it had on the collective identity for the returning soldiers: “That was the symbol of the youth of a generation – lines of crosses. That was the symbol for all of them, living or dead – a graveyard on a battlefield” (277). This statement is suggesting that war destroyed a whole generation and the disappointment lies in the fact that the abstract common ideals, the government advertised, were an illusion. The ideal to fight for civilisation as shown above was an illusion. The ideal that war would be healthy for the nation was proven wrong for many soldiers lost arms or legs thus were disabled and could not go back to work. Doctors and society did not know how to deal with the psychological problems soldiers struggled

with. The ideal of soldiers being heroes forfeit seeing the helplessness of war survivors. War promises turned out to be untrue, thus a great disappointment. As the short story proceeds the speaker asked: “Which of us were the fortunate – who can tell?” (278), this question suggests that life after war did not turn out to be a better life. The way war transformed and damaged the soldiers identity remained. This suggestion is shown when the speaker opposes the faith of the dead and the living soldiers: “For you there is silence and the cold twilight drooping in awful desolation over those motionless lands. For us sunlight and the sound of women’s voices, song and hope and laughter, despair, gaiety, love – life” (278). Life is described in the name of grand abstracts such as Hope, Gaiety, and Love. The meaning of those ideals is virtually impossible to grasp or define, thus these words appear empty and hollow. This use of abstract ideals links back to the war ideals, which sounded as promising as this description of life. However, the speaker indicates that description of life is an illusion by putting ‘despair’ in his description. Looking at the connotation of the nouns, it appears that all of them inherit a positive connotation, except despair which inherits a negative connotation. The word despair disturbs this promising characterisation of life. By interrupting the romanticised and idealised description of life the speaker implies how war experiences generated lasting damage on the soldier. As follows no matter how promising the future appears, the soldiers are filled with despair. On the one hand this links back to the inability of language to express reality. Before the war, words had been misused to advertise war, which implies that the speaker no longer trusts in words, thus language. On the other hand it also links back to the traumatized identity of the soldier that cannot be healed. For those reasons all that stays with him is the feeling of despair. The suggestion of the soldier being filled with despair after war explains Freud in his essay *Reflection on War and Death* the following way:

“The war in which we did not want to believe broke out and brought – disappointment. It is not only bloodier and more destructive than any foregoing war, as a result of the tremendous development of weapons of attack and defence, but it is at least as cruel, bitter, and merciless

as any earlier war. It places itself above all the restrictions pledged in times of peace, the so-called rights of nations, it does not acknowledge the prerogatives of the wounded and of physicians, the distinction between peaceful and fighting members of the population, or the claims of private property. It hurls down in blind rage whatever bars its way, as though there were to be no future and no peace after it is over. It tears asunder all community bonds among the struggling peoples and threatens to leave a bitterness which will make impossible any re-establishment of these ties for a long time to come.” (2)

This idea of the surviving soldier being filled with despair is also stated in the short story on page 277:

“Never again would there be hope and gladness, never again free laughter and the joy of a girl's soft lips. Through the music and the laughter, through the soft touches and the voice of desire and the starry eyes, always, always they would see that silent landscape, always see the lines of humble crosses marking a world destroyed.” (277)

The repetition of 'never again' and 'always' emphasises the lasting influence the war has on the soldier. It illustrates the distinction between peaceful and fighting members of the population. It emphasizes the bitterness the soldier carries inside him and the impossibility of any re-establishment. Having analysed the indication why life might not be as promising it will now be analysed what is said about death. “For you there is silence and the cold twilight drooping in awful desolation over those motionless lands” (278). The words ‘awful desolation’, ‘cold twilight’ or ‘motionless lands’ does not convey pleasantness. The speaker does not glorify death and whether the speaker implies that he would be rather dead is a tender point to make. The only implication that could allude to this point is the use of the word silence. The opposition of sound and silence appears throughout the short story. Sounds appear to be related to war happenings and sound is also interrupting silent moments. Listed are examples from the short story that correspond to this point: “Reveille sounded with peremptory harshness... They shouted through the murk and soft inaudible rain” (258), or “Orderly

corporals ran along the lines, beating with loud swagger sticks on the tents, shouting ...” (258), or “The N.C.O’s yelled ...” (261), “The crash of shells ...” (266) or “Shell burst near them ...” (269). “Deep silence over a mourning world, broken at times by the chill yellow flash and harsh crack of an eighteenpounder” (263), another example would be: “Slowly, too slowly, the night, with its noise and its fear and its murder ...” (265). Those examples show that sound is related to human action in war whereas silence is related to nature. Considering the word choice ‘deep silence’ or ‘inaudible rain’ evoke a rather peaceful feeling whereas ‘shouting’ or ‘yelled’ inhibit a sense of aggression, it is arguable that silence equals peace, thus in dead the soldier finds peace. This offers a possibility to understand the statement “Which of us were the fortunate-who can tell?” (278), but likewise this statement could be understood differently, the meaning remains ambiguous, which links back to what has been argued in the first paragraph, that language is inadequate to convey reality or define a collective meanings and leads to the isolation of the individual mind and identity.

To sum up it has been shown that the isolation of the individual is based on different grounds. On the one hand the inability of language to convey reality makes it impossible to build a shared meaning with others. On the other hand the value of the individual identity is meaningless in war and the individual becomes anonymous. It is precisely this anonymity that leads to the ungrievability of the individual soldier. Because his death is ungrievable his life and death lose their value and with it his individual identity. The abandonment of those values lead into a state of indifference, where the soldier disconnects from his emotions and feelings. Once this state is overcome, the soldier does not regain his full humanity. The horrors of war physically and psychologically marked him for life. His identity as a soldier is altered from the image of the heroic soldier into the image of a helpless creature. This transformation ultimately shows the destructiveness war has on the individual identity and points to the realisation of the futility of war.

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