

## “In a feverish hurry against Time and Death”

—Keith Douglas's Short Stories—

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More than just the finest British poet of the second world war, the claim that Keith Douglas was perhaps also the finest poet of his generation has been endorsed by a number of critics and fellow poets. Given this favourable critical reception, it is only natural that attention should now turn to his achievement as a war diarist and short story writer. Is *Alamein to Zem Zem* chiefly of interest for what it tells us about the man and poet? Or does it reveal an equivalent talent working in prose? Are Douglas's short stories merely sketches for poems, or responses to intensities in his experience that he could only express in prose narrative form? Focusing on two of the later short stories, *Death of a Horse* and *The Little Red Mouth*, this study briefly examines Douglas's development as a short story writer and assesses his achievement.

When Keith Douglas was wounded by a land-mine in January 1943 the adventure of battle gave way to the final and creatively most productive year of his short life.<sup>1)</sup> In the months of convalescence which followed, he devoted his time to writing poetry and stories, and also began a journal which retraced his experiences as a tank commander through some of the most intense fighting of the

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1) For biographical information about Douglas I am indebted to Desmond Graham's *Keith Douglas, 1920-1944: A Biography* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

North African Campaign. With so many of Douglas's manuscripts from this period (including worksheets and early drafts for several poems) coming down to us intact, it is particularly unfortunate that only two of the four short stories<sup>2)</sup> he wrote about his war experiences, *Giuseppe* and *The Little Red Mouth*, appear to have survived. If we include *Death of a Horse*, possibly written two years earlier while doing his military training,<sup>3)</sup> this leaves us with just three short stories we may properly term mature work, and of these, *Giuseppe* is best excused from scrutiny from the start. Recounting the last stand of a squad of Italian troops in the Tunisian hills, the story is crude and unconvincing *Boys' Own* stuff and far from representative of Douglas at his best.

There are in addition the stories of his adolescence and his Oxford years. A 1962 essay by Ted Hughes<sup>4)</sup> played an important

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2) These are mentioned in a letter to M.J. Tambimuttu dated 30th January 1944 which relates to plans to publish his war diary. The relevant passage reads:

"...if you're interested in short stories about the Middle East I have four so far written and may have more when I come. But I don't expect you want short stories."

The full text of the letter can be seen on pp.146-7 of *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, ed. Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1985).

3) It is impossible to date Douglas's stories with any precision. *Death of a Horse* may belong to the final months of 1940 when he was training at the Equitation School which provides the story's setting. *Giuseppe* relates to experiences in Tunisia in May-June 1943, and *The Little Red Mouth* carries the ascription "Beni Yusef" where Douglas was stationed from September to November 1943. A biographical note (presumably by Douglas) attached to *Death of a Horse* when it was published in *Lilliput* in June 1944 opens the possibility that he may have begun *The Little Red Mouth* with other stories in January-February 1943:

"At Wadi Zem Zem he tripped over a mine; and started writing short stories during subsequent convalescence..."

4) "The Poetry of Keith Douglas" in *The Listener*, 21 June 1962.

rôle in the establishment of Douglas's reputation. In it, disputing the restrictive label "war poet", Hughes focused almost exclusively on the poetry of Douglas's formative years and, much more than early promise, revealed the extraordinary talent evident from the first. It would obviously make the present task much easier if a similar virtuosity could be demonstrated in the youthful stories, but the sad truth is that, with one exception, the nine surviving stories<sup>5)</sup> (four, mainly autobiographical in cast, gleaned from his school exercise books, and the five pieces he contributed to the Oxford literary magazine *The Cherwell*), though confident enough in design and execution, bear no remarkable impress of talent.

The exception is the first, a story dated 1932, when Douglas was a mere twelve. It is a portrait of himself as a child of four or five, one he recalls playing war games with a neighbour's child or with lead soldiers, boxing and reciting comic verses with his father and cunningly employing temper tantrums to get his own way. The narrative reaches a natural but disturbing conclusion with a glimpse of his mother lying on a stretcher (Mrs Douglas's illness was to play an important part in the ensuing family break-up) and, locked in his room, Keir —Douglas's use of pseudonyms began early— frantically beating on the bedroom door. For the work of a twelve year old, the story is very accomplished. There is a confidence and economy in the telling, and a precision and exuberant delight in language itself, one in accord with the unusually alert consciousness portrayed. The sketches of his family are sharp and convincing and are worked into the narrative with remarkable naturalness and ease. Here is one of them:

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5) All of the surviving short stories are to be found in *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, cited above.

He was not restrained from punching his father's amateur-champion broken nose by the entry of his grandfather, Mr Castellain, a courteous and courtly old gentleman who now spent his life playing patience. Mr C. received the bomb story less enthusiastically. He had once been in the volunteers, but had never fought anyone in his life. Harrow and Balliol and an addiction to natural history and good manners had made him a quiet spoken and kindly old man. Considerate and unselfish to his own class but almost unaware of the existence of any other. (*PM*, p.14)<sup>6</sup>

The recollection of his grandfather, who died when Douglas was six, ties the young author to a stable world long since swept away. The portrait is thus affectionate and nostalgic but with no sacrifice of objectivity, as evidenced by the withering truthfulness of the final detail. The same uncompromising honesty and relish for the absurd is brought to bear on his own portrait, that of an imaginative but rather selfish child much absorbed in things military. Douglas stands back and ridicules this warlike self, perhaps out of an unconscious desire to deny the legacy of a still loved father whose desertion of his family haunts the tale. The story's opening sentence is the more memorable for the way it completes our perspective on a life prematurely cut short:

As a child he was a militarist, and like many of his warlike elders, built up heroic opinions upon little information, some scrappy war stories of his father. (*PM*, p.13)

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6 ) *Op. cit.* Here and in all subsequent page references, the title is abbreviated to *PM*.

But, of course, the teller's precocious knowingness is not yet a prescience, and the warp of Fate, here strangely exposed, remains unperceived.

It is perhaps not accidental that this first untitled story should both in quality and other ways anticipate the final works, for alone among the juvenilia it shares with the mature stories an underpinning in experience that had touched the vital core of its author's being. In contrast, the other early stories record not so much experiences themselves as the elusiveness of experience for a sensitive youth yearning for sympathetic understanding (*O spires O streams*, 1937, *Misunderstanding*, 1938), and emotional and creative release (*Drunk*, 1940, *A Present for Mimi*, 1940). Invariably their quests end in failure, whereupon they retreat into defensive self-mockery or romantic posturing. Others seek out an easy fund of inspiration in death and the supernatural (*Death of a Squire*, 1937; *The Angel, The Gnome, Coutts*, 1940), but a like reluctance to take themselves seriously betrays their experiential hollowness.

Douglas enlisted in the armed services when war broke out in September 1939, and for the rest of his time at Oxford impatiently awaited his call-up. It took another two years and something very close to a desertion before he saw a battlefield and for the war to satisfy an unusually powerful yearning for experience at whatever cost, both as an end in itself and as a source of artistic data. Perhaps for this reason his brief taste of fighting had an immediate steadying effect: it brought him to a maturity as a man and as a writer, or, as Hughes would insist, to a first maturity. What this did for his poetry is well known. What it did for his prose can be seen in the two short stories, *Death of a Horse* and *The Little Red Mouth*, now to be examined. Both, significantly enough, share a great deal

with the mature poetry. For one, their exquisitely compact suggestiveness is product of the same economy of means ("words each of which works for its place in a line")<sup>7)</sup> on which he insisted for the poems. Another similarity can be seen in the way both narratives quickly reach their destination in one of those strange, almost mesmeric confrontations with the dead, which give poems like *Vergissmeinnicht* and *Landscape with Figures 2* their peculiar intensity and holding power. Such resemblances may suggest that Douglas's short stories are ever reaching towards the condition of poetry, though if there is a grain of truth in this, in no sense can they be dismissed as sketches for poems. Rather, they are manifestations of that strong compulsion in him to work and rework the significant data of his experience through the medium of poetry and every other creative outlet available to him. Thus, one of the incidents on which *The Little Red Mouth* is based is also recounted at length in his war memoir, reproduced in no fewer than three of his pen and ink drawings, and remodelled for his poem *Vergissmeinnicht*. Significant data is the key here: for it is because their underlying experiences touched such a vital nerve in Douglas's being and so powerfully caught his imagination that these stories succeed so well. *Giuseppe* draws on the same stock of battlefront experiences but, in sharp contrast, fails to touch this vital nerve. As a result, far from opening a visionary perspective or transcending the objective facts of war, it offers little more than a lumbering and predictable fable of dishonour redressed. Its failure may also owe something to the author's notable lack of sympathy with his own main character and consequent difficulty in climbing into his skin. In contrast, Simon, the central figure of *Death of a Horse*, the story

7) From a letter to J.C.Hall, 10 August 1943. *Op. cit.*, p.127.

to which we now turn, like the narrator of *The Little Red Mouth*, and Keir, the four year old hero of the earliest tale, is obviously a thinly disguised version of Douglas himself.

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*Death of a Horse* (published in the Cairo literary magazine, *Citadel*, in July 1942, and posthumously in *Lilliput* in July 1944) is based on an experience Douglas had while training at the Army Equitation School in Weedon, Northamptonshire. There horses which became lame during exercises were slaughtered and dissected in the presence of the recruits as a routine element in their training. The aim clearly exceeded the giving of practical information about the disposal of injured animals on the battlefield. For most of the young recruits, it was a first opportunity to observe a death, and provided an unacknowledged rite of passage into manhood as well as a means of testing their mettle as fighting men. The veterinary major, "with a clean white coat over his uniform, and a piece of chalk in one hand", tells them before the killing, "'You're lucky to see this....The last lot didn't have the chance'", and provides them with a rôle model of clinical detachment. His function is to demystify Death: "He talked in a matter-of-fact way about an everyday occurrence."

Nevertheless, there is something chilling and mechanical in the vet's dispassion, in the geometrical precision with which he maps on the horse's forehead the exact point at which Death will enter, and in the easy casualness of his commentary as he drains off its jugular vein. The man "whose business it was to cut the horse up and cart it away" extends the vet's icy professionalism. "Working in a

scrupulous sequence", he reduces the magnificent amalgam of flesh and spirit that was the animal to the two dimensionality of a diagram:

The man took his knife, and drew a line with it along the exact centre of the underneath of the horse. His precision and the sharpness of the knife were uncomfortable to watch. The skin fell apart behind the knife, the vet talked on, and presently the horse lay stretched out into a diagram, to which the vet pointed as he spoke.

(*PM*, p.131)

Simon, the recruit on whose reactions the narrative focuses, is ill-equipped to pass this test from the start. His empathetic involvement with the beast ("“I wonder if it knows...It does know, but it doesn't seem to mind”") hobbles him emotionally and renders futile his attempted detachment when the critical moment comes:

The orderly moved forward holding something, a sort of tube, which he put against the intersection of lines on the horse's forehead. The horse still stared in front of it. Someone said: "The old hammer type." Simon stiffened. But he was ready to see the horse stagger, desperately trying to stand, and the death agony. The orderly's hand fell, he struck the tube and there was a small report.

The horse's knees gave way at once, so instantaneously that the eye could hardly mark its fall, and so silently that Simon might have been watching it through binoculars. It only stiffened and relaxed its legs once. The suddenness and silence of its



death defeated his preparations to be unmoved.

(*PM*, pp.137-8)

As the vet punctures the horse's neck, Simon's increasingly queasy involvement is felt in the shift to narrative close-up, the visceral jolt of the mundane yet precise similitude ("The blood poured out exactly in the manner of water from a burst drain"), and the synaesthetic transfer of the vet's sensations to the onlooker:

He held his hand in the incision and said casually: "Take particular note of the colour." It was almost black, very warm and thick. (*PM*, p.138)

The vet's flapping of the horse's stomach is finally too much for Simon. It releases an "unbelievable" stench which hits his stomach and makes him want to vomit. He searches his pockets frantically for his pipe, tries to pull himself together by looking steadily at the carcass and his fellow spectators, but finally succumbs to a fainting fit. Douglas shifts to a montage technique to "cement" together the swirling vortex of impressions:

The horrible casualness of the vet's voice grew more and more apparent; the voice itself increased in volume; the faces merged and disintegrated, the wreck of the horse lay in a flurry of colours, the stench cemented them into one chaos. He knew it was useless. His one thought, as he felt himself falling, was that he had let the horse down. (*PM*, p.139)

The tale in striking ways anticipates the mature poems. Here,

the way the sensory maelstrom binds the metaphysical and the visionary to the hallucinatory ("the stench cemented them into one chaos") looks forward to the alarming switchbacks from real to surreal in the desert poetry. Another distinctive trademark is the narrative cut-off at an instant of precarious balance between contrarities. Though Douglas had criticised Aubrey Beardsley and his fellow contributors to *The Yellow Book* for something similar, in an essay in *The Cherwell* of May 1940<sup>8)</sup>, he appears nevertheless to have assimilated the device from them:

Their stories end not with a moral but with a moment. A moment is caught in their poetry, in their illustration, poising a dancer in the air, or recording a fleeting impression. They sought thus to gain the essential virtue of life, working in a feverish hurry against Time and Death.

Like the figure of the dancer in Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's *Salome*, Simon is left poised in mid-air. One-pointed in the whirl of chaos, he is held suspended in a mid-fall stasis which both reenacts the horse's moment of extinction and prefigures his own. Viewed in retrospect, Douglas's life and work reveal a remarkable congruence and unity, and if they share a common theme it is a brooding prescience concerning his own fate. That this concluding freeze frame should thus anticipate the curiously premonitory endings of his post-combat poems comes as no surprise.

But there is much else that looks forward: the intuition of death, for instance, as a mysterious otherness which teases the im-

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8) Entitled *The Yellow Book*. The essay is reproduced in *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, pp.48-50. The passage quoted is on p.49.

agination. The death witnessed fits neither Simon's preconception ("he was ready to see the horse stagger, desperately trying to stand, and the death agony") nor the vet's dispassionate reduction to a bloody diagram. Indeed, for all the anticipatory build-up—the inscribing of a target-like graticule on the horse's forehead, etc—the critical instant comes so suddenly that it almost eludes the eye, and so silently that Simon "might have been watching it through binoculars." This image, with its effect of removing the death to an immense distance and simultaneously bringing it into sharply magnified close-up, may mark the emergence of one of the central exploratory figures of Douglas's later work: the lens as visionary threshold.<sup>9)</sup> Precursor of the "wrong way telescope" of *Simplify me when I'm dead*, the swordfish's eye of *The Marvel*, and of the sniper's gunsight of *How to Kill*, it also anticipates the optically enhanced tank warfare of the Western and Libyan Deserts. And as his future rôle as tank commander would plunge Douglas into a phantasmagoric world which he would compare to walking through a looking glass, Simon's confrontation of the ultimate dislocation of appearance and reality impels him into an inner landscape where there are no frontiers between the rational and the absurd, the delirious and the visionary. The story thus issues from the same base camp of imagination as the desert poems where the ludicrous freely consorts with the horrifying:

On scrub and sand the dead men wriggle  
in their dowdy clothes. They are mimes  
who express silence and futile aims

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9) There is an assumption here that the story was written in the late part of 1940. Its actual date of composition is, however, uncertain.

enacting this prone and motionless struggle  
at a queer angle to the scenery

(*Landscape with Figures 2*)<sup>10</sup>

...you can imagine  
the dead themselves, their boots, clothes and possessions  
clinging to the ground, a man with no head  
has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.

(*Cairo Jag*)

Peter was unfortunately killed by an 88;  
It took his leg off. He died in the ambulance.  
When I saw him crawling, he said:  
It's most unfair, they've shot my foot off.

(*Sportsmen*)

So the vet is observed nonchalantly holding forth to the recruits with his finger held in an incision in the horse's neck (prototype maybe of the doubting Thomas figure of the *Landscape with Figures* poems), while blood is cascading all about him ("The vet stood in blood, with blood running all round him, and blood jetting up over his hand"). There is a similar effect later when, to demonstrate the size of the horse's stomach, the vet flaps it "like an apron", generating an involuntary queasy echo in Simon's own stomach. And there is also something of the surreal or absurd in Simon's vision of the dead horse, wearing the same resigned and humble expression as in life,

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10) All quotations from the poetry are taken from *Keith Douglas The Complete Poems*, ed. by Desmond Graham (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

"consciously assisting" at its own dissection:

the whole atmosphere was that of a ritual sacrifice; the vet, intoning what he had said so often before, the other man working in a scrupulous sequence, and the horse, the central figure of the ceremony, invested with the dignity due to a chosen victim. From this came the impression that the dead horse was taking a pride in its own dissection. (*PM*, p.138)

Here the ludicrous joins hands with something close to the visionary as the putting down of a lame horse is sublimated to a consensual act of "sacrifice", in which the "chosen victim", the soldier-priest, and his acolyte, all cooperate in initiating the child recruits into the esoteric mystery of taking life. The vet's dispassionate procedure here anticipates the coldblooded artistry of the sniper (sorcerer rather than priest) of *How to Kill*, while the "resigned and humble" horse, "central figure of the ceremony", and indeed of the tale, offers a complementary model in the art of dying. Simon's final thought before he is sucked into the vortex is that he has betrayed the horse's sacrifice, and if this leaves him ambiguously poised between insight and absurdity, the betrayal itself seems curiously like the cardinal sin of Douglas's artistic credo (expounded in a series of letters to J.C.Hall in the summer of 1943): subjective involvement with the subject. Vet and horse, in this sense, provide alternative models of aesthetic detachment whose lesson Simon, in his guise as narrator, recollecting the incident at a tranquil remove, seems fully to have assimilated.

The first person narrator of *The Little Red Mouth*<sup>11)</sup> stands at a

similar corrective distance from the self recalled. The latter, a tank commander, resembles the young recruit of the earlier tale both in his emotional susceptibility and his total unpreparedness for the encounter awaiting him. Based on a harrowing confrontation on Douglas's second day of fighting at El Alamein,<sup>12)</sup> the story again draws a strength from being grounded in the iron of real experience.

Seeking an analogy for the otherworldliness of desert warfare in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, Douglas likens its strange silence to "that in a camera obscura or a silent film",<sup>13)</sup> and the illimitably strange perspective from a moving tank to scenes in *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. *The Little Red Mouth* begins similarly:

The flashes of the six pounders and of the big tanks firing their seventy-fives impinged on the eternal glare of the sunlight, infinitesimal moments of brightness like the scratches which show when an old film is being projected.....From one of the dots on the horizon a long straight column of black smoke stood up, leaning a little to the left, expanding at the top. Grey smudges showed where the seventy-fives were falling short.

(PM, p.139)

Soon we learn that this brightly illuminated, almost artistically composed warscape is one seen through field glasses from the turret of a

11) *The Little Red Mouth* was rejected for publication in Douglas's lifetime by *Citadel* (as being "slightly too concerned with the horrific") and also by *Horizon* (as being "not quite suitable for this magazine"). It was finally published in 1970, in *Stand*, vol.xi, no.2.

12) Compare pp.50-1, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, ed. by Desmond Graham (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1992).

13) *Op. cit.*, p.28.

tank. Like the death viewed as "through binoculars" in the earlier story, the tank battle has a remote and strangely unreal quality as if it were being watched on film, an illusion heightened by failures of synchronisation and other distortions of light and sound:

The boom floated across through the shimmery air, arriving late in my right ear. In my left ear George's voice said: "King 3, bloody good shooting, you're making them sit up. Keep on chucking them. Off." His words were a little distorted and uncomfortably loud. (*PM*, p.139)

The reconnaissance over, the tank commander removes his ear-phones and returns to the task of killing time. The tank has been at a standstill for an hour because the enemy are out of range of its "obsolete gun". He carves himself a chunk of cheese with his jack-knife and munches biscuits laid out beside his field glasses and Luger. His eye catches "the faint gleam on the breach of the two pounder, the little staircase of cartridges climbing up to the feed slide of the machine-gun" in the fighting chamber below, the weaponry's efficient readiness counterpointing the inert postures and lethargic air of the crew:

The gunner was reading a Wild West magazine: the driver's back hunched forward, as he wrote a letter home on his knee; the operator, dozing. (*PM*, p.139)

His precautionary memo ("I'll have to restart the engine or the wireless will go dead") before turning to his reading, ominously enlarges its scope to his own disengagement. His stock of light

reading exhausted, all that remains is the *Oxford Book of French Verse*, and in the apparent randomness with which the page falls open at Eustache Deschamps' *Virelay* lies an intimation of the epiphany to come:

Sui-je, sui-je, suis-je belle?  
 Il me semble, a mon avis  
 que j'ai bon front et doulz viz  
 et la bouche vermeillette:  
 Dittes moy se je suis belle

(*PM*, pp.139-40)

Art and life again meld (cf. "like the scratches which show when an old film is being projected") as memory gives flesh to the poem's coquettish speaker and pulls her into the here-and-now:

But it made me think of Sylvie, looking up out of the corner of her black eyes, under the long Syrian lashes, saying: "Je suis jolie, hein? Dis-moi, j'ai un joli corps?" in the very tone of voice of the poem. Et la bouche vermeillette, (Oui, c'est du Max Factor. J'en ai trouvé deux boîtes, mais deux boîtes seulement à Rivoli. Et tu sais combien j'avais à payer?) (*PM*, p.140)

Here, the dream girl of Douglas's adolescent stories, her charms accentuated by cosmetics (a reciprocal obeisance to art?) makes a return in her most seductive form. A thinly disguised portrait of Milena Pegna, whom Douglas had met on the beach at Stanley Bay in July 1942, Sylvie is one of a gallery of Dark Ladies, Cleopatras, Cressidas in the mature work. By October, Milena had broken off



the engagement that Douglas, rather against her better conscience, had talked her into, and the rift was made the more painful by her involvement with his friend, Norman Ilett, an officer serving with the Alexandria based naval flotilla. The story merely touches on the incident (Douglas remained on friendly terms with both) in the discreet shorthand of "Now at half past twelve, Sylvie is probably on the beach at Stanley with that sub-lieutenant from Mosquito." Long after his death, Milena recalled Douglas telling her that if they broke up he would go off and get himself killed, which, for all its romantic bravado, closely reproduces a similar threat after the failure of an emotional involvement three years before.<sup>14)</sup> It may thus not be coincidental that a month after the break-up with Milena, Douglas carried out his famous desertion in reverse to the battlefield at Alamein.

The impact of Milena's defection can be judged from the poetry Douglas wrote immediately in its wake: poems suffused with a dark brooding eroticism which shadows her cruelty in that of the desert and his longing in death:

And in your body each minute I died  
moving your thigh could disinter me  
from a grave in a distant city...

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14) Douglas met Yingcheng at Oxford in February 1939 and soon fell in love with her. The relationship developed rapidly but was broken off by Yingcheng the following August after a trip to France together. Learning early in September that she was now engaged to marry someone else, Douglas immediately enlisted in the army, and told a friend that he would join a good cavalry regiment and "bloody well make my mark in this war. For I will not come back." The incident is related on pp.78-9 of *Keith Douglas, 1920-1944: A Biography*, cited above.

This I think happened to us together  
though now no shadow of it flickers in your hands  
your eyes look down on ordinary streets  
if I talk to you I might be a bird  
with a message, a dead man, a photograph.

*(The Knife)*

O turn in the dark bed again  
and give to him what once was mine  
and I'll turn as you turn  
and kiss my swarthy mistress pain.

*(I listen to the desert wind)*

In the post-combat poetry this personal anguish broadens to trace the seeds of warfare in sexual betrayal (*Cairo Jag, Mersa*), and to implicate the treacherous woman, now transformed to cosmopolitan whore, in the death of her lover:

...Marcelle, Parisienne  
always preoccupied with her dull dead lover:  
she has all the photographs and his letters  
tied in a bundle and stamped *Décédé* in mauve ink.

*(Cairo Jag)*

Death is invariably female ("a murderer with a lover's face"; "The weightless mosquito touches / her tiny shadow on the stone"), and death in action a fearful consummation with her:

The next month, then, is a window  
and with a crash I'll split the glass.

Behind it stands one I must kiss,  
 person of love or death  
 a person or a wraith,  
 I fear what I shall find.

*(On a return from Egypt)*

Douglas introduces a bizarre sexuality in some of his portraits of the dead in his campaign journal, but the prose work which throws the fullest light on his macabre eroticism and its sources in his experience is undoubtedly his semi-autobiographical tale, *The Little Red Mouth*. Here, the speaker's involuntary echoing of the poem's refrain:

my mind was still saying over, you know how a phrase can  
 recur in your head for hours, till you forget how it came there:  
 'et la bouche vermeillette' (*PM*, p.140)

—one in a series of mirage-like refractions of sound, light and thought in the tale — provides a shimmering bridge between sexual betrayal and death, and between the real and the surreal.

A summons over the earphones tugs the rational portion of the speaker's mind out of reverie to focus on a more pressing reality which, with his "mind still half-occupied in Alexandria", he has already seen "growing smaller, receding" against the degree scale of his binoculars. "I'm awake, I'm awake," he protests, but held between the competing pulls of past and present, and with one part of his mind already trapped beyond some hypnagogic threshold, the warning from the earphones "Don't swan too much" seems doubly apt. As the tank moves forward, as through a different element ("oozing over the scrubby, undulating desert"), towards the interface

of life and death, the speaker's nervous vigilance lest Death sneak up on him provides a grim prelude for what follows.

Like *Death of a Horse*, the story closes with a figure held in suspended animation in the manner of Beardsley's poised dancer. Here it is a dead man wearing the vivacious imprint of a life experienced at its most intense at the instant of its extinction:

His left hand was raised, supported in the air apparently by rigor mortis, the fingers crooked as though taking hold. It was this seeming to be arrested in motion, which made the pose so vivid. The right hand clutched together a corner of the towel, as if he had seized it at that moment, when a wave of pain washed over him.

(*PM*, pp.140-1)

The corpse's precarious "pose" (cf. "posed", "position", "propped", "attitude" in the same few lines) between stillness and movement reinforces a bizarre impression that it is not human but something artistically contrived to mimic humanity: "It was like a carefully posed waxwork...and the face, yellowish with dust, a doll's or an effigy's." Douglas describes the numerous dead of *Alamein to Zem Zem* as being wrapped in a "triumphant silence" which gives them their curious "air of knowing the answer to life" yet which is, at the same time, "proof against any questioner in the world."<sup>15</sup> Here he takes the image a step further: death is a shadow or simulacrum of life in the same way that art is.<sup>16</sup> In *Landscape with*

15) From an abandoned draft revising *Alamein to Zem Zem* reproduced in *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, pp.98-114. The passage quoted is on p.108.

16) Douglas defines the corpse's preternatural otherness through a series of contraries: natural artifice, deathly vivacity, movement in repose, ecstatic pain and silent eloquence.

*Figures 2*, the speaker is watching a troupe of deathly actors in a maquillage of "cosmetic blood and hectic colours", and finally finds himself transformed from audience to a "figure writhing on the backcloth." Something very similar happens in *The Little Red Mouth* where the observer finds himself held in a violent stasis—"trembling with horror, stunned into involuntary speech"—which mirrors that of the corpse. What emerges quite spontaneously from his mouth, however, "Et la bouche vermeillette", seems less the incongruous memory spasm that it was before than an involuntary insight into the scene before him. Its startling rightness in this new context issues from the macabre eroticism that precedes it:

Pain, a climax or orgasm of pain, was expressed in his face and attitude as I would not have believed a motionless body and countenance could express it. It is not too much to say his position was a cry of pain. (*PM*, p.141)

The agony indelibly stamped on the dead man's face and form tells of more than just the violence of his end: it hints that his death was like an orgasmic coupling with a fearful female presence such as Douglas limns in the dark glass of his final poem ("one I must kiss / person of love or death / a person or a wraith"). Thus, at the story's close, the little red mouth of Deschamps' coquettish charmer, dissolved by memory to the painted lips of the inconstant Sylvie, transforms at last to the sucking mouth of Death. The iteration of the refrain serves as a marker for a progressive and involuntary expanding of associations in the observer's mind till what at first his eye so randomly entertained is discovered as the key to the whole design. The story ends, like several of the poems, with the observer

on the brink of a complete merger of self with other as the mirror.  
image of his own betrayal draws from his mouth a voice.