

Metaphysics in an Optic Glass: The War Poetry of Keith Douglas.

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For Keith Douglas, the North African desert war confirmed the thinness of the partition that divided him from an unknown dimension, and his writings of the period register a mounting conviction of his approaching end and, with it, a sense of the urgency of bringing his life's work to a consummation in the short space remaining to him. The result is these astonishing final poems into which the doomed poet has tried to concentrate all the experience he would ever and could never have.

In a short critical essay¹ written at the height of the North African Campaign, Keith Douglas gave voice to the predicament of his generation of war poets:

“The poets who wrote so much and so well before the war, all over the world, find themselves silenced, or able to write on almost any subject but war. Why did all this happen? Why are there no poets like Owen or Sassoon who lived with the fighting troops and wrote of their experiences while they were enduring them?

The reasons are psychological, literary, military and strategic, diverse. There are such poets but they do not write. They do not write because there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war except its mobile character. There are two reasons: hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain and boredom; the behaviour of the living and the appearance of the dead, were so accurately described by the poets of the Great War that everyday on the battlefields of the western desert—and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well—their poems are illustrated. Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological.”

Douglas's brief period of frontline experience (between 27th October 1942, when he

1. “Poets in this war”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 23. 4. 71, p. 478. It is also reproduced on pp. 117-20 of *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, compiled by Desmond Graham.

deserted his cosy base camp job in training and, in direct defiance of orders, drove off to join his regiment on the battlefield at El Alamein, and 15th January 1943 when he was wounded at Wadi Zem Zem) gave little opportunity for writing poetry, but the three months of hospitalisation and leave which followed provided both the leisure and perspective to write his first group of post-combat poems.² By May (when *Poets in this war* appeared), he was recording his battle experiences in prose, in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, and at work on a second group of major poems. This poetry, whose existence his essay ignores (it concludes: “it seems to me that the whole body of English war poetry of this war, civil and military, will be created after war is over”), together with the handful of poems which followed in the months leading up to his death in June 1944 were to establish Douglas’s reputation as the most talented poet of his generation, and to refute, once and for all, his argument that the poets of the Second World War had nothing new to say.

Most soldiers go into action with a firm conviction, against the statistical odds and contrary to a daily confirmation of the appalling randomness of death, that they will not be killed. Not so Keith Douglas who, from the very day of his enlistment, lived calmly and unreluctantly with the knowledge that he would meet a violent end. Desmond Graham’s fine biography of Douglas records several examples of this strange prescience, which hardened into a conviction as his death drew nearer:

“The Sunday before the regiment’s departure from Sway, their padre, Leslie Skinner, set up his altar beside Douglas’s tank as the most convenient place in the squadron’s line. Douglas, after directing his crew to tidy up the area and fold blankets to be used as kneelers, stayed to communion, and that evening, to Skinner’s surprise, he joined the civilian congregation for evensong in the small village church, the only soldier there. After the service, Douglas came up to speak to the padre, and they walked in the New Forest, talking of Douglas’s conviction that he would not return from Europe. “He was not morbid about it,” Skinner recalls. “He could talk of and even make plans for the days when the war was over, and having done so come back again to this feeling that it was unlikely he would survive. . . .” ” (p. 251)

2. For information about Douglas’s life I am heavily indebted to Desmond Graham’s *Keith Douglas, 1920–1944: A Biography*.

Standing midway in a perspective that begins with prescience and ends with death, Douglas's headlong flight, in October 1942, not from but towards the carnage at El Alamein seems to betray an impatience, one very typical of him, to confront the inevitable. It is clear, moreover, that the curiously detached preoccupation with the image of the doomed man in the prose and poetry which he wrote after that date is occasioned not by a death wish but by a sense of destiny which both the poet and the soldier were able to accept with clear-sighted resignation. To read through the three dozen or so poems that he wrote at Oxford while waiting for his military training to begin is to be reminded that, though Douglas had still to be exposed to the violent experiences that would mature his talents and forge a new poetic voice, he had already found his subject—for Death haunts poem after poem:³

Death has made up your face. His quiet hand
perfects your costume to impersonate
the one who cannot enter this living land.⁴

(Poor Mary)

How silly that soldier is pointing his gun at the wood:
he doesn't know it isn't any good.
You see, the cold and cruel northern wind
has frozen the whole battalion where they stand.

(Russians)

Well, I am thinking this may be my last
summer . . .

(Canoe)

The anticipation of a "sudden fearful fate" (*Canoe*) intensifies in the poems written during his military training:

3. I do not feel that the fact that much other youthful poetry is death-centred invalidates this comment.

4. All quotations from Keith Douglas's poetry are taken from *Keith Douglas The Complete Poems*, edited by Desmond Graham. Variants are listed there on pp. 127-42.

but alas, Cheng, I cannot tell why,
today I touched a mask stretched on the stone-

hard face of death. There was the urge
to escape the bright flesh and emerge
of the ambitious cruel bone . . .

(The Prisoner)

. . . You who can remake
the lizard's tail and the bright snakeskin
cannot, cannot. That you gobbled in
too quick: and though you brought me from a boy
you can make no more of me, only destroy.

(Time Eating)

and culminates in the stoic restraint and hard-edged brilliance of *Simplify me when I'm dead*, the poetic last will and testament which Douglas wrote on the eve of his departure for Egypt:

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

As the processes of earth
strip off the colour and the skin
take the brown hair and blue eye

and leave me simpler than at birth,
when hairless I came howling in
as the moon came in the cold sky.

Of my skeleton perhaps
so stripped, a learned man will say

'He was of such a type and intelligence,' no more.

Thus when in a year collapse
particular memories, you may
deduce, from the long pain I bore

the opinions I held, who was my foe
and what I left, even my appearance
but incidents will be no guide.

Time's wrong-way telescope will show
a minute man ten years hence
and by distance simplified.

Through that lens see if I seem
substance or nothing: of the world
deserving mention or charitable oblivion

not by momentary spleen
or love into decision hurled,
leisurely arrive at an opinion.

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

Though we have to remember that Douglas was only twenty-one when he wrote it, the poem clearly points the direction his precocious artistic maturity will take him, and exhibits many of the qualities of his finest work. In theme and treatment it rehearses the exploratory strategy of the poems to come: that of resecting the surface tissue and probing down to the metaphysical bones of the subject, while observing it ever at a clinical remove as through a lens. *Simplify me when I'm dead*, the self-made epitaph written at a critical turning point in Douglas's life, may thus be read as both prologue and epilogue to the

mature poetry.

For all Douglas's concern that the First World War poets had preempted and exhausted the subject of war, what quickly becomes evident, while reading *Alamein to Zem Zem*, is how very dissimilar Douglas's own experience of fighting was from that of poets like Owen or Sassoon. Douglas's detailed accounts of tank combat evoke the terrors and exhilarations of a completely new kind of warfare for, though fairly self-contained and "gentlemanly" (civilian casualties were light and there were remarkably few atrocities) the highly mobile, heavily mechanised fighting which engulfed the Western Desert in the winter months of 1942-3 heralded a new era of warfare in which the slaughter could now be quite impersonally done on a scale and at distances previously unimaginable, at the mere touch of a button. Douglas's journal describes graphically the insulated and unusually remote vantage point from which, as a tank commander, he observed combat:

"My place as tank commander was on the right of the sixpounder. I had a seat from which I could look out through a periscope. This afforded a very small view, and in action all tank commanders stand on the floor of their turrets so that their eyes are clear of the top, or actually sit in the manhole on top of their turret with their legs dangling inside." (*Alamein*, p. 16)⁵.

and how during tank engagements the enemy, in the depersonalised form of a machine, was normally visible only as an amorphous but fast moving speck on the horizon, whose range and progress could be tracked only with the help of inter-tank radio communication and powerful binoculars:

"Anyone who takes part in a modern battle in a tank, which is equipped with a wireless, has an advantage over the infantrymen, and over all the soldiers and generals of earlier wars . . . From the first appearance of the enemy, a Crusader troop leader, well out in front of the regiment, sees and hears the whole action, almost as if it were a pageant prepared for his entertainment: for hours on end it may continue to be exciting in quite an impersonal way. He sees a suspicious blob on the horizon; halts his squat turret almost

5. All quotations from *Alamein to Zem Zem* are taken from the 1946 Editions Poetry London edition.

level with a ridge and scrutinises the blob through his glasses . . .” (*Alamein*, pp. 97-8)

Unlike the poets of the First World War Douglas found little to question in the war itself. It was a job that had to be done, and one that he approached with a great deal of personal courage and initiative. In the early months at least, he also displayed a certain relish for the fighting which, coupled with the cool detachment he habitually displays in the accounts of human suffering in his journal, has prompted criticism of a certain heartlessness.⁶ All soldiers have to cultivate a special kind of numbness towards the carnage they view on the battlefield, and for tank commanders, like Douglas, such sang-froid possibly came the easier for the impersonality of tank combat and the fact that the dead were not normally encountered till battle was over and could thus be contemplated with a greater reserve and composure. Of heartlessness, however, there is no solid evidence: Douglas was by all accounts fair and considerate to the men who served under him and to those he took prisoner in battle. The misunderstanding lies, of course, in a too ready assumption that the aesthetic distance which Douglas imposes as a writer on emotionally highly charged material is commensurate with an icy reserve in the soldier meeting the same experience at first hand. The immense difference between the two roles can be seen in this recollection:

“About two hundred yards from the German derelicts, which were now furiously belching inky smoke, I looked down into the face of a man lying hunched up in a pit. His expression of agony seemed so acute and urgent, his stare so wild and despairing, that for a moment I thought him alive. He was like a cleverly posed wax-work, for his position suggested a paroxysm, an orgasm of pain. He seemed to move and writhe. But he was stiff. The dust which powdered his face like an actor’s lay on his wide open eyes, whose stare held my gaze like the Ancient Mariner’s. He had tried to cover his wounds with towels against the flies. His haversack lay open, from which he had taken towels and dressings. His water-bottle lay tilted with the cork out. Towels and haversack were dark with dried blood, darker still with a great concourse of flies. This picture, as they say, told a story. It filled me with useless pity.” (*Alamein*, pp. 41-2)

6. Ian Hamilton, for instance, finds in the poetry a “reticence stiffening into the tight-lipped insensitivity of the officers’ mess,” while Roy Fuller describes the poet as “an incipient fascist.”

This unexpected encounter makes for a very harrowing scene, one whose potentiality for pathos Douglas seems to exploit in his ordering of its details into an affective sequence and in the explicit record of feeling at the close. At the same time, however, he short-circuits our spontaneous reaction by reporting each of its particulars in the crisp dispassionate tones of a war correspondent and by cynically devaluing the emotion he claims to have felt (“*useless* pity”). The result is an uneasy seesawing between compassion and nonchalance in the observer, and a concomitant surge and restraint of emotion in the reader. The tension produced is mirrored in the uneasy coupling of static and kinetic elements in the scene itself: the dead man’s expression is agonisingly alive; his rigid posture suggests a paroxysm or orgasm of pain; his body is stiff but he seems to move and writhe etc. Unexpected elements in the description (such as the precise yet outrageous similes) similarly override the pathos, providing a further assurance that the writer is confronting the scene in its full naked intensity and with maximum objectivity. The writer’s detachment then, far from registering a heartless insouciance, is a liberating means of going beyond conditioned responses (“*useless* pity” is possibly a rejoinder to Wilfred Owen’s manifesto: “My subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity”) and of exploring new dimensions of the subject of war. In a letter⁷ to fellow poet and friend, J. C. Hall, in August 1943, Douglas provided his generation of writers with a counter-manifesto which extolled the importance of “*réportage* and extrospective (if the word exists) poetry”:

“I see no reason to be musical or sonorous about things at present. When I do, I shall be so again, and glad to. I suppose I reflect the cynicism and careful absence of expectation (it is not quite the same as apathy) with which I view the world. As many others to whom I have spoken, not only civilians and British soldiers, but Germans and Italians, are in the same state of mind, it is a true reflection. I never tried to write about war (that is battles and things, not London can Take it), with the exception of a satiric picture of some soldiers frozen to death, until I had experienced it. Now I will write of it, and perhaps one day cynic and lyric will meet and make me a balanced style To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others. To trust anyone or to admit any hope of a better world is criminally foolish, as foolish as it is to stop working for it.”

7. Reproduced on pp. 123-4, *Keith Douglas The Complete Poems*.

Some of the broader differences of aim and approach between Douglas and the earlier generation of war poets by whom he felt overshadowed can be seen by placing his *Landscape with Figures 1* (April 1943) alongside Wilfred Owen's *The Show* (1917). The title of Owen's poem refers to a visionary spectacle presented by the figure of Death, one of insect-like forms crawling across a shell-cratered warscape:

My soul looked down from a vague height, with Death,
 As unremembering how I rose or why,
 And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,
 Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
 And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.

Across its beard, that horror of harsh wire,
 There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled,
 It seemed they pushed themselves to be as plugs
 Of ditches, where they writhed and shrivelled, killed.⁸

The poem ends in a crescendo of horror with Death's revelation of the speaker's mutilated corpse:

And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid
 Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,
 Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,
 And the fresh-severed head of it, my head.

Owen hammers home the cruelty, squalor and the suffering of the trenches both by direct statement ("horror", "agonies", "terror") and via the powerfully physical and emotive terms of his extended metaphor ("pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues", "From gloom's these long-strung creatures crept"), generating a strong yet uncomplex reaction in the reader against the evil of war. The emotional pitch is occasionally so shrill, however, that the poem teeters on the brink of absurdity:

8. Taken from *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited by C. Day Lewis, pp. 50-1.

*On dithering feet upgathered, more and more,
Brown strings, towards strings of gray, with bristling spines,
All migrants from green fields, intent on mire.*

*Those that were gray, of more abundant spawns,
Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten.*

(Emphases added)

Douglas's *Landscape with Figures 1* begins from a similarly remote vantage-point high above the battlefield, one which now images the blank indifference of a mechanistic universe:

Perched on a great fall of air
a pilot or angel looking down
on some eccentric chart, the plain
dotted with the useless furniture
discerns crouching on the sand vehicles
squashed dead or still entire, stunned
like beetles: scattered wingcases and
legs, heads, show when the haze settles.
But you who like Thomas come
to poke fingers in the wounds
find monuments, and metal posies:
on each disordered tomb
the steel is torn into fronds
by the lunatic explosive.

As the dust storm of combat settles, a new landscape emerges, one that has neither coherence (“eccentric”) nor meaning (“useless”): destroyed and derelict vehicles strew the desert, lending it an eeriness that distils into a surrealist horror as the machinery transforms into insect and finally to human limbs. The horror is neither incited nor gratuitous but emerges naturally, and rather like a mirage, out of the strange desert set-

ting (the sand storm blurs and the high viewpoint foreshortens and flattens outlines), and is the more compelling for the clinical distance and reserve of the description (“scattered wingcases and / legs, heads, show when the haze settles”). Douglas creates a vision with its own persuasive rightness out of the crushed and dismembered vehicles and through it hints at an undefined malignity in the cosmos, one that readily subsumes the human variety. The poem’s tentativeness in this area (contrast the simple extroverted “message” of *The Show*) is compounded by a shift to a new perspective in the final lines. The incredulous human observer (read “poet”) who, like doubting Thomas, comes in search of revelation finds significance and order (read “poetry”) where there is neither: for him these “disordered tomb[s]” carved with a grotesque tracery by “lunatic” armour-piercing shells are monuments decked with mourning wreaths.

Landscape with Figures 2, its companion piece, spotlights a different kind of débris:

On scrub and sand the dead men wriggle
 in their dowdy clothes. They are mimes
 who express silence and futile aims
 enacting this prone and motionless struggle
 at a queer angle to the scenery
 crawling on the boards of the stage like walls
 deaf to the one who opens his mouth and calls
 silently. The décor is terrible tracery
 of iron. The eye and mouth of each figure
 bear the cosmetic blood and hectic
 colours death has the only list of.
 A yard more, and my little finger
 could trace the maquillage of these stony actors
 I am the figure writhing on the backcloth.

The theatre and the Danse Macabre had figured prominently in the poems Douglas wrote while at Oxford (*A Mime*, *A Ballet*, *Pas de Trois* etc). Here there is a return to these motifs to render the tragi-comic otherness of the world of the dead. The desert landscape fraught with human detritus dissolves into a nightmare theatre where dead men

play the living, ridiculing our complacent sense of purpose in their antic postures and silent cries. Yet though the dead are strangely compelling in the frozen intensity of their will to express, their mimes and soundless utterances leave only a vacancy. They convey no message that the living can understand.

The vision draws power from its fusing of a sort of macabre humour (“the dead men wriggle”, “crawling on the boards”, “opens his mouth and calls” etc) to the scrupulously understated horror (“in their dowdy clothes”, “at a queer angle to the scenery”), and is the more disturbing for the absence of any interpretative comment from the speaker who, as in the previous poem, makes his entrance in the closing lines. He too is a participant in this absurd drama, a skeptic who would know for certain whether these “stony actors” are living or dead, and the blood on their faces cosmetic or real. He has but to stretch his hand a yard further to attain the secret of their otherworldliness but, like the dead themselves, he is transfixed and writhing, a figure on a backcloth powerless to escape a nightmare in which the living “are hardly more than deluded variants of the dead.”⁹

The visionary poetry of an earlier war left a clear mark on Douglas’s work, but here and there in his journal he acknowledges other sources of inspiration for the phantasmagoric or surrealist flavour of several of his poems:

“The view from a moving tank is like that in a camera obscura or a silent film—in that since the engine drowns all other voices except explosions, the whole world moves silently. Men shout, vehicles move, aeroplanes fly over, and all soundlessly: the noise of the tank being continuous, perhaps for hours on end, the effect is of silence . . . I think it may have been the fact that for so much of the time I saw it without hearing it, which led me to feel that country into which we were now moving as an illimitably strange land, quite unrelated to real life, like the scenes in “The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari.” Silence is a strange thing to us who live: we desire it, we fear it, we worship it, we hate it . . . The most impressive thing about the dead is their triumphant silence, proof against anything in the world.” (*Alamein*, p. 19)

The journal also records that, among the books Douglas took with him into battle, were Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and the “easily relatable” *Short Survey of Surrealism*

9. From Ted Hughes’ introduction, *Keith Douglas The Complete Poems*, p. xx.

by David Gascoyne. There is an allusion to another of Carroll's fantasy works on the second page of the journal:

“But it is exciting and amazing to see thousands of men, very few of whom have much idea why they are fighting, all enduring hardships, living in an unnatural, dangerous, but not wholly terrible world, having to kill and be killed, and yet at intervals moved by a feeling of comradeship with the men who kill them and whom they kill, because they are enduring and experiencing the same things. It is tremendously illogical—to read about it cannot convey the impression of having walked through the looking-glass which touches a man entering a battle.” (*Alamein*, p. 8)

The journal occasionally captures the back-to-front logic of this looking-glass world with a startling graphic immediacy:

“What we saw was an odd sight. It was a Sherman [tank], right enough, but as it came towards us in the beginning of twilight, a red aureole about the turret top proclaimed that the inside was blazing. The immediate effect was of something supernatural, as though the dead or mangled crew were bringing in the remains of their tank. A very slim connection reminded me momentarily of Ambrose Bierce's Horsemen in the Sky.”

(*Alamein*, pp. 47-8)

But it was clear to Douglas that he could best confront this kind of visionary otherness in poetry, where his reader would register the least resistance to being drawn through the looking-glass to a strange subliminal world where there were no moral or rational signposts.

Cairo Jag, one of the finest of the early poems, places this nightmare world of irrational images in a strangely preferential juxtaposition with the exotic air and fleshly preoccupations of the Egyptian capital:

Shall I get drunk or cut myself a piece of cake,
A pasty Syrian with a few words of English
or the Turk who says she is a princess—she dances

apparently by levitation? Or Marcelle, Parisienne
always preoccupied with her dull dead lover:
she has all the photographs and his letters
tied in a bundle and stamped *Décedé* in mauve ink.
All this takes place in a stink of jasmin.

But there are the streets dedicated to sleep
stenches and the sour smells, the sour cries
do not disturb their application to slumber
all day, scattered on the pavement like rags
afflicted with fatalism and hashish. The women
offering their children brown-paper breasts
dry and twisted, elongated like the skull,
Holbein's signature. But this stained white town
is something in accordance with mundane conventions—
Marcelle drops her Gallic airs and tragedy
suddenly shrieks in Arabic about the fare
with the cabman, links herself so
with the somnambulists and legless beggars:
it is all one, all as you have heard.

But by a day's travelling you reach a new world
the vegetation is of iron
dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery
the metal brambles have no flowers or berries
and there are all sorts of manure, 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.

The war which is only a day's travelling away subtly pervades the atmosphere of the city,
and is manifest in the squalid addictions of its poorer districts and in the Gallic airs and

more ludicrous deceptions of its cosmopolitan whores. Cairo may seem a temporary haven from the violent and irrational world of killing, but it is really no more than an extension of that nightmare absurdity, as figured in the contribution it and similar “base towns” make to the gruesome incongruities of the battlefield. It matters little then whether the speaker decides to “get drunk or cut [him]self a piece of cake”: the sleep of the senses merely premises the nightmare.

And it is to this that the poem finally turns—not simply as a demonstration of an inescapable logic, but as a spontaneous reaction to the city’s stifling climate of duplicity and despair and to the sordid unity beneath the human facades: “it is all one, all as you have heard.” This perception broadens with the change of vista to a “new world” beyond the looking-glass in which death mimics life and grotesque vegetables burgeon in a manure of human corpses. Here Marcelle’s “dull dead lover”, the mutilated beggars and the poem’s speaker condense into a single dream-like image of a “man with no head” still clutching “a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.” Similarly, the derelicts “scattered on the pavement like rags / afflicted with fatalism and hashish” resolve into the nightmare’s fast decaying corpses, “their boots, clothes and possessions / clinging to the ground”, while the “stink of jasmin” which pervades the whorehouse and the “stenches and sour smells” of the poorer streets distil into the fetor of a horrible garden where “there are all sorts of manure”. The deceptive and shifting perspectives of the unreal city thus fix and harden into the paradoxes of a surrealist landscape in which death apes life, the feeder turns to food, and the inorganic sprouts in monstrous growth.

In *Time Eating*, which he wrote during his military training in 1941, Douglas had envisioned Time as a ravenous eater who:

has flowers for his food
at Autumn—yet can cleverly make good
each petal: devours animals and men
but for ten dead he can create ten.

With the more sombre existential colouring (seen in the coupling of feeding and annihilation in *Cairo Jag*) that came from a seasoned intimacy with death, Douglas returned to this theme repeatedly in his mature work. *Desert Flowers* frankly acknowledges his debt to the

poets of the First World War, particularly Isaac Rosenberg, and reveals too something of the frustration (expressed in *Poets in this war*) of having to write in their shadow:

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers—
Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying—
the shell and the hawk every hour
are slaying men and jerboas, slaying

the mind: but the body can fill
the hungry flowers and the dogs who cry words
at nights, the most hostile things of all.
But that is not new.

But this simply prefaces a resolution to go beyond the bounds of ordinary perception, beyond even life itself, in the pursuit of a vision no earlier poet had sung:

Each time the night discards

draperies on the eyes and leaves the mind awake
I look each side of the door of sleep
for the little coin it will take
to buy the secret I shall not keep.

I see men as trees suffering
or confound the detail and the horizon.
lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing
of what the others never set eyes on.

The speaker hovers on the brink of a transcendental understanding of the suffering he views on the battlefield (compare *Landscape with Figures 2* where the speaker seems tantalisingly close to a similar esoteric breakthrough), but like the returning sight of the blind man at Bethsaida (“I see men; they look like trees, but they are walking about”, Mark

8:24), his perception is distorted and blurred. And perhaps will stay so till Death, the source of this epiphany (the clue is provided by the reference to the coins weighting the dead man's eyelids and the coin laid on his tongue to pay his passage to Hades), chooses to complete that knowledge which the poet will then divulge. *Desert Flowers* here sounds a premonitory note that identifies the high-strung confrontations with the dead that recur in Douglas's poetry with his own tenuous hold on life. One can see too how this single-minded pursuit of otherworldly knowledge gives his poetry a marked speculative cast, illustrated here by an excerpt from *Dead Men*, which may be conveniently labelled metaphysical:

the dead men, whom the wind
 powders till they are like dolls: they tonight
 rest in the sanitary earth perhaps
 or where they died, no one has found them
 or in their shallow graves the wild dog
 discovered and exhumed a face or a leg
 for food: the human virtue round them
 is a vapour tasteless to a dog's chops.

All that is good of them, the dog consumes.
 You would not know, now the mind's flame is gone,
 more than the dog knows: you would forget
 but that you see your own mind burning yet
 and till you stifle in the ground will go on
 burning the economical coal of your dreams.

(Dead Men)

The coolly ironic and gem-like *Mersa* uses the same feeding / annihilation motif. It opens with a splendid panorama of Mersa Matruh, the historically famous Egyptian coastal resort, heavily scarred now by some of the fiercest fighting of the campaign:

This blue halfcircle of sea
moving transparently
on sand as pale as salt
was Cleopatra's hotel:

here is a guesthouse built
and broken utterly, since.
An amorous modern prince
lived in this scoured shell.

On this he sketches a party of soldiers, relaxed and making the most of a temporary lull in the business of killing:

the cherryskinned soldiers stroll down
to undress to idle on the white beach.

The idyll is threatened by reminders close by—the wreckage of a tank and the “immensely long road” leading to Tripoli—of the pressing business to which they must return. More ominously, the soldiers’ cherryskinned¹⁰ bodies seem the riper for picking for the bleached whiteness of the sands and the sinister façades of the skeletal town, which together form a backdrop. The cumulative unease focuses in the visionary intensity of the last stanza where, in typical Douglas fashion, the menace is coolly downplayed:

I see my feet like stones
underwater. The logical little fish
converge and nip the flesh
imagining I am one of the dead.

Not all the poems Douglas wrote in North Africa are directly concerned with the ex-

10. Douglas records that after the German retreat from Mersa Matruh “we lived on loot. Wine, cigars, cocoa, cherries, chocolate, meat roll and excellent ersatz coffee graced our menu. A great deal of fine white flour went with it, and cherry tarts were on the table four meals of the day” (*Alamein*, p. 62)

perience of war. There are love poems like *The Two Virtues*, *The Knife* and *I listen to the desert wind*, and a number of impressionistic sketches of the landscape and cities of the Middle East (*Syria*, *L'Autobus*, *Saturday Evening in Jerusalem*, *Egypt* etc) dating both from before and after he saw combat. One of the most accomplished is *Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden*, which he wrote just before leaving North Africa. Here the eater-eaten motif is turned to gentle comic effect:

As a white stone draws down the fish
she on the seafloor of the afternoon
draws down men's glances and their cruel wish
for love. Her red lip on the spoon

slips-in a morsel of ice-cream. Her hands
white as a shell, are submarine
fronds, sink with spread fingers, lean
along the table, carmined at the ends.

A cotton magnate, an important fish
with great eyepouches and a golden mouth
through the frail reefs of furniture swims out
and idling, suspended, stays to watch.

A crustacean old man clamped to his chair
sits near her and might coldly see
her charms through fissures where the eyes should be;
or else his teeth are parted in a stare.

Captain on leave, a lean dark mackerel,
lies in the offing, turns himself and looks
through currents of sound. The flat-eyed flatfish sucks
on a straw, staring from its repose, laxly.

And gallants in shoals swim up and lag,
 circling and passing near the white attraction—
 sometimes pausing, opening a conversation—
 fish pause so to nibble or tug.

But now the ice-cream is finished, is
 paid for. The fish swim off on business
 and she sits alone at the table, a white stone
 useless except to a collector, a rich man.

The metaphor of the warily circling fish too timid or astute to approach the glittering lure extends gracefully to the poem's close, unostentatiously displaying, in a new context, the exactly calibrated phrasing, the agile shifts of rhythm, and the highly luminous, hard-edged images which are the hallmarks of Douglas's mature style. This luminosity of image is enhanced here by his imitation of the magnified and foreshortened perspective ("red lip on the spoon"; "spread fingers, lean / along the table, carmined at the ends"; "with great eyepouches and a golden mouth") which obtains when an object is viewed through a casing of water. There is a similar optical illusion in the final stanza of *Mersa* where the refracted image of the speaker's feet lends them a startling otherness which prompts the comparison to stones. A glance through Douglas's poetry, however, reveals how often a membrane of glass or water separates observer from the thing observed. Indeed, some of his most powerful visionary moments seem to be thus mediated.

Alamein to Zem Zem proposes several analogues (*Alice through the Looking Glass*, *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, etc) for the surreal otherness of Douglas's imagery of war. Though not included there, one of the more potent influences on his imagery was the metaphysical poetry of John Donne and his contemporaries (and of Donne etc as projected through the poetry of T. S. Eliot). Douglas, in a reaction against the lyricism of his Oxford verse, submitted to this new tutelage soon after the start of his military training and began experimenting with a tough new impersonal mode of writing. Inevitably, a heavy air of pastiche clings to some of the results, but several poems can stand up in their own right and are very fine indeed. Among the latter are two written on the eve of his departure for the Middle East, *The Marvel* and *Simplify me when I'm dead*. Each, in true

metaphysical fashion, traces its argument along the knife edge of metaphor and, in each case, the lens provides the figure:

A baron of the sea, the great tropic
 swordfish, spreadeagled on the thirsty deck
 where sailors killed him, in the bright Pacific

yielded to the sharp enquiring blade
 the eye which guided him and found his prey
 in the dim country where he was a lord;

which is an instrument forged in semi-darkness
 yet taken from the corpse of this strong traveller
 becomes a powerful enlarging glass

reflecting the unusual sun's heat.
 With it a sailor writes on the hot wood
 the name of a harlot in his last port . . .

(The Marvel)

Time's wrong-way telescope will show
 a minute man ten year's hence
 and by distance simplified.

Through that lens see if I seem
 substance or nothing . . .

(Simplify me when I'm dead)

Douglas, keeping close here to the flavour of his model (possibly the tears and window panes of Donne's *Valedictions*), draws on the Renaissance science of optics for his extended conceits, creating in the process one of his poetry's most significant motifs. Two years later, in a poem which carries his transcendent aspirations to their apogee, he once more

mediates his vision through a lens. Douglas has since been through battle and found there the perfect counterpart for the visionary lenses of these earlier poems—the high precision optical sight on a rifle:

How to Kill

Under the parabola of a ball,
a child turning into a man,
I looked into the air too long.
The ball fell in my hand, it sang
in the closed fist: *Open Open*
Behold a gift designed to kill.

Now in my dial of glass appears
the soldier who is going to die.
He smiles, and moves about in ways
his mother knows, habits of his.
The wires touch his face: I cry
NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears

and look, has made a man of dust
of a man of flesh. This sorcery
I do. Being damned, I am amused
to see the centre of love diffused
and the waves of love travel into vacancy.
How easy it is to make a ghost.

The weightless mosquito touches
her tiny shadow on the stone,
and with how like, how infinite
a lightness, man and shadow meet.
They fuse. A shadow is a man

when the mosquito death approaches.

All the war poems examined so far have post-combat settings and the precise military role of their observer-speakers can only be inferred. In *Vergissmeinnicht*¹¹ and *How to Kill* (both begun in May / June 1943), the speaker is now unambiguously a participant in the violence that confronts him. The “I” of *Vergissmeinnicht* is a tank commander, returning with his crew, their apprehension mingled with a certain furtive content, to review the scene of a bloody engagement with a German 88mm gun, while in *How to Kill* we look at war through the eyes of a sniper¹² who is of indeterminate nationality and allegiance.

How to Kill is the sole poem in Douglas’s mature work that focuses directly on the act of killing. It offers no palliatives: there is no mention of duty, of having to kill or be killed, nor reference to compassion for the victim. The viewpoint is that of a professional soldier skilled in the handling of high precision automatic weapons that seem to do your job for you, and trained not to let “useless pity” stand in his way. We can only watch as he casually selects his target, plays audience with a chilling curiosity to his victim’s last moments, lines up the graticule of his telescopic sight then slowly squeezes the trigger.¹³ “Damned” unequivocally by the rôle he plays, but simultaneously freed from moral compunction by the absurd logic of war, the sniper is coldbloodedly able to relish the slick and deadly efficiency with which he can “make a ghost.” The untrammelled power over life and death that this gives him he compares to sorcery and, by the same equation, his optic sight transmutes to a sorcerer’s perspective glass, and his bullet to a “familiar”. Peering into his “dial of glass”, the sniper dons the cloak of visionary, and becomes prime mover and dispassionate witness at the supreme and most mysterious drama of our existence.

As in *Vergissmeinnicht*, Douglas underscores the sanctity of human life by relating it to love, there sexual, here maternal. It starts with the vision, surprising in its context, of a child playing with a ball, one whose ballistic trajectory foreshadows darkly the premature

11. This poem is the subject of a separate paper, “The Evolution of Keith Douglas’s *Vergissmeinnicht*”, to be published in 広島女学院大学英語英米文学研究, No. 2, March 1993.

12. The copies of this poem Douglas sent to Edmund Blunden and to J. C. Hall in August 1943 have *The Sniper* as title.

13. The viewpoint is anticipated by a poem written by Douglas at the age of fifteen:

Through a machine-gun’s sights

I saw men weep, cough, sprawl in their entrails . . .

(.303)

impulsion into manhood (and damnation) that will be thrust upon him by the game of war. The vision seems also to echo and extend the conclusion of a Dylan Thomas poem, *Should lanterns shine*:¹⁴.

The ball I threw while playing in the park
Has not yet reached the ground.

Its catching, in Douglas's poem, signals the foredoomed selection of the killer-to-be for, at that instant, the child changes to a sniper steadily aiming his weapon, and the ball to the ambiguous "*gift designed to kill*".

The child soldier is met once more in the second stanza:

He smiles and moves about in ways
his mother knows, habits of his

but we are no longer looking at the sniper but his victim, his image magnified in the telescopic sight. The transfer generates another of those highly charged moments, frequent in Douglas's poetry, where the observer seems to fuse with the observed, the killer with his victim, the living with the dead: a special form of negative capability that Douglas seems to have wrenched out of his own prescience. The switch here is in perfect accord with the poem's own ambivalence towards this killer who, though savagely amused by the butchery he deals, displays a precision and refinement in his meditation of the act that more than upholds the sanctity of the life he spills.

This refinement of vision carries over into the final stanza with its image of the delicately poised mosquito, Douglas's Angel of Death. The insect had once before supplied an analogy for the sniper's bullet: in the early pages of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, referring to the large number of casualties sustained through sniping, Douglas recalls how while talking to a sentry, "two bullets sang past in the darkness like innocuous insects; one struck a tank somewhere and rebounded whining into the darkness" (p. 24). In the poem, the mosquito

14. This poem is included in Douglas's copy of Dylan Thomas's *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936). This text is kept in the Brotherton Collection, the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds which contains the main part of Douglas's surviving library.

is anticipated both by the conceit of Death as a demonic spirit (“familiar”) and by an exact resemblance between the insect’s weightless hovering before homing in, and the gentle alignment of the fine cross wires of the sight onto its target. Sinister yet supremely graceful in her movements, the mosquito’s exquisitely light caress of her own shadow (a variation on the self mirroring lens) is dumb show to an awesome drama: the fusion of man and “shadow”—the reflection in the sight and the spectral entity or “ghost” that complements the living man—on a visionary plane intersecting the lens. The complementary meanings of shadow feed the fine play of paradox which ends the poem:

A shadow is a man
when the mosquito death approaches

the word subtly shifting its ground according to how the syntax is construed.

The fact that the dead soldier is not individualised (in the way that he is in *Vergissmeinnicht*) elevates the drama to a plane above the personal and above the here and now of a particular war. The sniper and his victim seem the embodiments of antithetically opposed destructive and creative principles in the cosmos, which are perpetually at war with each other, and which ultimately defy moral categorisation. The soldiers’ preordained rôles are interchangeable, and the forces that impel them are seen to be at odds within the same entity, for the sniper is child as well as killer, seer as well as sorcerer, innocent as well as damned. In this respect, *How to Kill* resembles *Vergissmeinnicht*, which explores a similar paradox (the soldier as lover and killer) but which, in the scale and intensity of its vision, *How to Kill* surpasses incomparably.

The return to England in November 1943 brought an even more sombre mood to Douglas’s work. The *Bête Noir* fragments enact a losing battle with the ineffable, “a protracted failure” to define (and in the process perhaps exorcise) the destructive elements in himself that complemented the creative:

If at times my eyes are lenses
through which the brain explores
constellations of feeling

my ears yielding like swinging doors
admit princes to the corridors
into the mind, do not envy me.
I have a beast on my back.

But, as he identifies in his note on these fragments,¹⁵ the failure is “also a protracted success” for *Bête Noir* is “the poem I begin to write in a lot of other poems.” The statement confirms what is clear from the poems themselves: the lacerating inner contention that feeds them. And if the endeavour to define the dark side of his own creative impulses is indeed the thread unifying Douglas’s poetry then it is one that culminates and finds its most profound expression in *How to Kill*.

Actors waiting in the wings of Europe, another unfinished piece, looks forward darkly to the impending return to combat:

Actors waiting in the wings of Europe
we already watch the lights on the stage
and listen to the colossal overture begin.
For us entering at the height of the din
it will be hard to hear our thoughts, hard to gauge
how much our conduct owes to fear or fury.

The speaker imagines himself as one of the “little pieces of food / swirling in an uncomfortable digestive journey” in the “stomach of a war”, and the poem breaks off with a premonitory glimpse of his ghost wandering. *To Kristin Yingcheng Olga Milena* is much more explicitly doom-laden. Returning to the image of the body’s disintegration to its primal elements that he had used to preface the desert poems (in *Simplify me when I’m dead*), Douglas writes an elegant valediction to the four young women with whom he had become closest:

Women of four countries
the four phials full of essences

15. Reproduced on p. 120, *Keith Douglas The Complete Poems*.

of green England, legendary China,
cold Europe, Arabic Spain, a finer
four poisons for the subtle senses
than any in medieval inventories.

Here I give back perforce
the sweet wine to the grape
give the dark plant its juices
what every creature uses
by natural law will seep
back to the natural source.

The opening stanza of his final poem, *On a return from Egypt* (composed March / April 1944), reworks some of the content of *Actors waiting in the wings of Europe*, but the gaze is now turned backwards rather than forwards and the dispirited reluctance runs deeper:

To stand here in the wings of Europe
disheartened, I have come away
from the sick land where in the sun lay
the gentle sloe-eyed murderers
of themselves, exquisites under a curse;
here to exercise my depleted fury.

There emerges here a new note in Douglas's poetry: the spiritually enervated cadences of a man who has had enough of war. Gone is the dispassionate reportage and the alert openness to experience that marked the desert poems: all that remains is the hyperbole of despair. The third stanza confirms the demise of the artistic quest which gave meaning to this young life: the expedition has been abandoned, not for want of endeavour, but because the short time allotted him has run out:

And all my endeavours are unlucky explorers
come back, abandoning the expedition;

the specimens, the lilies of ambition
still spring in their climate, still unpicked:
but time, time is all I lacked
to find them, as the great collectors before me.

No longer a vague foreboding, Death is finally given a date:

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.

It was an appointment that Douglas would keep faithfully, on 9th June 1944, near the village of St. Pierre in Normandy.

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