

## Keith Douglas: Death's Several Faces

When a promising or very good poet dies young, critics tend to lament a lost talent. Indeed a risk of war is that talent may perish before its time. That was so with Owen and Rosenberg in the First World War; and it was so with Douglas and Keyes [killed at the ages of 24 and 21 respectively] in the Second.

Keith Douglas was born in the quiet country town of Tunbridge Wells on January 24, 1920. At two, he was already precociously artistic; and at four he could read *The Times* with fluency. He was just ten when he first attempted a poem, which he called Waterloo:

Napoleon is charging our squares,  
with his cavalry he is attacking:  
let the enemy do what he dares,  
our soldiers in braveness aren't lacking.

But naught can this charging avail,  
he cannot do anything more,  
for not one heart does fail  
e'en when 'tis at death's door.<sup>1</sup>

What Waterloo lacks in metrical expertise, it more than makes up in urgency and realism—even allowing for the stupendous bathos of the sixth line. Already his poetry has direction. It is, of course, ordinary for schoolboys of this age to read war stories; and if they happen to write verse, their reading will spill over into it. But with Douglas it seems to have gone a good deal deeper. He read history, and especially military history, voraciously. Henty was still a popular author; and the weekly *Boy's Own Paper* contained much information. When he wrote the poem just quoted, he had been reading about the Boer War and Baden-Powell.

His first war poem, “.303,” dates from 1935. He was barely fifteen, and still five years away from call-up. The title is the calibre of a rifle. His poem opens with a sensuous, new-Romantic landscape:

I have looked through the pine-trees  
cooling their sun-warmed needles in the night:  
I saw the moon's face white,  
beautiful as the breeze.<sup>2</sup>

The second stanza opens similarly. Then suddenly the mood is completely transformed:

Yet you have seen the boughs sway with the night's  
breath,  
wave like dead arms, repudiating the stars.  
and the moon, circular and useless, pass  
pock-marked with death.

The simile in the second line is nightmarish—living branches

hanging limply like dead arms. The exact choice of the word *repudiating* gives it added power.<sup>3</sup> So too does the clinical adjective pock-marked. Now comes Douglas' first war scene:

Through a machine-gun's sights  
I saw men curse, weep, cough, sprawl in their entrails:  
you did not know the gardener in the vales,  
only efficiency delights you.

This is the territory of the Great War. Soon enough, Douglas would be living such scenes himself and developing the necessary detachment and coolness—his “objective correlative”—to describe them in prose or verse.

The prime significance of the poem is that it was a turning point. Until then the young schoolboy had, as poet, been preoccupied with the beauties of nature and with living creatures. The man in his poem “Caravan,” for instance, is “speaking the tongue of the swallows,”<sup>4</sup> while in “Strange Gardener,”

over the meadow,  
framed in quiet osiers, dreams the pond;  
region of summer gnat-busyness  
and, in the afternoon's blue drowsiness,  
plops among the water-shadows:  
and the cool trees wait beyond.<sup>5</sup>

This is a Kentish pastoral, in fact, with already the same charm and exact observation as *The Wind in the Willows*. But “.303” turns away from this. It is as if the poet's sensibility had been changed by the weapon's brutal coldness. This is not to say that Douglas never again wrote about Nature; or that he occupied himself exclusively with war poetry. The poem “.303” is simply a foretaste of what he was eventually to write in the Libyan Desert.

At about this time, the schoolboy had become a militarist. He was causing grave problems of discipline. He broke into the school's training corps armoury and stole an old rifle which he had been refused permission to take home. This nearly led to his expulsion. Duty was his lodestar now. He very much enjoyed the drill of the School Cadet Corps. His early life was, one might say, a psychological preparation for the war which was “on the cards” throughout the later Nineteen-Thirties.

A further significance of “.303” is that it was Douglas' first dealing with death. The idea of death haunted the young poet. From start to finish, it is a major theme of his and one for which war provided the vehicle. If we count from “.303”, death is referred to in no less than thirty of his poems, a startling figure if set against the eighty-eight poems that constitute his *Collected Works*. He had a presentiment of his own early death, and it strengthened after he enlisted. One night in Libya, as he lay down to sleep,

Perhaps betrayed by the spectacle of the stars as clear as jewels on black velvet into a mood of more solemnity, I suddenly found myself assuming that I was going to die tomorrow.<sup>6</sup>

Not long after he enlisted—on September 6, 1939, to be exact—he announced that he would go off and join a good cavalry regiment and “*bloody well make my mark in this war. For I will not come back.*”<sup>7</sup> And as he was passing a War Memorial with some friends, he remarked casually to them that his own name would be on the next one.<sup>8</sup> Shortly before D-Day and his own death on June 9, 1944, he visited Oxford for the last time. During a meal with Joan Appleton, he gave her his watch, remarking that he would not be needing it again, and asked her to make his poetry known if he was not there to do so himself.

This absorption with death was not fear or morbidity so much as a death “wish.” Douglas was (it seems) “courting death”. He may have been thinking to himself: “If I am to be killed anyway, let it happen as soon as possible.” In Libya, during the winter of 1942-3, he had a tendency to regard his post as a roving commission.<sup>9</sup> War brought him moments of excitement. They had to be enjoyed, for there might not be another chance. Often he left a tank formation and drove his Crusader off in order to take a better look at something or other, or joined the heavy tanks in the front line long before they had cleared a path for the light tanks. He enjoyed jumping out of his vehicle to hurl hand-grenades, but was sharply told to “leave the cowboys-and-Indians stuff to the infantry.” Not, then, a morbid fear of death, but a happy-go-lucky defiance.

Before he sailed for the Middle East, Douglas had written a poem on his own part in the natural process:

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 entered the cold sky.

Of my skeleton perhaps,  
so stripped, a learned man will say  
“He was of such a type and intelligence,” no more.

With the clinical coolness of an anatomist, Douglas examines his own body and draws certain conclusions. Significantly, he has no hesitation in viewing himself as one of the dead, with indifference and complete detachment:

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 felt, even my appearance;  
but incidents will be no guide.<sup>10</sup>

This is an extreme case of an attitude which characterises his poetry. Douglas seems to regard death not in philosophical terms [as something with a meaning to be grasped] but as merely the end of a phase [a man's life]. It would be a mistake to ascribe this to his experience of life in the desert—which had a similar effect on T.E. Lawrence—for as early as 1936 we find him writing, in the vein of *The Waste Land*, the following aphorism:

Death is the season and we the living  
Are hailed by the solitary to join their regiment.<sup>11</sup>

His mood often tends toward dejection. This is more so the nearer the actual fighting he comes. Even sunlight—which to most people brings pleasure—has an adverse effect on him:

So despair

Fills my heart. With funerall  
And with no usual mirth let fall  
A sigh of sorrow. Even fear  
The sunlight settled on a wall.<sup>12</sup>

This poem, Elizabethan in flavour and diction, is full of death images, the word *funerall* (in its archaic spelling) appears no less than four times. Much of his poetry from this period mirrors Douglas' ill-starred love affair with a sophisticated, thoroughly Europeanised Chinese girl, Yin-cheng.

A premonition of death was to produce his fine poem *Canoe*. This dates from just before his enlistment. “*I cannot stand aghast/at whatever doom hovers in the background.*”<sup>13</sup> He finds his relaxation and spiritual fulfillment in “the old-fashioned art of idleness” as practised at Oxford, punting his friends slowly upstream “towards Iffley,” in the wake (as one might say) of Matthew Arnold.

In the summer of 1939, Douglas visited France. On his return, he learnt that Hitler had denounced the Anglo-German naval pact and the Non-Aggression treaty with Poland.

Intelligences like black birds come on their wings  
from Europe... (he tells Yin-cheng) So keep a  
highlight in your handsome eye... We with our heart  
still sensitive as air will do our part, always to think,  
and always to indite of a good matter, while the black  
birds cry.<sup>14</sup>

The ironic lightness, the Elizabethan pastiche, and the “stiff upper lip” quotation of an anthem by Purcell<sup>15</sup> should deceive nobody. This is a poem of dejection, of bitterness, and of regret for the lovers' moments hinted at throughout.

The first occasion on which Douglas wrote about dead soldiers was in 1940, describing a Russian battalion frozen to death in the Russo-Finnish war.

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.

The naive, clumsy couplets—a technique successfully developed by Stevie Smith—help underline the broad irony. The situation is after all tragi-comic. The words “you see” add a final touch of the grotesque. Douglas pursues the macabre joke at the expense of what would in another country have been the bourgeois officer class:

That's never a corporal: even now he's frozen,  
you could see he's only a commercial artist  
whom they took and put those clothes on  
and told him he was one of the smartest.

Wilfred Owen believed that “the poetry is in the pity” of war. In this poem it certainly isn't. Douglas is not, like Owen, a pacifist condemning war. He is simply looking facts in the face and expressing them. The dead men are inert material. They rouse neither horror nor pity:

Walk along the innocuous parade  
and touch them if you like, they're properly stayed:  
keep out of their line of sight and they won't look.  
Think of them as waxworks, or think they're struck  
with a dumb immobile spell,  
to wake in a thousand years with the sweet force  
of spring upon them in the merry world. Well,

and Douglas is ready to deliver the half-rhymed punch-line with impeccable comic timing:

at least forget what happens when it thaws.<sup>16</sup>

Pity is not what he is aiming for. These dead are not human beings brought through suffering to death, but dolls in funny postures. He refuses to reach down to any deeper meaning in their death. The best thing to do is “at least forge....” He is not in any way involved; nor does he comment on what he is describing. This is consistent with his logic. The horror of war had, he felt, been adequately portrayed for all time by the Great War poets. The business of Second War poets was something different. Remember that at the date of this poem, he had not yet been in action. “Russians” is important for another reason too. During his last two terms at Oxford, Douglas had begun to demolish his romantic hopes and take a more realistic view of life. Among those hopes had been romantic Communism. (“Lives there a man with soul so dead/ who was not, in the ‘Thirties, Red?”) “Russians” is one of his earliest attacks on his previously-held convictions; and for the first time, he gives free rein to his cynicism. So too in another “pre-war” poem, “John Anderson”:

John Anderson, a scholarly gentleman,

advancing with his company in the attack  
received some bullets through him as he ran.

So his creative brain whirled, and he fell back  
in the bloody dust (it was a fine day there and warm).  
Blood turned his tunic black

while past his desperate final stare  
the other simple soldiers run  
and leave the hero unaware.

There is no moral. Nor is there disrespect for the dead soldier, “a scholar and a gentleman”; although it is the “simple,” less brainy soldiers who come out alive. Death in war is merely a natural process, on which Douglas refuses to comment, even for dramatic purposes. There is no sorrow, no brief obituary; only casual detachment. “It was a fine day.” Suddenly, reverting to his earlier style of florid pastiche, he shifts the focus by invoking the classical world of the Olympians and of the *Greek Anthology*:

Descend, Phoebus, and cleanse the stain  
of dark blood from the body of John Anderson.  
Give him to Death and Sleep,  
who'll bear him as they can

out of the range of darts to the broad vale  
of Lycia; there lay him in a deep  
solemn content on some bright dale.

And the brothers, Sleep and Death,  
lift up John Anderson at his last breath.<sup>17</sup>

The poet would have been wiser to close his poem after the first three stanzas. In the interests of historical truth, it should be recorded that many “scholarly gentlemen” spent the war very “creatively” in decoding German messages, blowing up bridges in the Balkans and so on.

Douglas' poetry inevitably poses the question: what was at the root of his preoccupation with death? Was it a natural morbidity in his temperament? Certainly poems such as “Simplify me when I am dead” suggest this possibility. But, it is a difficult conclusion to accept without qualification. On the other hand, “Russians” suggests that he was a realist on exact logical grounds: he knew his chances of survival were finite, and therefore spontaneously decided on a hectic life, so as to meet death halfway and not go down passively: “I cannot stand aghast.” Gradually, he developed the habit of ignoring death and viewing it without horror. Being no coward, he did not try to avert it.

A linked question is whether his detachment was in any way modified when he started to write about actual corpses seen in battle. His first poem from the Middle East, “Negative Information,” written in Palestine in November 1941, mentions only death in the abstract, together with the characteristic presentiment:

And in general, the account of many deaths—  
whose portents, which should have undone the sky,  
had never come—is now received casually.

You and I are careless of these millions of wraiths...  
the hungry omens of calamity  
mixed with good signs and all received with levity  
or indifference by the amazed mind.<sup>18</sup>

Casualness, careless, levity, indifference. The poem is almost a manifesto. By now, Douglas was in daily and close contact with men who had been to the front. The studied indifference reappears in *The Offensive*, a title capable of two interpretations:

When you are dead and the harm done  
the orators and clerks go on  
the rulers of interims and wars  
effete and stable as stars.<sup>19</sup>

What was noticeably lacking in 1939 was shock. The trauma of the Great War could not be recreated. Never again was trench warfare on that scale to be experienced. Instead, the new war took on its own dimensions. It was not a static conflict. A number of fronts were opened and British soldiers might find themselves fighting in Europe, Africa or Asia. Their responses reflect the wider scope. Again, the sense of futility was, on the whole, absent. For, in 1939, there were the best possible reasons for fighting. *We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here* was not a chorus typical of the later war. Britain was wholly involved in a struggle for survival, and no chasm existed between civilians and fighting men. The war impinged on even the most detached. Nor was there as high a price to be paid. Whereas the total figure for world casualties was by 1945 roughly double that of 1918, the British figure was only half.

Churchill made sure that people at home were brought close to the action in the main theatres of war. Censorship was far less blatant. Newsreels and journalism from the front, as well as mass-produced Ministry of Information leaflets, enabled almost everyone to share the combatants' experiences. Air raids had brought the war literally to the front doorstep. Thus, there was really no audience left for poets to shock. For them, what needed to be written had already been written twenty-five years before. Little would be achieved by revisiting the fires of Hell. Even Rosenberg could have made nothing new, perhaps, of the Blitzkrieg.

The first poem in which Douglas actually mentions corpses seen in the desert is simply called "Dead men." The addressees are men on leave in Cairo and having a good time, far from the field of battle. A smooth change of gear takes us from "white dresses and jasmine" to the "white dust"—the desert sand half-covering the corpses. The poet invites his heart to come out of its trance and look at them:

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 for them, the dog consumes.<sup>20</sup>

Here flippancy and cynicism are avoided. The tone is a Hamlet-like melancholy on seeing how a human being is liable to end up. The dead are not portrayed in detail, but with the simile "like dolls"—bringing to mind, perhaps, Chinese or Japanese actors. As in the earlier poems, the poet keeps his distance from his material, with an air of resignation. Unlike the Great War poets, it is no part of his plan to shock, so that one's first impression is of weariness and exhaustion, of degradation of the human body and human virtues. No message is attached. The reader must draw his own conclusions without being told how to react or what emotions to expect from the poet. The ghastly scene in which the Libyan hyenas are devouring the bodies of the dead is done with a detachment which suggests to me that Douglas had known all along what the war would be like and had prepared or drilled himself psychologically. To apply the outmoded standards of the Great War writers, here is a poet who "has not taken the war seriously." One thing he is anxious to make clear, however, is that the remote reader cannot possibly "get under the skin" of the death and desolation which prevails in the desert:

Then leave the dead in the earth, an organism  
not capable of resurrection, like mines,  
less durable than the metal of a gun,  
a casual meal for a dog, nothing but the bone  
so soon. But tonight no lovers see the lines  
of the moon's face as the lines of cynicism.

And the wise man is the lover  
who in his planetary love resolves  
without the traction of reason or time's control,  
and the wild dog finding meat in a hole  
is a philosopher. The prudent mind resolves  
on the lover's or the dog's attitude forever.<sup>21</sup>

The unifying theme is the scavenger dog who, instead of living in day-dreams, takes what he wants. The dog—and Douglas is well aware of the etymology of *cynic*—is your only true philosopher, feeding ironically, like a good scholar, on dead meat, whereas the lovers feed on an immaterial, unreal, confection of "planetary" dreams. The poet, deadpan, sets the two methods side by side and leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions. The last two lines take the poem out of the grip of the scavenging dog by appealing to common sense. It makes a very interesting contrast to Owen's "Greater Love," where the lovers occupy the centre of the stage alone:

Red lips are not so red  
 As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.  
 Kindness of wood and wooer  
 Seems shame to their love pure...  
 Heart, you were never hot,  
 Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;  
 And though your hand be pale,  
 Paler are all which trail  
 Your cross through flame and hail:  
 Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them  
 not.<sup>22</sup>

The theme is essentially the same—the lack of reality in love when confronted with death—but I find Owen the more forceful, thanks to his skillful handling of contrast, alliteration, and paradox. Which is not to say that Douglas' poem, more detached, has not an effectiveness of its own.

With the picture of corpses in *Dead Men*, we can compare a prose description by Douglas of his first glimpse of a dead body in the desert:

As we approached another trench, I was too late to prevent the driver from running over a man in black overalls who was leaning on the parapet. A moment before the tank struck him, I realized he was already dead; the first dead man I had ever seen. Looking back, I saw a negro. "Libyan troops," said Evan. He was pointing. There were several of them scattered about, their clothes soaked with dew; some lacking limbs, although no flesh of these was visible, the clothes seeming to have wrapped themselves round the places where arms, legs, or even heads should have been, as though with an instinct for decency. I have noticed this before in photographs of people killed by explosive.<sup>23</sup>

Had Douglas survived, he would surely have been a great prose writer, to judge by the muscularity of his paragraph and the logical precision of its events. There is no emotion, no psychological reaction—merely the Thucydidean corroboration by reference to "photographs of people killed by explosive." The poet sees his task as to describe not what he felt, but what he saw; and he does so. In *Alamein to Zem-Zem*, however, he permits himself a 'realist' picture of a body:

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.<sup>24</sup>

For perhaps the only time Douglas forgoes his detachment, even as he recognises that his pity is "useless" [as the moon in "303" was "useless"]. No longer is he totally the cool observer, even though he undercuts himself with the ironic comment "as they say." He permits himself two similes and a virtual third ["concourse"]. The first—"like an actor's"—is virtually the same as "like dolls" in "Dead men." The second "like the Ancient Mariner's" is powerful in that it prolongs the onlooker's horror.

This prose passage is a profoundly poetic piece of writing; put into verse, it might have reminded one of the nightmare world of Sassoon's *The Rear Guard* or Owen's *Strange Meeting*. Douglas actually committed himself to a statement of policy about prose:

Nor can prose and poetry be compared any more than pictures and pencils. The one is the instrument, the other art. Poetry may be written in prose or verse, or spoken extempore.<sup>25</sup>

This was printed when he was twenty. It explains why what we should call his "prose" is very often close to the condition of poetry, close to what he called "art," with a small a.

New in the Second War was a large-scale use of machines and the introduction of technological skills. Since the enemy normally had to be killed at a distance, hand-to-hand fighting had an obsolete air, now that death was a matter of applied mathematics, and men died from the pull of gravity and a quick estimate of velocity and altitude. Douglas describes the view from a moving tank to be like that of a silent film.

Characteristic of the war were short periods of fighting followed by long periods of movement from place to place—by land, sea, or air—and preparations for the next encounter. Comparatively speaking, the earlier war had been static.

Since fighting had now partly taken to the air, we find poems written by pilots, in defiance of Robert Graves' strange belief that 'no war poetry was to be expected from the R.A.F.'—founded on the still stranger observation [which we might quote Kipling's poem "McAndrew's Hymn" to refute] that "the internal combustion engine does not seem to consort with poetry." Encouragement, if any were needed, came from W.B. Yeats' technical masterpiece *An Irish airman foresees his death*. Note that the pilot very rarely even saw the enemy he was destroying, whether in the air or on the ground. Gloom and filth conditioned the imagery and the chiaroscuro of the poetry of the first war. But the second war was mainly fought in the open, since the mechanized divisions needed vast spaces to manoeuvre in. This shift in "atmosphere" is visible from two great war poems. The first is Sassoon's *The Rear Guard*:

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,  
 He winked his prying torch with patching glare  
 From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know;  
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;  
And he, exploring fifty feet below  
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie  
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,  
And stopped to give the sleeper's feet a tug.  
"I'm looking for Headquarters." No reply.  
"God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had  
no sleep).  
"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."

Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,  
And flashed his beam across the livid face  
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore  
Agony dying hard ten days before;  
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

Alone he staggered on until he found  
Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair  
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground  
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.  
At last, with sweat of horror in his hair,  
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,  
Unloading hell behind him step by step.

Everything here speaks of twilight [*groping, prying, too vague to know, blackening, ghost, filtered, dazed*]. Even sound is muffled. Nor are conditions any different above ground [the rosy gloom of battle: a cliché of war paintings and book colour plates of the period]. The only lighting is on the horror of the fourth stanza: "the livid face /Terribly glaring." The central figure has indeed made his brief, nightmare descent into Hell. Very different is the second poem, Keith Douglas' "Vergißmichnicht" [Forge-me-not], possibly the best known poem of the Second War:

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone,  
returning over the nightmare ground  
we found the place again, and found  
the soldier sprawling in the sun,

The frowning barrel of his gun  
overshadowing. As we came on  
that day, he hit my tank with one  
like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gumpit spoil  
the dishonoured picture of his girl  
who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht  
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content  
abased, and seeming to have paid  
and mocked at by his own equipment  
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

But she would weep to see today  
how on his skin the swart flies move;  
the dust upon the paper eye  
and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here the lover and killer are mingled  
who had one body and one heart.  
And death who had the soldier singled  
has done the lover mortal hurt.

This also is a nightmare; but its disgusting details, more typical of First than of Second War poetry, become less overpowering in bright sunlight. The swart flies [20] provide an effective image of monochrome motion. Douglas uses human complexity—the girl with her Hollywood romanticism, the man once so passionate [hard and good] in ironic counterpoint to the infallible, indiscriminate machine. This makes the poem tidy: in the final stanza the tidiness is perhaps too artificial to be entirely convincing. Just like Sassoon, Douglas comes across the face of a corpse, but in his poem there is no frisson. The eye has accustomed itself. Also in *Alamein to Zem-Zem* is the description of the dead crew of an Italian tank. It begins: "At first it was difficult to work out how the limbs are arranged." His first reaction is the abstract geometry of the structure! He continues:

They lay in a clumsy embrace, their white faces whiter, as those of dead men in the desert always were, for the light powdering of dust on them. One with a six-inch hole in his head, the whole skull smashed in behind the remains of an ear—the other covered with his own and his friend's blood, held up by the steel mechanism of machine-gun, his legs twisting among the dully-gleaming gear-levers. About them clung that impenetrable silence I have mentioned before, by which I think the dead compel our reverence.<sup>26</sup>

It is hard to see precisely why Douglas chose, almost invariably, to exclude horror and the gamut of the emotions from his poetry. In his prose (as we have seen), he is capable of showing his feelings, however tentatively. What inhibited him from shocking the readers of his poems?

Possibly he wanted them to make up their minds for themselves. In that case his indifference as poet would contrast with his involvement as prose writer and historian. Up to a point this is an accident of circumstances. *Alamein to Zem-Zem*, the prose work, was written-up much later, from notes in a pocket diary, so that "emotion recollected in tranquillity" led him to make expressions of feeling.

There is however one poem which seems to fall between the two attitudes. "This is Landscape with Figures?"

Perched on a great fall of air  
a pilot or angel looking down  
on some eccentric chart...  
discerns crouching on the sand vehicles

squashed dead or still entire, stunned  
like beetles: scattering wingcases and  
legs, heads, show when the haze settles.

For the only time in his war poems, Douglas explicitly mentions the revolting minutiae of mutilation—seen from a vast distance, admittedly. He now goes on to add images of the wounded and dead actors on stage:

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.....

Now Douglas pursues the simile of “doll” or “waxwork” to a painful degree of intensity:

The eye and mouth of each figure  
bear the cosmetic blood and hectic  
colours death has the only list of.

So far, the view has been from an altitude. Soon the poet homes in on the scene:

A yard more, and my little finger  
could trace the maquillage of these story actors,  
I am the figure writhing on the backcloth.

Here then is his reaction. Is it remorse for the loss of so many others while he stays in the background? No: because Douglas hated desk jobs, and he had “wangled” a post in a front-line unit. And now he declares, in a tone of self-pity unusual for him:

I am the figure burning in hell  
and the figure of the grave priest  
observing everyone who passed,  
and that of the lover. I am  
all the aimless pilgrims, the pedants and courtiers:  
more easily you believe me a pioneer  
and a murdering villain without fear,  
without remorse hacking at the throat...

Here we have the coexistence of the observer and the observed. “Landscape with Figure” was Douglas’ last poem before he came home on leave. It is in a way a “provisional assessment” of his experiences so far. He seems to have changed as a man, into a more mature, self-critical person with some regret for his part in the war. No longer is his attitude towards the fighting casual, careless and flippant. He conceded that he is the figure “writhing on the backcloth,” and all the rest of the cast:

...and I am the craven,  
the remorseful, the distressed  
penitent: not passing from life to life,

but all these angels and devils are driven  
into my mind like beasts. I am possessed,  
the house whose wall contains the dark strife,  
the arguments of hell with heaven.<sup>27</sup>

For the multiple identity of the poet—though in an optimistic sense. The high-level viewpoint probably derives from “The Show,” one of Owen’s poems, in which the “show” was a macabre zoëtropé of soldiers creeping along wire fences:

It seemed they pushed themselves to be as plugs  
Of ditches, where they writhed and shrivelled, killed.

Owen’s picture is much the more revolting, because his figures are not even actors, but caterpillars and worms eating one another:

Those that were gray, of more abundant spawn  
Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten.  
I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten.  
I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.

and the last lines are a whole nightmare in themselves, as Death joins the poet in his flight:

...Death fell with me, like a deepening moan.  
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.<sup>28</sup>

This scene is written in order to shock, and to turn the reader’s stomach. Owen presents flesh as real, as organic. Douglas, however, standing aloof, uses his image of actors as rag dolls. He is not out to shock.

War brought Douglas, preoccupied with death, into daily contact with dead bodies. Besides a general-sobering-up, did he develop new poetic techniques, as Owen had done, to deal with his new experience? We must remember that Douglas had been living with the atmosphere of war since at least the age of fifteen. It was not a New World, unknown and with unsuspected horrors. When war started, he was, so to speak, ripe for it, and had certain pre-formed notions to guide his writing about it. At the peak of his poetic career, we find him writing on August 10, 1943, to J.C. Hall that in his early poems

...I wrote lyrically, as an innocent, because I was an innocent: I have (not surprisingly) fallen from that particular grace since then. I had begun to change during my second year at Oxford.<sup>29</sup>

A characteristic early poem which matches this generalisation is his “Dejection”:

Yesterday travellers in summer’s country,  
Tonight the sprinkled moon and ravenous sky

Say, we have reached the boundary. The autumn clothes  
Are on, Death is the season and we the living  
Are hailed by the solitary to join their regiment,  
To leave the sea and the horses and march away  
Endlessly.<sup>30</sup>

Though immediately a personal voice, this poem falls into a pattern of romantic melancholy, as does the first poem of his Oxford years:

Forgotten the red leaves painting the temple in summer,  
Forgotten my squirrel in his dark chamber,  
The great turtle and the catamaran,  
Rivers, where the mosaic stones are found.  
That church, amputated by high explosive,  
Where priests no more lift up their murmurous Latin,  
And only the sun, a solitary worshipper,  
Tiptoes towards the altar and rests there.<sup>31</sup>

Already Douglas is beginning to discard experience fairly ruthlessly. The first stanza is the debris of his childhood: the summer-house, the Swiss Family Robinson. The second stanza is belief, blown sky-high by the shattering metaphor amputated, placed with maximum effect after the word *church*. The personification of the sun finding its way to the altar seems well ahead of its time. There is clearly a development, from surface lyricism to a heightened, more demanding lyricism of which "Invaders" is another example. The steady maturing of his lyric technique is observable in "The Poets," which dates from 1940:

But we ourselves are already phantoms;  
boneless, substanceless, wanderers; they look at us  
with primitive mistrust. Not even the wantons  
roll eyes in our direction. For we are hated,  
known to be cursed, guessed to be venomous  
we must advance for ever, always belated.<sup>32</sup>

This is very much the world of certain of the war painters, such as *Piper* of Paul Nash. Douglas himself briefly discussed the question in the course of answering the criticisms of his friend Hall:

Incidentally, you say I fail as a poet, when you mean I fail as a lyricist....But my object (and I don't give a damn about my duty as a poet) is to write true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in the line.<sup>33</sup>

The last half-dozen words are perhaps an unconscious reminiscence of Eliot, and the parenthesis is one which would have shocked Owen. But the key phrase, surely, is "true things." Douglas means that the poet has to "tell it like it is" and must not concern himself primarily with the emotional impact and the "reaction shot." He returns to this point:

...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.<sup>34</sup>

This constitutes his definition of a "war poem." It is interesting that Douglas, with all his emphasis on military perfection in life, should sense a lack of balance in his own work. This merging of cynical and lyrical is what he was working at in the handful of poems from the last eleven months of his life; and I think he can be said to have achieved it. One of the Cairo pieces in particular is a close approach, from its title onwards, to his ideal union. This is "Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden." Written on October 8, 1943, it describes a genteel social gathering. An attractive lady is entertaining a number of admirers. Douglas presents them as fish of various kinds:

A cotton magnate, an important fish  
with great eyepouches and a golden mouth

and then

A crustacean old man clamped to his chair

who

sits coldly near her and might see  
her charms through fissures where the eyes should be  
or else his teeth are parted in a stare.

How Douglas must have enjoyed writing that last trite pentameter. The procession of admirers continues:

And gallants in shoals swim up and lag,  
circling and passing near the white attraction:  
sometimes pausing, opening a conversation.

On the technical level, the internal half-rhyme passing...pausing is first rate. "After the ball is over," there is a painful, empty anti-climax:

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.<sup>35</sup>

This, one of Douglas' most successful poems, pinpoints the vacuity of a society eating its own tail as it waits idly for war to put an end to its futile existence. Humans are so many species of fish, in a tank of noiseless, aimless, ceaseless admiration. Yet no satisfactory relationship is ever established, either mutually or with the lady, probably a high-class *poule*. If this is not a war poem, about "battle and things," at least it recalls the people in wartime Cairo, unable to shake off feelings of



frustration and moral decay. Princess Volupine had personified the degeneration of Venice. Douglas' nameless woman—not a native Egyptian perhaps, for she is “the white attraction...a white stone”—that is, not sunburnt—is a doll without emotions, hardly even human. She draws men momentarily and then loses their interest as soon as “business” takes them elsewhere. The hedonism of the time is exactly described: these are “true things, significant things” about the atmosphere just behind the Front. Douglas has exploited his technique to the full, and yet with economy, to project a cynicism towards individuals and situations.

City and battlefield are brought into juxtaposition in “Cairo Jag,” where the relationship of desert corpses to pleasure-seeking live people in “civilization” comes under scrutiny:

Shall I get drunk or cut myself a piece of cake [38],  
 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 Décédé in mauve ink.  
 All this takes place in a stink of jasmin.

The reader may agree that this is a much better focused and more truthful picture than “Mr Eugenides” and ‘Phlebas the Phoenician’ of *The Waste Land*. Douglas widens his angle to include a selection of the odd fish then resident in Cairo. The cosmopolitanism and fake values are well brought out: the Turkish belly-dancer claiming aristocratic rank, a Syrian of indeterminate sex and complexion, a French émigrée living in a fantasy world where her dead lover is brought back to all the life he was capable of, if indeed he existed. Even the pure, sweet smell of jasmine—one thing the reader might take as beyond question—becomes a stink in this city of deceptions. But it does not take long to pierce the veil of sham:

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.

This “whiteness”—the colour that runs through Douglas' poetry—is not that of innocence. “La Parisienne” is in fact Egyptian, a hashish smoker [“sommambulist”] who—since she lies on her divan and waits for clients—is just as much a “legless beggar” as are some of the crowd. The garden party was one face of the city: this is the other. And not many miles from this absurd world is a different world, grim and (instead of deceptively real) deceptively unreal:

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 give no flowers or berries  
 and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine  
 the dead themselves, their boots and their possessions  
 clinging to the ground, a man with no head  
 has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.<sup>36</sup>

What would otherwise have been bare sand contains a surreal growth of “dead” weapons. “Split like celery” is a fine and original simile suggesting an immediate tactile sensation. The “metal brambles”—again an inner half-rhyme, with barrels, ties together the structure—are a paradox: the mind wants to see the beauty of nature but instead encounters nature wrenched to its most appalling ugliness. How does this “vegetation” sprout? From manure, supplied by a humus of rotting bodies and shoeleather. The last line is a supreme example of how to turn cynicism into great poetry. A corpse has a certain happiness: some chocolate, though no mouth to eat it, and a souvenir booklet, something to “remind” him, though he has no mind now. This whole last stanza is a tour de force, catching the reader off guard just when he was prepared to hear further examples of the misleading appearances of Cairo. Not for nothing had Douglas studied the tactics of surprise. The poet is able to use the misleading world of the battlefield to comment on that of the city, and at the same time suggest that it has its own “beauty,” even if few are able to appreciate it.

“In Cairo Jag” the cynical and the lyrical had finally been fused satisfactorily. Douglas does so again in “Dead Men,” where his lyrical dreams speak for those killed:

Then leave the dead in the earth, an organism  
 of capable of resurrection, like mines  
 less durable than metal of a gun,  
 a casual meal for a dog, nothing but the bone  
 so soon. But tonight no lovers see the lines  
 of the moon's face as the lines of cynicism.<sup>37</sup>

The word “cynicism” had not previously been used in his work. At the same time, “Dead Men” is an intensely lyrical poem. Douglas clearly felt it essential, even at the risk of going a little too far, to undercut the soft sentimentalism which war brought out in the English. The following anecdote would have seemed very caddish to a gentleman of the old school; but then Douglas had been brought up on Yin-Cheng, a very different proposition from English girls:

I was discussing Rupert Brooke with someone the other day, who has a book which a very sentimental hospital sister has lent him. I wrote a poem to slip into the book when he gives it back (unsigned of course) which I hope will shock her sentimentality a bit.<sup>38</sup>

That was how he came to write Gallantry:

The colonel in a casual voice

spoke into the microphone a joke  
which through a hundred earphones broke  
into the ears of a doomed race.<sup>39</sup>

The colonel inside his tank, the ears not those of his men enjoying the joke he has cracked but those of the target people, "a doomed race." The stanza has an even bleaker chill in the Nuclear Age. The last two words are an example of a favourite tactic of Douglas, the replacement of the expected by the unexpected word: what classical Greek critics would have called "contrary to expectation."<sup>40</sup> The casual tone throughout stresses the indifference with which the men face battle. So too the "doomed race" itself:

Into the ears of the doomed boy, the fool  
whose perfectly mannered flesh fell  
in opening the door for a shell  
as he had learnt to do at school.

Once more, as in "John Anderson," the gentlemanly scholar pays the price of his breeding and "good" education. This time Douglas passes moral judgement, calling him bluntly a fool. The death itself is casual, not lamentable: the shell did not select him particularly. "It just happened," and that is all there is to be said. Another of the soldiers, Conrad, survives the winter, and then the onset of spring, like a weapon,

only his silken  
intentions severed with a single splinter.

This line shows how far the poet has come in his handling of metre since his clumsy early days. He has come far, too, in his attitude toward death. Death is now that which brings spiritual salvation to the dead man, whose memory is sacred, however disreputable his past may have been:

Was George fond of little boys?  
we always suspected it,  
but who will say: since George was hit  
we never mention our surmise.

The theme of metal imagery, very characteristic of this poet, also turns up in the poem:

It was a brave thing the colonel said  
but the whole sky turned too hot  
and the three heroes never heard what  
it was, gone deaf with steel and lead.

The 1939-45 war was a war of steel plate involving massive movements of heavily mechanised divisions. Victory often depended on destroying the enemy's metal "forts." Naturally, therefore, soldiers would go deaf "with" steel. The three soldiers failed to laugh because they were dead already. It was left to the missiles to hear and appreciate the joke:

But the bullets cried with laughter

the shells were overcome with mirth  
plunging their heads in steel and earth—  
(the air commented in a whisper).<sup>41</sup>

The whine of high-velocity bullets, a cliché today, had been brand-new to Owen. He wrote of "choirs of wailing shells."<sup>42</sup> But for Douglas the bullets cried not in mourning but in heartless glee at the destruction they were causing.

Perhaps the most ingenious example of Douglas' cynical-lyrical style is his well known poem "*Vergiβmichnicht*." The "plot" of it is that a dead German soldier has been discovered in his tank. The soldiers of the winning side find a snapshot of his girl-friend with one word written on it:

"*Vergiβmichnicht*," which is both a command, the name of a flower, and also the title of a German "hit" tune popular at that time:

We see him almost with content  
abased, and seeming to have paid  
and mocked at by his own equipment  
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

The air of content is that of the other corpse, the one with the chocolate and the souvenir of Tripoli [the flawed rhyme *contént/équipement*] being a trademark of Owen's.] Now the poet revisits a paradox which was increasingly obsessing him, that the metal of weapons is actually much more durable, indeed more human, than the body of the man that uses them. The soldier—short-lived, liable to rottenness and extinction—is outlived by his gun. And all this is in the nature of war. (With hindsight we may well say that atomic weapons have proved him right.) Douglas cuts through the imprecision of European romantic love with characteristic cynicism. The dead man's girl-friend

...would weep to see today  
how on his skin the swart flies move;  
the dust upon his paper eye  
and the burst stomach like a cave.<sup>43</sup>

Here [and perhaps for the only time in Second War poetry] a writer tries to handle the truly nauseating. The gaping stomach "like a cave" disgusts, but it is difficult to see that the simile is relevant or successful. With this stanza I would compare one by Graves:

In a great mass of things unclean  
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk,  
with clothes and face a sodden green,  
big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,  
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.<sup>44</sup>

This is really very nasty indeed. Graves' German has died horribly from gas, and has become a troll, just recognisable enough to turn the stomach. Beside his "sodden green," Douglas' victim is almost pallid. It is not the frightfulness that has changed, however, but its impact. The Great War poets

depicted in order to shock. They had a moral duty. But in Douglas such details as the papery eye and the cave-like stomach merely show an extreme of detachment, backed up by a cynicism not far removed from levity. Now, with a logic worthy of Donne, Douglas brings his poem safely to harbour:

For here the lover and killer are mingled  
who had one body and one heart.  
And Death who had the soldier singled  
has done the lover mortal hurt.<sup>45</sup>

The lover and the killer are one person playing a dual role. Death has confined himself to the soldier, as he is entitled to do, but has, by this logic, killed both: just as an X-ray destroys malignant and benign cells together. The culminating pun on *mortal* also recalls the Metaphysical poets.

Douglas' war poems reveal a tendency to analyse and explain what he was seeing, for his own benefit and for the interest of others. He does not set out to condemn the war or its perpetrators. He was not, like Owen, Sassoon and their contemporaries, protesting; merely trying to get the facts straight. Owen and Sassoon, as pacifists, had wanted to undermine War, to uncover its ugliness and horror and prove to the public in England how pointless the fighting was. In 1939 conditions were different. So far as Britain and free Europe were concerned, the war had every justification, since it was a fight for survival—the terms in which the vast majority of the nation agreed to view it. This is not to say that Douglas had any illusions about the war. We can see that from "The Trumpet." In this poem he first describes the bugle figuratively as

...this long tube a man sets to his mouth  
crying that war is sweet, and the men you  
see sleep after fighting, will fight in the day before  
us?

This is surprisingly close to the language of Great War poetry just before it began to be dominated by the element of protest. A trumpet-call voices all the heroic attractions of war. Having seemed to endorse this view Douglas goes on:

Since with manual skill  
men dressed to kill in purple  
with how many strange tongues  
cried the trumpet, that cried once  
for the death of Hector from Troy steeple  
that cried when a hundred hopes fell.

Battle and feats of the distant past are evoked by classical references: the purple cloak of the Roman general, the Trojan War and by the contorted syntax, which is a pastiche of Aeschylus or something very like it. Donne would again have been pleased with the Metaphysical pun in "dressed to kill," which means, *prima facie* "in battledress" but in fact in colloquial [demotic] speech "in one's best clothes for a big occasion." The sound of the trumpet appears to calm the

troops:

Tonight we heard it  
who for weeks have only listened  
to the howls of inhuman voices.

There may be a concealed reference here to the end of the "Phoney War," when the oratory of Herr Hitler was replaced by the sirens of the Blitz.

But, as the apprehensive ear rejoiced  
breathing the notes in, the sky glistened  
with a flight of bullets...

Just when their nerves are steady and morale is high, they see the sky lit up with flights of tracer bullets—"glistened" is an accurate piece of observation—and the grim reality shakes them out of their philosophic reverie:

We must be up early  
tomorrow, to forget the cry and the crier  
as we forgot the conversation  
of our friends killed last month, last week,  
and hear, crouching, the air shriek  
the crescendo, expectancy to elation  
violently arriving. The trumpet is a liar.<sup>46</sup>

This is an analysis of human feelings. One may be temporarily fooled by promises of glory and uplift. But the euphoria does not last long. One has to awake to reality, to the crescendo of missiles<sup>47</sup> leading up to the explosion itself, "violently arriving." This is "more real" than thoughts of the dead ["last month, last week...," a mathematical infinite regress which ends "...killed a fraction of a second ago."] Such thoughts would be the heresy of Marcelle in "Cairo Jag," in another form. It is not what the trumpet told us war would be like: therefore the trumpet is a liar.

It needs to be emphasized once again that in Douglas we have not a pacifist trying to drum up pity and horror; but a poet professionally interested in representing the nature of war and getting to the heart of it. As regards war heroes, on the other hand, while he did not deny their existence—he saw them killed every day—his manner towards them is exceedingly casual:

Peter was unfortunately killed by an 88:  
it took his leg away, he died in the ambulance.  
I saw him crawling on the sand; he said  
It's most unfair, they've shot my foot off.<sup>48</sup>

With the word "unfair" one can even hear Peter's plaintive Oxford tone of voice. His reaction to his mortal wound might kindly be described as "very British." He relates it to his received ideas about fair-play in sport. It was a cliché of First War poetry that war was "the game of games." Here it is a game gone badly wrong. Peter is still thinking like a public-school prefect, as far as Douglas is concerned, and, though he

does not pass judgement overtly, the poet has only one word for such people: "fool,"<sup>49</sup> the same word that Homer applies to fighters who show a lack of common sense or maturity. When Douglas wants to describe a true hero, he has a quite different vocabulary, as in the preceding stanza:

The noble horse with courage in his eye  
clean in the bone, looks up at a shellburst.

This "horse" is probably meant for Player, an officer whom he admired greatly. The poet's own reaction on the deaths of the two men follows and seals the poem:

How can I live among this gentle  
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?  
Unicorns almost, for they are falling into two legends  
in which their stupidity and chivalry  
are celebrated.  
Each fool and hero will be an immortal.

There is balance here. The hero of the first stanza and the fool of the second both rank as "gentle" heroes—*gentle* as in "gentlemen." The poet's words "and not weep" express his own feelings, again in the studied pun which seems to be his way of sublimating emotion. He "weeps" both from sorrow at losing two such friends and from exasperation that there can be anyone naive enough to think that war is a game and that the opponent will always stick to the rules. The final stanza gives full vent to philosophical cynicism. The artful use of the philosopher's "I think" should be noted. Having likened the deaths to losing at cricket, Peter, or failing to jump a fence, Player, the noble horse. Douglas concludes:

... Here then  
under the stones and earth they dispose themselves,  
I think with their famous unconcern.  
It is not gunfire I hear, but a hunting horn.<sup>50</sup>

From "dispose" can be extracted both "disposition" (behaviour, e.g., friendly, foolish) and "disposal" (of a body, of refuse); another loaded pun. Unconcern is treble-edged: either "unthinking bravery," in laying down one's life for others, or "fooling about" or "culpable carelessness." Was Douglas beginning to envy them?

The detachment which Douglas cultivated is very strong in his most typical war poem "How to Kill." The poet—half magician, half morally-corrupt soldier—is looking through the sights of his tank gun:

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.

Here is all the excitement of a child receiving a present (Open

[it]! Open!) The child is spoilt, aggressive, and already under the spell of his newly obtained power. Now, with the coolness of a professional killer, the attacker describes what he is seeing:

Now in my dial of glass appears  
the soldier who is going to die.

This is a cliché today, but it was new then. The soldier "who is going to die" inevitably but unknowingly,

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

so that for a moment we come closer to the human being who is going to cease to exist, to turn into a rag doll. In a way, he becomes an acquaintance of ours. We feel that we do not want him to die yet. Nevertheless, through the machine-gun or tank sights,

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...

The killing is not man-made. It is "Death," personified, who converts a live man into "dust," in the Biblical sense and also into a whitened heap with "a light powdering of dust." The transition is made in a fraction of a second. Compare Douglas' first war poem ".303". Just for a moment, after the killing, the soldier experiences an irresponsible, sadistic pleasure at his power:

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 act is its own condemnation, "being damned," and yet the killer feels amused when he looks at the effect. "Love" is juxtaposed with hatred; or rather with sadistic desire to deprive of life other competing creatures. The fighting, which has lasted some time, has hardened his heart to take pleasure in killing. He admits to being damned, but this cannot check his elation. The last line voices his only qualm. There follows the final stanza, in which he, the Poet-Soldier-Killer, is deep in thought about the exact nature of the "murder" he has committed. Compare *Metsolis*' he is trying to come to terms with the unreality of death:

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.<sup>51</sup>

The mosquito is death approaching in the form and voice of a bullet or shell, “weightless” because of the velocity with which it pierces the air. “Infinite” in the context recalls Hamlet’s soliloquy “What a piece of work is a man!...How infinite in faculty!” In some ways Shakespeare lies behind Douglas as Homer lies behind the Greek war poets. The conception of death as a fusion of man and shadow is a powerful one. The use of the first person singular greatly enhances the impact of the poem, and enables the poet to transfer to an impersonal third person for his final, reflective stanza. The emphasis is on moral corruption; on the soldier denuded of all trace of humanity and getting immense pleasure from testing out deadly toys and causing death at a distance. Only in the last stanza is there a serious reckoning with

mortality.<sup>52</sup>

This raises an important side-issue. One of the new things about the Second World War was just this “killing from a distance.” Everything became a matter of calculations. “Parabola” and “glass dial” and “wires” are part of a new vocabulary of mechanization. No longer was war a claustrophobic existence in trenches, buried alive, but a geopolitical conflict across vast distances and with quick movements by machinery of one sort or another. “How to kill” further demonstrates that Douglas’ poems are more “intellectual” in outlook than those of the Great War poets. There is no chance of fraternization now; for the only enemies with whom one has contact is the dead enemy, killed when he is hundreds or thousands of yards away.

## Notes

1. In: Graham, D. Keith Douglas [London 1974] p.15.
2. Douglas. Collected poems (ed Waller, Fraser & Hall) [London 1966] p.31. Abbreviated, in the notes to this chapter, as CP.
3. It is admittedly hard to see how “dead” arms could be capable of “repudiating.” Douglas was carried away by this sonorous word which he presumably heard used a number of times on the radio in connection with Hitler.
4. CP p. 26. Note that Cassandra in Aeschylus’ play Agamemnon does just the same.
5. *Ibid* p. 29.
6. Douglas, K. Alamein to Zem Zem [Penguin Books, 1969] p. 17. The title of the collection is an expansion of the phrase A to Z [compare the Greek equivalent alpha to omega]. Alamein and Zem Zem are both Libyan place names.
7. In: Graham, op cit. p. 79.
8. *Ibid* loc cit.
9. Peniakowski (‘Popski’) did the same, and managed to obtain not only complete independence to operate in Libya, but also a substantial private army. Official control was nominal until Montgomery’s appointment as Commander of the Eighth Army [July 1942].
10. CP p. 89.
11. *Ibid* p. 34.
12. *Ibid* p. 51.
13. *Ibid* p. 73.
14. *Ibid* p. 47.
15. “My heart is inditing of a good matter.” An Anglican church anthem to music by Henry Purcell. Douglas (and Yin-cheng) will have heard it sung in one of the Oxford college chapels while seeking “relaxation and spiritual fulfilment.”

16. CP p. 68.
17. *Ibid* p. 70.
18. *Ibid* p. 93.
19. *Ibid* p. 103.
20. *Ibid* p. 116.
21. *Ibid* p. 116.
22. Owen. Poems (ed Blunden) [London 1966] p. 62.
23. Douglas. Alamein to Zem Zem p. 27.
24. *Ibid* p. 46.
25. Douglas, K. On the Nature of Poetry. In: *Augury*, an Oxford Miscellany of Prose and Verse (ed Hardie & Douglas) [Oxford 1940]. Quoted in: CP p. 148.
26. Alamein to Zem Zem p. 65.
27. CP p. 127.
28. Owen. Poems (ed Blunden) p. 59.
29. CP p. 149.
30. *Ibid* p. 34.
31. *Ibid* p. 43.
32. *Ibid* p. 56.
33. *Ibid* p. 149.
34. *Ibid* pp. 149 - 50.
35. *Ibid* pp. 112 - 113.
36. CP p. 115.
37. *Ibid* p. 116. Mines “come to life” long after the war ends—as recently in the Falklands. A bizarre incident is mentioned in *Return to Oasis*. A German soldier had been shot dead as he prepared to hurl a grenade. An hour or two later, rigor mortis caused his fingers to detonate the grenade, which exploded and killed one of a group of British soldiers going past.
38. Graham, K. Keith Douglas p. 191.
39. CP p. 120.
- 40.—Compare, from Douglas himself, dead arms [“303”] dolls, mines [Dead Men] wriggle [Landscape with figures] amputated [Forgotten the red leaves] fish, jasmin, iron [Behaviour of Fish] shell, intentions, h ot [Gallantry] bullets [The Trumpet] kill [How to kill].
41. CP p. 120.

42. Owen. Poems (ed Blunden) p. 80.
43. CP p. 121.
44. In: Bergonzi, B. Heroes' twilight [London 1965: this title is a rendering of Götterdämmerung] p. 67.
45. CP p. 121.
46. CP p. 126.
47. "Shriek" turns out to be a verb here, though one automatically first reads it as a noun. Douglas is driving the language too hard for comfort.
48. CP p. 124.
49. The word fool occurs in Gallantry, and again in the present poem, in the third stanza.
50. CP p. 124.
51. CP p. 122.
52. Compare the thoughts noted down by Campbell Muirhead, a Lancaster bomb-aimer, in his diary of 1944: "A faint niggling at the back of my mine [about] women and small children. But it's daft to think of that" [then, some days later] "No such niggling this time. Didn't even give it a thought this time. Should I have?" [Quoted, BBC Radio 4, 9.11.1982].

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