

KEITH DOUGLAS

WAR POET

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

The dilemma of the war poet -- how "to combine two incompatibles" -- has produced several temporary alternatives and as many permanent misconceptions. For some, writers and audience alike, war poetry has come to be merely a form of propaganda, or perhaps an outlet for the emotions. For Keith Douglas, however, war was apparently a natural and a compatible subject for poetry. This study focusses upon Douglas's life, work and reputation, in an attempt to discover how, why, and to what effect he was able to solve the dilemma.

PREFACE

The present study is by no means an exhaustive treatment of Keith Douglas's life and work; nor is it to be taken as the case history of a typical war poet. It is limited in reference to materials already published by or about Douglas, and it is confined in scope to only those generalizations about war poetry or about other war poets which may serve as a convenient contrast to Douglas's work. The measure of its limitations will become clearer no doubt with the forthcoming publication of a book about Keith Douglas by Desmond Graham. Mr. Graham has recently completed and submitted to the University of Leeds a doctoral thesis based upon extensive personal research and manuscript study, and entitled "A Critical Study of the Writings of Keith Douglas, 1920-44"

For the sake of simplicity, the bibliography refers only to those editions of Douglas's Collected Poems and Alamein to Zem Zem which are actually cited in the discussion. I have attempted, however, to examine, and to include in the bibliography, every piece of published criticism concerning either Douglas or his work. I have also included, in the form of an appendix, a list of the British Museum's Douglas manuscripts.

I wish to thank Dr. Brian John for all his encouragement, his criticism and his patience; also Dr. A.D. Hammond for his help in compiling the bibliography, and in obtaining information concerning the Douglas Papers. I am grateful, too, to Mr. Graham Petrie for his interest and concern, and to Dr. D.J. Duncan for his kindness in reading and examining the final draft.

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INTRODUCTION

"The very phrase 'War Poet,'" wrote Osbert Sitwell, "indicates a strange twentieth-century phenomenon, the attempt to combine two incompatibles " (war and poetry).¹ It is an attempt which has produced successes of various kinds. It has produced the stirring rhythms and patriotic sentiments of Rupert Brooke:

If I should die, think only this of me;
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.²

But it has also produced the agonizing of Wilfred Owen, in rhythms that stutter and quicken with anxiety, and with a sensitivity to sounds (in the sibilants of the second last line, for instance) that is both acute and apt:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds
that knife us....
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent....
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the
salient...
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
But nothing happens.³

The anger and bitterness of Siegfried Sassoon mark yet another way in which war and poetry have been brought together. Sassoon's strength lies in the violent and satirical

mating of ideas:

Does it matter? -- losing your leg?...
 For people will always be kind,
 And you need not show that you mind
 When the others come in after hunting
 To gobble their muffins and eggs.⁴

Then, too, in the 1930's there were the prophecies of
 Stephen Spender, with their apocalyptic tone and military
 imagery:

Deep in the winter plain, two armies
 Dig their machinery, to destroy each other.
 Men freeze and hunger. No one is given leave
 On either side, except the dead, and wounded.
 These have their leave; while new battalions wait
 On time at last to bring them violent peace.⁵

There were also W. H. Auden's ominous warnings of a society
 turned more and more inhuman by totalitarian ideals:

With guns beneath your arms, in sun and wet,
 At doorways posted or on ridges set,
 By copse or bridge we know you there
 Whose sleepless presences endear
 Our peace to us with a perpetual threat.⁶

When the Second World War broke out, the disturbed conscience
 of Alun Lewis struggled to understand the significance of
 the lost peace. His simple, beautiful lyrics stressed the
 anomaly of poetry in a world characterized by war:

Blue necklace left
 On a charred chair
 Tells that Beauty
 Was startled there.⁷

Finally, the post-war writers such as Roy Fuller spoke with
 moral indignation and cynicism of a new historical dialectic:

Reader, could his limbs be found
 Here would lie a common man:
 History inflicts no wound

But explodes what it began
 And with its enormous lust
 For division splits the dust.
 Do not ask his nation; that
 Was History's confederate.⁸

With feelings such as theirs, the attempt to combine war and poetry doubled back upon itself. Instead of producing verse espousing patriotism and glory, a later generation of writers had come full circle to disclaim what Brooke began by saying. Despite the efforts of so many men, not one produced a true combination of the incompatibles, war and poetry, except perhaps Keith Douglas.

For Douglas, poetry and war had never been incompatible at all. Going off to war, he tells us, "I still looked -- I cannot avoid it -- for something decorative,
⁹
 poetic or dramatic." He found that something not in his own mind but on the battlefield itself: "Whatever changes in the nature of warfare, the battlefield is the simple, central stage of the war: it is there that the interesting things happen. ... 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
¹⁰
 and to be killed...."

Douglas's own response to war was inherently poetic and, for a young man, surprisingly mature and restrained -- an interesting contrast to the somewhat artificial attitudes fostered by certain other war poets. Where, for instance,

Rupert Brooke exulted boyishly in the call to patriotic duty and to glory, Douglas talked earnestly of the need to exercise his sense of personal responsibility in the face of danger; he did not need to propagandize his commitment to make it more significant. Nor did he find it necessary to appeal blatantly, as Wilfred Owen did, to the emotions of his audience. While Owen felt the poetry was "in the pity", Douglas, instead, relied upon the power of his own poetry to evoke the desired pity. Not that he could not, in his own way, sympathize: Douglas's object was neither to censure nor to ridicule, but to attempt to understand man's role in modern warfare. He did not depend heavily upon the kind of bitter satire commonly employed by Siegfried Sassoon. In Douglas's view, war had to be accepted as a fact of life. Spender and Auden, even Fuller, preached against it, but Douglas, accepting its inevitability, did not. His knowledge of its recurrent role in the course of history triumphed, in effect, over whatever sense of moral indignation he might have felt. Then, too, this knowledge led him to enquire further. Where Alun Lewis clung to that which seemed to him so human and concrete, Douglas freed himself of such concerns; he wanted to face the metaphysical reality so feared by men like Lewis.

Douglas wrote about war with a self-conscious and insistent sense of honesty and authority -- "I am the man,
 11
 I suffered, I was/there...." In a letter to J. C. Hall he

declared: "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."¹² Certainly, Douglas was not the only poet to undergo such an experience; his secret lies in an ability to demythologize and, at the same time, to poeticize it. Alun Lewis, writing to his wife, from India, confessed:

And although I'm more and more engrossed with the single poetic theme of Life and Death, for there doesn't seem to be any question more directly relevant than this one of what survives of all the beloved, I find myself quite unable to express at once the passion of Love, the coldness of Death (Death is cold) and the fire that beats against resignation, acceptance. Acceptance seems so spiritless, protest so vain. In between the two I live.¹³

Lewis comes closest to the expression he desired in his short stories.¹⁴ The conjunction of Love and Death is a theme which haunts his experience, but is one which he never really understands because the myth of social and moral obligation compels his attention. Should he accept, should he protest, or should he resign himself? War confronts Lewis with a dilemma which stifles his ability to write poetry about it. It presents no such hindrance to Douglas, however. For Douglas, Love and Death represented two of "the subjects we have to discuss now"; moral and social debts are merely part of that "mass of irrelevancies, of 'attitudes', 'approaches', propaganda, ivory towers, etc.,

that stand between us and our problems and what we have to do about them." ¹⁵ When Douglas cuts through them, as he does in "Dead Men", he bares an essential, if ugly, truth that is beyond the poetic power of Alun Lewis. Death is not just "cold", it is unreachable -- "what survives" is insignificant and irrelevant, merely "a casual meal for a dog":

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 to-night 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
with 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.¹⁶

Lewis could write with honesty and candour about his torn conscience and battered psyche, just as Brooke could write about honour, or Sassoon about injustice, or Owen about pity, or Auden about fear or even Fuller about immorality. None, however, could write with Douglas's knowledge of war itself. In effect, all their experiences were encompassed in his.

Douglas's themes are basic -- life, love, death, mutability; his imagery, cold and stark. Lawrence Durrell speaks of him as having been "brilliantly impressionistic" ¹⁷ and this seems particularly true of his awareness of physical impressions. Like his drawings, his poems are sharp, strong pictures of reality:

On sand and scrub the dead men wriggle
in their dowdy clothes....

* * * * *

crawling on the boards of the stage like walls,
deaf to the one who opens his mouth and calls
silently. The decor is a horrible tracery
of iron. The eye and mouth of each figure
bear the cosmetic blood and the hectic
colours death has the only list of.¹⁸

The poems are pictures of "blood and roses", of "mortality and life, ... mixed, as they always have been, at the times when a writer was most deeply possessed by life."¹⁹ In a sense, moreover, Douglas's verse is both highly philosophical and metaphysical. Douglas strikes not at man's response to war but at the nature of war itself. He is neither as explicitly moralistic or as patently realistic as, for example, Wilfred Owen. When Owen wrote "Spring Offensive",²⁰ he captured what well may be the reality of the moment, the time when

... many there stood still
To face the stark, blank sky beyond the ridge,
Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.

That scene, as Owen describes it, lives. It expresses the tension, the anxiety, the incredulity of the spectator in whom the offensive evokes such shock. It does not, however, go as far as Douglas's brooding and introspective treatment of a similar theme in "The Offensive".²¹ Owen's poem involves the realization of one particular moment, Douglas's expands to include that of all moments. Owen's cup holds blood, Douglas's time. Owen's stars are "the sky's mysterious glass", Douglas's "the heavenly symbols of a class/

dead in their seats.". Owen's conclusion is a tentative and unspoken answer to the question "Why speak not they of comrades that went under?", Douglas's is an affirmation of a fundamental and rather cynical truth:

The sun goes round and the stars go round
the nature of eternity is circular
and man must spend his life to find
all our successes and failures are similar.

One man feels pity because of that element of war which distorts man's sense of values; the other is consoled by the way in which war teaches man the falseness of those values.

Douglas's style, though simple, is likewise full of meaning. Ted Hughes has described it thus:

a style that seems able to deal poetically with whatever it comes up against. ... It is a language for the whole mind, at its most wakeful, and in all situations. A utility general-purpose style, as, for instance Shakespeare's was, that combines a colloquial prose readiness with poetic breadth, a ritual intensity and music of an exceedingly high order with clear direct feeling, and yet in the end is nothing but casual speech.²²

Where Lewis was obviously lyrical, depending upon his music and its effects, Douglas consciously rejected lyricism for its own sake;²³ where Owen professed to be "not concerned with Poetry",²⁴ Douglas most certainly was. Douglas did for war what none of the other 'War Poets' did -- he poeticized it. Without the glory, without the pathos, without the condemnation and the warning, he made war itself the centre of his poetry, the object of his style.

In doing so, he broke perhaps the final barrier between war and poetry. Henry Treece has written:

War, as I see it here and now, is not the material of poetry. Lasting poetry must go down deeper than the superficial appearances of war machines; it must seek out the spirit of man in pain and glory, and must express that spirit and that pain and that glory in simple terms, in those fundamental statements to which the mechanisms of contemporary warfare are irrelevant.²⁵

But Douglas, through his own experience, demonstrated a relevance between the spirit of man and the mechanisms of contemporary warfare. He found, like Donald Stauffer, that there was a "close and mysterious relationship" between war and poetry, that "different though the two are, intimate contact of the one with the other seems to bring out the finest qualities both in war and in poetry. They are mutually sustaining."²⁶ Douglas's choice and use of themes and images bear this out. But finally, through the development of his style, Douglas came to the final realization. As Richard Eberhart states concerning war poetry:

The poetry comes out of the chaos. Chaos is present to the poet in war in violent forms. He may recognize in this violence his true element, a reduction to terrible simplicity of what he knew in the heart before. Giant objectifications tossed and forced on sky, land and sea only emphasize the essential fact of struggle. Thus, a poet knows war without objective war in the world; it was conflict at the root of his mind that impelled him to the masking of these conflicts in the apparent resolution and order of works of art. In a dialectical sense, all poetry is war poetry.²⁷

For Douglas, war became poetry and poetry war.

In spite of all this, however, Keith Douglas is not as famous a poet -- nor even as popular a 'War Poet' -- as Brooke, or Owen, or Sassoon, Spender, Auden or Lewis.

Indeed, he is not as well known as several others besides; and this demands some explanation. Douglas's reputation among those familiar with his writing is high. G. S. Fraser,²⁸ Alan Ross and Ted Hughes, in particular, are among his admirers. Moreover, his work figures prominently in two of the more recent and influential anthologies of Second World War poetry: Brian Gardner's The Terrible Rain²⁹ and Ronald Blythe's Components of the Scene.³⁰ Despite this, however, it is clear that Douglas has been unjustly overlooked. Several reasons are involved.

First is the fact that "resistance to good poetry in general is intensified when it has **war** or the problems of war as its subject matter."³¹ Not only do many people find the recollection of war uncomfortable and annoying, they find it irrelevant to their present concerns. As a war fades into history, the immediacy of the poet's response to it disappears; so too does the audience's need to unburden the emotional tensions which have been evoked by it. In Douglas's case,³² the unfavourable circumstances of his publication -- too late to profit from the wartime demand for poetry, too early to escape the general disappointment and disaffection which marked the first peacetime appraisals of that poetry -- added to the natural difficulty.

Then, too, Douglas's reputation has suffered because of his own attitude to war. In an age in which "all serious war poetry is anti-war poetry,"³³ he admitted feeling the

excitement and amazement of combat, the thrill of living in
 "an unnatural, a dangerous, but not wholly terrible world."³⁴

"I had to wait until 1942," he writes, "to go into action.
 I enlisted in September 1939, and during two years or so of
 hanging about I never lost the certainty that the experience
 of battle was something I must have."³⁵ Such eagerness did
 not suit the mood of the post-war years. As C. B. Cox points
 out, "To some readers today this desire to confront death
 might seem perverse or suicidal."³⁶

Besides this, Douglas's work, like that of all the
 Second World War poets, suffered because of the extra atten-
 tion given to the literature of the First or Great War.
 There was a distinctive personality, even glamour, connected
 with that war, which the Second War, despite the active drum-
 beating of many critics, could not match. In 1941 The Times
Literary Supplement, remembering the great popularity of
 Brooke, Sassoon and Owen, cried "Where are the war-poets?"³⁷
 while, ten years later, in what might have been an interes-
 ting reflection upon its own culpability, the same magazine
 admitted: "Memories of the 'war poetry' of the First World
 War created, in the Second, expectations which were hardly
 fulfilled but which led to extravagant praise of any poet
 who showed the least promise in making war the subject of
 his verse."³⁸

Finally, Douglas has been unjustly ignored, at
 least by some, because of the facts of his death. "It is

easy to romanticize a ³⁹gifted and handsome young poet whose career is cut short"; moreover, premature death, especially on the battlefield, brings with it a certain aura of glamour. Consequently, some critics have made a special point of attacking this aspect of Douglas's reputation:

If Keith Douglas had not died a hero or a 'poet dead in war,' much of what he wrote would never have been reprinted. ... very likely this shapeless, though decorously unsentimental monument [Collected Poems, 1951] will keep him buried.⁴⁰

As a poet, Douglas had that dangerous youthful facility which prompts writers to put pen to paper without really having anything to say.⁴¹

Neither statement is fair to Douglas: the first is an indiscriminate judgement upon dead heroes, the second an equally unqualified assessment of youth.

For these reasons, then, it seems necessary that the work and the reputation of Keith Douglas should be re-examined. In the light of his achievement as a 'War Poet' he deserves to be evaluated carefully. His methods and ideas need to be compared with those of other poets whose work is more familiarly known. Above all, the distortion brought about by certain critical attitudes to war poetry needs to be removed, so that Douglas's place in modern poetry may be properly estimated.

NOTES TO PAGES 1 TO 12

1. Noble Essences, pp. 90-91.
2. The Poetical Works of Rupert Brooke, p. 23.
3. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 48.
4. Selected Poems, pp. 26-27.
5. A College Book of Modern Verse, p. 173.
6. Selected Poetry of W.H. Auden, p. 12.
7. Selected Poetry and Prose, p. 67.
8. War: An Anthology, p. 92.
9. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 15.
10. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
11. See Louis Simpson, Harper's Magazine, (August 1967), p. 91.
12. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 149.
13. Lewis, Selected Poetry and Prose, p. 53.
14. The measure of his success, perhaps, is the poignant short story "Dusty Hermitage" (Selected Poetry and Prose, pp. 167-172.) There, more than in any of his poems, Lewis succeeds in capturing the uncertain feeling brought by the conjunction of Love and Death.
15. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 149.
16. Ibid., p. 116.
17. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 13.
18. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 127.
19. Though they do not refer directly to Douglas, these phrases of Geoffrey Grigson's (The War Poets, p. 13.) seem to describe aptly the paradox of the war poet.

20. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, pp. 52-53.
21. Douglas, Collected Poems, pp. 102-103.
22. "The Poetry of Keith Douglas", The Listener, LXVII (June 21, 1962), 1069-1071.
23. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 149.
24. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 31.
25. The War Poets, ed. Oscar Williams, p. 20.
26. Ibid., p. 15.
27. Ibid., p. 19.
28. Other admirers are C.B. Cox, P. N. Furbank, Michael Hamburger, Joseph Langland, John Press, Kathleen Raine and Chad Walsh.
29. The Terrible Rain: The War Poets 1939-1945, ed. Brian Gardener (London: Methuen, 1966).
30. Components of the Scene, ed. Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).
31. Oscar Williams, The War Poets, ed. Oscar Williams, p. 4.
32. See Howard Sergeant, English (Summer, 1964), p. 74.
33. Seldon Rodman, The War Poets, ed. Oscar Williams, p. 22.
34. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 16.
35. Ibid., p. 15.
36. "Poets at War", Spectator, (November 18, 1966), p. 654.
37. See Components of the Scene, ed. Ronald Blythe, p. 14.
38. "Casualty of War", The Times Literary Supplement, I (October 19, 1951), 662.
39. Chad Walsh, Saturday Review, XVIIIIL (January 2, 1965), 29.
40. Mac Hammond, "Normandy to Christ's Hospital", Poetry, LXXIX (March 8, 1952), 356-358.
41. "Casualty of War", The Times Literary Supplement, I (October 19, 1951), 662.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LIFE

The temperament of the war poet, perhaps because of what seems to be the emotional nature of his art, provokes a good deal of psychological curiosity. If, in fact, war and poetry are "incompatibles", what lies behind the efforts of certain individuals who try to combine them? What background does the war poet bring to his work? What reasons are there, either in his personality or in his attitude to life, to suggest why and in what way war should come to be the pre-occupation of his poetry? How does the idea as well as the fact of war strike him? How does it, in the end, affect his art? In Keith Douglas's case, the answers to these questions disclose an outlook which is the basis of a unique sensibility and honesty both for coping with and for writing about war.

Born at Tunbridge Wells, Kent, on 24 January 1920, Keith Castellain Douglas came from a family descended from Scots-Irish on his father's side and mixed European (mainly French) on his mother's. When Douglas was eight, however, his father deserted both wife and son, and the family was never reunited. Raised from then on entirely by his mother,

Douglas thus inherited at an early age a strong sense of personal independence and responsibility. From the beginning he had to learn to shoulder the cares and anxieties of an existence which was often troubled.

Already, however, he was a precocious and artistic youth. According to his mother, who admittedly must be accused of doting over her son:

from an early date Keith showed interest in art. First, shapes intrigued him. Then words. (He started to draw things at two years old.) Always very independent, he usually spurned advice till his own mistakes had proven him wrong. He had few "advantages" in the generally accepted sense of the word and as a baby had to spend long spells on his own. But he was never at a loss for amusement. He "talked" stories to his various toys till he learned to write and then he attempted to write them. He drew on every available scrap of paper; on doors and walls and any soft flat surface he could scrape with a stick. He pored over books he couldn't possibly read, comparing shapes of words he knew with shapes he didn't know and trying to guess their meanings.¹

At the age of six he was sent to a boarding school, Edgeborough, at Guildford. Even then he could read and write with facility, his favourite books being a History of the Boer War and the Children's Encyclopaedia. He was especially intrigued by the "myths, fairy tales and historical anecdotes"² which he found in the latter, and it was this fascination which very probably encouraged Douglas's earliest verse. Even when he was at Oxford he could look back wistfully to those days of childhood magic:

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 numinous
Latin,
And only the sun, a solitary worshipper,
Tiptoes towards the altar and rests there.

These and the hazy tropic where I lived
In tall seas where the bright fish go like footmen
Down the blue corridors about their business,
The jewelled skulls are down there. I have forgot,

Almost forgot. How slowly they return
Like princes into the rooms they once owned. How
I see the imaginary moon, the magic painter
Of long, deserted acres with splendour and silence.

Once on Monte Nero in the spring
Some peasant girl fashioned for love and work
Taught me a smile that I had forgotten,
It is so hard to speak her language now.

Almost forgot. How slowly they return
Like princes into the halls they once owned.3

As Ted Hughes points out, "in this particular poem the fairyland images are being remembered by one still partly under their spell, indulging the dream."⁴ The technique is immature, the sentiment vague and maudlin, but still the proper tone is there -- the reverence and regret. Douglas's early attempts to draw were also noteworthy. He attempted several times to illustrate James Stephens' The Demi-Gods, another work of charm and fancy which no doubt similarly inspired the more fanciful side of his nature.

Fortunately, this precocity was of great benefit to Douglas after his father abandoned the family. At eleven he

passed the Nomination Examination, and was enrolled at Christ's Hospital. The rest of his education was acquired through scholarship assistance. By now he had developed into an independent and strong-willed young man. Again his mother writes:

He had too much individuality to be popular with many of the Powers -- but there were those who appreciated him despite the headaches he sometimes caused. He was impatient of most people's opinions till he had tested them personally. He loved an argument and would cheerfully argue against his own opinions and (theoretically) prove them wrong, rather than have no basis of argument. He did this so convincingly that people who did not know him well sometimes believed his views to be the exact opposite of what they were.

He was accused by the Headmaster of being constitutionally lazy. The truth was he had unbounded energy and perseverance in anything he considered really worth-while. He was keen on rugger and swimming, on riding, on dancing and acting. He was interested in people and the reasons for their behaviour; in past ages -- and the future.⁵

It was at Christ's Hospital (1931-1938) that Keith Douglas first began to write poetry seriously. He published his earliest poems in the school magazine and, in 1936, had one accepted for publication in Geoffrey Grigson's distinguished collection New Verse.⁶ At the time he wrote "Dejection" he was only sixteen:

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. The spheres speak with persuasive voices.

Only tomorrow like a seagull hovers and calls
 Shrieks through the mist and scatters the pools of
 stars.

The windows will be open and hearts behind them.⁷

Already, however, the tone and attitude reflect his contemplative and perceptive mind, while the argument implies a knowledge of life beyond his years. Particularly interesting is the employment, even at this early age, of military imagery -- the regiment of the solitary dead.

In 1938, Douglas began to study English Literature at Merton College, Oxford. There, two circumstances in particular can be linked to his attitude towards war and towards war poetry. First, Edmund Blunden was assigned as his tutor, thus providing what was probably a significant contact between Douglas and the poets of the First World War. Second, Douglas himself, in the hope of obtaining free riding, joined the Officer's Training Corps, and thereby committed himself to being called up for active service upon the outbreak of war. A third circumstance, the removal to Oxford of the Slade School of Art, came about because of the war, and enabled Douglas to obtain his first official training as an artist.

Despite the war, in fact, literary life at Oxford was as active as ever. Among the poets were Sydney Keyes, John Heath-Stubbs, Herbert Howarth, John Short, John Waller and J. C. Hall.⁸ Douglas himself became the editor of the undergraduate magazine Cherwell,⁹ and in 1939 he helped, on Blunden's instigation, to collect and edit a miscellany of his fellow students' verse,¹⁰ Augury (1940). A statement 'On

the Nature of Poetry' included in that anthology shows the extent to which Douglas's theory of poetry had evolved:

Poetry is like a man, whom thinking you know all his movements and appearance you will presently come upon in such a posture that for a moment you can hardly believe it a position of the limbs you know. So thinking you have set bounds to the nature of poetry, you shall as soon discover something outside your bounds which they should evidently contain.

The expression "bad poetry" is meaningless: critics still use it, forgetting that bad poetry is not poetry at all.

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

For it is anything expressed in words, which appeals to the emotions either in presenting an image or picture to move them; or by the music of words affecting them through the senses; or in stating some truth whose eternal quality exacts the same reverence as eternity itself.

In its nature poetry is sincere and simple.

Writing which is poetry must say what the writer has himself to say, not what he has observed others to say with effect, nor what he thinks will impress his hearers because it impressed him hearing it. Nor must he waste any more words over it than a mathematician: every word must work for its keep, in prose, blank verse, or rhyme.

And poetry is to be judged not by what the poet has tried to say; only by what he has said.¹¹

Although he was still only twenty years of age, the bases for his approach to poetry -- the efficiency of form, the integrity and simplicity of thought -- are already present. By first stressing that "poetry may be written in prose or verse", and then reminding that in essence it appeals "to" the emotions rather than "by" the emotions, Douglas makes clear the aesthetic argument which might be used to counter charges like those which were later levelled

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 against his failure in musicality and sensitivity. It was
 during these years, as well, that some of his best early
 verse was published in fellow student John Waller's
 13
 magazine, Kingdom Come.

Not all of Douglas's time was taken up by the more
 glamorous literary pursuits, however. There were the mundane
 exercises as well. Blunden writes:

Keith was one of the most outspoken of people, as
 many accounts agree, but to his Tutor (capital T
 in those days) he was infallibly gentle and
 attentive. He took plenty of trouble over his
 weekly essay, even when his passion for horseman-
 ship (and his friendship with the amusing Hamo
 Sassoon, another pupil of mine) preoccupied him.
 Handwriting -- ever clear and flowing; but then,
 so was the expression. Brevity -- but nothing
 impecunious about it. Substance -- as matter-of-
 fact as he could make it! He did not care about
 novelty when he was finding his way.¹⁴

There was also Douglas's zestful pursuit of life and love.
 The poem "Canoe" perhaps best expresses the tenor of those
 busy days at Oxford:

Well, I am thinking this may be my last
 summer, but cannot lose even a part
 of pleasure in the old-fashioned art of
 idleness. I cannot stand aghast

at whatever doom hovers in the background;
 while grass and buildings and the somnolent river,
 who know they are allowed to last for ever,
 exchange between them the whole subdued sound

of this hot time. What sudden fearful fate
 can deter my shade wandering next year
 from a return? Whistle and I will hear
 and come another evening, when this boat

travels with you alone towards the Iffley:

as you lie looking up for thunder again,
 this cool touch does not betoken rain;
 it is my spirit that kisses your mouth lightly.¹⁵

Two interests in particular won his devotion -- the stage and painting. Both influenced his approach to poetry. Douglas worked hard upon a performance of Dryden's Secular Mask, among other things creating a series of papier-mâché masks. This was a task which, in effect, recalled and extended his earliest love of fantasy and dream. At the age of fourteen, in his first published poem "Mummers" he had written:

See where the deep night's blast has straddled
 The ancient gargoyle, weather addled
 And striped with melted tapestry
 Of snow; his evil face well-carven
 By Brother Ambrose, lean and starven,
 Cell-fasting, rich in artistry.¹⁶

Now he himself was accomplishing work comparable with that of Brother Ambrose. He was actually creating the kind of image and atmosphere which later would imbue many of his war poems with a distinctive fairy-tale reality. Similarly, it was at Oxford that he first developed that painter's eye which later turned impressively upon the desert scene. A contemporary at Merton College, Douglas Grant, has estimated that Douglas "might have excelled eventually as the artist rather than as the poet."¹⁷ But certainly the skills complemented each other.

It was at Oxford, too, that Keith Douglas exercised his interest in history. One reviewer of his work has written that "as a poet, Douglas had that dangerous youthful facility which prompts writers to put pen to paper without

really having anything to say." Not the least of Douglas's poetic assets, however, was his knowledge of history. He wrote about this with confidence. Edmund Blunden, his tutor, admits:

His intellect was as I now feel on the verge of greatness. It is on this account that his poetry ... looks like answering the demand of his distant school predecessor Coleridge: the best poets utter a philosophy. Keith Douglas was (in the words of one of his schoolmasters) 'one of the ablest of our History Grecians,' and had formed his panorama of life and time out of his historical contemplations.¹⁹

When war was declared, Douglas, as a member of the O.T.C., was immediately eligible for service. "You can only do three things about a war -- fight in it, protest against it, or ignore it."²⁰ Douglas decided to fight in it. In fact, he had little difficulty making that decision. To a certain extent, he was preconditioned by his upbringing and his education to accept the responsibility. World War I had struck a whole generation of young men so suddenly and forcefully that little real choice was given. Swept up by the enthusiasm, they enlisted. The Second World War was another matter. It had loomed upon the horizon for several years. Men could thus anticipate it, and many of the more sensitive agonized over their dilemma. Alun Lewis wrote: "the army, the bloody, silly ridiculous red-faced army -- in its bloodied boring khaki -- God save me from joining up. I shall go to the dogs like blazes -- it's the only honest way."²¹

However, Keith Douglas, having already joined the O.T.C.

largely for the free riding which it provided, suffered no such qualms. Indeed, he fell naturally into the old cavalry traditions of the public schools. According to a friend, in fact, he "religiously polished the soles of his boots as well as the uppers."²² Moreover, he felt quite positive that the experience of battle was one which he must undergo. Alun Lewis eventually came to the same decision, but in 1939 he was still uncertain. In August he writes:

I shall probably join up, I imagine. I've been unable to settle the moral issue satisfactorily; when I say I imagine I mean I have a deep sort of fatalist feeling that I'll go. Partly because I want to experience life in as many places as I'm capable of -- i.e. I'm more a writer than a moralist, I suppose.²³

But, in December, he adds:

I don't want to kill. Is it a victory over myself to go and kill, to do something terrific like bayonetting a man. ... D'you know what I shall probably do? Register as an objector and ask the judge for non-combatant work.²⁴

Douglas, by comparison, regarded the war as a personal challenge, even an opportunity. In contrast to Lewis's indecision in the face of war, Douglas's brash self-confident approach is evident in the opening lines of Alamein to Zem Zem:

I am not writing about these battles as a soldier, nor trying to discuss them as military operations. I am thinking of them -- selfishly, but as I always shall think of them -- as my first experience of fighting: that is how I shall write of them. To say I thought of the battle of Alamein as an ordeal sounds pompous; but I did think of it as an important test, which I was interested in passing.²⁵

Despite his willingness, Douglas's call-up, to his dismay, was delayed until late in 1940. Then, he was sent for

training to Edinburgh, Weedon, Sandhurst and Lulworth Cove. Upon receiving his commission, he was listed for attachment to the Indian Army and a special duties posting. When that plan was cancelled he went to the Middle East where he became a captain in a tank regiment of the Notts Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry. There, after eight months of frustrating and boring inactivity as a camouflage instructor, he ran away from his staff job with Divisional Headquarters to rejoin his regiment in the desert. Except for a brief stay in a Palestinian hospital to recover from the effects of a mine explosion, he fought throughout Montgomery's drive through North Africa. His account of that campaign, written at intervals in 1943, was later published as Alamein to Zem Zem (1946).

The desert stimulated Douglas. Its starkness and brutality encouraged those qualities in his own verse. It was at once a very physical and yet allusive world, as if, in the magical processes of his imagination, it could be transformed into fairy tale. Desert landscapes thus haunt his poetry and prose, lending their archetypal nature to his voice. Moreover, the battle for North Africa appealed to Douglas. The desert war had a morality of its own. It was fought, unlike the European campaigns, far from towns and civilians. Destruction was limited, and left little trace upon vistas of wind, sand and rock. There was nothing really to compare with the terrible scars left upon the

face of Europe. In that sense, the barren sands of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia proved an ideal arena for the struggle that took place. It was a war of mobility, designed to please the generals with its opportunities for initiative and tactical genius. But, curiously, the constant activity and variety of existence which went with it were also a boon for the ordinary soldier. Historians and poets alike have pointed out that he faced none of the tedium and discomfort, nor any of the nagging and constant fear that had been the lot of the men in the trenches during the First World War. Somehow, it all seemed more like some great spectacle or sporting event than it was like war. At intermission, the participants could always retire to Cairo, with its "oriental glitter" and "magical perversities", or to Alexandria where "the fleshpots bubbled merrily."²⁷ It needed a great struggle to maintain some kind of sane perspective in the face of such a change. Douglas made it the subject of a poem, "Cairo Jag":

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 Décédé in mauve ink.
 All this takes place in a stink of jasmin.

But there are the streets dedicated to sleep
 stench and 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, and possessions
 clinging to the ground, a man with no head
 has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.²⁸

Actually, there was a special 'esprit de guerre'
 about the desert war -- a vestige of the old-style chivalry
 -- which attracted Douglas. Concerning this, Lawrence
 Durrell writes:

The gravity of the general war situation, then, did
 little to depress the spirits of the desert armies.
 Despite the shortage of equipment and the lack of
 experience they seemed to be buoyant and full of an
 invincible optimism, ... These mechanized horsemen
 had imported a good deal of their cavalry panache
 into the grim business of modern war. This aspect
 of things Douglas found irresistible. I was reminded
 of Douglas the other day while reading an account
 of Wellington's Peninsula Army, where 'the
 young gentlemen' went into battle 'as if out hunting'.
 It conveyed very clearly the spirit of the
 Eighth Army before and during Alamein. Never have
 the schoolboy values proved so effective in the
 field, ridiculous as they may seem to armchair
 readers or civilians.²⁹

Again, it was the kind of observation which Douglas made
 about his comrades in poems like "Gallantry" and "Aristo-
 crats":

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.³⁰

Thus, despite the turmoil and the unreality of the world which he found himself in, Douglas adapted to it perfectly. He continued to write prolifically both in the Western Desert and during periods of leave in Cairo and convalescence in Palestine. His poems were published almost immediately -- some, mailed to England, in M. J. Tambimuttu's Poetry London; ³¹ others in a Cairo magazine, Personal Landscape,³² edited by Bernard Spencer, Terence Tiller and Lawrence Durrell. It was through this second connection that Douglas met Durrell. The latter makes some interesting observations:

I have only met him twice in Cairo, and then all too briefly: but I have retained a clear image of his physical appearance. Fine poets have a right to inhabit fine skins, and Douglas was blond and handsome. He was strongly built but not burly, and he had capable and expressive hands which were always on the move as he talked: the hands not of a pianist but of a surgeon. His talk was all effervescence, discursive, warm and gay. He was self-possessed, and wore his uniform as if he had been born to it. He seemed perfectly sure of his poetic gifts and to know exactly how they were to be developed. But praise made him look unhappy and a little distrustful. There was a disarming innocence about him, and he conveyed a feeling of perfect health, both physical and mental. He was delighted with his war and glad to have tested his courage against the ordeals of battle with unqualified success.³³

If there was a darker aspect to Douglas's nature, at this time it lay in two beliefs: a pessimistic view of the world's future and a premonition that his own life might at any time be cut short. Apart from his personal

bravado in the face of danger, he was too much of a realist and a student of history to be an optimist. When this attitude became apparent in the rhythms of his poetry, he answered J. C. Hall's query by saying:

Only someone who is out of touch, by which I mean first hand touch, with what has happened outside England ... could make that criticism. I am surprised you should still expect one to produce musical verse. ... I see no reason to be either 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 the careful absence of expectation (it is not quite the same as apathy) with which I view the world. ... To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others. To trust anyone or to admit to any hope of a better world is criminally foolish, as foolish as it is to stop working for it. It sounds silly to say work without hope, but it can be done; it's only a form of insurance; it doesn't mean work hopelessly.³⁴

In fact, Douglas followed his own advice. Every possible spare moment was devoted to his poetic work. In the winter of 1943 he returned to England to train for the second front. The first selection of his poems had appeared in Eight Oxford Poets³⁵ published in 1941. A second was put out earlier in 1943 and included, as well, poems by John Hall and Norman Nicholson. Now Douglas began collecting his poems for a major volume to be entitled Bête Noire. His premonition of death was strong. "I can't afford to wait", he confided to a friend, "because of military engagements which may be the end of me."³⁶ "On a Return From Egypt", his last completed poem, expresses this anxiety as well as anything could:

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.

For the heart is a coal, growing colder
 when jewelled cerulean seas change
 into grey rocks, grey water-fringe,
 sea and sky altering like a cloth
 till colours and sheen are gone both:
 cold is an opiate of the soldier.

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.

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.³⁷

Within a very short time he was dead, killed on
 9th June, 1944, his third day in Normandy, after acquiring
 information from behind enemy lines. He was twenty-
 four.

In a letter later addressed to Maurice Wollman,
 Douglas's mother wrote:

His last completed poem reflects, I think, his
 doubts and urges -- his longing to carry out the
 things he once planned and looked forward to --
 all the writings, illustrations, back cloths ...
 all the travel. And through all, the sense that if
 he did not face and share in every experience that
 came his way neither could he write any more. So
 for him there was no other choice despite his fear.
 So he went. He might have stayed in a safer spot.
 But I understood he couldn't. He always loathed
 the "safety first" idea, holding that one might
 as well be dead as afraid to move. He believed

in venturing and having -- or losing if need be.
 If he had lived to be a thousand I think he would
 still have gone on trying to weave his gathered
 experiences and knowledge into some comprehensible
 pattern of words and shapes -- or sounds.³⁸

Her words were confirmed by M. J. Tambimuttu. Writing

Douglas's obituary in Poetry London (1944), he declared:

"I can say without any hesitation that Douglas's view of
 life and his actions were the most sound and realistic that
 any man of our generation can come to. He accepted the
 greatest gifts of life and lived with passionate sincerity.
 His conclusions about life in action are the most mature any
 poet has arrived at in this war. ... Douglas lived the
 poetry he believed in."³⁹

NOTES TO PAGES 15 TO 31

1. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 13.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid. p. 43.
4. "The Poetry of Keith Douglas", Critical Quarterly, V (Spring, 1963), 43-48.
5. Douglas, Collected Poems, pp. 13-14.
6. See G.S. Fraser, "Keith Douglas: A Poet of the Second World War", Proceedings of the British Academy, VLII (1956) 94-95.
7. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 34.
8. Douglas's editors provide one list of his contemporaries at Oxford (Collected Poems, p. 14.) G. S. Fraser gives another in "Keith Douglas: A Poet of the Second World War", Proceedings of the British Academy, VLII (1956) 95.
9. See Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 14.
10. Augury. An Oxford Miscellany of Verse and Prose, ed. A. M. Hardie and K.C. Douglas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1940).
11. Douglas, Collected Poems, pp. 148-149.
12. See, for instance, the charges cited on pages 80-81 of this study.
13. Kingdom Come, the magazine of wartime Oxford (November 1939 - Autumn 1943).
14. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 17.
15. Ibid., p. 73.
16. Ibid., p. 23.
17. Ibid., p. 18.

18. "Casualty of War", The Times Literary Supplement, L (October 19, 1951), 662.
19. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 18.
20. John Manifold, The War Poets, ed. Oscar Williams, p.14.
21. Lewis, Selected Poetry and Prose, p. 18.
22. quoted by Philip Oakes, "The Desert Poets", Alamein and the Desert War, p. 198.
23. Lewis, Selected Poetry and Prose, p. 18.
24. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
25. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 15.
26. Lawrence Durrell (Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 12.) paints the brightest picture of desert war morale, but Alan Moorehead (The Desert War, pp. 11-12.) and Derek Jewell (Alamein and the Desert War, pp. 6-8.), realizing full well the hardships to be met, also point to the ability of the Allies to adapt readily and happily to such conditions.
27. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p.12.
28. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 115.
29. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 12.
30. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 124.
31. See also Poetry in Wartime, ed. M.J. Tambimuttu.
32. See also Personal Landscape; An Anthology of Exile, compiled Robin Fedden.
33. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, pp. 11-12.
34. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 149.
35. See Eight Oxford Poets, ed. M. Meyer and S. Keyes.
36. Part of a letter written to M.J. Tambimuttu, quoted in Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 15.
37. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 130.

38. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 15.
39. quoted in G.S. Fraser, "Keith Douglas: A Poet of the Second World War", Proceedings of the British Academy, VLII (1956), 97.

CHAPTER TWO

ALAMEIN TO ZEM ZEM

"Against a backcloth of indeterminate landscapes of moods and smells, dance the black and bright incidents." ¹ Thus Keith Douglas recalled the campaign which took him, as a junior tank officer in Montgomery's Eighth Army, from El Alamein on the coast of Egypt to Wadi Zem Zem in Tunisia. His record of that experience, Alamein to Zem Zem, ² is a very literary, indeed a poetic, work. It is very likely the only first-hand reminiscence of fighting in the Second World War one can favourably compare with the classic narratives of battle emerging from World War I: Robert Graves's Good-Bye to All That, Edmund Blunden's Undertones of War, Siegfried Sassoon's Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man and Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, Herbert Read's In Retreat and Ambush, ³ David Jones's In Parenthesis. Like each of its predecessors, in fact, it is a superb account of one man's response to modern warfare.

A war diary may prove to be of historical or psychological interest or, on certain rare occasions, even of literary interest. Alamein to Zem Zem succeeds on all

three of these counts. As a document describing armoured warfare in the desert it is frankly, painfully, and sometimes humorously accurate. But it is not just a record of what Douglas saw around him; it provides an intimate glimpse into the realities and the myths of his own life, into the psyche of that peculiar creature called a war poet.

Moreover, it is an excellent piece of writing, fascinating from start to finish, "the kind of book one reads in a rush, compelled onwards by the lucid, colourful style and the drama of events."²

Men write memoirs of war for various reasons: some because they must piece together some whole from all that jumbled mass of "sights, sounds, fears, hopes, apprehensions, smells ... of that singular time and of those particular men"³ they knew; others since they hope mankind may yet learn from its mistakes;⁴ still others merely because they do not see why they shouldn't.⁵ In a sense, all are moved to write by a kind of personal compulsion. As Earle Birney suggests: "Typically the poet and the poetic novelist are, I think, trailed by the spectres of their experiences, and the poems or the novels are the counter-spells they create, to try to prevent these spectres from becoming permanent hallucinations."⁶ By writing about them, men thus exorcise their own particular ghosts.

Keith Douglas's reason for writing about war, however, was different. His ghosts had not yet begun to haunt him.

He died before they ever could. He died still thinking war a kind of vicious amusement park where "tomorrow ... we'll get into every vehicle we can find, and go out over the whole ground we beat them on, and bring in more loot than we've ever seen!"⁷ Graves, Jones, Sassoon and Blunden all knew better, but then they all lived longer, and wrote only after time had distanced them from their original emotions. Of all the twentieth century's major narratives of war, only George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia⁸ was written, as was Alamein to Zem Zem, almost contemporaneously with the events it records. There is, of course, a practical reason for this fact -- poetry, with its less prolonged demands upon time and sensibility, is a much more acceptable genre for the man who must snatch his moments of creation from a chaotic and often ephemeral existence. But it is true, too, that for many writers it was not easy to write about the reality of war until the nightmares that it left behind began to fade. Robert Graves admits that for Edmund Blunden and himself the war continued, like a case of shell-shock, into civilian life:

we translated everything into trench-warfare terms. In the middle of a lecture I would have a sudden very clear experience of men on the march ...; the men would be singing, while French children ran along beside us, calling out: 'Tomme, Tomme, give me bullee beef!' ... Or it would be ... passing a company billet; an N.C.O. would roar: 'Party, 'shun! ... Or I would be in a barn with my first platoon... watching them play nap by the light of dirty candle stumps. Or in a deep dug-out at Cambrin, talking to a signaller; I would look up the shaft and see somebody's muddy legs coming

down the steps; then there would be a sudden crash and the tobacco smoke in the dug-out would shake with the concussion and twist about in patterns like the marbling on books. These day-dreams persisted like an alternate life....

* * * * *

I made several attempts during these years to rid myself of the poison of war memories by finishing my novel, but had to abandon it - ashamed at having distorted my material with a plot, and yet not sure enough of myself to turn it back into undisguised history....9

Douglas's nightmares were of a different kind. The compulsion to write, rather than the horror of war, was the dominant strain upon his psyche during the period of his military service. For David Jones war might have been an unpleasant interlude, or for Robert Graves merely something which could be left in the past; but for Keith Douglas, war was the raw material of poetry, the mirror of his soul. Not the "spectres of ... experience", but the spectres of ambition haunted him. This was part of the "Bête Noire" that he found so difficult to write about:

He is a jailer.
 Allows me out on parole
 brings me back by telepathy
 is inside my mind
 breaks into my conversation with his own words
 speaking out of my mouth
 can overthrow me in a moment
 can be overthrown, if I have help
 writes with my hand, and censors what I write
 takes a dislike to my friends and sets me against them
 can take away pleasure
 is absent for long periods, shows up without notice
 employs disguise.10

What Douglas wanted more than anything else was to fulfill part of that ambition before his time ran out. War was the

subject to hand. The desert campaign offered a tremendous opportunity to exercise his need to write. Enough that these battles should represent his "first experience of fighting" -- that was something to write about, something to "excite
 11
 a poet or a painter."

Indeed, the excitement which Keith Douglas felt throughout this initiation dominates the mood of Alamein to Zem Zem. In contrast to the thoughtful sobriety of Blunden, the studied casualness of Graves, or the continual frown of Sassoon, Douglas's attitude to war seems entirely immature and cavalier. It is an extension of that fascination which guns and knives hold for little boys. Moreover, it is, as Douglas himself realized, a selfish attitude. All that saves it, in fact, from becoming totally fantastic and egocentric is this self-awareness. Douglas recognizes his own delusions. Thus he is able to analyze honestly his decision to go A.W.O.L. in order to rejoin his regiment: "I decided, if there was no other means of going into action with my regiment, to run away from Divisional Headquarters in my truck, and report to my colonel. I thought vaguely that this might be straightened out later. To plan this was the natural result of having the sort of little boy mentality I still have. A little earlier, I might have
 12
 wanted to run away and be a pirate."

Douglas has been accused of taking a naive and adolescent view of war -- Graham Martin in The Listener,

for example, argues that "the Alamein diary 'Alamein to Zem Zem', suggests that he never went beyond the idea of war as tragic game, of the good enemy as 'sporting'" ¹³ --- and, of course, this seems true. It is undoubtedly, however, the particular view of war which Douglas chose to accentuate. War has as many sides to it as there are people to participate in it. It is a horror and an abomination, but it is also a tragic, and at times an exciting game, played by naive adolescents. Douglas struggled with this plurality of emotions, and in the end wrote chiefly of the excitement and the tragedy, not because he had not gone beyond that viewpoint, but because he had gone beyond the feelings of horror and fear and there found the detachment and the freedom to see war in a different light. As a preliminary to his first taste of battle, he describes this experience:

I lay down to sleep in my clothes, covered with my British warm and blankets, for the nights were already beginning to be cold. 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. For perhaps a quarter of an hour I considered to what possibilities of suffering, more than of death, I had laid myself open. This with the dramatic and emotional part of me: but my senses of proportion and humour, like two court jesters, chased away the tragic poet, and I drifted away on a tide of odd thoughts, watching the various signs of battle in the lower sky.¹⁴

The humour and the proportion took hold. During that initial battle Douglas encountered death for the first time:

There were one or two German infantry positions and

pits for vehicles to be driven into: beautifully finished and deep-cut trenches. John selected a deep narrow trench about the length and width of a bed, and was going to drop his blankets into it when I said: 'I think there's some stuff in the bottom of it.' 'Oh!' John peered down into the murk. 'I hope it's not a corpse.' That was exactly why I had said 'some stuff' instead of 'something'. But the object, whatever it was, was as long as a man and in a pose which suggested limbs. I stretched a tentative and reluctant hand down into the pit, wondering whether I should touch a stiffened arm, shoulder or leg. I had aimed at the centre of the mass to avoid contact with the face and teeth. Of course, after all this agony it was not a corpse, but someone else's bedding. We had been forestalled and had to sleep in a more open pit dug for a small truck.15

The anti-climax is masterful. After the deliberate and self-conscious understatement used in re-enacting this scene, one wonders, as Douglas himself must have at the time, whether to shudder at the horrid expectations raised by the situation, or laugh with relief at its resolution. In either case, Douglas had made his point. The horror and the fear, though real in themselves, are merely the products of an overactive imagination. Contrast this instance with a second:

Another Crusader several hundred yards away attracted our attention, and we rushed towards it, floundering over split trenches and passing through some of our own infantry. 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 he was 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.¹⁶

Here, it is the vision of death that is real; the emotions that prove empty. How misleading they are! Seen in proportion to the scale of the conflict, in relation to the impersonality of photographed dead, the actual dead evoke no more than an observation about the curiosity of their covered wounds. Again the understatement builds to a telling anti-climax as the subject of death is dehumanized. The man who might be saved becomes, in turn, a dead man, a Negro, one of several mutilated bodies and, finally, part of a remembered photograph. The two incidents thus demonstrate a truth by which Keith Douglas, unlike many war poets, was guided: the agony of war is created in the mind; on the battlefield it is often not even recognized. That, too, is part of the tragic game.

Thus Douglas strove to be unsentimental in writing of the war. It was not that he did not feel pity or anger because of what he saw, but rather that he understood how those emotions could distort reality and, indeed, elevate the nature of war. As Earle Birney, and later Joseph Heller,¹⁷ have pointed out, war, when seen impersonally, is essentially farce -- a bizarre black comedy. Laughter, and not tears or curses, can alone dispel its hold upon the world. War is not worth our hatred or our sorrow, for these

emotions are the basis of self-satisfaction and false hope. Douglas's great ability, then, was to see war in all its facets: the excitement and the humour as well as the tension and the pathos. His personal sense of joy in the experience of fighting and observing battles, together with his strong and honest awareness of the motives and conditions of his own involvement, prevented him from making a burlesque of war. At the same time his sense of proportion would not allow him to take it too seriously. Thus Alamein to Zem Zem has an almost perfect blend of visual and mental excitement along with a startling emotional detachment. The poetry is certainly not in the pity, but rather inherent in the scene.

"Anyone who takes part in a modern battle in a tank, which is equipped with a wireless," Douglas writes, "has an advantage over the infantrymen, and over all the soldiers and generals of earlier wars. Before his mind's eye the panorama of the battle is kept, more vividly even than before the general of other times who watched his soldiers from a vantage point, or was kept posted by telephones and runners." It is this sense of watching battle in panorama which gives Alamein to Zem Zem its real value as a record of tank warfare in the desert. Douglas depicts the incredible variety, the confusion and the contrasts of an armoured battle. Almost everything interests him -- the men, the landscape, machines and instruments, tactics and emotions -- from the mundane details of how to load a Crusader tank on to a

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diamond T-transporter, to a dramatic re-enactment of the
 20 capture of enemy troops. Battles come alive as he describes
 them, wireless and gunnery procedures are explained. And yet,
 amid this violence and passion Douglas paints a humorous
 and enlightening picture of his fellow officers: of men
 like Guy "fantastically rich and handsome ... a figure straight
 21 out of the nineteenth century", and Edward "a man progressing
 imperceptibly with the inconspicuousness of English good
 22 manners, from youth to middle age." He even takes time to
 analyze unusual aspects of the panorama. At one stage he
 explores the silence:

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 noises 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. It is the same in an aircraft, but unless you are flying low, distance does away with the effect of a soundless pageant. 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. There is a divinity about cats, as long as they are silent: the silence of swans gives them an air of legend. The most impressive thing about the dead is their triumphant silence, proof against anything in the world.²³

At yet another stage, the sweetness captures his attention:

Sometimes the surface of the desert where we halted for a few hours or a few days was thick with flowers which changed the ridges and hollows whose

sandy colour had for weeks been relieved only by stones, the hiding places of scorpions -- or the dead grey sprouts of camelthorn -- into undulating distances of blue-green. The sweet scent of the flowers would come up to your nostrils even in a tank turret, moving along; it could overcome all the odours of machines.²⁴

All this is accomplished with a prose that is informal, pungent and full of wit. It is the prose of a poet, economical, direct and colourful, yet, at the same time, fiercely impressionistic and disordered. Incidents and thoughts rush into each other, set off as if by some mysterious and impulsive chain reaction of the memory. There is evidence, as in the meditations upon silence and the sweetness of desert flowers, of a sensitive and philosophic mind, but there is also evidence of a strongly physical and masculine personality. One senses, for instance, the pride Douglas felt in reporting: "The battle of Alamein began on 23 October 1942. Six days afterwards I set out in direct disobedience of orders to rejoin my regiment. My batman was delighted with this manoeuvre. 'I like you, sir ,' he said 'You're shit or bust, you are.'²⁵ This praise gratified me a lot."

Then, too, Douglas was a painter as well as a poet. Alamein to Zem Zem comes alive with sketches of battle, both visual and oral. With only a few ragged lines and shadows,²⁶ Douglas captures in the drawing, "Arab dogs", the same stark and casual horror which he exploits in the poem "Dead Men":

... 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.²⁷

What is surprising is not that poetry and art should go together, but that, in Douglas's case, poetry and war should. Yet it is clear that Douglas found a kind of disguised but nevertheless fundamental poetry in the homely metaphors and staccato rhythms of wireless procedure,²⁸ or in the changing patterns of man's emotional and physical response to war. Indeed, the narrative acquires its unusual poetic quality to a large extent because of the way in which this feeling for the natural poetry of war informs not only his attitude but his style.

Alamein to Zem Zem, however, is more than just a poet's vivid recollection of war. What, in the final analysis, sets it apart from either history or memoir is the sense of personal struggle and self-analysis that pervades the entire account. In effect, the diary reveals the stages of Douglas's initiation into manhood, his quest for self-possession. It is in this sense that Douglas admits he thought of the battle of Alamein as "an important test which I was interested in passing." The battle, in fact, becomes the key to finding himself: "It's tremendously illogical," -- he writes-- "to read about it cannot convey the impression of having walked through the looking glass which touches a man entering a battle."²⁹ Once through, however, one can

contend with life and death at its most elemental level, face to face with all its myths and realities. There is comedy as well as horror, freedom as well as tension, and in the end there is relief and reconciliation:

We repeated over and over again in our thoughts and conversation that the battle was over. The continual halting and moving, the departure at first light, the shell-fire, the interminable wireless conversation -- and the strain, the uncertainty of tomorrow, the fear of death: it was all over. We had made it. We stood here on the safe side of it, like swimmers. And Guy, lying under the flowers in Enfidaville cemetery, Piccadilly Jim, buried miles behind us, Tom, and all the others, back to the first casualties, during Rommel's attempt to break through to Alexandria; they didn't make it, but it's over for them, too.30

Out of this hiatus the re-affirmed self emerges, to make plans for a new tomorrow.

NOTES TO PAGES 35 TO 47

1. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 15.
2. C.B. Cox, "Poets at War", Spectator (18 November 1966), p. 654.
3. Jones, In Parenthesis, p. x.
4. Steinbeck, Once There Was a War, pp. v-vi.
5. Blunden, Undertones of War, p.vii.
6. Birney, The Creative Writer, p. 28.
7. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 152.
8. Published 1937.
9. Graves, Goodbye to All That, pp. 239-240.
10. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 158.
11. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, pp. 15, 16.
12. Ibid., p. 16.
13. The Listener, LXXVI (December 1, 1966), 816-818.
14. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 25.
15. Ibid., p. 31.
16. Ibid., p. 34.
17. Compare Birney's Turvey, Heller's Catch 22.
18. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, p. 107.
19. Ibid., p. 81.
20. Ibid., pp. 36-40.
21. Ibid., p. 91.

22. Ibid., pp. 95-96.
23. Ibid., p. 28.
24. Ibid., pp. 97-98.
25. Ibid., p. 17.
26. Ibid., p. 128.
27. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 116.
28. Douglas, Alamein to Zem Zem, pp. 108-109.
29. Ibid., pp. 15, 16.
30. Ibid., p. 152.

CHAPTER THREE

THEMES AND IMAGES

Keith Douglas's poetry exhibits many of the qualities of his prose. There is the same honesty and immediacy in approach, a similar self-consciousness and detachment in conception. The expression is equally vigorous and clear. Douglas's verse never lapses into mere verbal ingenuity or trite sentimentality. It represents always the voice and the vision of an artist with a strong and independent sensibility.

The major issues of existence -- life, love, death, mutability -- form the centre of Douglas's vision. War is its integral metaphor. "We defined the war in our poems," wrote Robert Graves of Siegfried Sassoon and himself, "by making contrasted definitions of peace."¹ This is what Douglas does when he talks of hunting and cricket ("Aristocrats"), dancing ("A Ballet") and music ("Haydn-Military Symphony"), of security ("Sanctuary"), pain and pleasure ("Song"). But it is also true that Douglas, by making comparisons with war in his poems, helps to define and appreciate the essence of life. He reverses the process outlined by Graves. War

provides the context and the contrast by which the meaning of peace is examined. Life, love, death and mutability are thus all brought into the poet's focus.

In effect, Douglas employs war as a symbol of man's archetypal fallen state. This is apparent especially in his early verse where the literary imagination, unqualified by actual experience and prone to the idealization commonly found in immature work, tends to embrace grand conceptions. It is apparent, for instance, in the poem "Youth":

Your sword is brilliant; through the auburn leaves
The sun patches your tunic of smooth-woven green,
Each fold a thousand aery shimmers leaves
Dazzling as leaping fish a moment seen.

The road curls down below you. In its spell
Pass glebe and woodland, where a hundred ways
Twist, some to fairyland, and some to Hell;
But there are better things beyond the maze.

When you have heard the whirl and song of strife,
When use scratches and rusts your weapons' gleam
And age has marred the youngness of your life
With dreams, you will come back again, and dream.²

The poem, written when he was only fifteen, foreshadows the process of initiation through which Douglas himself was to struggle seven years later in the Western Desert, but more importantly and deliberately it recalls the initiation of all mankind. Adam, the young soldier, reflecting still the glory of Paradise, stands at the gates of Eden. Before him lies the road out of that perfect peace into "the whirl and song of strife", the world of "use" and "age". He must forsake the garden for the "maze", peace for war; only in

his dreams, the archetypal dreams of lost innocence, will he return. Such is the fate of us all.

For the youthful Douglas, however, the image of the garden was particularly vivid. It is the basis for two other early poems -- "Strange Gardener" and ".303" -- and two translations -- "Head of a Faun" and "Le Dormeur du Val." In each of these sets of verse, which can be readily paired, the idyllic setting, at once so fragile and beautiful, is at last seemingly tainted by death. Two attitudes to life, perhaps subconscious ones, are thus contrasted. One can sense the conflict by juxtaposing the first set of poems:

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

A young man dwelt there
with a swift, sad face, and full of phantasy,
repeating, as he heard it,
the alliterative speech of the water spirit;
smoothing his pale hair
with automatic ecstasy.

This was his garden,
uncultivated (order hated him);
whence, in a winter-madness
(whose scourge filled him with recklessness,
seeing the frost harden),
the water-spirit translated him.

("Strange Gardener")3

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.

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.

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.
 (".303")4

In the first, Douglas presents a vision of a garden and a young man: not, this time, a youth who must leave the garden, but rather one who, "translated" by a "water-spirit", has his identity merged with his surroundings. In a sense, perhaps, he thus symbolizes a part of all of us --- that sub-conscious memory of psychic innocence, the feeling that, once, we were in that garden, were ourselves a kind of strange gardener, and were, to that extent, similarly translated. In effect, the strange gardener is the sensitizing, even the idealizing, force within us. That the speaker of the second poem knew him while the person addressed did not, thus explains the tension between their attitudes. Both view exactly the same scene, but their estimation of it differs completely. Because he has failed to recognize that "gardener in the vales" of his own soul, the latter is insensitive to life and beauty, even to the harsh reality of death. The speaker, perhaps in contrast to the other, has killed in battle, yet it is he who knows the horror and the shame of death, can still appreciate the purity of life. Humanity, not efficiency, delights him. Perhaps, as with the strange gardener, "order hated him." On the surface, efficiency and

order may triumph in bleakness and decay, but, underneath, a garden blooms. It is this garden, nurtured carefully in our deepest memories and merged with the self within our secret soul, to which we can return again, in the realization of our final dream.

In this sense, death cannot spoil the garden. The garden, instead, has the power to overcome death, and this is what happens in Douglas's translations from Rimbaud. In "Le Dormeur du Val"⁵ there are again the garden and the young man, who, as in "Youth" and ".303", is a young soldier. Now, however, he is dead or, rather, in a final sleep. Strangely, he does not seem out of place. As if this garden were his own Christian Valhalla, he is at peace -- perhaps, indeed, the peace of a sick child rather than that of the warrior. It is in childhood that he must leave the garden; only through childhood memories may he return. Between these moments, war -- the fallen state of man -- has intervened, leaving its wounds, the "two red holes" that may be caused by either bullets or the serpent's fangs. Nevertheless, the young soldier, in all innocence, has returned to the place where Nature may once more "attend and warm him." Though "scents will not succeed to charm / his nostrils", he can rest secure in the love of the garden.

⁶
In such love, the wild faun ("Head of a Faun") is nurtured. That faun, in fact, may be a symbol of rebirth, even the rebirth of the young soldier, "translated", though

in a different way from the strange gardener before him. The faun, in the first stanza of the Douglas version, "shows his two eyes" from out "the foliage, a green casket spotty with gold", the place "where a kiss is curled / Alive." Much of the force of these lines comes from the use of the words "casket" and "Alive", yet the original French "écrin" and "Vif" represents, in their usual and more literal sense, "jewel case" and "lively".⁷ Moreover, in the original, the kiss is not "curled / Alive", it merely "sleeps": "le baiser dort" is separated from the adjective "vif" by a comma, thus precluding, in the French, the enjambment which Douglas employs so effectively in the third and fourth lines of his version. By means of these three subtle differences, none of which, admittedly, is produced by more than slightly juggling the denotation of the French, Douglas has effectively altered the connotation of the English. A "casket" becomes a womb, gives birth to a "kiss" and, suddenly, "A wild faun shows his two eyes." Even more than in the French, there is a sense of nature's mysterious and wonderful progenitive power -- the kind of power invoked in "Le Dormeur du Val" by the line "Nature, attend and warm him, he is cold." Death gives birth to life, as the image of the fallen soldier fades into the image of the garden, and is revived in the image of the faun, to "run away free."

The Eden myth, so prominent in these early poems and translations, does not appear with equal clarity in any

of Keith Douglas's later poems. It would be wrong, however, to suppose that it ceased exercising a considerable hold upon his imagination. In one sense, the Paradisal ideal is merely suppressed in Douglas's mind by the reality of war.

As in the poem "Youth", it becomes a subject and a place of dreams, an experience not to be attained in the fallen world with its "whirl and song of strife." Because of this, it is absurd to reminisce continually. Nevertheless, the relevance of the myth is proven by the sustained effort to recapture it. Sisyphus's labours left him always at the bottom of the mountain, but he would not, therefore, have considered the top inconsequential. It is in this spirit of resignation and stoicism that Douglas wrote in August 1943: "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. It sounds silly to say work without hope, but it can be done; it's only a form of insurance; it doesn't mean work hopelessly." Thus, the world of the strange gardener lies behind much of what Douglas wrote at Oxford, in training depots throughout England and in the Middle East. In fact, it forms a counter-myth which tends to work in much the same way as that which underlies "The Waste Land." The desire which both Eliot and Douglas share for regaining a mythical paradise is, curiously, at the centre of their insistence upon facing

life realistically. In fact, throughout Douglas's poems, significant allusions to this Edenic preoccupation are fairly frequent. The Western Desert, the converse of his imagined garden, was his waste land:

... the sick land where in the sun lay
 the gently sloe-eyed murderers
 of themselves, exquisites under a curse.⁹
 ("On a Return from Egypt")

There the war became his new reality, just as the Fall became Adam's. The rest was merely dreamed.

In a second sense, too, the concept of paradise continued to be important in Douglas's later verse. Here the parallel is not with Eliot but rather with Blake. Douglas's young men, like himself, choose to go to war. In effect, they thus accept their fallen state as a challenge to be dealt with, and a lesson to be learned from. To refuse that "test", as Douglas calls it, or to wallow in self-pity, simply confirms their fallen nature. Like Blake's Thel, Douglas, as he is his own chief hero, must not flee back from the eternal gates into the vales of Har.

Innocence may be glimpsed in love, in childhood and in art, but its only permanence for the individual comes from entering into and emerging on the other side of the world of experience. In Blake's terms, what is needed is to pass through Generation. To live only in memories of the garden is to be condemned forever to Ulro. This is what happens to Douglas's strange gardener, a figure who must be

treated with some sympathy because of the dream which he helps to preserve, but who must also, because of the living death in which he is trapped, not be admired excessively. One should be warned by that "swift, sad face" so "full of phantasy", and by that damning description of him:

smoothing his pale hair
with automatic ecstasy.10

Ecstasy is not, and should not be, automatic; nor should it be so easily aroused. Douglas forces the reader to see this. Knowing "the gardener in the vales" is indeed important in developing an attitude towards life, but that one must, with sword and tunic, leave the garden, is also a fact that must be accepted. Experience does not often bring happiness, but as Douglas points out, in a statement true to Blakean theory, "there are better things beyond the maze." Keith Douglas's own life brought him to a point where, like Thel, he had to choose between going forward or backward:

The next month, then, is a window
and with a crash I'll split the glass.
Behind it stands one I must kiss,
person of love or death
a person or a wraith
I fear what I shall find.

("On a Return from Egypt")11

In order to attempt to find those "better things", he, unlike Thel, went on.

In the meantime, however, his choices were not so dramatic. While he waited impatiently in England, and even while he was caught up in the tank battles of North Africa,

Douglas continued to write poetry about war; that is to say, he wrote poetry about man's life within a fallen world. His central metaphor was war. Within its range, he could encompass a cross-section of events and people and emotions. The real difficulty lay not so much in being limited by his subject but, rather, in being limited by the uncontrolled emotional response of his audience. For many people, the subject of war aroused strong feelings -- of pride, of pity, or perhaps of disgust. Whether by design or not, a great deal of wartime literature plays upon such feelings. Thus a poet like Wilfred Owen could, with justification, assert that in his verse the poetry is in the pity. However, this could not be permitted to happen in Keith Douglas's verse without encouraging the kind of emotionalism which he wanted to avoid; hence the reason for the very self-conscious detachment employed by Douglas. That detachment was not the product of a callous nature, but rather the triumph of poetic discernment. For Douglas's purpose, only an unemotional approach would do.

This is perhaps a major factor behind what has been called, and harshly criticized as, Douglas's "narrowly recurrent imagery." In fact, it is true that his poems are full of "ghosts, actors, effigies, cosmetics, décor,
¹²
 jewellery, &c." Perhaps, too, it seems confining for him to reach back into his own childhood love for fairy tales, art and drama in order to call up such images. Yet, there

can be little doubt about Douglas's ability to use such images to conjure up an atmosphere charged with magic and strangeness. He creates an unreal world of shapes and spaces, colours and sounds -- in effect, merely a backdrop for the mummers who, years after his first attempt to write of them, still come knocking, anxious to play out their scenes. They represent all men, no man, Douglas himself. This is true for example, of a poem written in the Middle East, entitled "Landscape with Figures":

I

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.

II

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 had 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.

III

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. Yes,
 I am all these and I am the raven
 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 and heaven.¹³

All the elements of Douglas's special imagery are here.

The effect, indeed, is quite bizarre, illustrative of what can be accomplished. Douglas's subject is the horror and the unreality of mindless destruction, the personal agony of suddenly identifying oneself with it. In the clutter of images used in stanza I -- the "useless furniture", dismembered beetles, the allusion of Christ's wounds, steel torn in the shape of ferns -- in all of these there is a sense of waste and cruelty, a feeling for the vacuous aftermath of some incredible and terrible moment of carnage. Seen from the air, however, by a "pilot or angel looking down / on some eccentric chart", the horror itself is distanced, unreal because its effects can more easily be likened to some other phenomenon. When, in the second stanza, the scene is viewed at closer hand, reality is still avoided. Now the chart becomes a back-drop, dead men appear, but wriggle still, like mimes

who express silence and futile aims
enacting this prone and motionless struggle.

The speaker himself will not recognize the actual horror; yet in his references to the "décor" of the set, the "cosmetic blood" and "hectic colours" of death, he heightens that horror considerably by his own bizarre transposition of the scene. When, at last, he does become emotionally involved with what he sees, it is predictably with a sudden and traumatic shock: "I am the figure writhing on the back-cloth." The final stanza thus consists entirely of an outburst of feeling, in essence no more real than the emotionless depictions of the scene in the preceding stanzas. One is distanced from the argument by its excess and incoherence; nevertheless, it does fill one with horror, for in the rantings of this man, who is ridden with **guilt** and remorse, can be seen the self-destruction of a soul. The speaker, realizing at last the brutal meanings of the detritus before him cannot cope with it. Perhaps because he has suppressed reality for so long, his own despair is all the more terrible. He has been one of the mummers himself, caught up within a closet world of exotic imagery, and he is therefore infinitely vulnerable.

The effect Keith Douglas brings about by using this particular kind of imagery, is similar to that achieved by Eliot in "The Waste Land." Both men want us to confront reality, to see life for what it is, and has become, in

contrast to the dream of paradise. The world created in their poetry, therefore, is a nightmare world comprised chiefly of what Eliot aptly calls "a heap of broken images."¹⁴ In fact, the "narrowly recurrent imagery" which Keith Douglas employs, serves much the same purpose as Eliot's figures of sterility, decay and death. For Douglas, life is a kind of war -- and yet a bizarre game or sport or play as well: tragic because it brings death and destruction; engaging because it is competitive, challenging and entertaining. Douglas maintains his faith in the human element. For him the real horror of war lies in accepting its impersonality, treating life as if it did consist only of "ghosts, actors, effigies, cosmetics, décor, jewellery, &c."

An instance of this may be found in the poem "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 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.¹⁵

It is, indeed, an outline of the way in which killing becomes emotionally possible. Once man is reduced to shadow, death to a mosquito -- their relationship as coldly logical as the cross-hairs of a gun-sight -- then pain and suffering are removed: "How easy it is to make a ghost." The philosophic moral is double-edged. Literally, there is the simple truth that, in war especially, "A shadow is a man / when the mosquito death approaches." Douglas no doubt realized that fact in his own first-hand experience of battle. In action, certainly, it is a comforting as well as a hard truth. If, as in war, a man must kill or even be killed, it is impossible to act unless all but such a stoic philosophy is excluded from the mind. Yet Douglas knew also the emptiness of such a belief. His knowledge of that fact, even at the age of fifteen, gave rise to the accusation at the end of ".303":

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.

Impersonality in war may be a necessary attitude. It is nonetheless evil, particularly to anyone who, like Douglas, knows "the gardener in the vales."

Douglas's customary voice appears detached and

coldly unemotional in his poems, not because he was merely callous, but because the war he wrote about demanded such an attitude. As Douglas said:

my object (and I don't give a damn about my duty as a poet) is to write true things ... I see no reason to be either 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 the careful absence of expectation (it is not quite the same as apathy) with which I view the world. As many others ... are in the same state of mind, it is a true reflection.¹⁶

Thus the cynic in Douglas suppressed the lyric. Like Owen and Sassoon, Douglas was repulsed by what he saw of the death and destruction caused by war; unlike them, however, he was not moved to pity or condemnation. Perhaps, conditioned by the advent of a second world war, he was too cynical to hope for reformation.

Douglas's verse remarkably betrays no lasting bitterness because, in some ways, of its philosophical and detached character. In a poem entitled "Spring Sailor"¹⁷ there is a reference to "the imagery of longing." Actually, a good deal of Douglas's work, especially that written while he was at Oxford, depends heavily upon such imagery. The imagery is derived essentially from the longing for the old unfallen world, first symbolized within this section by the opening poem, "Forgotten the Red Leaves", with its reminiscence of the tokens of childhood and youth. The longing can be found in the assumption of the stranger's role ("Stranger"), the protestations of the spring sailor ("Spring

Sailor"), the poem for Mary ("Poor Mary"), the invocation of sunlight ("Villanelle of Sunlight"), above all, in the parting of "Farewell Poem."

Douglas seldom broods upon such moments. It is worth noting, for instance, how deftly he employs a wry and irreverent sense of humour to salvage some sense of proportion in several poems where to continue in a serious vein would be disastrous. In "Shadows", a poem which suffers from being much too deliberately poetic and pseudo-mythic, the speaker, searching for some ancient elixir, flatly admits: "And I find this charm as weak." Thus, he punctures the pomposity of both the style and idea which he has hitherto pursued. Similarly, the conclusion of the poem, "Russians", ostensibly just a careless and off-hand remark, is effective in the way it delivers a punch-line. Here the problem is one of topping an already grotesque and playful image of a group of frozen soldiers -- "Think of them as wax-works." One might imagine keeping them alive within this state a thousand years and then reviving them. But, warns Douglas, "at least forget what happens when it thaws."

When Douglas himself became actively involved with the Second World War, his poems began to take on a more philosophical attitude. It has been suggested (significantly enough, rather early in the life of the first publication of Collected Poems) that this increased philosophical concern was detrimental to Douglas's development. Mac Hammond

states that "war hit this poet in his already sensitive guts and cramped what was, or was becoming, control in his poetry."²⁰ Since that time, however, there has been no real agreement with this point of view. If anything, control seems to be regarded as one of Douglas's major strengths. Indeed, though I have argued against the opinion, it has been felt by certain critics that Douglas was in fact so conditioned as to be insensitive in his attitude to war.²¹

Again, Hammond is critical of the fact that "For Douglas the dead at his feet, the wild Egyptian dogs consuming his dead friends, loomed too large to belittle."²² But surely that is exactly what Douglas does. Just as in Alamein to Zem Zem he describes how his first actual brush with death seems somehow less traumatic than the mere appearance of a bedroll in a trench, so too, in poems like "How to Kill" or "Dead Men", he points out how insignificant the fact of death can seem. True, Douglas's intention is, at least partially, to make us realize that death is more important than it is often regarded, but then has not almost every war poet tried to make the same point? Moreover, Douglas simply employs philosophical detachment and irony in order to produce an effect which other poets, such as Wilfred Owen, obtain by a direct and often less controlled appeal to the emotions. His methods of approach may be individual, but, in the end, no war poet can very well afford to belittle "the dead at his feet."

Indeed, Douglas's attitude to death is very likely the key to his view of life. In many ways it corresponds to the distinction which T. S. Eliot made between true life and mere living death, a distinction which is most often indicated in Keith Douglas's verse by the use of those "narrowly recurrent images" drawn from fairy tales, art, drama and bourgeois society. It is indicated, for instance, in these lines from "The Offensive":

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.

The stars in their fragile house
are the heavenly symbols of a class
dead in their seats,
and the officious sun goes round
organizing life;23

At both the cosmic and the everyday level, individual life is mocked. Your own death is ignored while orators and clerks, like the stars in the sky, live on, a careless meaningless life. What should be life's ultimate reality -- its termination -- becomes, instead, part of the fantastic mime put on by Time and Death:

Time and Death, villains in the wings,
stretch out their fingers parallel
at me. Death says: If I don't get you,
then Time aha will presently upset you --
you'll find how soon his famous spell
will coil you in successive strings.

The man who truly wishes to live must struggle not to be crushed by these two:

Only between these dangerous two
let me be nimble, jump and dodge

the unnatural uncles on my track;
 If I don't croak and falter back
 despairing in the end to cadge
 careless hearts from you and you.²⁴

The struggle is important. His problem, in the end, is to find his own reality through imagination and metaphysics. Before then, however, he must actively participate in the action and passion of life. He must enter the war as a soldier, for, as Douglas knew, much could be salvaged in that way. He must free himself from the nightmare sleep we call reality, and escape to the dream, the pure vision of Eden which marks our greatest wakefulness. If he cannot do this, then he must be condemned to that living death which is the fate of his brothers. These lines from the poem "Song" will then be his confession:

I who could feel pain
 a month, a month ago
 and pleasure for my mind
 and other pleasure find
 like any dotard now
 am wearily sat down,
 a dull man, prisoner
 in a dull chamber.

You who richly live
 look at me, look at me;
 stirred to talk with you
 I say a word or two
 like an effigy
 What answer will you give?
 Will it wake the drugged man,
 I wonder if you can.²⁵

Neither love nor change will serve to "wake the drugged man." Love is an answer only momentarily. As in the experience recounted in the poem "Canoe", it may bring an

instant when the free spirit dominates, but that soon fades. In fact, the glimpse of true life which it brings may too easily be reversed, turned into something trapped and dead. This is what happens in "The Prisoner" and "The Knife."²⁶ As in "I Listen to the Desert Wind", love turns ultimately into betrayal. In a sense, perhaps, it is part of that greater mutability which, in its most obvious guise, is little more than a circular time trap, a betrayal of expectation. Certainly, this is the image employed in "A Round Number",²⁷ where both time and love conspire first to build and then to destroy hope. The same theme is used in a much better poem, "Time Eating." There the image is more powerful: an emblem of eternity, the snake devouring its own tail.

If love and change are not sufficient answers, the problem then becomes even more complex. What must be tried, at last, is Death itself:

Dotards do not think
but slowly slowly turn
eyes that have seen too much
and look for the soft touch
of Fate who cannot burn
but is a last drink,
a night drink, an opiate,
and almost comes too late.²⁸

Paradoxically, only genuine death can bring back an honourable life:

Yes, the dead are wakeful and swift, at once to know
when disgrace comes, strangers on their graves.²⁹

By waking the drugged man from his stupor, death recalls

him to a higher innocence; in fact, fulfilling the prophecy made to youth:

When you have heard the whirl and song of strife,
When use scratches and rusts your weapons' gleam
And age has marred the youngness of your life
With dreams, you will come back again, and dream.³⁰

Man must let this false world die, let go of all its misconceptions and corruptions. The sham reality of war, the reality forced upon us by man's fall, will thus be exchanged for the archetypal reality of our pre-fall origins.

... The city
may still stir, the lovely soul become
alive, alive, and all her beauty alive;
the fountains playing in the squares, the white
buildings
standing erect, smiling on the day,
and all the pleasant traffic moving again.
Songs will appear like flowers, they'll sing and sing
and everywhere as it used to be, permanent spring
for which this town was known, will fly and dance
on the soft air, the food and wine flow
from all the fertile outskirts, plenty, plenty
for the poor and the rich, plenty for the admirers,
the visitors and those travelling through.
Such will the city be when she awakes.

When this occurs, the vision of the artist must be changed. So might the imagery of ghost and actor disappear:

This is not highflown language or impossibility but the happy people I paint for you, today, who are yourselves unhappy, you yourselves. You are the happy people, when you unswoon, poor marionettes, when you become real.³¹

So, and only so, might the metaphor of war become irrelevant. Such a day has not yet come. It is a day Keith Douglas would have celebrated.

NOTES TO PAGES 50 TO 71

1. Graves, Goodbye to All That, p. 191.
2. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 28.
3. Ibid., pp. 29-30.
4. Ibid., p. 31.
5. Ibid., p. 136.
6. Ibid., p. 134.
7. French Poetry from Baudelaire to the Present, p. 100.
8. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 150.
9. Ibid., p. 130.
10. This description may, in fact, be borrowed from The Waste Land. There (l. 255) Eliot describes the "typist" after her meeting with the "young man carbuncular" in these terms: "She smooths her hair with automatic hand...."
11. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 130.
12. "In Military Terms", The Times Literary Supplement, (March 19, 1964), p. 278.
13. Douglas, Collected Poems, pp. 127-128.
14. Eliot, The Waste Land, l. 22.
15. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 122.
16. Ibid., p. 149.
17. Ibid., p. 45.
18. Ibid., p. 54.
19. Ibid., p. 68.

20. Mac Hammond, "Normandy to Christ's Hospital", Poetry, LXXIX (March 8, 1952), 356-358.
21. Thus, John Carey ("Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis", New Statesman, LXXII, November 18, 1966, p. 745.) writes: "he coveted the immunity of the less sensitive, and formulated a sang-froid of his own."

 TLS ("Simplified by Death", TLS, LXV, December 1, 1966, p. 1128,) comments: "He is stylish, intelligent, adroit, but it is not often that this intelligence and adroitness express very much feeling."
22. Mac Hammond, "Normandy to Christ's Hospital", Poetry, LXXIX (March 8, 1952), 356-358.
23. Douglas, Collected Poems, pp. 102-103.
24. Ibid., p. 69.
25. Ibid., p. 88.
26. Ibid., pp. 81, 105.
27. Ibid., p. 59.
28. Ibid., p. 88.
29. Ibid., p. 78.
30. Ibid., p. 28.
31. Ibid., p. 78.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEVELOPMENT OF STYLE

Keith Douglas had a strong sense of the importance of words. Within his two brief statements on poetry, for instance, one is struck by the recurrent emphasis on the element of words. Poetry, Douglas tells us, "is anything expressed in words ... or by the music of words." "Nor must a poet waste ... words"; rather, "every word must work for its keep."¹ One must write "true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in a line."²

Then, too, there is the evidence supplied by Mrs. Douglas of how, before he could read, her son began "comparing shapes of words he knew with shapes he didn't know and trying to guess their meanings."³ In later years,⁴ Douglas even wrote a poem entitled "Words" -- a poem about his method of using them creatively.

This concern for words may be interpreted in two different ways. Superficially, it demonstrates a commendable concern for getting to the heart of the poetic process. With more uncertain effects, however, it may point

to a serious and immature imbalance in Douglas's approach to poetry. Robert Graves testifies in Goodbye to All That that T. E. Lawrence held such a misconception. "Lawrence," he writes, "envisaged the poet's secret as a technical mastery of words rather than as a particular mode of living and thinking. I had not yet learned enough to be able to dispute this...."⁵ The question which must be applied to Douglas, then, is whether he, unlike Graves, had already "learned enough."

Two factors indicate that he had. In the first place, there is the poem "Words" itself. Douglas does not profess to hold a mastery over words. On the contrary, "Words are my instruments," he says, "but not my servants." He must "wait for them", try different ways of catching them, and even then, he admits, "I keep words only a breath of time/ turning in the lightest of cages -- uncover/ and let them go: sometimes they escape for ever." His is not even a strictly technical approach towards words. They are the products of time and experience and, as such, are simply "come upon" in the course of living and thinking. Douglas deeply appreciated the importance of both these latter aspects to the poetic process. Indeed, the second reason why he would have upheld Graves's criticism hinges upon this fact. "I never tried to write about war," Douglas attested, "... until I had experienced it." Conversely, the possibility of turning his experience into verse was also

never very far from his mind. The opening pages of Alamein to Zem Zem, in which he analyzes his general attitude towards war, bear this out. What Douglas wanted, above all, was a chance to extract an aesthetic from the war. For him the experience of fighting was, among other things, an opportunity to define what he believed was a natural source of poetry -- poetry that came, not from a mere technical mastery of words, but from a particular mode of living and thinking: the poetry of war.

Enough has been said, however, about Keith Douglas's ideas and experiences of war. Being, in reality, a natural soldier, he was well qualified to write from that viewpoint, but, being also a poet, he had to be concerned with words. And, in fact, Douglas was a self-conscious stylist. In the letter to J. C. Hall (10 August 1943), he commented:

In my 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. T. S. Eliot wrote to me when I first joined the Army, that I appeared to have finished with one form of writing and to be progressing towards another, which he did not think I had mastered. I knew this to be true without his saying it. Well, I am still changing: I don't disagree with you if you say I am awkward and not used to the new paces yet.⁶

It is an interesting and intelligent piece of criticism. What Douglas recognized -- and expressed in terms of punning aptness -- was that the change in metaphor and myth, the change from garden to war, was itself accompanied by a

change in attitude and style. Several factors were involved. In the first place, obviously, lyricism was indeed replaced by cynicism. Instead of the early emphasis upon cleverness, a brooding passion haunts the later verse. The delightful confidence and inhibition of youth fades and is supplanted by signs of worry, doubt and strain. Then, too, there is a marked transition from the decorative images of a poem like "Sonnet: Curtaining This Country" ("the whispering rain/ Stipples in cold monochrome the sun's/ Alive and tinted picture"⁷) to the rhetorical force of "The Trumpet" with its call to emotion:

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,⁸

Douglas was beginning to find his proper voice as a poet. The war poems demonstrate a newer, plainer diction. Moreover, they break into a characteristically tense and ragged kind of prose rhythm, as if they were concerned as much with mere reporting as with poetry. In fact, as poetry, they might have suffered greatly from this tendency, were it not that, at the same time, they became more metaphysical: the nature of the statement, more obviously and purely poetic in itself, thus compensates the verse for any loss. Douglas, as he also tells Hall, was more concerned with the truth and relevance of his poetic expression than with mere

musicality. Instead of subscribing meekly to poetic form, he thus developed that individual voice which best expressed the content of his argument. "My rhythms, which you find enervated, are carefully chosen to be read as significant speech." As he explains: "To write on the themes which have been concerning me lately in lyric and abstract form would be immense bullshitting."⁹

What Keith Douglas accomplished in this respect should not be underestimated. His was a short, if relatively prolific, career, and one may well be impressed by its rate and extent of technical evolution. In effect, his poems gather in a series of discrete groups, reflected generally by the headings in Collected Poems: "Schooldays", "Oxford", "Army:England" and "The Middle East." Besides this chronological ordering, there are the small sections of "Translations" and "Unfinished Poems and Fragments." However, disregarding these, there are, in all, only one hundred and thirty pages of verse on which to base any judgement of Douglas as a poet.

In G. S. Fraser's view there is considerable and consistent poetic development within these pages:

The poems that he wrote at school are mainly important in that they show us a boy patiently learning his craft. The poems that he wrote at Oxford have more depth and subtlety, but they have something in common -- both in their charm, and in their occasional weakness -- with all undergraduate poetry. They are very 'literary' poems. In the poems which Douglas wrote during his period of military training in England, we

begin to feel that he is biting deeper into experience; or that experience is biting deeper into him. Finally, the poems written in the Middle East are, of course, Douglas's most important achievement.¹⁰

With respect to this view, however, it is probably equally fair to admit T.S. Eliot's seemingly antithetical criticism that, in fact, a large portion of Douglas's verse is little more than "very accomplished juvenilia", while much of the rest exhibits a technique as yet not fully mastered.¹¹ Both men imply essentially the same point: Douglas's art was an improving one. What differs is not the analysis but the conclusion. Eliot says that Douglas was still struggling to be successful; Fraser argues that he was successfully struggling.

The hesitation felt in the pronouncements of both these critics, however, was not shared by Ted Hughes. With Hughes's championing of Douglas in the early 1960's Keith Douglas's reputation rose. In Hughes's opinion, Douglas was, on all counts, a successful writer. Of course, he did improve with time and experience, but what really mattered was that even in Douglas's juvenilia "the qualities that create and distinguish his most important later work were already there." By the end of his career, according to Hughes, Douglas had "invented a style that seems able to deal poetically with whatever it comes up against. It is not an exalted verbal activity to be attained for short periods, through abstinence, or a submerged dream treasure

to be fished up when the everyday brain is half-drugged. It is a language for the whole mind, at its most wakeful, and in all situations."¹²

In the twenty-year span represented by these three judgements, the climate of poetic criticism changed considerably. This fact is reflected clearly by the range of discussion concerning Keith Douglas. Generally speaking, the early and unfavourable appraisals of Douglas were made under the influence of Dylan Thomas and the Neo-Romantics;¹³ the later laudatory estimations came from the new poets like Hughes and Charles Tomlinson,¹⁴ poets who, in matters of style, were interested above all in precision and directness. For them, in fact, Douglas's work stood out as a precursor of their own.

Seen against the background of the Forties, Douglas's style was quite obviously anomalous. By contrast, both his early and his later verse seemed out of step: the former because it appeared to be poor romantic poetry, the latter because it was clearly not intended to be romantic at all. Thus, in 1951, these comments appeared:

Of the poems written before he joined the Army few convey any strong or clear impression: the reader is too often bewildered by inconsistent rhythms, unconvincing imagery, and a general diffuseness in which the experience to be communicated is irrevocably lost.... (TLS)¹⁵

The rhythms of the war poems are unlyric, stanzas fall into nervous prose, and bathotic: '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.' (Mac Hammond)16

Between these two critical standpoints -- founded, in the first instance, upon a distaste for, and in the second instance, upon the desirability of, the rhythms and images of the Neo-Romantic model -- Douglas's reputation suffered greatly. But as the Neo-Romantic tide turned, and as G. S. Fraser attempted to explain the development of Douglas's technique, that reputation began at last to be established. With the praise of Hughes and Tomlinson, it became considerable indeed. By that time, the whole tendency of accepted poetic fashion has moved so far from the criteria of the Forties that it was no longer even necessary to apologize for Douglas's juvenilia.

In a sense, perhaps, it never should have been. Even Douglas's earliest poems have a maturity and virtuosity of their own. The poem "Famous Men" is a case in point:

And now no longer sung,
not mourning, not remembered
more under the sun,

not enough their deserved
praise. The quick movement of dactyls
does not compensate them.

The air is advertised of seas
they smote, from green to copper.
They were merciful men.

And think, like plates lie deep
licked clean their skulls,
rest beautifully, staring.17

Douglas wrote this poem at the age of fifteen, yet it is probably as complete a work as he ever produced. As in all his best poetry, its special character is derived from the mutual reinforcement of form and meaning. Its statements are terse, broken, incomplete -- like the ironic epitaph they suggest. Time and Death do not distinguish between "Famous Men" and ordinary men. At the hands of Time and Death, all become merely "Dead Men", and as such, they too, in a sense, are no more than a "casual meal for a dog."

"Famous Men" is not a simple poem, but the elliptical nature of its syntax and imagery, while making it seem difficult, also makes it more economical, taut and powerful. In the final stanza, for instance, syntax and imagery are scrambled, confusing, with ironic effect, "plates" that are "licked clean" with "skulls" which "lie deep": the former supposedly "rest beautifully", the latter are still "staring." The effect produced -- that of a spare, unemotional and judicious weaving of words and images -- is much more akin to Douglas's later attitude and style than it is to the general tendency of his "Schooldays" verse. But in this early poem, at least, it is appropriate, and demonstrates the difficulties of trying to be too fastidious in observing Fraser's theory of a ladder-like progression from the schoolboy to the mature poetry.

Other poems, it is true, may seem more characteristic of an early phase, but the choice inevitably is a

personal one. Fraser chooses to discuss "Dejection",¹⁸
 a poem which he is quite right in saying, "says nothing
 very much, but says it very agreeably." "Dejection"
 provides, in fact, ready-made support for Fraser's comments
 that "In a schoolboy's poems one does not look for original-
 ity of thought or feeling. One looks for adroitness in
 handling words, for signs that the handling of rhythms,
 the shaping of phrases, gives a young poet pleasure."¹⁹
 It is a lucid and a muscular poem, in terms of the tech-
 nical aspects Fraser mentions, a much more agreeable poem
 than "Famous Men"; yet it is not, in the long run,
 nearly as interesting or as important a poem as the latter.
 "Famous Men" with its suggestive irony and its careful
 manipulation of form and feeling is a poem which attempts
 far greater effects than "Dejection." In the latter
 Douglas is content merely to describe an emotion, in the
 former he creates one. Similarly, "Encounter With a God",²⁰
 although charming in its main idea, is not as impressive as
 "Famous Men." It is less vigorous, less controlled and in-
 finitely less thought provoking. It suits Hughes's argu-
 ment that Douglas's poetry "in general seems to be of some
 special value", but it is also, as he admits, "quite limi-
 ted in scope, and comes properly into the category of
 Juvenilia."²¹ Douglas did, indeed, improve upon poems such
 as "Dejection" and "Encounter With a God" -- they are
 juvenilia at least in that sense -- but "Famous Men", with

its complexity and wholeness, is much more difficult to categorize.

All Douglas's best poems share this sense of complexity and wholeness. What is most impressive about them is their feeling of uniqueness. Each poem is intensely individual and self-contained. From a single and distinctive image or idea at the centre, they expand in thought until, seemingly, they encompass all that could be said at that particular instant. Particularly relevant, in this regard, is a poem which seems to derive at least partially and more successfully from the emotion and the setting attempted by "Dejection":

Walking along beside the beach
where the Mediterranean turns in sleep
under the cliff's demiarch

through a curtain of thought I see
a dead bird and a live bird
the dead eyeless, but with a bright eye

the live bird discovered me
and stepped from a black rock into the air --
I turn from the dead bird to watch him fly,

electric, brilliant blue,
beneath he is orange, like flame,
colours I can't believe are so,

as legendary flowers bloom
incendiary in tint, so swift he
searches about the sky for room,

towering like the cliffs of this coast
with his stiletto wing
and orange on his breast:

he has consumed and drained
the colours of the sea
and the yellow of this tidal ground

till he escapes the eye, or is a ghost
 and in a moment has come down
 crept into the dead bird, ceased to exist.
 ("The Sea Bird")22

It is a fine poem, demonstrating not only that Douglas had a good ear, but that his sensibility in general was unusual and acute. Several images, in particular, appeal both to the mind and the eye: the Mediterranean turning, restless and unconscious in its sleep; thought described as a "curtain" to perception; the "bright eye" and the "stiletto wing" of the gull. But, above all, the poem is remarkable for its intensely poetic conception and execution. The image of the two birds fills the mind completely, widening and spiralling outwards like the live bird's flight itself, suggesting the process -- the vitality and impermanence of the moment -- of poetic imagination. During that moment, the live bird, not the man, is the discoverer and the centre of attention. Indeed, the bird so dominates the scene "he has consumed and drained / the colours of the sea", becoming himself "incendiary in tint." Only when he has "crept into the dead bird, ceased to exist" is the moment over, and the flight of imagination ended.

A similar effect is discussed in "The Marvel."
 Despite Eliot's particular criticisms, it too is an
 impressive poem, employing as it does a unique, almost
 bizarre, symbol of poetic power -- the lens of a sword-
 fish's eye. Used to focus the burning rays of the sun, the

eye, in the hands of a sailor, becomes a most extraordinary engraving tool with which to cut "the name of a harlot in his last port"; but

... to engrave that word the sun goes through
with the power of the sea
writing her name and a marvel too.

The marvel lies in the unfolding of marine history of which the eye is capable:

For it is one most curious device
of many, kept by the interesting waves,
for I suppose the querulous soft voice

of mariners who rotted into ghosts
digested by the gluttonous tides
could recount many. Let them be your hosts

and take you where their forgotten ships lie
with fishes going over the tall masts --
all this emerges from the burning eye. 24

Just as the dead bird holds within itself the image of the live bird, so, in this poem, it is the swordfish's eye which is the medium for imagination. Through its power, if that power can be realized, all that it has seen may be retold.

Less metaphysical, perhaps, but still highly original and effective is the imagery of "Behaviour of Fish in An Egyptian Tea Garden." Here, Douglas transposes a rather commonplace and sordid Cairo scene into a wonderful symbol of magic and fun gone decadent. When, in the end, disgust becomes more overt, it is, therefore, all the more telling:

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. Slyly red lip on the spoon

slips in a morsel of ice-cream; her hands
white as a milky stone, white 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 coldly near her and might see
her charm 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.

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.²⁵

Throughout the poem, the imagery of the fishbowl is delight-
fully and consistently apt. Particularly effective are the
phrases which directly link the commonplace to the exotic:
phrases such as "on the seafloor of the afternoon", and "the
frail reefs of furniture." Then, too, certain lines are
wonderfully imitative of the action of real fish: fish like
the flatfish who "sucks / on a straw, staring from its repose
laxly" or the gallants who "in shoals swim up and lag." It
is only when we are reminded that these fish "swim off on
business / and she sits alone at the table" that we must

return abruptly to the world of the Tea Garden.

In all these poems, then, -- "The Sea Bird", "The Marvel", "Behaviour of Fish in An Egyptian Tea Garden" -- what is essential is the conception of the central symbol. Given that inspired core, the rest of the poem follows intrinsically. Douglas described the process in a poem entitled "Negative Information":

As lines, the unrelated symbols of
nothing you know, discovered in the clouds,
idly made on paper, or by the feet of crowds
on sand, keep whatever meaning they have,

and you believe they write, for some
intelligence, messages of a sort --
these curious indentations on my thought
with every week, almost with each hour, come.²⁶

In all his later poems, it is a process which is extremely interesting. In effect, the verse written in the Middle East gives very much this impression of a diary notation -- the recording of a moment's inspiration. With it Douglas approached most closely the stylistic goal which he had set himself: "to write true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in a line."²⁷ By then he had mastered a flexible iambic measure or free verse, patterned after T. S. Eliot's, and much, indeed, like the rhythm of "significant speech."²⁸ His diction, syntax and power of disposition were all successfully bent to the ends of economy and pure, direct expression.

Several poems, illustrative of these facts, are well worth looking at, but perhaps the most effective and

beautiful is "I Listen to the Desert Wind." Here, the lines, like the desert wind itself, sweep cleanly across the page. Only in the second line of the fourth stanza is there a strong caesura to break this pattern, and it effectively sets apart and emphasizes the connection between the fact of the wind and the poet's thought of his girl. Similarly, the rhyme scheme, in the last stanza of the poem only, is abca, and, accented by the repetition in "I'll turn as you turn", this pairing of the first and last lines helps recreate through the form the physical sense of turning over. It is a wonderfully sensitive poem which builds to the agony of the last deliberately trite line. With it Douglas's development of style reached a culmination:

I listen to the desert wind
that will not blow her from my mind;
the stars will not put down a hand,
the moon's ignorant of my wound

moving negligently across
by clouds and cruel tracts of space
as in my brain by nights and days
moves the reflection of her face.

Skims like a bird my sleepless eye
the sands who at this hour deny
the violent heat they have by day
as she denies her former way:

all the elements agree
with her, to have no sympathy
for my tactless misery
as wonderful and hard as she.

O turn in the dark bed again
and give to him what once was mine
and I'll turn as you turn
and kiss my swarthy mistress pain.²⁹

NOTES TO PAGES 74 TO 89

1. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 148.
2. Ibid., p. 149.
3. Ibid., p. 13.
4. Ibid., p. 119.
5. Graves, Goodbye to All That, p. 244.
6. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 149.
7. Ibid., p. 35.
8. Ibid., p. 126.
9. Ibid., p. 149.
10. G.S. Fraser, "Keith Douglas: A Poet of the Second World War", Proceedings of the British Academy, VLII (1956) 97.
11. See Antony Coleman, "T.S. Eliot and Keith Douglas", The Times Literary Supplement (July 7, 1970), p. 731.
12. Ted Hughes, "The Poetry Of Keith Douglas", Critical Quarterly, V (Spring, 1963), 48.
13. See Press, A Map of Modern English Verse, p. 230-234 and also G.S. Fraser, "Keith Douglas: A Poet of the Second World War", Proceedings of the British Academy, VLII (1956) 91.
14. G.S. Fraser points out ("Keith Douglas: A Poet of the Second World War", Proceedings of the British Academy, VLII, 1956, p. 91.) that since 1951 "a whole new school of young poets has come into notice that does share Douglas's ideals of precise and disciplined statement in verse: ...poets like Mr. Philip Larkin, Miss Elizabeth Jennings, Mr. Philip Oakes, Mr. Kingsley Amis, Mr. Gordon Wharton, Mr. Bernard Bergonzi, Mr. John Wain."
15. "Casualty of War", The Times Literary Supplement, I (October 19, 1951), 662.

16. Mac Hammond, "Normandy to Christ's Hospital", Poetry, LXXIX (March 8, 1952), 356-358.
17. Douglas, Collected Poems, p.25.
18. G.S. Fraser, "Keith Douglas: A Poet of the Second World War", Proceedings of the British Academy, VLII (1956) 99-100.
19. Ibid., p. 99.
20. Ted Hughes, "The Poetry of Keith Douglas", Critical Quarterly, V (Spring, 1963), 43-44.
21. Ibid. p. 44.
22. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 99.
23. See Antony Coleman, "T.S. Eliot and Keith Douglas", The Times Literary Supplement, (July 7, 1970), p. 731.
24. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 87.
25. Ibid., pp. 112-113.
26. Ibid., p. 93.
27. Ibid., p. 149.
28. Ibid.,
29. Ibid., p.104.

CHAPTER FIVE

DOUGLAS AS WAR POET

Keith Douglas has been called "the one British poet of the Second World War who can bear comparison with those of the First World War, with Owen, Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg."¹ In terms of style, he well may be, if not the superior, at least the equal, of any of the Great War's poets. Several points of contrast are worth noticing.

First of all, control and understatement, both so prominent in the writings of Edmund Blunden, are also prime qualities in Douglas's work. The neatness of a poem like Blunden's "At Senlis Once" thus finds its counterpart in Douglas's "Enfidaville." In both poems the compactness and simple effectiveness of the images (Blunden's "Clad so cleanly, this remnant of poor wretches / Picked up life like the hens in orchard ditches"; or Douglas's "the daylight coming in from the fields / like a labourer, tired and sad"³) are most impressive.²

With this in mind, perhaps, any overt sign of emotionalism is deliberately and carefully subdued in Douglas's work. Unlike Sassoon's, Douglas's voice is sel-

dom raised either in protest or despair. Typically, therefore, his "Dead Men" still

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.⁴

Whatever their condition, Douglas's "prudent mind" remains detached and philosophical, personally uninvolved in the significance of death. By contrast, Sassoon's "I Stood With the Dead" is a forlorn cry of grief and guilt:

I stood with the Dead ... They were dead; they were
dead;
My heart and my head beat a march of dismay:
And gusts of the wind came dulled by the guns.
'Fall in!' I shouted; 'Fall in for your pay!'⁵

Both poets, no doubt, intend to express their sense of shock at seeing so much death around them -- Sassoon with the passion and the vehemence of his remorse and his shame; Douglas with his apparently callous, matter-of-fact tone, his brutal images. The difference, really, is that to a greater extent Douglas lets the horror of war speak for itself, in lines that are cold and seemingly unfeeling. Sassoon translates that horror more explicitly perhaps, but his emotionalism, rather than the war itself, tends to become the centre of the poem. In Douglas's terms, therefore, this shift in focus is no more than another kind of "bullshitting."

Despite, however, Keith Douglas's distrust of such emotionalism, his verse can be extremely moving. It manages to achieve that same blend of irony and poignancy which

characterizes the best work of Wilfred Owen. Like Owen, Douglas felt the pity of war. And while his poetry is colder and more distanced than Owen's, it can be, none the less, equally evocative of sympathy and pathos. Douglas's "Vergissmeinnicht" and Owen's "Asleep" point to the same conclusion: the real tragedy of death is felt not by the dead themselves but by those who must learn to live on in the absence of their fallen lovers or comrades:

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.⁶

Owen's description of the moment of death seems, on the surface, much more sensitive -- at least, it may be said to deal with death more tenderly and mercifully:

After the many days of work and waking,
Sleep took him by the brow and laid him back.
And in the happy no-time of his sleeping,
Death took him by the heart. There was a quaking
Of the aborted life within him leaping ...
Then chest and sleepy arms once more fell slack.
And soon the slow, stray blood came creeping
From the intrusive lead, like ants on track.⁷

At the same time, however, Owen's verse is slack, his sentiments banal and trite -- ludicrous, when to describe the moment of death, they attempt a phrase like "in the happy no-time of his sleeping." Owen is guilty of trying excessively, and too obviously, to manipulate the emotions of his readers.

His poem suffers from clichés such as "Sleep took him by the brow" and "Death took him by the heart", for, in the end, such pleasant formulas are powerless to evoke any real sympathy. Indeed, even the particular images employed by Owen are either too bland or much too forced to be effective. For instance, the picture of "the slow, stray blood ... creeping / From the intrusive lead, like ants on track" seems both vague and artificial as a depiction of the dead man's wound. "Slow" and "stray" seem especially poor adjectives not just because of their own dullness, but because they also contradict the sense of what is anyway a rather grotesque simile -- "like ants on track." Ants are full of purpose, energy, direction. Their movements are surely neither slow nor stray. Their resemblance to blood, moreover, while possibly apt at times, is here too unusual. By overshadowing what it is intended to modify, this simile is poor, distracting from, rather than enhancing, the entire picture. Then, too, Owen's circumlocution for "bullet" -- "the intrusive lead" -- is similarly distracting. Like the clichés and the vapid rhythms ("After the many days of work and waking"), this instance of periphrasis also contributes to the aura of excessive and affected poeticism which mars Owen's verse.

Douglas's images of death -- "the swart flies", "the paper eye", "the burst stomach" -- are, in comparison with Owen's, very vivid and unadorned. The adjectives

"swart" and "paper", the simile "like a cave", are not themselves emotionally evocative. In fact, they contribute to that sense of distance and detachment -- "Three weeks gone⁸ and the combatants gone" -- which pervades "Vergissmeinicht." But that is Douglas's problem: "returning over the nightmare⁹ ground" to find what death has left behind. It is not the kind of experience to encourage blatant rhetoric and emotionalism like that exploited by Owen:

Who knows? Who hopes? Who troubles? Let it pass!
 He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold
 Than we who must awake, and waking, say Alas!10

Owen's comrades must awake in the morning to find that death has struck one of their number while he slept. Theirs is an ironic and poignant realization, but it is not as horrid a truth as that which Douglas must face. Douglas must not only relive the moment but see its brutal consequences when time has made them all the more repulsive. Nor should it be forgotten that, in this poem at least, Owen's sensibility, while strong, extends naturally, but only, to a friend. Douglas finds sympathy and understanding for the lover of a dead enemy soldier. His methods are subtle. He depends, in fact, upon the display of sensitivity intrinsic to the scene, upon the fact that time and death and former hatred for the enemy must be bridged to see the viewpoint of the girl. While Owen focusses upon the particular effects of the death on us "who must awake", Douglas enlarges his vision in the last stanza, by becoming less personal, by introducing and per-

sonifying death, by extending the allegory to include all soldiers and lovers.

In effect, this poem, as with many of Douglas's other later poems, thus becomes more metaphysical. In this respect, it more nearly approaches the work of Isaac Rosenberg than it does that of Owen, Blunden or Sassoon. Rosenberg, perhaps one of the most undeservedly underrated poets of the First World War, was greatly admired by Keith Douglas. His work lacked the technical realization of Owen's polished achievements, his voice the humanity of Blunden or the outrage of Sassoon, but his extraordinary vision encompassed the war on a grand and fiercely metaphysical scale. Moreover, his concept of poetry coincided most remarkably with Douglas's. As he wrote to Edward Marsh:

I think with you that poetry should be definite thought and clear expression, however subtle; I don't think there should be any vagueness at all, but a sense of something hidden and felt to be there. Now when my things fail to be clear I am sure it is because of the luckless choice of a word or the failure to introduce a word that would flash my idea plain as it is to my own mind.¹¹

Here is foreshadowed Douglas's desire for directness, significance, clarity and truth, his emphasis upon words, his need for self-expression. Douglas sought after that same quality which Rosenberg displays in finding the essence of emotion within a single image: the disgust engendered by a louse¹² or a rat, the inadequacy of "the parapet's poppy", the¹³ sense of beauty and peace invoked by a lark's song.¹⁴

Thus, the poem "Desert Flowers" owes a great deal to Rosenberg's influence:

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. 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 details and the horizon.
 Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing
 of what the others never set eyes on.¹⁵

It is not an easy poem to understand, and the meaning may, in fact, be complicated by a commonplace of Desert War slang:

desert rose, or desert lily, a: a perforated tin
 ('flimsy') let into the sand for a urinal.¹⁶

If, indeed, "Desert Flowers" refers, not to such a beautiful anomaly as Rosenberg's parapet poppy, but to the unnatural presence of these home-made urinals -- reminders of man's mere mortality -- then the tone and sense of the poem changes considerably. Instead of being a poem about the pleasantly ironic survival of beauty amid suffering, an idea appearing frequently in Rosenberg's verse, it becomes a much more sardonic comment upon man's adaptation to a vile and ugly condition of life. Like the rat or the poppy

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in Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches", Douglas's desert flowers would then be seen as images both bitterly ironic and vulgar.

However, it would perhaps be unwise to make too much of such a possible interpretation. Except to say that Douglas probably would have been familiar with such slang as "desert rose" or "desert lily", and to point out that, as the type of humour used in "Russians" shows, he would have been capable of writing in such a vein, the argument should not be pressed. Indeed, in Alamein to Zem Zem, Douglas makes very seriously and poignantly much the same kind of statement about the surprising triumph of beauty over horror.¹⁸ The point is that, like Rosenberg, Douglas was capable of either sentiment, pleasant or sardonic, and the metaphysical quality of the poem may be enhanced by the ambiguity. Certainly, too, the ending, the final stanza of "Desert Flowers", captures the visionary spirit of Rosenberg's writing. Douglas not only repeats what Rosenberg said, he imitates the latter's manner as well.

What sets Keith Douglas apart from Blunden, Sassoon, Owen and Rosenberg, then, is not his style; nor is it any limitation in the scope of his themes and images; rather, it is that he represents a different kind of attitude towards war in the modern world. Indeed, no poet of the Second World War could have seen the world around him as had his predecessors of the First War. As Michael

Hamburger states:

It was the inter-war period, with its demands for a total ideological commitment, that tended to 'drown' the 'ceremony of innocence' everywhere and make naiveté a crime. The political utopianism so striking in the modernist movements of the pre-1914 era had given poetic imagination a scope and impetus that rarely outlasted the experience first of mass slaughter, then of perpetually clashing ideologies, factions and national ambitions throughout the next half-century. But for those utopian premises, the realistic war poems of Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon would have lacked the sharp edge of pity and anger that distinguishes them from most of the poetry written by combatants in the Second World War.¹⁹

The two wars had their separate personalities. The First, its high hopes dashed at the Somme, turned suddenly sour. The courage and nobility so prized by Rupert Brooke became, as clearly, the stupidity and obstinacy condemned by Owen and Sassoon. Emotions rose and fell, producing verse of heightened sensibility and extreme reactions, poetry of anger and of pity.

By contrast, the Second War gave rise to verse of a much more even temper. The outbreak of war in 1939 invoked no enthusiasm or jubilation like that in Brooke's poetry; nor, however, did it call down the disgust of a Sassoon. The general attitude, in fact, was one of little expectation (Douglas himself spoke of his personal "absence of expectation"²⁰) and no illusions. A moderate passivity, even a kind of fatalism, in accepting the course of events prevented the war from becoming an occasion for either violent anger or pity. The result was what G.S. Fraser has called

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"a condition of patiently exasperated stalemate."

The reason for this difference in the poetry produced by the two world wars derives from the antithetical psychological climates in which each war was received. As Graham Martin puts it: "in 1939 most people were prepared. There is no parallel to the savage shock which forced the poets of the first world war to extend their imaginative resources, or go under. The problem was rather to find, against the pressure of an impersonal history, a human scale, to sustain a small integrity." ²² The writers were completely in accord with the decision to go to war, but balked at the invasion and disruption of private life which accompanied that decision. Like the heroes of Arthur ²³ Koestler's novels, they struggled in the face of rising tides of ideology and bureaucracy to preserve their individuality and initiative. War itself was not the ogre it had been for Owen and Sassoon but, rather, merely a condition of life. Historians and sociologists throughout the Thirties had been predicting its advent. Artists such as George Orwell, Auden and Spender ²⁴ had already glimpsed its horrors and its possibilities. In 1939, therefore, the fact of war proved less traumatic than it had in 1914.

For this reason, World War II did not produce the same extreme reactions that the Great War had provoked. Because it was much more predictable, because, in fact, it was a symptom not a cause of the villainy and evil within

society, pity and anger were merely so much waste emotion, and the majority of artists realized this. As Keith Douglas wrote: "To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others."²⁵ The war needed to be fought without pity, without anger, even, as Douglas knew, without hope. Its hard reality had to be exposed coldly and analytically if people were at last to come to grips with it.

The task of the poet, therefore, was made much more difficult. Memories of the poetry of the First War accustomed his audience to expect something quite different from the inelegant and self-centred verse they were to receive. But Sassoon's invective and Owen's despair were no longer relevant; even the time for sermons by Stephen Spender and W.H. Auden had passed. All that was important and meaningful was the self. The great need was to preserve that, to maintain a sense of personal humanity despite an inhuman and impersonal environment. As Ronald Blythe records: "Each poet spoke as wholly and truthfully as he could from out of the one inviolate spot of an otherwise violated order, his own identity."²⁶

For Keith Douglas, certainly, the need to do this was imperative. Nothing could better express the importance he placed upon his individuality, than the simple and thoughtful lines:

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.²⁷

The threats to his identity came not from the list compiled by Blythe -- "the inanities of the barracks, war-time bureaucrats and those countless inroads upon the dignity of the person which a national emergency prescribes"²⁸ -- but rather from the battlefield itself. Alun Lewis and Sydney Keyes wrote of the former threats; Douglas's foes were Time and Love and Death and Mutability -- all of which he found condensed in war itself.

Douglas was a natural soldier, and here this fact stood out. According to Michael Hamburger, "both Keyes and Alun Lewis responded far less positively and vividly to the experience of war, because of literary and personal preoccupations difficult to reconcile with a soldier's life."²⁹ Sydney Keyes began the war emulating Wilfred Owen's hatred for battle; Lewis almost did not fight at all because of certain qualms he had about the morality of war. Thus, only Douglas entered the war whole-heartedly, because it was a challenge, because it was a proving ground for his identity.

Perhaps more than any other twentieth-century poet Keith Douglas realized the essential paradox in the fact that warfare had become a way of life. On the one hand, total war brought with it a serious threat to the very essence of individuality -- its human core. But it also offered an opportunity to affirm that humanity, for, along with all his evils, war draws from man nobility, courage and strength. No matter how inadequate or absurd these

qualities may be in terms of the whole reality of war, they are worth valuing. Even the full-blooded stupidity of the officers described in Douglas's "Aristocrats"³⁰ has its importance in a world where to be stupid, at least, is to be human.

NOTES TO PAGES 92 TO 104

1. Michael Hamburger, "Hero and a Poet", Nation, CCVI (April 29, 1968), 576-578.
2. Blunden, Undertones of War, p. 290.
3. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 123.
4. Ibid., p. 116.
5. Sassoon, Selected Poems, p. 36.
6. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 121.
7. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 57.
8. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 121.
9. Ibid.
10. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 57.
11. quoted in J. Press, A Map of Modern English Verse, p. 144.
12. See Rosenberg's "Louse Hunting".
13. "Break of Day in the Trenches".
14. "Returning, we hear the lark's".
15. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 129.
16. Peter Sanders, "The Gaberdine Swine -- and others", Alamein and the Desert War, p. 139.
17. See J. Press, A Map of Modern English Verse, pp. 149-150.
18. See pages 44-45 of this study.
19. Hamburger, Truth of Poetry, p. 174.
20. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 150.
21. G.S. Fraser, New York Review of Books, II (March 6, 1964).

22. "A Human Scale", The Listener, LXXVI (December 1, 1966), 816.
23. See, for instance, Darkness At Noon or Arrival and Departure.
24. Auden and Spender are cited elsewhere. See Orwell's Homage to Catalonia and Coming Up For Air.
25. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 150.
26. Components of the Scene, p.15.
27. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 89.
28. Components of the Scene, p. 15.
29. "Hero and a Poet", Nation, CCVI (April 29, 1968), 576-578.

CONCLUSION

As a war poet, Keith Douglas's perception, his willingness to write of battle as it really was, his ability to find its true significance and then to turn that significance directly into poetry, are qualities to be greatly admired. War, Douglas found, is a fundamental implication of our modern culture, a part of the world that man has come to accept, although not to understand. In effect, mankind has been numbed not just by war itself, but by the welter of meaningless ideals -- "the mass of irrelevancies, of 'attitudes', 'approaches', propaganda, ivory towers"¹ -- which tend to characterize our existence and separate us from the honest and necessary appreciation of ourselves as individuals. It is, therefore, the individual in whom Douglas is primarily interested: the individual at war with the fallen world around him, at war with his own fallen state. When specific wars such as the First or Second World War break out, the individual is at least partially freed from the strait-jacket placed upon him by society. True, the total wars of the twentieth century have brought increased socialising pressures in the form of mass ideologies, bureaucracy, militarism itself; but along with these imper-

sonal dehumanizing forces, it has also brought, what Ronald Blythe calls, "a great profusion of those experiences by which identity is fed: foreign travel, sexual freedom, bereavement, pain, separation, comradeship and those close groupings which, far from turning many individuals into a regiment or a ship's company or a bomber's crew, brings each man face-to-face with his own essential solitude."²

It is in realizing and stressing, often contrasting, this later fact -- the humanizing aspect of war -- that Douglas successfully understood the only grounds for genuine compatability between war and poetry. Both may induce a state of heightened sensibility, provoke an ultimate confrontation with reality. "War," as Graham Martin puts it, "is imaginatively liberating because it speaks to realities which 'peace' cannot directly cope with. War poets are priests, ritual sacrifices more often than not, in a half-hidden cult of Mars, and we respect them as profound truth-tellers."³

The kind of "truth" that war poets tell is therefore of utmost importance. If, indeed, a sacrifice must be made, surely it can best be offered in the cause of strict and total reality. Oscar Williams recounts a case in point:

Alan Seeger's "I have a rendezvous with Death" conjures up a picture of the soldier's easy death in a cloud of noble ecstasies, which effectually prevents the death rattle from being mentally heard. (The poet who gives his life in battle most certainly has the privilege of writing such verse. But has the civilian reader exactly the

same right to confine his thoughts of war to such sentiments? Rather, I think such a reader is accepting an intellectual and emotional sacrifice of the soldier, as well as his physical sacrifice. ...)⁴

Seeger's "truth", accepted as "an intellectual and emotional sacrifice" by the reader, is actually no more than a comforting distortion. By setting up a false image as the object of sensibility, this kind of distortion merely masks reality. In effect, it attempts to provide compensation like that offered by Rupert Brooke's poetry. In Brooke's case, the compensation for death in action lies in the fulfillment of one's patriotic duty:

If I should die, think only this of me;
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.⁵

As long as one believes in that sort of sentiment, then war, far from being feared and hated, will be fashionably respected.

Today it is possible to ridicule sentimentality like that of Brooke's. The horrors of total warfare have proved far too tangible to be dismissed so easily, and old-fashioned patriotism, whether sham or genuine, is commonly and cynically suspect. As Roy Fuller warns:

History inflicts no wound
But explodes what it began
* * * * *
Do not ask his nation; that
Was History's confederate.⁶

Today, indeed, the danger is one of over-reaction. As Keith Douglas realized, excessive emotion also removes

one from reality. As with Seeger and Brooke, every poet has the privilege of seeing and reacting to war in his own particular way. In that sense, all war poetry has a valid basis whether it depends upon the pity of Wilfred Owen, the outrage of Siegfried Sassoon, the apocalyptic visions of Stephen Spender and W. H. Auden or the pain and questioning of Alun Lewis. Not one of these approaches, however, strikes at the heart and meaning of war. War, itself, is not the fundamental enemy of society, though it is the bugaboo of our emotions.

Men are at war, unfortunately, because it is their nature to be so. That is the truth which Douglas tried to get at,

not by momentary spleen
or love into decision hurled,⁷

but by an unemotional and compelling vision of war, and a scrupulous honesty with himself.

NOTES TO PAGES 107 TO 110

1. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 149.
2. Components of the Scene, p. 13.
3. "A Human Scale", The Listener, LXXVI (December 1, 1966), 816.
4. The War Poets, p. 5.
5. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, p. 48.
6. War: An Anthology, p. 92.
7. Douglas, Collected Poems, p. 89.

APPENDIX

KEITH DOUGLAS MANUSCRIPTS

The British Museum has two separate groups of Keith Douglas MSS., Add. MSS. 53773-6:

- Add. MS. 53773 Autograph drafts of poems, including four with comments by T.S. Eliot. Minor prose work.
- Add. MS. 53774 "War Diary", subsequently published as "Alamein to Zem Zem".
- Add. MSS. 53775-6 Miscellaneous drawings and paintings.

Add. MSS. 56355-60:

- Add. MS. 56355. Keith Douglas letters, mainly to his mother.
- Add. MS. 56356. Letters to Keith Douglas and to his mother, Mrs. M. Douglas.
- Add. MS. 56357. Poems and stories, complementary to Add. MS. 53773.
- Add. MS. 56358. Miscellaneous notes made at school and at Oxford.
- Add. MS. 56359. School exercise books.
- Add. MS. 56360. Book diary (recording his reading).

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