

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

‘I see men as trees suffering’: The Vision of Keith Douglas

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SHELLSHOCKED AT THE SOMME, Wilfred Owen spent the second half of 1917 recuperating in Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh. He began taking lessons in German, first at the nearby Berlitz school, and then with the Librarian of Edinburgh University, Frank Nicholson. Jon Stallworthy relates:

There were three or four of these lessons and after the last of them . . . Owen spoke as he rarely did of the horrors of the Front. He told Nicholson of photographs of the dead and mutilated that he carried in his wallet and his hand moved towards his breast-pocket, only to stop short as he realized, with characteristic delicacy, that his friend had no need of that particular lesson in reality.¹

There is no external evidence that those photographs existed. Dominic Hibberd suggests that a subaltern could not have obtained such material without falling foul of the military censor and his fellow soldiers. Owen’s wallet, Hibberd maintains, probably carried nothing more than a new war poem with which the poet hoped to ‘assault the civilian conscience’;² the confusion may have arisen because of Owen’s description of one of his poems, ‘A Terre’, as a ‘photographic representation’.³ Whatever the contents of his wallet, Owen’s ‘characteristic delicacy’ would not have been the only reason for his second thoughts. Whether visual or verbal, he found photographic representations of the most extreme horrors

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¹ Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (Oxford, 1974), p. 222.

² Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* (1986), p. 129.

³ Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (Oxford, 1967), p. 545.

inadequate, as he unequivocally informed Siegfried Sassoon after one traumatic incident:

the boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.

Catalogue? Photograph? Can you photograph the crimson-hot iron as it cools from the smelting? That is what Jones's blood looked like, and felt like. My senses are charred.⁴

Believing that 'every poem, and every figure of speech should be a *matter of experience*',⁵ Owen on this occasion considered the photographic art a betrayal of that experience, capable of capturing neither what Jones's blood 'felt like' nor even what it 'looked like'.

Owen's credo that experience must precede and shape poetic inspiration was reinforced by the gulf between the trenches and the sanitised propaganda with which the government and media controlled public opinion: photographs of dead Allied soldiers, for example, were prohibited as bad for morale. Other Great War poets shared Owen's rage at the misinformation disseminated throughout the civilian population. One such poet, Edmund Blunden, would remember this sense of bitterness almost three decades later in 1943, when, as tutor at Merton College, Oxford, he reassured an ex-student that 'The fighting man in this as in other wars is . . . the only man whom Truth really cares to meet.'⁶ His correspondent was a twenty-three year-old Alamein veteran called Keith Douglas.

Douglas, by this stage, needed no reassurance, having told his friend and fellow poet J. C. Hall just six days before Blunden's letter that his self-appointed task was to 'write true things'.⁷ Like the Great War poets before him, Douglas derived an authority from his experiences which led him to dismiss the work of poets back in England. He advised Hall: '[your poetry] is getting too involved and precious, chiefly because you now find yourself in a backwater and have nothing to write about that is relevant. The same applied to me in pre-Alamein days.'⁸ Douglas repeated the charge in this essay 'Poets in This War', sardonically complaining that poets currently springing up 'among the horrors of War

⁴ Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, p. 581.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 510.

⁶ Edmund Blunden to Keith Douglas, 16 Aug. 1943; *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, ed. Desmond Graham (Manchester, 1985), p. 129.

⁷ Keith Douglas to J. C. Hall, 10 Aug. 1943; *The Letters*, ed. Desmond Graham (Manchester, 2000), p. 295.

⁸ Keith Douglas to J. C. Hall, 10 June 1943; *Ibid.*, p. 287.

Time Oxford . . . are technically quite competent but have no experiences worth writing of'.⁹ The 'important test' of Alamein having been passed,¹⁰ Douglas had earned the right to his poetic vocation. His 'true things' may have been truer to the facts of war than those of his civilian contemporaries, but the difference between the 'horrors' of the desert campaign and those of 'War Time Oxford' created artistic dilemmas similar to those with which Owen had wrestled: how might the poet bridge the gap to make his audience see what he had seen, understand what he had endured? That Douglas and Owen arrived at radically different solutions is illustrated by Douglas's more consistently positive attitude to photographs and photographic techniques—an attitude which cannot be attributed merely to the intervening decades of technological advance.

As a fully-qualified camouflage officer, Douglas was one of the few soldiers entitled to a camera.¹¹ He did not always use the privilege for strictly military purposes. Writing to his publisher, M. J. Tambimuttu, in January 1944, he aired the idea for a book containing his 'prose, verse, photographs and drawings'; as for the photographs, he had lately rediscovered his negatives of some of them, 'though not as yet of the dead men'.¹² Amongst the subjects of his drawings were corpses, men being hit by an anti-personnel mine, and the face of a man burning to death. Sharing little of Owen's 'characteristic delicacy', Douglas confirmed to Tambimuttu that the drawings gave 'an accurate idea of the appearance of things', with just one exception: 'In the case of the man burning to death I have had to retain all the features, to give the chap some expression, although of course they're expressionless, as their faces swell up like pumpkins.'¹³ The one disruption to the photographic style merely aggravates the horror. Douglas's 'of course'—'of course they're expressionless'—is a disingenuous presumption of knowledge which stresses his own intimacy with the barbaric nature of war. He has witnessed so much atrocity that it has become commonplace, to be photographed, drawn, and described with throwaway nonchalance.

Douglas's poetry and prose are, like his drawings, photographic in their ambition to give 'an accurate idea of the appearance of things'. He describes his style as 'extrospective'—defined by the *OED* as 'regarding

⁹ Keith Douglas, 'Poets in This War' (?May 1943), *A Prose Miscellany*, p. 119.

¹⁰ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, eds. John Waller, G. S. Fraser, and J. C. Hall (1966), p. 15. First published by Editions Poetry London, 1946.

¹¹ See Keith Douglas to Jean Turner, 4 Nov. 1942; *The Letters*, p. 251.

¹² Keith Douglas to M. J. Tambimuttu, 2 Jan. 1944; *Ibid.*, p. 313.

¹³ Keith Douglas to M. J. Tambimuttu, 30 Jan. 1944; *Ibid.*, p. 316.

external objects rather than one's own thoughts and feelings'. Douglas, in Owen's terms, aims to present what it 'looked like', not what it 'felt like'. 'Réportage and extrospective' poetry, he insists, is the sort 'that has to be written just now, even if it is not attractive.'¹⁴ Answering Hall's complaints that he is writing 'too remotely, cleverly but not movingly',¹⁵ Douglas counterattacks by proposing that his friend should develop 'a little more cynicism, or should I say indifference to emotion once felt'.¹⁶ This dispute traces the faultline between Owen's pity and Douglas's dispassion: as Kevin Crossley-Holland states, 'Douglas deliberately distances himself from all that he sees in such a way that it is difficult to feel close to him.'¹⁷ The poet becomes a camera, but only, his detractors argue, at the expense of his humanity.

'My subject is War, and the pity of War', proclaimed Owen.¹⁸ 'To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others', Douglas affirmed, as if providing the perfect riposte.¹⁹ The problem lies in judging whether his studied aloofness ever slipped into affectation or something even worse: callousness. Whereas Owen spoke 'rarely . . . of the horrors of the Front', Douglas related his own experiences of battle with what sounded like gratuitous enthusiasm. As a cadet, he had embellished a photograph of himself, proud in his uniform, with an Horatian motto which, one might have assumed, Owen had successfully proscribed: 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.'²⁰ What Owen had condemned as 'The old lie',²¹ Douglas apparently felt able to incorporate, before active service, as one of his true things: 'I can see nothing more attractive than active service and final oblivion, to which I quite look forward. I shall feel such a chap dashing about with stuff blowing up everywhere.'²² Self-conscious almost to the point of parody, Douglas struck an attitude which revealed an authentic pride. Battle did little to destroy his zeal: having met Douglas in Cairo after the desert victory, the expatriate

¹⁴ Keith Douglas to J. C. Hall, 10 June 1943; *The Letters*, p. 287.

¹⁵ J. C. Hall to Marie Douglas, 10 Oct. 1942; *A Prose Miscellany*, p. 121.

¹⁶ Keith Douglas to J. C. Hall, 26 June 1943; *The Letters*, p. 288.

¹⁷ Quoted by William Scammell, *Keith Douglas: A Study* (1988), p. 205.

¹⁸ Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, vol. II, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London and Oxford, 1983), p. 535.

¹⁹ Keith Douglas to J. C. Hall, 10 Aug. 1943; *The Letters*, p. 295.

²⁰ Photograph reproduced by Desmond Graham in *Keith Douglas 1920–1944: A Biography* (Oxford, 1974), p. 225.

²¹ Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, vol. I, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London and Oxford, 1983), p. 140.

²² Keith Douglas to Jean Turner, ? Dec. 1940; *The Letters*, p. 152.

literati reported that ‘He was delighted with his war’,²³ and that his talk ‘was all of burning tanks and roasting bodies.’²⁴ If Owen showed ‘characteristic delicacy’ in withholding the contents of his wallet, Douglas by comparison risked seeming characteristically indelicate, flaunting his experiences to demonstrate that he was—as a recent and prominent review of *The Letters* disapprovingly declares—‘a tough guy’.²⁵

To appreciate Douglas’s motivation, it is necessary to understand that what he saw, what he spoke and wrote about, and the extrospective style he developed, were inalienably connected; if he saw nothing new, he had nothing new to say. Douglas confessed to Hall in June 1943, ‘I am not likely to produce anything but virtual repetitions of [my earlier work], until the war is cleared up now, because I doubt if I shall be confronted with any new horrors or any worse pain.’²⁶ Similarly, G. S. Fraser recalled Douglas’s belief in Cairo that ‘he had seen everything that was necessary. Everything else would be repetition, waste.’²⁷ The title of Douglas’s prose memoir of the desert campaign, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, indicated that the A–Z of war had already been mapped; there were no further lessons to be learnt. Those lessons which Douglas had already learnt, he had learnt by looking (‘he had seen everything that was necessary’); and looking, his work establishes, need not be the morally neutral or morally reprehensible activity which several critics have alleged.

The prominence of the visual is singular and fundamental to Douglas’s work: it constitutes nothing less than—in Charles Tomlinson’s suggestive phrase—an ‘ethic of sight’.²⁸ To betray such an ethic is to fail in a moral duty. This belief informs Douglas’s mature war poetry; but it is already apparent in ‘Death of a Horse’, a short story probably dating from late 1940, two years before he saw active service. ‘Death of a Horse’ narrates a vet’s shooting and dissection of the injured animal: ‘You’re lucky to see this’, he tells the spectators. The story’s main character, Simon, does not merit the privilege, and responds inadequately to the occasion:

‘The horse has a small stomach,’ said the vet. ‘Look!’ And he flapped the stomach in front of him, like an apron. The stench was unbelievable. Simon began at last to feel sick . . . The horrible casualness of the vet’s voice grew more and more apparent; the voice itself increased in volume; the faces merged and

²³ Lawrence Durrell, ‘Introduction’ to Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, p. 12.

²⁴ Quoted by Desmond Graham in *Keith Douglas 1920–1944: A Biography*, p. 225.

²⁵ Ian Hamilton, ‘Tough Guy’, *London Review of Books* (8 Feb. 2001), 17–18.

²⁶ Keith Douglas to J. C. Hall, 26 June 1943; *The Letters*, p. 289.

²⁷ Quoted by Desmond Graham, *Keith Douglas 1920–1944: A Biography*, p. 225.

²⁸ Quoted by William Scammell, *Keith Douglas: A Study*, p. 211.

disintegrated, the wreck of the horse lay in a flurry of colours, the stench cemented them into one chaos. He knew it was useless. His one thought, as he felt himself falling, was that he had let the horse down.²⁹

Significantly, Simon lets down neither himself nor the vet who allows him to spectate, but the dead horse. The story is a clandestine manifesto, outlining what Douglas's work expects of itself and its audience. The abasement of the dead is transformed through detailed visualisation—at whatever cost to the spectator—into a new nobility. Simon reports how the horse became 'invested with the dignity due to a chosen victim': 'From this came the impression that the dead horse was taking a pride in its own dissection.' To look is to honour; turning away or, in Simon's case, fainting, represents a final insult to the dead.

Less subtle than Douglas's war poetry, 'Death of a Horse' nevertheless begins to articulate a rejoinder to Owen's emphasis on the pity of war. Owen objects to the photograph because he believes it is unable to convey what Jones's blood looked like or felt like. This employs the verb 'to feel' predominantly according to its tactile but also according to its emotional meaning: 'My senses are charred', Owen acknowledges. Albeit in far less horrific circumstances, Simon's senses are charred too. His queasiness blurs the focus, revealing a culpable self-regard. This negative example indicates one advantage of Douglas's extrospective art: clear-sighted, it performs an autopsy (from the Greek for 'seeing with one's own eyes') on the dead by achieving a level of self-forgetfulness which more emotional responses cannot hope to attain. 'Extension to Francis Thompson', written around the same time as Douglas's short story, ends with the 'wise man' learning the art of 'analysis in worshipping'.³⁰ Shifting the emphasis slightly, 'Death of a Horse' implies that analysis *is* worshipping.

'Death of a Horse' is inspired by Douglas's training in horsemanship as an officer cadet during the late summer of 1940. Unsurprisingly, however, the tone of his poetry has more in common with the 'horrible casualness of the vet's voice' than with Simon's squeamishness. 'Look!', the vet commands, as he flaps the horse's stomach out in front of him. 'Look!' also happens to be the most frequent imperative in Douglas's poetry, as the reader is pushed into the same predicament which Simon fails to withstand. The imperative is shared by two of Douglas's best-known poems, '*Vergissmeinnicht*' and 'How to Kill', both dating from the

²⁹ Keith Douglas, 'Death of a Horse', *A Prose Miscellany*, pp. 138–9.

³⁰ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Desmond Graham with an Introduction by Ted Hughes, 3rd edn. (2000), p. 66. First published in 1978 by Oxford University Press.

summer of 1943. Revisiting the 'nightmare ground' of battle, and finding a three-week-dead German soldier 'sprawling in the sun', '*Vergissmeinnicht*' persists with a detailed examination of his personal effects: 'Look. Here in the gunpit spoil / the dishonoured picture of his girl'.³¹ In 'How to Kill', the imperative again invites scrutiny of a dead enemy. The poem ensures that a sniper's 'sorcery', as he singles out his unsuspecting victim, will be properly appreciated: 'Death, like a familiar, hears / and look, has made a man of dust / of a man of flesh'.³² With an authority which need not raise its voice through exclamation marks, both poems compel a heightened visual awareness, and seem to linger over the bloodshed, at the moment when the instinct to turn away is most intense.

The unwavering focus of '*Vergissmeinnicht*' and 'How to Kill' provokes a queasiness similar to that felt by Simon in 'Death of a Horse'; there is no respite from a vision which, Edna Longley declares, 'does not so much look from alternative angles, as aim at progressive penetration'.³³ Douglas's imperatives are calculated affronts to the sensibilities of his audience. They constitute a poetic buttonholing, much as he buttonholed the Cairo literati; but they also achieve something more sophisticated. Examining the use of imperatives in poetry, John Hollander has argued that 'Wise poets are usually careful about their commands, whereas foolish ones . . . write as if they expected to be taken literally'.³⁴ 'Look', as a poetic command, can never hope to be literal, because it gestures towards a scene from which the audience is temporally and geographically displaced. Douglas's imperatives are a technique for translating the detached and verbal into the immediate and visual, forcing the audience to see. However, they also act as internal prompts for the poem itself. Hollander goes on to describe the ability of great poetry to talk to itself 'in that double way of speech by which we *hear* it addressing a putative, if fictional, hearer, while its commanding of itself is only overheard'.³⁵ On its lyric scale, Douglas's 'Look' attempts nothing so grandiloquent as, for example, Milton's imperative, 'Sing, Heav'nly Muse' (*Paradise Lost*, 1. 5), but the need for self-inspiration and self-encouragement (especially when facing 'new horrors') remains the same. Just as *Paradise Lost* personifies

³¹ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, p. 118.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³³ Edna Longley, "'Shit or Bust": The Importance of Keith Douglas', *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1986), p. 105.

³⁴ John Hollander, 'Poetic Imperatives', *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), p. 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

itself with the injunction to begin singing, so Douglas's poems command themselves, as well as their audience, to keep looking.

The dead body is, overwhelmingly, the central image in Douglas's work, and each corpse poses new ethical challenges. But the imperatives appear to carry no moral charge, and do not resolve concerns over what may seem like indifference to the bloodshed or even voyeuristic gloating. Douglas's poetry not only foresees and understands such criticisms, it dramatises them. The sniper of 'How to Kill' sees his victim 'move about in ways / his mother knows, habits of his', before invoking death and metamorphosing flesh into dust. The sniper represents the ultimate in detached observation, admitting only to amusement as he watches 'the centre of love diffused / and the waves of love travel into vacancy'. His (as opposed to the poem's) injunction to 'look', in these circumstances, is akin to the French '*Voilà*', requiring applause for a splendid trick. Looks can kill: the sniper never refers to his gun or to pulling the trigger, but destroys his target by studying his victim through a 'dial of glass'. Although less murderous, '*Vergissmeinnicht*' seems to betray a similar indifference, and comes close to artful voyeurism as it lingers over the decaying corpse. Steffi, the girl in the dead German's photograph,

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.

The strong iambics, disrupted only by the 'swart flies' and the gaping assonance of the 'burst stomach like a cave', conceal the curiousness and the curiosity of this stanza. Steffi becomes the cypher and channel for emotion, as the poem imagines her reaction to a scene which she will never witness; the impossible scenario is exploited as the motive for further and closer inspection. Discovering the dead soldier, Douglas's speaker had acknowledged that 'We see him almost with content'. This invites comparison with the amusement felt by the sniper in 'How to Kill'; but it is also easy to detect the more natural phrasing of the near-homonym, 'almost with contempt'. Much of the poem's drama of looking resides in that precarious 'almost'.

'It may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal', wrote J. M. Synge in 1908.³⁶ Synge's statement has

³⁶ J. M. Synge, 'Preface', *Collected Works*, vol. 1, ed. Robin Skelton (Oxford, 1962), p. xxxvi.

been subsequently applied to Great War poetry,³⁷ but its most complete realisation comes in poems like ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’ and ‘How to Kill’. Douglas’s work is brutally human and brutally honest in its ambivalent response to the sight of a dead enemy who would himself have been a killer: ‘As we came on / that day, he hit my tank with one / like the entry of a demon’. His personae are survivors and destroyers who record their relief, their satisfaction and their pride at a soldier’s job well done. This should not imply that Douglas understood less than Owen about the pity of war. Desmond Graham’s biography recounts how on one occasion Douglas was ejected from the cinema after watching ‘the usual newsreel in which an aerial dogfight was concluded with the German plane spinning to the ground in flames’; reacting with rage to cheers from the audience, he climbed onto his seat to shout at them, ‘You shits! You shits! You shits!’³⁸

Like Owen, therefore, Douglas could be struck by a ‘feeling of comradeship with the men who kill [us] and whom [we] kill’.³⁹ Such feelings do not, at first glance, seem to disturb the cool self-possession which characterises his work. When, in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, Douglas observes the bloody minutiae of a dead man on the battlefield, he finally considers that ‘This picture, as they say, told a story. It filled me with useless pity.’⁴⁰ Reality is reduced to a ‘picture’, the same word Douglas employs for the photograph of Steffi in ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’; and ‘pity’, the keynote of Owen’s response, becomes censured as a ‘useless’ indulgence. If pity is a weakness, it follows that to avoid it must be a strength. Douglas recommended to Hall in June 1943 that he should become less willing to show he is ‘deeply affected’: ‘a little more of the traditional Englishman—however much you deplore him—would make your poetry stronger and more effective’.⁴¹ His own relentless emphasis on the visual rejects the sanctuaries of consolation and brotherhood in which Owen’s work, despite the poet’s denials, often seeks refuge.⁴² Writing a ‘Homage to Keith Douglas’, Geoffrey Hill has asked how far Owen’s poetry, in thrall to ‘a residual yet haunting echo of . . . nineteenth-century rhetoric’,

³⁷ See John H. Johnstone, *English Poetry of the First World War: A Study in the Evolution of Lyric and Narrative Form* (Princeton, NJ, 1964), p. x.

³⁸ Desmond Graham, *Keith Douglas 1920–1944: A Biography*, p. 100.

³⁹ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, p. 51.

⁴¹ Keith Douglas to J. C. Hall, 26 June 1943; *The Letters*, p. 288.

⁴² See Owen’s ‘Preface’: ‘[T]hese elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next.’ *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, vol. II, p. 535.

‘applies a balm of generalized sorrow at a point where the particulars of experience should outsmart that kind of consolation’.⁴³ In the double meaning of Hill’s ‘outsmart’ can be heard praise for the refusal of Douglas’s work to succumb to consolation. Hill reverses the value judgements of Douglas’s detractors, revealing how the same scrupulous dispassion which they deplore is the only means by which the full horror may be expressed. The swart flies, the eye coated in dust, the burst stomach—these particulars of experience smart with an agony which renders aesthetic balm ineffective and irrelevant.

Douglas’s true things find expression through the avoidance of sentimentality. When a friend objects to unpleasant elements in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, Douglas replies: ‘You want “selectivity” again—a suppression of something ugly but true . . . I am afraid I refuse to cut it out to suit [your] connoisseur sensibilities . . . I’m not sure that the instinct for selectivity isn’t based on sentimentality anyhow.’⁴⁴ The extrospective art records without judging; the poetry, one might be tempted to conclude, is in the pitilessness. Yet although sentimentality may be banished, Douglas’s *réportage* does not so much exclude emotion as find different ways of provoking it. Emotion exerts a constant, if unarticulated, pressure. As the most extreme and resistant examples, ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’ and ‘How to Kill’ provide the evidence: despite their apparent callousness, their careful visualisation cannot help but award individuality, nobility and sympathy to the dead. The references to mother and girlfriend situate the soldiers in a wider sphere, emphasising the scale of the loss. Like ‘Death of a Horse’, ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’ moves away from the degradation of death—the German is initially described as ‘abased’—towards a dignified and even afflated tone. The victim becomes much more than a mere soldier:

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.

The balance of brutality and compassion is also accomplished by the instruction, ‘Look’. An unfinished poem, written several months before ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’ and ‘How to Kill’ and subsequently published as ‘Fragment’, better indicates Douglas’s source. What is probably the most famous instance of the imperative, ‘Look’, in literature also draws

⁴³ Geoffrey Hill, “‘I in Another Place’: Homage to Keith Douglas”, *Stand*, 6, no. 4 (1964–5), p. 7.

⁴⁴ Keith Douglas to Jocelyn Baber, 28 April 1944; *The Letters*, p. 342.

attention to a corpse. With his dying words Lear imagines signs of life in Cordelia: 'Look on her. Look, her lips / Look there, look there' (5. 3. 286–7). 'Look, / their gestures',⁴⁵ Douglas's fragment says of the remembered dead. This allusion rings less sonorously in the imperatives of '*Vergissmeinnicht*' and 'How to Kill', but it distantly endures as a tacit 'Look there, look there' amidst the inventories of decay. Whatever the intentions of the poems' speakers, the command to 'look' is again, as 'Death of a Horse' had established, an instruction to honour and pity the dead.

Douglas's ethic of sight proposes that to look is a moral act, measuring the extent of one's humanity. Awarding vision such authority, what he finds most striking and appalling about the corpses he encounters on the battlefield are their eyes—final proof of man's inhumanity to man. The 'swart flies' and 'dust upon the paper eye', observed in '*Vergissmeinnicht*', parallel the sight in *Alamein to Zem Zem* of a dead Libyan soldier: 'As I looked at him, a fly crawled up his cheek and across the dry pupil of his unblinking right eye. I saw that a pocket of dust had collected in the lower lid.'⁴⁶ Later, Douglas examines another corpse: 'The dust which powdered his face like an actor's lay on his wide open eyes, whose stare held my gaze like the Ancient Mariner's.'⁴⁷ Common to all three descriptions, the 'dust' remembers not only the burial service and the way of all flesh, but also Isaac Rosenberg's 'Break of Day in the Trenches', where the poppy in the protagonist's ear is 'Just a little white with the dust'.⁴⁸ Rosenberg's speaker hints that he may have begun to decay even before his imminent and inevitable death; the soldiers in the trenches are as good as dead already. The corpses Douglas describes are incontrovertibly dead, despite fleeting impressions: 'His expression of agony seemed so acute and urgent, his stare so wild and despairing, that for a moment I thought him alive.'⁴⁹ However, like Rosenberg's poem, or the sniper's instantaneous transformation of flesh into dust in 'How to Kill', the strong possibility remains that the dust is not something external but a product of decay: the eyes of the dead are rapidly and horribly mouldering.

War, *Alamein to Zem Zem* recurrently insists, destroys vision, not only filling the eyes of corpses with dust, but also blinding the living both physically and morally. If looking is an ethical act, then the cruel activity

⁴⁵ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, p. 38.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁸ Isaac Rosenberg, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Ian Parsons (1979), pp. 103–4.

⁴⁹ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, p. 50.

of war will foster oversights, confusions, and misrecognitions. The narrative of *Alamein to Zem Zem* is driven by countless errors of vision. Early in Douglas's account, he reports that a friend had painted a 'huge eye' on the side of a Sherman tank. This represents the all-seeing eye of Horus, 'the nearest thing in Egypt to the God of battles'.⁵⁰ The choice of deity may at first seem pertinent: the desert war was considered one in which 'Nothing and nobody can be hidden'⁵¹—hence Douglas's frustration with his job as camouflage officer and his consequent desertion to the front line at El Alamein. Yet events soon prove otherwise. Tank squadrons lose each other in the desert, or are victims of friendly fire; sleeping soldiers risk being run over by their own side's heavy machinery; enemy tanks on the horizon are mistaken for a clump of trees; the dead look like they are alive, while the living appear dead; corpses or loot hide booby-traps. On two occasions Douglas's tank comes within yards of the enemy before the two sides even notice each other's presence. Douglas himself is seriously injured after stumbling over a trip-wire attached to a group of mines: 'I realized that I had seen it and discounted it because of its newness, and because subconsciously I had come to expect such things to be cunningly hidden.'⁵² Nothing and nobody can be seen with any accuracy.

Looking in *Alamein to Zem Zem* possesses neither the ambition nor the necessary alchemical magic to transform analysis into worship. For all the emphasis on *réportage* and extrospective poetry, Douglas never forgets that there are many different ways of looking, that the act is subjective and therefore often flawed. His persona not only describes what he sees, he describes himself seeing; and his way of seeing may be morally dubious or even murderous like the sniper's in 'How to Kill'. Optical instruments, which might be expected to add a more scientific accuracy to observation, do not deliver a clearer vision: Simon in 'Death of a Horse' 'might have been watching . . . through binoculars';⁵³ 'Simplify me when I'm dead' alludes to 'Time's wrong-way telescope';⁵⁴ the sniper of 'How to Kill' looks through his 'dial of glass' (perhaps glimpsing his own reflection in the 'soldier who is going to die'). Douglas may not share Owen's reservations, but he still recognises the responsibilities of the photographic art, and portrays it as pathological not only in his own pictures of dead men, but in his poetry: 'if I talk to you I might be a bird / with a

⁵⁰ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, p. 31.

⁵¹ Lieutenant Schorm, 1941; quoted by William Scammell, *Keith Douglas: A Study*, p. 161.

⁵² Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, p. 129.

⁵³ Keith Douglas, 'Death of a Horse', *A Prose Miscellany*, p. 138.

⁵⁴ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, p. 74.

message, a dead man, a photograph', 'The Knife' concludes;⁵⁵ Marcelle, the 'Parisienne' of 'Cairo Jag', has all the photographs and letters of her 'dull dead lover' 'tied in a bundle and stamped *Décedé* in mauve ink';⁵⁶ the connection between photography and death pervades '*Vergissmeinnicht*' as well, although this time it is not the subject of the photograph but her soldier lover who is dead. No instrument, not even the camera, can aid the human task of keeping the right distance, keeping everything literally in perspective. The courage of Douglas's extrospective art lies in its willingness to attempt dispassion without detachment, autopsy without intrusion. It must negotiate between the alternatives explored in 'Landscape with Figures I', which switches disconcertingly from long-shot to close-up as it shifts from 'a pilot or angel looking down / on some eccentric chart', to the prying impertinence of 'you who like Thomas come / to poke fingers in the wounds'.⁵⁷

These examples of the fallibility of sight acknowledge that war corrupts and erodes empirical techniques. It can be no coincidence that a poet whose Biblical allusions are infrequent should refer in his work to three passages where vision merges into spiritual revelation: Christ's appearance to Thomas; Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus; and Christ's healing of the blind man at Bethsaida. Vision allows a redemptive knowledge, reaffirming the charity which Douglas's poetry requires in the act of looking. Douglas believed his locale was auspicious for such spiritual discoveries: in January 1943 he told Margaret Stanley-Wrench, 'I have an idea it's somewhere round here St Paul made one of his journeys.'⁵⁸ The following month he produced a version of 'Cairo Jag', which differs from the published form by virtue of its two extra sections. The poem's final section, which Douglas eventually dropped, describes a Pauline conversion:

You do not gradually appreciate such qualities
but your mind will extend new hands. In a moment
will fall down like St. Paul in a blinding light
the soul suffers a miraculous change
you become a true inheritor of this altered planet.
I know, I see these men return
wandering like lost sounds in our dirty streets.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 102.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 109.

⁵⁸ Keith Douglas to Margaret Stanley-Wrench, 8 Jan. 1943; *The Letters*, p. 256.

⁵⁹ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, p. 154. See Keith Douglas to Olga Meiersons, ? Feb. 1943; *The Letters*, p. 264.

The men in question, rendered ghostly by the comparison to 'lost sounds', are the 'noble dead' of the poem's previous section. His eyes having been spiritually opened, the poet inherits the earth, in its 'altered', war-ravaged form, along with the gift of seeing these wandering souls. However, with the exception of the last two lines, the poem asserts rather than reveals; Douglas's speaker 'know[s]' like a gnostic believer, but does not find a means of expressing that knowledge. The shorter, published version of 'Cairo Jag' cross-cuts from Cairo's hedonistic delights of alcohol and casual sex, to a world reached by 'a day's travelling' where 'a man with no head / has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli'.⁶⁰ This startling juxtaposition does not require distracting references to St Paul.

The final section of 'Cairo Jag' prepares for Douglas's embodiment of an almost religiously intense mode of seeing. It is this gift which, he recognised, made his work original. Contemptuous of the wasteful repetition of war, Douglas had no desire to repeat the work of his predecessors, even though they had 'so accurately described' their experiences that 'Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological.'⁶¹ In his essay 'Poets of This War' Douglas began a roll-call of Great War poets with Owen, who 'arose . . . to the sound of wheels crunching the bones of a man scarcely dead'.⁶² This places Owen first, but only by misattributing an image from Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump': 'The wheels lurched over sprawled dead / But pained them not, though their bones crunched'.⁶³ In fact it is Rosenberg, not Owen, whom Douglas had difficulty avoiding, as 'Desert Flowers' from the spring of 1943 admits: 'Living in a wide landscape are the flowers— / Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying.'⁶⁴ As Fran Brearton has noted, 'All the Great War elements are here.'⁶⁵ But 'Desert Flowers' escapes repetition by describing a way of looking peculiar to Douglas. Breaking off from its descriptions of the 'wide landscape' with an abrupt dismissal—'But that is not new'—the poem makes another, more conclusive, attempt at originality:

Each time the night discards
draperies on the eyes and leaves the mind awake
I look each side of the door of sleep

⁶⁰ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, p. 102.

⁶¹ Keith Douglas, 'Poets in This War' (?May 1943), *A Prose Miscellany*, pp. 119–20.

⁶² Keith Douglas, 'Poets in This War', *A Prose Miscellany*, p. 117.

⁶³ Isaac Rosenberg, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 109.

⁶⁴ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, p. 108.

⁶⁵ Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (Oxford, 2000), p. 269.

for the little coin it will take
to buy the secret I shall not keep.

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

‘Desert Flowers’ is structured around the crossing of threshold—sleep and wake, life and death. Douglas’s speaker has seen a secret ‘the others’ did not see; he will sing of it in death, paid by the coin laid on his tongue so that he may cross the Styx. This may be a promise of future revelation, but the process of enlightenment has already begun. Freely mixing Christian and classical references, Douglas alludes not only to Charon’s fee but to Christ’s healing of the blind man at Bethsaida: ‘when [Jesus] had spit upon his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking’ (Mark 8. 23–4). Douglas’s speaker exists in this interim state, still prone to errors of vision prior to the second part of the healing process: ‘after that [Jesus] put *his* hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly’ (Mark 8. 25). To ‘see men as trees suffering’ therefore only constitutes a partial revelation, even though Douglas’s speaker knows that eventually he will see more, and more clearly, than ‘the others’ who have ‘never set eyes on’ what he will sing about. Because the poem begins with an acknowledgement of poetic belatedness, those ‘others’ are less likely to be fellow soldiers than Douglas’s Great War predecessors. This is the proudest boast of his poetry: through its scrupulous and incessant acts of looking, it will attain a vision which surpasses even their achievement. In ‘Desert Flowers’ only death can provide this ultimate vision and allow the poet to sing the secret he has seen. Yet by the time he was killed in Normandy the following year, at the age of twenty-four, Douglas had already seen and sung more than enough to fulfil those high claims for his work.