The Vision of Keith Douglas

Keith Douglas (1920–1944), poet, artist, prose writer and veteran of El Alamein, was the subject of the 2001 Chatterton Lecture, delivered at the Academy on 26 April 2001 by Dr Tim Kendall, University of Bristol. In an edited extract below, Dr Kendall considers the centrality of the ‘visual’ in Douglas’s poetry.

Like the Great War poets before him, Keith Douglas derived poetic authority from his experiences of war. Douglas’s poetry and prose were, like his drawings, photographic in their ambition to give ‘an accurate idea of the appearance of things’. Réportage and extrospective poetry, he insisted, was the sort that ‘has to be written just now, even if it is not attractive’.

What Douglas 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. The title of Douglas’s prose memoir of the desert campaign, Alamein to Zion, 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 (a friend reported him as stating, in 1943, that ‘he had seen everything that was necessary’); and looking, his work establishes, need not be the morally neutral or morally reprehensible activity that 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’. To betray such an ethic is to fail in a moral duty. ‘Look!’ is the most frequent imperative in Douglas’s poetry, forcing the reader to dwell on the dead and decaying bodies of the battlefield. To look is to honour; turning away insults the dead. Yet each corpse poses new ethical challenges; the poems honour; turning away insults the dead. Yet each corpse poses new ethical challenges; the poems

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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 Wilfred 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!’.

Like Owen, then, Douglas could be struck by a ‘feeling of comradeship with the men who kill [us] and whom [we] kill’. 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.’ 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 (‘My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity’), becomes censured as a ‘useless’ indulgence. Douglas’s 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. 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 ... applies a balm of generalised sorrow at a point where the particulars of experience should outsmart that kind of consolation.’ 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 judgement of Douglas’s detractors, revealing how the same 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.