

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.

The Chatterton Lecture series was established in 1954 under the will of E.H.W. Meyerstein of Gray’s Inn. A sum was fixed for the funding of an annual lecture to be given by a scholar under the age of 40 on the life and works of a deceased English poet (interpreted as ‘a deceased poet writing in the English language’).

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*¹ 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 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 (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 negotiate between scrupulous dispassion and reprehensible detachment as they conduct their autopsy (from the Greek for ‘seeing with one’s own eyes’) on the scattered remains of friend and foe alike.

The sniper of one of Douglas’s best-known poems, ‘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’ 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 merely 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 decomposing corpse of a three-week-dead German soldier. 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. Synge’s statement has been subsequently applied to Great War poetry, 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

¹ Defined by the *OED* as ‘regarding external objects rather than one’s own thoughts and feelings’



'Making a fire in a petrol tin'.
Drawing by Keith Douglas.
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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.