

Keith Douglas and The Name of the Poem I Can't Write

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SINCE the publication, in 1966, of the definitive edition of his *Collected Poems*, interest in the work of Keith Douglas has been maintained at a steady if undramatic level. The Penguin Modern Classics edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem* appeared in 1969, to be followed by Desmond Graham's detailed biography in 1974. Douglas' work has worn better than that of Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes, the other two British World War II poets with whom he is frequently compared, but critical comment has been sparse, and, while a handful of poems are repeatedly anthologized, discussion has been very limited, rather as if Douglas were forever condemned to lounge at ease in the shadow cast by Wilfred Owen. "It is my purpose in this book to justify the belief that the poets who served . . . during the war against Hitler produced a body of poetry which is of a very high order indeed and can compare favourably with the best work of the Great War." So writes Vernon Scannell in a recent work on the poets of World War II.¹ In such an atmosphere, Douglas' work is dutifully admired but seldom analyzed; a pity, for the necessarily small oeuvre of a poet who died at the age of twenty-four enables us to view themes and preoccupations with considerable clarity — to chart, in fact, the evolution of a poetic sensibility. It is my purpose in this essay not to examine the large-scale claims made for Douglas' talent, but to anatomize his work and to view it as an evolving entity.

On 9th December 1943 the ship carrying Douglas from Egypt arrived off the Scottish coast, and Douglas' regiment, the Sherwood Rangers, encamped at Chippenham on Dec-

ember 12th. After Christmas, Douglas became a frequent visitor at Tambimuttu's *Poetry (London)* office in Manchester Square, where he made the acquaintance of Tambi's secretary Betty Jesse, an acquaintanceship which soon deepened. "Chiding Douglas for his arrogant, cynical manner with her, she had called him her *bête noire*. She meant little by it, but her comment had struck home. Before the close of his letter Douglas wrote, 'Now (all your fault), I have to think of and write a poem called *Bête Noire!*'"²

During this, the final year of his life, Douglas began to apprehend his own approaching death with considerable clarity. He had been revolving the subject in his poetry and in his conversation for some time; at Oxford, he had confidently predicted that he would not survive the war. *Bête Noire*, which he did not live to finish, has struck some readers as an epitome of his central concerns, and there has been a tendency to assume that the core of Douglas' work consists of his ambivalence towards the subject of his impending death in battle. The point of view has been expressed, for instance, by Ted Hughes: "The truth of a man is the doomed man in him or his dead body. Poem after poem circles this idea, as if his mind were tethered. At the bottom of it, perhaps, is his private muse, not a romantic symbol of danger and temptation, but the plain foreknowledge of his own rapidly approaching end . . . Hemingway tried to imagine the death that Douglas had foresuffered."³ G. S. Fraser, writing from the vantage point of his personal friendship with Douglas, has presented the issue in rather more attenuated terminology, interpreting the subject of *Bête Noire* both morally and psychologically. The poem, "as it stands, is not anything achieved. It is a succession of hopeless attempts to grapple with an intractable subject . . . It is the subject of what Freudian psychologists call, or used to call, the Death-Wish and Jungian psychologists call the Shadow. I imagine a Jungian psychologist would say

that Douglas was very much aware of his Shadow, in a sense at times almost obsessed with it, but that he had never properly accepted it, or come to terms with it, and that therefore, in spite of the impression he gave of being far more mature than his years, he was not, when he died, yet a fully integrated personality."⁴

For the reader of Douglas' poetry, however, the issue presents itself in a rather different light. One might regard Douglas' work as unformed and in many ways repetitive, but this, I think, would be an error. Rather, Douglas seems preoccupied with a particular cluster of images, and the story of his short poetic career is the story of a writer endeavouring to utilise the images, to investigate them, and to comprehend the inner meaning of their poetic and psychological dominance.⁵ Critics are right, I think, to stress the centrality of *Bête Noire*, but it is precisely the fact that Douglas himself confesses that he has been unable to define his beast — and hence, unable to finish the poem — that ensures that any attempt to identify the beast with the "Death Wish" remains simplistic. Briefly, I would say that Douglas' basic psychological impasse is concerned with the nature of perception, and involves the issue of the speaking poet's identity and the putative reality of the external world. *Bête Noire* is an attempt to approach the beast directly, and this must logically fail.

He is a jailer.
 Allows me out on parole
 brings me back by telepathy
 is inside my mind
 breaks into conversation with his own words
 speaking out of my mouth . . .
 writes with my hand, and censors what I write.⁶

Bête Noire was to be "the poem I began to write in a lot of other poems . . ." Douglas confesses his failure to snare the beast, but "if he is not caught, at least I can see his tracks (anyone may see them), in some of the other poems. My failure is that I know so little about him" (p. 158). This beast, who seems to lurk within Douglas' entire literary corpus, from the effusions of the

fifteen-year-old schoolboy to the last completed lines of *On a Return from Egypt*, may best be approached via a specific image cluster, glanced at in the concluding lines of *Bête Noire*, where "at times my eyes are lenses / through which the brain explores / constellations of feeling" (p. 145). In this essay, I propose to scrutinize the various ways in which Douglas utilizes the images of lens, mirror, window-pane, gun-sight and mask, regarding each occurrence as an attempt on the poet's part to overcome the philosophical problems associated with perception, an issue which has preoccupied Elizabeth Jennings, another modern English poet who employs a similar nexus of imagery and who, at least in one poem, has perhaps identified the real nature of the black beast more successfully than Douglas usually managed to do:

Do I control what I can contemplate
Or is it my vision that's amenable?
I turn in my mind, my mind is a room whose wall
I can see the top of but never completely scale
 . . . my thoughts about it divide
Me from my object. Now deep in my bed
I turn and the world turns on the other side.⁷

In the Berkeleian or solipsistic world inhabited by Keith Douglas and Elizabeth Jennings, an everpresent cause for concern is the possibility that the universe outside the persona of the perceiver is illusory, or is so effectively disguised that the perceiver can never grasp its essence. To convey this sense of unease, Douglas has recourse to the image of the mask.

The mask is already present, although in a very primitive form, in his poem *Mummers*, written at the age of fourteen and the first item in *Collected Poems* (p. 23). The poem is relatively unstructured, and is permeated by a quasi-Keatsian or pre-Raphaelite medievalism. A snow-strewn night is glimpsed "through the arch window;" the arrival of "the masked mummers" ends the poem where the unlocking of a door creates a balance of perception between external and internal worlds: "The door's unlocking / Answers the stars with indoor light." At Oxford, Douglas'

interest in masks was objectified in concrete fashion via amateur theatricals. He participated, for instance, in a production of Dryden's *The Secular Masque* — "Douglas painted scenery for the masque, made papiermâché masks for it They collapsed before the performance" (Graham, p. 86). The part of Chronos was played by Edmund Blunden ("with a beach-ball as the globe he was compelled to carry"), and the academic whose rendition of Saturn seems indirectly to have provoked an ongoing motif in Douglas' poetry recognises, indirectly, the importance of the image. "He hated decoration without anything behind it, but his verse is decorative, and, thinking of it, I think of figureheads and lamias, or of the masks which he devised so eagerly."⁸ *The Prisoner* (p. 81), written to Yingcheng after Douglas had gone down from Oxford, describes her face as "a mask stretched on the stone / person of death;" from within, the skull tries to shatter the skin, "the ambitious cruel bone" attempting "to break the bright flesh and emerge." Desmond Graham prints Douglas' skull-beneath-the-skin illustration for the poem (p. 119), and pertinently remarks that "it is not Yingcheng's loss but the shift in perception which concerns him" (p. 120). In *Farewell Poem* (p. 76) the theatrical masks which collapsed seem to emerge momentarily when a sadistic God is envisaged, one who gives delight only as "impermanent bluff" to lull his victims until he launches himself at them — "the ethereal veil is cracked painted lath." *Reproach* (p. 67) abuses Yingcheng for being "handsome and false" and asserts that any praise the poet might give her would be a cosmetic "figurative mask of words / for beauty," whilst in *Snakeskin and Stone* (p. 114) "even the lowest / never made himself a mask of words." *Mersa* (p. 118) is "a poor town whose masks would still / deceive a passer-by," peopled by "faces with sightless doors / for eyes." On the whole, the mask image was not a successful poetic gambit, but it is important because of its later reintroduction via Douglas' ruminations on the photographs of the

faces of dead soldiers in the Western Desert and the soiled photographs of distant girls scattered amongst the smashed corpses of the retreating armies. After the Oxford period, the mask image rapidly weakens, to be resurrected later in the best known passages of *Alamein to Zem Zem*; as it declines, it gives way to increasingly frequent instances of the window-pane image, or of cognate associations like the paradoxical figure of the inverted, reversed world of reflections in water. For Douglas' purposes, the window-pane image is more versatile, and is better adapted to the problem of poetic cognition which Kingsley Amis, with endearing facetiousness, has called "the here-where recipe," where the act of literary creation, springing from the impulse to write a poem centred on a strongly felt observational reaction to an external object — say, a landscape — can be related only with difficulty to the persona of the observer.⁹

Douglas' juvenile poem *Distraction from Classics* (p. 24), written at the age of fifteen, is concerned with the familiar subject of the schoolboy's boredom with books and his longing for the free world glimpsed through the class-room window. As the pupils try to project themselves backward in time to the milieu of Catullus, so as grown men in the future they will nostalgically try to project themselves back to the remembered and now cherished boredom of the class-room; they will "praise these years / Of watching clouds through windows . . . Hearing the loud bees mumble at the glass." Here the window image is casual, with little organic function, but in *Strange Gardener* (pp. 29-30), written at much the same time, the image is invoked with a haunting intensity to create by far the most successful of the juvenilia. The poem opens with a Georgian evocation of a quiet pool in a secluded countryside. The pool has an attendant daemon — "a young man . . . with a swift, sad face," who, in a summer trance and with a gesture reminiscent of Eliot's typist, "[smooths] his pale hair / with automatic ecstasy" and "[repeats] . . . the

alliterative speech of the water spirit." But this Edenic spot is fragile and dangerous, and the youth's colloquy with the water spirit ends in a sinister summation of implicit violence:

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.

In the *Collected Poems*, *Strange Gardener* is accompanied by a linocut, a graphic work more attractive than Douglas' later, nervy pen-and-ink sketches. The linocut depicts a nude youth who re-enacts the Narcissus myth. His splayed arms are plunged in the water to the elbow, his face immersed, so that the arms and face of his reflected *alter ego*, the water spirit, extend upwards to clasp and kiss him. The boy who lives in the pool is the person whom Douglas will eventually meet after swimming a hundred yards upstream between the villages of St. Pierre and Fontenay Le Pesnel, the "person of love or death" who, in *On a Return from Egypt*, stands behind the window-pane of next month. What lurks behind the pane which divides present from future will be realised with greater clarity in the concluding stanza of *Mersa* (p. 118):

I see my feet like stones
underwater. The logical little fish
converge and nip the flesh
imagining I am one of the dead.

Window-pane is momentarily melded with mask in the poem *Poor Mary* (p. 46), written "after a violent quarrel with [Mary Oswin] . . . and published . . . to annoy her" (Graham, p. 73). Douglas, now nineteen and at Oxford, envisages the woman he is addressing as a house, within which the inner being dwells. The image had been hinted at in the exuberant love poem *Stranger* (p. 44), addressed to Yingcheng in the previous year. In the later poem, Poor Mary wears a cosmetic mask applied by Death, inhabiting a body which is "the house of sorrow," hemmed in by "cold walls." Immured within herself, Mary is "an

effigy bobbing at the pane." *Poor Mary* anticipates a much more elaborate delineation of the image in *The House* (p. 83), where it is now the poet himself who is the prisoner, unable to escape from within a house "of which . . . the whole is glass," rudely invaded by outsiders who "through a wall serenely go / unnoticed." Within the house, in the midst of these translucent barriers, one superimposed upon another, one may encounter "a face traversing the stair / alone, like a mask of narrow porcelain."

The dominant nature of the image cluster defined by such words as "pane", "mask", and "wall", becomes clearer still in a poem such as *Sanctuary* (p. 59). Here barriers, intact and shattered, are omnipresent. "Once my mother was a wall" — when, as embryo or protected child, "I lay as snug as winter mouse" in the womb, in the subsequent maternal protection, "in a safe and hungry house." But to grow up is to witness the process by which the barriers are breached by the outside world — "all the barriers give in." The end of the process will occur when the poet, no longer passive, himself shatters the final barrier: ". . . beyond a desperate fence / I'll cross where I shall not return." This fence, however, is not a metaphor for death or the act of dying: it is "the line between indifference / and my vulnerable mind." A variant upon the house of glass image is presented by the poem *Syria I* (p. 95): "Here I am a stranger clothed / in the separative glass cloak / of strangeness." The eyes and smiles of others "glance on the glass and break / falling like fine insects." The glass cloak is "this armour," but it is "proof only against friends." Unlike the moths shattered against the pane, "the gnat is busy / wounding the skin, leaving poison there." With *Devils* (p. 107) we are drawing close to the world of *Bête Noire*. Here the "mind's silence," its "deceptive quiet," is "the fastening of a soundproof trap / whose idiot crew must not escape." The obsession here is intense, and the gaucheness of the poem's language, reminiscent of the unformed phrases of *Bête Noire*, indicates the intractability

of the issue and Douglas' inability to distance and apprehend it. Outside the wall of the mind are the devils of the conventional rigorous world: "outside the usual crowd of devils." But "inside the unsubstantial wall" are "these idiots of the mind." Each set of demons is unaware of the existence of the other, but the collapse of "the unsubstantial wall" will transcend this dichotomy in a daunting fashion: "there'll be an alliance of devils if it fall."

Several drafts of *On a Return from Egypt* have survived, and are briefly discussed by Desmond Graham (pp. 252-253). "The next month, then, is a window," but, understandably, Douglas is unclear as to the identity of the person standing behind it, waiting for the blow of his fist on the pane. Before the doubts crowd in, he is explicit: he will find that "Woman or the ominous skull of time / stretch out lips or the bone of death to kiss." Now the barrier softens to become a curtain, and beyond the curtain may exist a vivid and complex world: ". . . beyond are islands, clouds, rivers and people / the eyes and limbs, real to the touch / of the legendary people, whose bones are / hollow like bird's bones . . ." By the time Douglas is ready to write the final draft, however, as Desmond Graham succinctly observes, "the islands and land beyond the mountains [have] disappeared, leaving the ambiguities of metaphor to hold all the suggestions he desired to offer." More bluntly, one might remark that the initial drafts seem to represent some conventionally conceptualised vision of an after-life. Douglas' final position sees the abandonment of any concept of a total milieu, a society or a way of life existing beyond the glass. Beyond the glass is a single, definite person. Either Douglas still does not know his identity, or he refuses to admit it.

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. (p. 130)

Using Douglas' own vocabulary, one might, up to now, regard all these forays into various ongoing but related skeins of imagery as "unlucky explorers / come back, abandoning the expedition." Their final avatar, however, is ideally suited for the soldier-poet, lover and killer in one, for the metamorphosis of mask, window-pane, and water into lens and gunsight produces Douglas' most genuinely powerful poetry. As we would expect, its first manifestation comes in another juvenile poem composed at the age of fifteen. The first two stanzas of *303 (p. 31) describe a view of the moon — "circular and useless . . . pock-marked with death" seen through the "dead arms" of pine trees. The image seems to suggest the foresight of a Lee Enfield rifle or a Bren light machine gun (both used *303 ammunition), seen through the aperture in the rear leaf sight, and the fifteen-year-old marksman already imagines proleptically the havoc he is to cause "through a machine gun's sights" in *How to Kill*. The world of firearms is unaware of the Narcissus youth, "the gardener in the vales;" it is a world where "only efficiency delights." But this is to anticipate.

It was in 1941 that Douglas came into his own as a poet. The juvenilia, for all their promise, are largely unformed and empty poems; the poems of the Oxford years all too often celebrate an unattractive petulance and irritability. 1941, though, sees the production of six poems which inaugurate Douglas' mature period, for, with a poet who died at twenty-four, we can unfortunately adopt no other designation. Of these poems, *Oxford* seems a maudlin throwback to the previous phase, but *The House* marks an enormous step forward in complexity. *Time Eating* has, I think, been overrated, but at Linney Head Douglas wrote the superb *The Marvel* (p. 87), a powerful poem in which the lens image makes its first mature appearance. Sailors catch a swordfish, kill it, and remove its eye to use as a burning glass. The eye "is an instrument forged in semi-darkness; / yet taken from the corpse of this strong

traveller / becomes a powerful enlarging glass." With telling bathos, a sailor uses it to burn on the deck "the name of a harlot in his last port." The mysterious trophy of the swordfish's eye suggests to the poet a penetration through the sea's surface into the drowned world, the upside-down *Alice* world, of sunken ships and dead sailors. Through the imaginative entity of the eye/lens, Douglas creates an evocation of the alternative world which is beneath the surface of the strange gardener's pool, beyond the looking glasses and window-panes and translucent barriers, a world where the fish soar over the sunken ships like birds.

Simplify Me When I'm Dead (p. 89) is the last poem to be written before Douglas' departure for Africa, and successfully combines several motifs. Douglas imagines the decomposition of his own corpse, reverting back to and beyond the inchoate foetal form, "simpler than at birth." He gazes through the tiny concave lens of a telescope into his future dissolution: "Time's wrong-way telescope will show / a minute man ten years hence / and by distance simplified," and his life will now descend in a parabolic curve: "Through that lens see if I seem / substance or nothing . . ." The lens image here seems important in several ways. It provides a more finely articulated and more pregnant image than the mask and the window-pane could do, and leads forward into the photographic images which are such a singular feature of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, where they are linked to the contemplation of the battle-field dead. Again, time's telescope is a felicitous attempt to bring together Douglas' own premonitions of his death (" . . . time, time is all I lacked") with his own repeated, and usually self-conscious and artificial, attempts to treat the passage of time as a major subject for his poetry. To do this, Douglas seems to have resorted to a poetic mode more usually associated with the English poets of the seventeenth century. Douglas' work has, indeed, often been described as metaphysical, but his commentators have

not enlarged on this simple observation. Desmond Graham, for instance, remarks (p. ix) that "At Oxford, Donne, Rimbaud, the later Yeats, and Shakespeare were added, to shape the metaphysical, exploratory style with which he approached the experience of war," and he speaks (p. 120) of the "formal, metaphysical tone" of *Time Eating*. Of the same poem, Fraser remarks that "*Time Eating* might be described as metaphysical," and invokes "the melancholy gusto, here, of his metaphysical wit" (p. 102).

Time Eating (p. 86) is devoted to a subject familiar to the student of Renaissance iconology, the concept of time as the devourer of its own creations, a concept which underpins much of the poetry of Shakespeare and Spenser, and which, as iconologists such as Wind and Panofsky have taught us, must be identified with the myth figure of Saturn. "The Greek expression for time, Chronos, was very similar to the name of Kronos (the Roman Saturn), oldest and most formidable of the gods The mythical tale that he had devoured his own children was said to signify Time, who had already been termed 'sharp-toothed' by Simonides and *edax rerum* by Ovid, devours what he has created."¹⁰ The incident is a commonplace in the art of Renaissance Europe; Panofsky reproduces an engraving of 1526 by Jacopo Caraglio, depicting Saturn sinking his teeth into a screaming child, and the image is eventually adapted with such literal-mindedness that the frontispiece of a technical work on architecture, published in Rome in 1638, consists of a cautionary representation of Saturn gnawing the Apollo Belvedere. Generally, of course, this concept of time as linear and destructive is countered in the Renaissance mind (in, for instance, Spenser's *Mutabilitie Cantos*) by the apprehension of a higher mode of time which is cyclical rather than linear, containing an inner pattern of renewal where that which is destroyed is regenerated by its incorporation into the greater stasis of the seasons and human resurrection. *Time Eating* is there-

fore a Renaissance poem not in terms of its "metaphysical wit" but by virtue of the fact that it takes a conventional Renaissance icon and treats it in a fairly conventional way. Thus the devoured child returns to a foetal position to be regurgitated in a new birth; just as "Ravenous Time has flowers for his food / in Autumn, yet he can cleverly make good / each petal," so, "as he makes he eats," and the devoured victims are lost only for a limited period, "in that catholic belly curled." Douglas assimilates the mode cleverly, locating images of death and renewal in "the lizard's tail and the bright snakeskin," but his ultimate purpose is to deny the validity of the traditional image for his own case; the loss of Yingcheng is permanent, and is synonymous with the loss of his own boyhood. The traditional consolation is rejected, rather as Shelley has rejected it in *Adonais*, and "you can make no more of me, only destroy." There is even a possible allusion to the salvation of Jupiter from Saturn's maw in the phrase "how secretly you've come / to mansize from the smallness of a stone." Two years earlier in *Haydn — Clock Symphony* (p. 50), Douglas had toyed with the same image, and had incorporated again the concept of the personality as an inhabited house, addressing the reader as "the man who in your sleep / Walks in the corridors and in the deep / Recesses of your mind." In this edifice the timepiece of the title stands as a butler in the hall, but Saturn's traditional hour-glass has become a mirror, "a glass" in which "to quiz your elegant person." The dance measures of the psychic ballroom, though, must eventually be abandoned, one must "Re-enter the hall and find the solemn clock / Who cries that Time's alive." A year later, Douglas published *A Round Number* (p. 60) in *The Cherwell* for May 1940, when he had reached the round number of twenty years. His own illustration for the poem shows a dejected figure slumped against a chimney-piece, above which a dial indicates two o'clock; "the monotonous evil clock" acts like "creeper climbing on my heart" to commemorate the

"fragrant girl" who died "two hundred years ago" along with the poet's innocence.

Douglas' Ovidian poems make somewhat embarrassing reading, and suggest a self-importance and an adolescent posturing which is largely abandoned in the bitter gaiety of *Alamein to Zem Zem* but which can still taint even the best of the Western Desert poems. Their main interest, as I have suggested, is to indicate that Douglas is acquainted with some iconological commonplaces of English Renaissance poetry, and to prepare us for the possibility that he was also acquainted with a slightly more recondite mode of thought, medieval Christian typology. This we may perhaps encounter in two brilliantly suggestive and enigmatic poems, *The Sea Bird* (p. 99) and *Adams* (pp. 100-101). In common with many young poets of the 1940's, Douglas was attracted by surrealism, and "a short *Survey of Surrealism*" formed part of his small personal library during the Alamein campaign.¹¹ The two poems in question are usually regarded as surrealist in inspiration, and hence, one suspects, as necessarily unintelligible. *Adams* is a re-working of *The Sea Bird*; both were written at Nathanya, in Palestine, in 1942, and are based upon a beach walk when Douglas observed "a sort of kingfisher here" which he described that year in a letter to his mother. *Adams* repeats, with minimal changes, the first four stanzas of *The Sea Bird*, then, rejecting for the moment the first poem's vision of the live bird which "crept into the dead bird, ceased to exist," adds eight stanzas at an apparent tangent on the subject of a certain "Adams", reverting to the first poem's final image only in the last, thirteenth, stanza. John Adams had been a friend of Douglas' at Christ's Hospital who detested Douglas' beloved O.T.C. and invented a game whereby people were divided into "friends" (charming, volatile eccentrics) and "others". It is unlikely that this antithesis informs the two birds of the poem, and unless there is a concealed biographical allusion, Adams' only importance for the poem is his name, recalling the

two Adams of Christian typology, a complex which would surely have been familiar to Douglas from his reading of Donne (for example, the fifth stanza of *Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse* provides a *locus classicus*).

On his beach walk, Douglas observes two birds, one alive, one dead — “the dead eyeless: but with a bright eye / the live bird discovered me.” The live bird quits the body of the dead bird, and soars into the sky in a brilliance of electric blue and orange flame. The poem now abruptly shifts to Adams, who “is like a bird . . . bird eyed / the bones of his face are / like the hollow bones of a bird.” Adams now becomes an image of dominance, standing against a wall “between two pictures hanging there / certain of homage from us all” and suggestive of a representation of the crucified Christ between the two thieves. The crushing image of the second Adam devours the poet’s vitality, “utterly drained / the colours of my sea . . . swallowing all my thought.” In conclusion, the poet implores the second Adam to vanish, to destroy himself, to merge back into the first Adam, “let me alone / creep into the dead bird, cease to exist.” Read in this way, the poem becomes Donnean in a more pungent fashion than if we were to regard it merely as an exhibition of linguistic energy, and deepens the historical authenticity of the meditation on time in *Time Eating*. One might note that the ensuing poem, *The Offensive* (pp. 102-103), again invokes time. The quiet before battle is “like a curtain” separating present from future, poised and waiting for Time to descend and eat; in this Ptolemaic universe, just as “The sun goes round and the stars go round,” so the “nature of eternity is circular.” Time devours and regurgitates, the second Adam quits the first and is implored to return to him, and “all our successes and failures are similar.”

The early attempts at the lens image had spawned subsequent exercises on the nature of time; it is in the details of the North African campaign that the lens of “time’s wrong-way telescope” is next introduced, albeit indirectly,

through the camera-lens which prompts the elegiac meditations on the dead and on photographs of them, together with the sad emblems of the photographs found on the bodies of dead soldiers. This complex seems first to occur on October 18th, 1942, in the poem *The Knife* (p. 105): "If I talk to you I might be a bird / with a message, a dead man, a photograph." It is most poignantly assimilated in the well-known and much-anthologized *Vergissmeinicht* (p. 121). The tone is cool but compassionate. The British troops, "returning over the nightmare ground" after an absence of three weeks, find the masticating powers of time at work on the body of a soldier who opposed their advance. The dead soldier lies beside the photograph of his living girl, an icon of the moment when "the lover and killer are mingled." The corruption of the corpse seems "mocked at by his equipment / that's hard and good when he's decayed;" death and life are melded in the unknowing stasis of the photograph, whose unseeing eyes in fact do not "weep to see today / how on his skin the swart flies move," and the eyes of girl and corpse coalesce — "the dust upon the paper eye / and the burst stomach like a cave." The image becomes insistent in Douglas' last phrase, as in the description of the dead Libyan soldier, where, "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 trough of the lower lid" (p. 32). A later encounter pursues these associations: "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 This picture, as they say, told a story. It filled me with useless pity" (p. 47). The incident is also commemorated in the short story *The Little Red Mouth*, where Douglas notes the "eyes open, dulled with dust; and the face, yellowish with dust, a doll's or an effigy's."¹² The transmutation of lens into photograph and gunsight is very insistent in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, and the singular

isolated existence of the cavalryman in his tank suggests to Douglas the detachment of someone observing a film:

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. (p. 20)

The image occurs again in *The Little Red Mouth*, where "The flashes of the six pounders and of the big tanks firing their seventy-fives impinged on the eternal glare of the sunlight, infinitesimal moments of brightness like the scratches which show when an old film is projected" (p. 9). The inalienable otherness of the dead, wrapped in the finality of their silence, seems habitually to be conjured by the mimesis of film and photograph: a burnt-out German tank beside a heap of charred clothing "made a disconcerting cautionary picture" (p. 21), and Douglas is struck by the way in which the clothes of mutilated bodies seem to cover the wounds "as though with an instinct for decency. I have noticed this before in photographs of people killed by explosive" (p. 27).

The transition from lover to killer, from man of peace to man of war, provides one of the final instances of Douglas' preoccupation with barriers and the psychic struggle to transgress them. "It is tremendously illogical — to read about it cannot convey the impression of having walked through a looking-glass which touches a man entering battle" (p. 6), and one recalls that amongst "the odd books I had brought from division" was a copy of *Alice in*

Wonderland (p. 103). Hence the aptness of John Waller's summing up of Douglas' combat experiences: "His descriptions of anything he did are so careful and yet at the same time so casual, that his diary reads for all the world like a new Alice gone to explore a new wonderland in which the scenery is unaccountably composed of strange flowers made by the dead and the dying and their broken machinery"13

Any attempt at a final judgment on the merit of Douglas' achievement must in the end gravitate around *How to Kill* (p. 122), by far the best of Douglas' poems, and, arguably, despite the jejune phrasing of line 15, the only fully achieved poem which he ever wrote. In *How to Kill*, and the final half dozen or so poems which succeed it in *Collected Poems* and bring his oeuvre to a close, we see Douglas drawing towards a genuine understanding of his perceptual dilemma. *How to Kill* was much revised. Desmond Graham prints a holograph (p. 221), and invokes fourteen sheets of revision. The initial drafts speak of the poet's approach to death "enclosed in my own silence / as in a glass sphere," moving smoothly "towards the minute when shadow and silence are one" (p. 219). As the drafts continue, Douglas significantly recasts himself from victim to killer. The gunsight of the boy-poet of *303 has gone; the child has turned into a man at the end of the poem, and "Now in my dial of glass appears / the soldier who is going to die." The obsessive image of the transcended barrier which has dominated his poetry is now perfectly assimilated in the mosquito/killer and the shadow/victim. By the "sorcery" of war each becomes the other; the victim of stanza one, who catches the child's ball (the "lethal instrument" of the drafts) becomes the executioner who cries "NOW" as "the wires touch his face," the face of an *alter ego* who is the former child-marksman who "moves about in ways / his mother knows." This is a brilliantly achieved poem, flipping the coin whose opposing faces are sadism and compassion; "as he responds to the sensitivity of his image of death in

the final stanza," Desmond Graham writes, "the poet does not rule out the possibility that this is the musing of a connoisseur of death" (p. 222).

In the final three poems, the task is almost accomplished. In *Landscape with Figures* (p. 128) there dawns the realization that on both sides of the barrier the poet will find himself. This seems now realised as a logical necessity, rather as if Douglas has collided with Wittgenstein's aphorism that to think a limit one must think both sides of that limit. So, "I am the figure burning in hell / and the figure of the grave priest . . . I am possessed, / the house whose wall contains the dark strife / the arguments of hell with heaven."

Douglas' position, as was indicated at the beginning of this essay, is the position of the solipsist or the Berkeleian. From the inner certainty of his private self, he perceives the external world through window-arch, window-pane, lens and gunsight, trying to penetrate its mask in order to establish its reality. The outcome is entirely logical: to pass through the barrier, to shatter the glass, will fuse perceiver and perceived.

I look each side of the door of sleep¹⁴

NOTES

- ¹*Not Without Glory: Poets of the Second World War* (London: Woburn Press, 1976), p. 17.
- ²Desmond Graham, *Keith Douglas 1920-1944: a Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 233. All references to the personal details of Douglas' life derive from this work.
- ³"The Poetry of Keith Douglas," *Critical Quarterly*, 5, no. 1, (1963), 47.
- ⁴"Keith Douglas: a Poet of the Second World War," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 42 (1956), 98. The same point has been made by Ian Hamilton: "What one misses in Douglas, finally, is the sense of a firm discovered personality." ("Poetry: The Forties, I," *London Magazine*, April 1964, 86).
- ⁵The situation is accurately summed up in Geoffrey Hill's comment that Douglas "possessed the kind of creative imagination that approached an idea again and again in terms of metaphor, changing position slightly, seeking the most precise hold." See "I in Another Place: Homage to Keith Douglas," *Stand*, 6, no. 4 (1964/5), 10.

- ⁶John Waller, G. S. Fraser and J. C. Hall eds., *Keith Douglas: Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 158. All subsequent page references to the poems within the text of this essay are to this edition.
- ⁷Elizabeth Jennings, "In the Night," *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 39.
- ⁸Edmund Blunden, Introduction to *Keith Douglas: Collected Poems*, pp. 18, 19.
- ⁹"Here is Where," *Penguin Modern Poets 2* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 33.
- ¹⁰Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (1939; New York: Icon Editions, 1972), pp. 73-74, plates XXV (47) and XXXIV.
- ¹¹*Alamein to Zem Zem* (1946; Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1969), p. 103. Subsequent page references in the text are to this edition.
- ¹²*Stand*, 11, no. 2 (1970), 10.
- ¹³"The Poetry of Keith Douglas," *Accent*, 8, no. 3 (1948), 234.
- ¹⁴"Desert Flowers," *Collected Poems*, p. 129.