



مجلة كلية الآداب بقنا (دورية أكاديمية علمية محكمة)

## The Experience of War in the Poetry of Keith Douglas

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Keith Castellain Douglas was born in Kent on June 24th, 1920. From the very beginning, he loved shapes, colors, words and images. An only child and independent, he actively turned towards creative self-amusements. At the age of six and due to family problems, Douglas was placed in a boarding school. He showed remarkable skills in reading and writing early. When he was eight, his father left the family to live with another woman and Douglas never saw him again. He was deeply affected by the broken relationships of his childhood and they found their way directly into his war poetry. Having been exposed early to suffering, despair and detachment, Douglas was able to understand the complexities of war better. He proved that the Second World War was "his fittest subject" and that "he was its best poet" (Shires, 113). This is assured by Fedden who declares him the best English poet thrown up by the war (1966, Passim), and by El Sadda who considers his poetry "the best poetry to come out of World War II" (217).

Douglas mastered the art of poetry at the age of fourteen. By the age of eighteen, he was being published. Prior to his departure for the Middle East to participate in the war, he had several poems printed in *Eight Oxford Poets* (1941). In 1943, he shared an anthology entitled *Selected Poems* with John Hall and Norman Nicholson. Between his arrival in the Middle East in June, 1941, and his return to England, he wrote a war journal called *Alamein to Zem Zem*. Besides, he contributed poems to

*Personal Landscape*, a literary magazine published in Cairo in the 1940s. He returned to England in 1944 and was killed in action at the same year in Normandy.

After his death, Ted Hughes and Desmond Graham played an important role in widening the circle of his reputation. Hughes wrote several articles about his poetry, an introduction to his *Selected Poems* in 1964 and a new introduction to *Keith Douglas: The Complete Poems* in 1987 (hence forth CP). Graham gave him a powerful boost by writing *Keith Douglas 1920-1944: A Biography* in 1974 and edited *The Complete Poems of Keith Douglas* in 1978.

Attracted to military life from his youth, Douglas plunged himself deeply into the risks of war. He loved military order; he took pride in being a member of a group. But essentially he responded to the "breakdown of structures and was drawn to the nobility inherent in the role of warrior" (Shires, 61). In a schoolboy's analysis, he defined himself as a "militarist" who "like many of his warlike elders, built up heroic opinions upon little information" (Graham,1). Brought up on stories of combat, he was known from his early days for his obsessive attention to cleaning and polishing the accoutrements of his trade such as his uniform, saddle, bridle, and boots (Graham, 4).

Being a courageous soldier by nature and having the required and necessary sensibility of the artist, Douglas had unflinching willingness to expose himself to any experience that could help him to discover the hidden reality and lead to a clear

poetic vision through which he can directly and clearly express his feelings and reactions. El Satta explains:

Douglas is basically admired for his refusal to subordinate himself to either traditional or fashionable literary to either traditional or fashionable literary trends. His aim was to penetrate the essence of reality, to seek the truth hidden beneath the superficial forms and drag it out into the open (219).

Douglas did not find a better practical experience to deal with than to participate in a world war and witness the horrors of its hidden truths. This participation led him to develop his ideals and perspectives on life, and thence, his poetic visions. What helped him to do this are his "imaginative courage" (Silkin, 1981, 58) and the "bluntness in his inflexion of the voice" (Hughes, 1963, 44). A quick look at his poems easily reveals war and the extent of its horrors that he experienced and tried to depict in his poetry.

This paper means to examine the disillusionment of a young poet who, stranded in a foreign land and a foreign culture, finds war forced upon him, deprived of all the glories normally attached to war in the European tradition. Growing up to expect war to be glorious, as in the classics, the young British poet is greatly shocked and is often puzzled by World War II. Reality seemed to run counter to literary images and his poetry was inevitably a record of such a clash between literary illusion and reality.

Douglas and his generation still had the ideal that war was a source of glory. They were driven to the war having in their minds the stories of the Old English heroic poems such as 'Beowulf', 'The Fight at Finnsburg', 'The Wanderer', 'The Battle of Maldon', 'Chronicle', 'Maxims I' and 'Maxims II'. What they had thought proved in reality to be false. Instead of glory, they saw horrors that drove them to reconsider their situation.

Like the poets of the First World War—such as Robert Graves, David Jones, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon—the poets of the Second World War—Keith Douglas, Terence Tiller, Bernard Spencer, Robin Fedden, Iain Fletcher, John Gawsworth, John Waller, George Fraser, Hamish Henderson, Robert Liddell and Lawrence Durrell—found themselves in a dilemma. What they found was completely different from what they imagined. El Sudda says that "The shadow of the First World War hovered significantly over the poets who found themselves writing about yet another world war. Superficially, this is evident in direct references by Second World War poets to their predecessors and their themes" (261).

Douglas, along with other poets, was surprised with the horrors of war. He found himself in a confrontation with the unknown. He had what is called a shock of disillusionment which caused him to grow suddenly to maturity. El Sudda confirms this point stating that "Like Rosenberg before him, Douglas was true to his own poetic vision and did not succumb to the demands of the times, or the public. His goal was 'to write

true things', not bound by old conventions and techniques" (220).

Douglas' earlier poems show that he has a split in his psyche. This self-division took various forms: two aspects of the self in conflict, two realms such as heart and head, two systems such as Catholic France and Protestant England. Concerning the struggle between heart and head, Douglas comes out on the side of the heart, defending it against its struggle with trespassers who would rob it of the pleasures of beauty and order (Selwyn, xxv). Douglas' poetic development shows an increased understanding of these private struggles and a need to connect them with external events.

Being unable to fuse the conflicting opposites, Douglas nonetheless persists in "his search for some kind of order" (Currey, 31). In many of his poems he is in a quest for finding a structure of belief which will survive. He imagines for a while that the destination of his quest is participating in war. Contrary to his belief, war increased both the split that he had come to feel and his need to mingle the dualities of his psyche. At first, he was suspicious of being able to write 'war poetry'. His gradual tendency to the role of a war poet becomes clearer when he came to write the essay entitled 'Poets in this War' in 1943.

Recalling Owen, Sassoon, and Rosenberg, Douglas reminds us why they were able to capture in verse the unique nature of the First World War:

Such was the jolt given to the whole  
conception men had had of the world and

of war, and so clear was the nature of the cataclysm, that it was natural enough not only that poets should be stirred, but that they should know how to express themselves (1971, 478).

Surveying his own generation, Douglas finds no one to compare with the poets of the First World War. He declares that "I do not find even one who stands out as an individual" (1979, 479). At the time Douglas wrote 'Poets in this War', he was experiencing some frustration in coming to terms with the war.

Going to war, the British soldiers suffered from an internal 'civil' conflict. They did not want to go to war. But they felt torn by responsibility and desire. So, they were drawn into friction and battles by a divided self. In Douglas' case, self-division makes him hesitate for a while but his peculiar strengths could and did allow him to write poetry capable of facing both the 'civil and military' conflicts without and within (Shires, 68). It seems that he took a decision to write poetry that reflects his experience of war and in which he shows the truths of war. The main truth in wars is the horrors that they cause and that come in different forms and at different levels. He had to forsake the metaphors of his early poetry—Oxford poetry—and find new ones. This is why when he was in the Middle East; he wrote poetry that witnessed its complete conversion to maturity in both its form and content.

In order to provide sufficient descriptions of the horrors of war, Douglas resorts to change in the form of his poems. The stanza patterns of his war poems become adaptations of the

three-stanza and eighteen-line form. Nearly all the poems consist of four, five or six stanzas. Each stanza contains four, five or six lines. The average length of his typical Oxford poem is approximately twenty lines. The war poems are generally twenty five lines each or longer. The longer forms are more fluid and allow longer treatment of the horrors of war. Besides, Douglas resorted to modify the style of his poems. He had to present his perceptions and values in a concise and precise style.

Douglas was drawn magnetically to the world of war where, as he says "the incredible things happen" (1979, 1). In 'Desert Flowers', Douglas declares that he has something new and distinctive to say. Though the speaker at first appears to repeat what Rosenberg had mentioned in his poems of war, it soon becomes obvious that he wants to have his own voice and take his own direction. The meaning of the dependent 'I' of the second line has become different from the meaning of the independent 'I' in lines 10, 13 and 15. The speaker of the last lines of the poem clearly shows himself as doing something that is different from just repeating previous visions of others. Douglas says:

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 man 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 detail and the horizon.  
Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing  
Of what the others never set eyes on.

(CP,

102)

The situation of the poem is similar to that of Douglas himself. Douglas' independence of his predecessors and colleagues is shown in 'Desert Flowers' where it executes the main ideas of 'Poets in this War'.

Douglas' earlier poems show, as I have said, that he has a split in his psyche. The war did not cause this division, but it gave him an opportunity to face the dreadful landscapes of war in the Middle East and Europe. Besides, it drove him to face his own defects within himself. In other words, he used war to explore the darker side of himself in personal terms.

Concerning faith, Douglas, Like Eliot, did not actively move towards it— perhaps because his experience of the 'boredom, the horror and the glory' of battle outstripped any of Eliot's mental demons, more likely because skepticism and doubt dominated any leanings towards faith (Coleman, 136). It is probably no accident that Douglas' work appealed to T. S. Eliot, for both men were interested in tradition, fusion, and

structure. Both were also seekers for belief in an age providing none (Coleman, 137).

Douglas' experience of war strongly enabled him to develop his capacity as a poet—ushering in a new stage in his poetic career. As he wrote to J. C. Hall in the summer of 1943, the lyricism of his early days was no longer effective after his active participation in battle (1978, 124). While he was “finished with one form of writing” and was “progressing towards another”, Douglas was “grasping for a closer personal integration of conflicting internal impulses” (124). He could no longer write in the lyrical “old forms”; he could write only “rue things” (124). Having faced war, he declared that “Now I will write of it and perhaps one day cynic and lyric will meet and make me a balanced style” (124). Douglas could not succumb to a ‘sentimental or emotional’ reaction to war. What he did is that he spoke passionately for ‘honesty’ and some kind of belief even if that belief had to be tempered. He explains:

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 (1979, 124).

Douglas was a realist as well as a romantic who carried a beast within. Fraser says that the romantic and the realist

Douglas met in war. Douglas had realized that the new war poet could not be a patriotic national spokesman or a person whose role is to teach the civilians about war or 'paint' specific war events. Rather, he understood that the Second World War poet carried his own demon into the realm of history (Fraser, 1977, 217) and that his identity could be defined only by their interaction. Douglas looked upon war as a personal test and a battle with the devilish tormenter he called "Bête Noire" (Fedden, 1945, 78).

Following in the footsteps of the poets of the First World War, Douglas depicts the horrors of war and its battlefields. This can be found in his best and most famous poems that he wrote during and after his combat duty in the Middle East. Recalling Sassoon's outraged tone, Douglas refers to his cynicism in the following lines of 'Gallantry':

The Colonel in a casual voice  
spoke through the microphone a joke  
which through a hundred earphones broke  
into the ears of a doomed race.

Conrad luckily survived the winter:  
he wrote a letter to welcome  
the auspicious spring; only his silken  
intentions severed with a single splinter.  
It was a brave thing the Colonel said,  
but the whole sky turned too hot  
and the three heroes never heard what  
it was, gone deaf with steel and lead. (CP, 99)

The shattered beliefs of Sassoon and Owen are also recalled in other poems. In 'The Trumpet', Douglas expresses his despair over the brutality of war. He concludes his poem saying:

... We must be up early  
tomorrow, to forget the cry and the crier  
as we forgot the conversation  
of our friends killed last month, last week  
and hear, crouching, the air shriek  
the crescendo, expectancy to elation  
violently arriving. The trumpet is a liar. (CP, 98)

In his introduction to his book *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, Silkin compares Douglas to the poets of the First World War. He states that Douglas is closer to Rosenberg than to Owen or Sassoon. Though Douglas appears to act as a public spokesman, he is not like Owen in his compassionate detachment or Sassoon in his penetrating of civilian complacency. He is very near to Rosenberg in depicting the victims of the battlefield as outcomes of war's outrage with a mixed response of anger and compassion (Silkin, 29-30).

In 'How to Kill', Douglas shows his courage and his sense of novelty in his treatment of the elation and amusement of a soldier with the power to kill. Douglas refers to the self-destruction involved in killing by using a very different tone. He depicts a soldier who seems to become a professional killer. The soldier's bullet is compared to a child's ball. Though killing seems to be like child's play, the killer himself knows the real and full meaning of his dreadful action. He writes:

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 the waves of love travel into vacancy,  
How easy it is to make a ghost.

(CP,

112)

Assuming the role of killer, Douglas refers to some power that he cannot know or explain. This damnable power drives him to kill without having any control over it.

Douglas' experience of war enables him to reconsider his attitude towards the phenomenon of death. Death is one of the important themes frequently used in his poetry. It is considered an honest exploration of his own relationship to war and its horrible scenes and results. Death on the battlefield promises a new vision for the poet whose eyes have been clouded by previous false visions.

In his 'Landscape with Figures', Douglas attempts to show a direct relationship to the dead figures of war. In 'Landscape with Figures 1', he observes the battlefield from an airplane and sees the same dreadful landscape described by the

poets of the First World War. He assumes the role of 'a pilot or angel looking down / on some eccentric chart'. From this imaginary height, the vehicles are seen as 'squashed dead or still entire, stunned / like beetles'. In vivid images, the steel 'is torn into fronds / by the lunatic explosive'. The plain is 'dotted' / scattered wingcases and/ legs, heads, show when the haze settles'. It seems that Douglas refuses to mention any artificial visions of the stage of the battle.

In 'Landscape with Figures 2', the spectator personally confronts the dead bodies who appear as 'mimes', 'crawling on the boards of the stage'. They are 'stony actors' who are unable to conquer the reality of the play they perform. The sets are iron, and the makeup is 'cosmetic blood'. In this poem, Douglas records his own creative struggles with the reality and unreality of war.

In 'Landscape with Figures 3', the speaker of the poem continues to speak in theatrical terms but moves to centre stage from his position of spectator in '1' and from a figure on 'the back cloth' in '2'. After describing the battlefield and the dead, the poem presents him in an omniscient position. Douglas says:

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  
I am all these and I am the craven

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 with heaven. (CP,

104)

Making himself an actor and a spectator in the drama, Douglas paradoxically becomes able to see himself in many different roles. Aware of all people, and representative of all, he is the unity of opposite things: good and evil, power and weakness; and heaven and hell (Sinclair, 39). His poems begin to deal with different topics. They no longer deal with stereotypical combats of devils and angels. He forces a multiple point of view into himself and into his readers in other poems. Now he is priest, penitent, killer and victim. Seeking to be a different poet, he openly confronts his own complicated feelings towards destruction and self-destruction (Fraser, 1977, 95).

In 'Negative Information', written in 1941, Douglas presents another aspect of his changing attitude towards death. Set against the background of the voyage to the Middle East, it reveals an indifference and lack of emotion about death:

And in general, the account of many deaths—  
whose portents, which should have undone the sky,  
had never come—is now received casually.  
You and I are careless of these millions of wraiths

for as often as not we meet  
in dreams our own. dishevelled ghosts.... (CP, 79)

The awareness of his own inevitable death is presented by an air of studied coolness; he preserves his emotions behind a wall of apparent resignation. Douglas seems determined to protect his sensitive poetic nature from harm by adopting a pose that Fraser sees strained by "an element of brittleness and precariousness" (1970, 292). Douglas' military commitment forced him to become "an agent of death, a role inconsistent with his beliefs, but an unavoidable one" (293).

In 'Vergissmeinnicht', written in 1943, Douglas transfers his own internal battles to the outer landscape of death. The poem does not depict the common scenes of war; it shows a particular and intimate instance of a dead man. Douglas discovers that the dead body is a German soldier who had fired at his tank three weeks before. What remains of him are his girlfriend picture and his weapons. The poem says:

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone  
returning over the nightmare ground  
we found the place again, and found  
the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The frowning barrel of his gun  
overshadowing. As we came on  
that day, he hit my tank with one  
like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil



the dishonoured picture of his girl  
who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht.  
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,  
abased, and seeming to have paid  
and mocked at by his own equipment  
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

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.

The lines of the poem present a beautifully balanced portrait of a dead enemy soldier as seen from two opposing points of view. The dead soldier is seen as a killer and, at the same time, a lover. The speaker is glad to see his enemy dead. Later on, he changes his point of view when introducing his beloved. The killer and the lover represent two opposing worlds. The lover represents all what is human, personal and moral. The killer is the opposite; he represents the inhuman, impersonal and immoral. In front of death, the killer and lover are the same.

The horrors of war can easily lead to suffering. In many of his poems, Douglas talks about this stinging feeling. 'Cairo

Jag' and 'Dead Men' are good examples. In 'Cairo Jag', he presents the life of the civilian and the soldier on leave against the physical experience of combat:

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

But there are the streets dedicated to sleep  
stenches and the 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 his 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, clothes and  
possessions

clinging to the ground, a man with no head  
has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.  
(CP, 97)

What distinguishes this poem is Douglas' awareness of a locality. Though the last stanza is cruel and does not include any praise for Cairo, it fascinates by the "sheer force of its harsher honesty" (Currey, 68). Douglas wants to tell more through his sparse painting of the landscape and the dead. He urges the reader to give his full attention to the details he offers such as the sharpness of the metal, the stench of the bodies and 'a packet of chocolate and a souvenir'. Unlike the poets of the First World War, Douglas refuses to shape our responses. He guides us to feel a range of emotions as wide and deep as his own by increasing the range of conflicting responses (Bolton, 135).

In 'Dead Men', written after his participation in the battle of El Alamein, Douglas tries to shed light on the chaos and disorder in life at the time of war. In its six-line six stanzas, the poem refers to an eastern romanticism which is harshly displayed by a western reality. This reality is represented by the cruelties of war. Besides, it is represented by Douglas' 'beast' which is found in his poetry from the very beginning. The first two stanzas of the poem say:

Tonight the moon inveigles them

to love: they infer from her gaze  
her tacit encouragement  
Tonight the white dresses and the jasmin scent  
in the streets. I in another place  
see the white dresses glimmer like moths, come

to the west, out of that trance, my heart—  
here the same hours have illumined  
sleepers who are condemned or reprieved  
and those whom their ambitions have deceived;  
the dead men, whom the wind  
powders till they are like dolls.... (CP, 96)

The first two stanzas present the moon shining on lovers and the dead. It is difficult to reconcile the 'white dress' and the 'shallow graves'. In the next stanzas, a dog, digging at the bodies, understands the nature of death better than man does. The poem ends with a separate acceptance of love and death 'without the traction of reason or time's control'. Every side is accepted on its terms and the 'prudent mind resolves / on the lover's or the dog's attitude forever.' Commenting on the poem, Fraser says that Douglas did all his best to make the reader avoid a "false impression of emotional...hardness" (1970, 294). This is why Douglas is very sensitive to impressions and this can lead to a nervous breakdown (Fraser, 1977, 99).

Douglas elaborates his experience of war with depicting the horrors of war in a variety of outer and inner images such as devil, beast and spiritual corruption. Firstly, in many of his poems, Douglas imagines that a devil constantly rides on his back. In a drawing he made in 1944 for the cover of a book he

planned to call *Bête Noire*, a black devil clings to Douglas as he rides his horse. In other sketches, the 'monster' grips, claws and fells him. Douglas' battles are not only with outer forces but with inner ones, for he feels cut off from half of himself (Shires, 88).

'Devils', written in 1942, shows Douglas' recognition of a single evil, without and within. This discovery occurs in a vast silence, a 'deceptive quiet' similar to that Douglas associated with the desert, a torn yet honest landscape (Graham, 26). It also recalls his description of tank warfare. He states that "The view from a moving tank is like that in a camera obscura or silent film" (1979, 27). Though the world seems to be silent, it is not. Even the inside world of both the tank and the mind seems to be noisy. He writes:

Outside the usual crowd of devils  
are flying in the clouds, are running  
on the earth, imperceptibly spinning  
through the black air alive with evils  
and turning, diving in the wind's channels.  
Inside the unsubstantial wall  
these idiots of the mind can't hear  
the demons talking in the air  
who think my mind void. That's all;  
there'll be an alliance of devils if it fall. (CP, 88)

Douglas does his best to separate between two sides. Instead of imagining angels in combat with devils, he views his mind as he had viewed his body; the same relation can be found in a fortress that is infiltrated by devils. Though body and mind

that were separated early, they are now joined by the fact that they are both attacked. Both are subjected to assaults by a group of devils and angels. 'Devils' is a confusing poem in which the speaker stands alone and is not able to confront powerful forces which now threaten to attack him and fell him for good.

Secondly, the image of 'beast' is used as a form of horror. In his letter to Hall, Douglas describes it as "my particular monster" and recognizes it as "a permanent inhabitant for over ten years" (1978, 120). Although Douglas fails to identify the nature of this beast, it seems to represent a destructive force. Douglas feels the daunting power of the animal he cannot control or yield to. He says:

The beast is a jailer  
allows me out on patrol  
brings me back by telepathy  
is inside my mind  
breaks into my conversations with his own words  
speaking out of my mouth  
can overthrow me in a moment  
writes what I write, or edits it (censors it)  
takes a dislike to my friends and sets me against them

If this is a game, it's past half time and the beast is winning.

(CP, 92)

Thirdly, a sense of spiritual corruption is caused by war. Using this image, Douglas depicts life in Egypt at the time of war, away from the horrors of the battlefield. In 'Behavior of

'Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden', written in 1943, Douglas uses a sustained metaphor to describe a woman in a tea garden as a 'white stone' attracting the men or 'fish'. While eating her ice-cream, he describes her fingers as 'white, submarine fronds'. The men pass 'circling and pausing,' and preparing to 'nibble or tug'. The extended metaphor of the poem enables Douglas to describe men as 'A cotton magnate, an important fish / with great eyepouches and a golden mouth'. The description in the poem implies a certain boredom and the silence and the absence of sounds in the poem convey certain messages of emptiness.

Douglas' experience of war caused him to have a continuous feeling of facing an early death. The horrors that he had seen in the war were as peculiar that he had a premonition of his own fate. While in England in early 1944, before his regiment left for Normandy where he was killed, he gave away his watch, seemed to lose interest in soldiering, and told various people that he would not survive (Graham, 125). The last poem of the Middle East poems, and probably the last poem ever completed by Douglas, is amazing in its calm acceptance and foreknowledge. It depicts his strong feeling of an expectation of his own death. In its draft form, it explored several possibilities the future might hold: a woman's lips, islands, a land beyond mountains, death. In its final form, it is entitled "On a Return from Egypt". It concerns the unknown future, but it does not entertain multiple possibilities for that future. It is worthy of quoting in its entirety, as it culminates his brief poetic career in stylistic and thematic depth:

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.            (CP, 122)

Written in a relatively peaceful time, between the Middle East campaign and the invasion of Europe, the poem sums up Douglas' feelings and reflections on his poetry. The tone is reflective throughout the first three stanzas; the long sentences and initial stresses create a solemnity and elegiac grace. The



second stanza is particularly deliberate and formal. Despite the fear he cannot hide, he takes the definite step to 'split the glass'. The courage of the last stanza is predominant over any fear.

The experience of war broadened Douglas' horizons. For him, the war "opened up vistas of knowledge and areas of life which he endeavoured to experience to the full" (El Satta, 225). This is confirmed by Hughes who remarked that "war was his ideal subject: the burning away of all human pretensions in the ray cast by death" (1964, 13). The young poet turned to think that the meaning of life is to embrace destiny with a nobility of spirit. He welcomed the idea of responsiveness and did not highly support the idea of sentimentality (Graham, 68), so it seems right to close with another poem about his own death. 'Simplify Me When I am Dead' is the farewell of a soldier-poet who participated in a global war and clearly expressed the experience of his generation. Though the poem appears to be a command from a poet who echoes different backgrounds and deals with complex reactions, it does not lack the quality of response itself:

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

As the processes of earth  
strip off the colour and the skin  
take the brown hair and blue eye

and leave me simpler than at birth,  
when hairless I came howling in  
as the moon came in the cold sky.

Of my skeleton perhaps  
so stripped, a learned man will say  
'He was of such a type and intelligence,' no more.

Thus when in a year collapse  
particular memories, you may  
deduce, from the long pain I bore

the opinions I held, who was my foe  
and what I left, even my appearance  
but incidents will be no guide.

Time's wrong-way telescope will show  
a minute man ten years hence  
and by distance simplified.

Through that dens see if I seem  
substance or nothing: of the world  
deserving mention or charitable oblivion

not by momentary spleen  
or love into decision hurled,  
leisurely arrive at an opinion.

Remember me when I am dead  
and simplify me when I'm dead. (CP, 74)

Ending as it begins, the poem has a message that Douglas wants to convey. He wants to say that he is a part of the natural order, no more and no less. He asks us to get rid of any

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stereotypes, arrogance and any ideal images we may hide in our minds. By asking to be simplified in death, he forces honesty on the living. He wishes time to judge him fairly; he will not bother and make himself busy with the considerations of momentary hates or loves.

Generally speaking, war was the main and heavy experience that Douglas had in his short life. Before coming to the Middle East, he had rosy perspectives about war and its false glories. Insisting on having his feet on the front lines of fighting, he discovered that the situation is completely different. The horrors of war that Douglas had seen represented a turning point in his life. The war experience may even be said to provide both form and content to his poetic experience, as this brief essay may have made clear enough.

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