Isaac Rosenberg and Keith Douglas

by Louise Williams



English Association Bookmarks
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THE POETRY IS IN THE PITILESSNESS
Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918)
Keith Douglas (1920-1944)

by
Louise Williams

BOOKS TO READ

ed. Jon Stallworthy, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, Chatto & Windus 1990.
Isaac Rosenberg, *Collected Works*, Chatto & Windus 1995.
Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, OUP 1978.

FURTHER READING

ed. Brian Gardner, *Up the Line to Death*: *The War Poets 1914-1918*, Methuen 1964.
ed. I. M. Parsons, *Men Who March Away*, Chatto & Windus 1968.
ed. Brian Gardner, *The Terrible Rain*, Methuen 1977.
ed. Adrian Barlow, Six Poets of the Great War, CUP 1995.

CRITICISM

Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle*: *The Poetry of the Great War*, OUP 1972.
Jon Stallworthy, *Poets of the First World War*, OUP 1975.
J. M. Gregson, *Poetry of the First World War*, Studies in EL 64, Edward Arnold 1976.
Adrian Barlow, *The Great War in British Literature*, CUP 2000.

SCOPE OF TOPIC

This Bookmark contends that the poetry of Keith Douglas (arguably, if not certainly the finest English poet of the Second World War) is best approached not by responding to the familiar appeal of Wilfred Owen, but by pursuing the less emotive way of Isaac Rosenberg. Whereas Owen famously maintained that 'the Poetry is in the pity', both Rosenberg and after him Douglas seem – on the contrary – to feel that all a poet can do is point to the *pitiless* look on the face of a world in which men find themselves at war with one another.

NOTES

> Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
> My subject is war, and the pity of War.
> The Poetry is in the pity.
> Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory.
> They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is
> why the true Poets must be truthful.
>
> Wilfred Owen: Preface, 1918.

> 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.
>
> Keith Douglas: Letter to J. C. Hall, 1943.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) bears telling witness to the human tragedy of the First World War (1914-1918). Presenting 'the pity of War' in its most graphic terms, Owen aims to compose fitting 'elegies' for those who 'die as cattle'. His intense disillusionment after having been immersed in 'the cess of war' is expressed in an emotional poetry that he laces with complex

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literary effects. Keith Douglas ((1920-1944) is also a product of his time, but of a very different time. The emotionally detached, clinical tank-warfare of the Middle-East Campaign lends to Douglas' verse of the Second World War (1939-1945) an entirely opposite emphasis. Douglas' subject is 'the soldier who is going to die' (**How To Kill**); equally determined to give evidence of his concrete experiences, he conveys the stagnancy of a human life upon which the only pervading influence is death itself. By choosing to convey the banalities of his desert-existence in an unembellished, disinterested language, Douglas presents us with his low estimation of man's life. Our limited human existence, he explains, is the last thing in the world to get 'sentimental or emotional' about.

Wilfred Owen's vision is of 'a botched civilisation' (Ezra Pound, 1920); his embittered disillusionment with it is conveyed by the dramatic effects of his poetry. For example, in **Anthem for Doomed Youth**, Owen's intention is to portray with a photographic realism his revulsion at the wholesale slaughter of his compatriots; the irony of the sonnet-form (traditionally associated with romantic poetry) being used to demonstrate the effects of 'demented choirs of wailing shells' cannot be lost on the sensible reader. His use of an onomatopoeia which involves both assonance and alliteration –

> Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
> Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
> Can patter out their hasty orisons

– is functional in the description of the exchanged gun-fire; its terse staccato puts us in immediate touch with 'the cess of war'. The plangent rhymes ('cattle'/ 'rattle', 'shells'/'bells') draw our attention to a 'monstrous anger' which the poet thus seeks to make audible. Similarly, Owen's extended metaphor (comparing the trenches' rite of passage to that of a funeral – 'candles', 'pall', 'drawing-down of blinds') leaves us in no doubt about the emotional charge of this elaborate death-lament. Moreover, Owen's concession to poetic diction ('hasty orisons') only draws attention to his experience: in this violent declaration of disgust, any such attempts to dignify the slaughter (by 'prayers' or 'bells', perhaps) are merely mockeries.

It has always seemed to me that Owen's deployment of these literary effects is not automatically appropriate to the context in which he is writing. For he manipulates his poetic language in order to convey the horror of war in much the same manner that Keats, for example, handles his poetic diction in order to convey the pleasures of love! It is therefore necessary for the reader to ask herself whether this language calls attention to 'the pity of War' or to itself. Is Wilfred Owen's diction always functional in the expression of this pity or could it be merely meretricious? Owen shows that his humanity goes beyond liberal humanism. The pity for his agony-ridden fellows is clearly apparent in **Dulce Et Decorum Est** which portrays 'the soldier who is going to die' as an infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing (T. S. Eliot, 1917) and refutes any charge that Owen's rhetoric embarrasses his resolution to tell 'the truth untold':

> *But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,*
> *And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime ....*
> *Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,*
> *As, under a green sea, I saw him drowning.*

Owen's revulsion at the crime of romanticising the 'poignant misery' of conflict (**Exposure**) 'to children ardent for some desperate glory' is demonstrated by his candid imagery which duly portrays the gruesome reality of war in gruesome terms. The cumulative forcefulness of the similes in these opening lines –

> *Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,*
> *Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge*

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– debunks any idea that 'dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'. Owen's sepia imagery renders a soldier's life nothing more than repulsive, for, in the trenches, men do not whistle, but 'curse' while they work. Moreover, Owen's uncomplicated syntax conveys the soldiers' weariness, presenting active service in a pitiful light which not even the most 'ardent' white-feather carrier could dispute.

In **Exposure**, Owen employs irony to inspire pathos in his reader. Writing with a resigned compassion, rather than with indignation, the repeated observation that 'nothing happens' is bitterly ironic, for the company is slowly freezing to death:

> *Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,*
> *Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.*

Owen has recourse to an extremely archaic poeticism ('puckering foreheads crisp') in order to show that the minds of the soldiers – as well as their bodies – are gradually becoming inactive. By sharp contrast, Keith Douglas' circumlocution will in due course be employed in the description of his astonishment at the sheer immediacy of death (which 'has made a man of dust of a man of flesh').

Douglas responds to Owen's agenda (as outlined in his Preface) by insisting that the poetry is **not** 'in the pity', but – by marked contrast **–** in the pitilessness. In an impersonal and unsentimental verse, Douglas comes not to exalt Owen, but to bury him. Instead, he regards a very different figure as his mentor:

> *Rosenberg, I only repeat what you were saying.*

The line is from **Desert Flowers**.

Like Douglas after him, Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918) casts a Yeatsian eye on both life and death and permits his trench experiences to impact upon his consciousness without undue embellishment. Indeed, Rosenberg was in possession of a sensibility upon which the First World War made an unusually ***un***-dramatic impact. In **Returning, We Hear the Larks**, the poet's aim is to draw attention to the incongruity of the sweet song of 'unseen larks' in the 'sombre' atmosphere of trench warfare. It is by means of his oxymoronic diction ('strange joy') that Rosenberg transforms larks' song from a simple emblem into a confusing element. Putting an imaginative construction upon his concrete experience, he intends us to feel how bitterly ironic it is that, rather than a shell from some howitzer, bird-song should 'drop from the dark'. His juxtaposition of a down-to-earth diction ('dragging these anguished limbs') with exclamations reminiscent of Romantic elation ('But hark!'/'Lo!') reinforces this sardonic and pitiless observation. Moreover, the quasi-religious imagery – 'Music showering on our upturned listening faces' – serves to underline the soldiers' vulnerability to the impersonal threat of death that lurks round every corner of the 'poison-blasted track'. Generalising from this single experience, Rosenberg suggests that there exists a 'sinister threat' behind all such superficially innocuous occurrences. He thereby illustrates man's helplessness in the face of non-human elements that remain forever beyond his control:

> *But a song only dropped*
> *Like a blind man's dreams on the sand*
> *By dangerous tides.*

In Rosenberg's vision, behind all apparent purity lurk perils; nightmares shadow fragile human 'dreams'. **Returning, We Hear the Larks** thus becomes a pitiless poem about the dangers inherent in even the most superficially harmless experience of human life.

In **Break of Day in the Trenches**, Rosenberg's diction endows his experience with its due moral weight. For example, he maintains that in the trenches the literal and metaphorical darkness is so oppressive that it is friable: 'The darkness crumbles away'. Rosenberg sees a

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peculiarly pitiless haze over Flanders' Fields, which does not evaporate, but 'crumbles away'. By writing as if a 'queer sardonic rat' is the most alive thing in the trenches, he heightens the irony at the expense of the superior soldiers ('haughty athletes ... less chanced than you for life') who dimly believe that this 'droll' creature is more unhealthy than they are. This dry irony is not lost on Keith Douglas, for in **Vergissmeinnicht** the 'sardonic rat' finds a parallel in the 'swart flies' which crawl over the skin of a dead German soldier. Similarly, Douglas is left to place imaginative constructions on his concrete experiences. From his observations on the 'nightmare ground', he brings out the irony that the German soldier's weaponry is in better condition than its 'decayed' operator: that is, that the tank commander is

mocked at by his own equipment
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

With a harsh irony, Douglas, like Rosenberg, illustrates the transience of human life. As well as being a poet, Douglas is a sorcerer who makes 'a man of dust of a man of flesh'. As a soldier, he is a self-confessed alchemist ('This sorcery I do') who recognises 'how easy it is to make a ghost'.

However, Douglas' verse, though primarily concerned to express his pitilessness, keeps a crucial sense of balance. For example, in both **How To Kill** and **Vergissmeinnicht**, he clearly demonstrates the balance between life and death, between the soldier and the lover. In **Vergissmeinnicht**, if Douglas feels pity at all, then he pities the lover who has been dealt 'mortal hurt' by the untimely death of her sweetheart. Skilfully, he balances his own pitilessness as a soldier ('We see him almost with content ... seeming to have paid') with the imagined reaction of a lover when faced with 'the dust upon the paper eye' and 'the burst stomach like a cave':

And death who had the soldier singled
has done the lover mortal hurt.

The soldier who must die is now 'a man of dust' and can feel no 'hurt', whereas it is the woman 'of flesh' who must bear the anguish. In **How To Kill**, Douglas sees death as being equally balanced with life itself. The poet insists that death makes our lives what they are, for our existences are permanently threatened by total eclipse:

A shadow is a man
when the mosquito death approaches.

In Douglas' vision, the 'man of flesh' meets his death with an 'infinite lightness'; it is neither a notable nor a dramatic process – in stark contrast to Owen's rhetorical observation in **Dulce Et Decorum Est** where man is 'guttering, choking drowning'. In fact, death is such a dominant influence upon Douglas' desert-experience that it is personified and revered ('Death ... hears'). Death is 'the beast' upon Douglas' back (his **Bete Noire** fragments).

In the 1942 poem **Mersa**, Keith Douglas expands his philosophy of life – or, rather, his philosophy of death. Here, his cool and logical vision is of a man – not unlike himself – who is effectively dead. Because Douglas' desert-experience has rendered him into a 'soldier who is going to die', the fish make a plausible assumption:

.... the logical little fish
converge and nip the flesh,
imagining I am one of the dead.

The astute 'little fish' (who are ironically more alive than Douglas himself) recognise that 'a shadow is a man when the mosquito death approaches'. In **Simplify Me When I'm Dead**, Douglas' technique is at its most unobtrusive. He does not perceive humans as 'sentimental

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or emotional', but as physical beings who will decay in time. Men are made up not of abstract thoughts and feelings, but of flesh and bone:

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

Douglas does not wish to be adored after his death. He recognises the position of each individual in the great scheme of things ('a minute man') and thereby refuses to allow any sentiment/pity to cloud his stark vision of reality. In coolly shortening 'I am' to 'I'm', he wishes to express his lack of involvement in the business of living. This being so, he wants 'Time's wrong way Telescope' to 'simplify' him not merely after he is dead, but even while he still lives. Such an unobtrusive rhyme-scheme is clinically functional in the description of his impersonal stance. This impersonality is expressed by chain-rhymes which are far from immediately obvious ('earth' ... 'birth'/ 'seen' ... 'spleen') and so aspire towards a nonchalant poise.

Keith Douglas demonstrates his technical confidence in a similar manner in **Egyptian Sentry, Corniche, Alexandria** in which he carries out a precise verbal exercise. In this magnificent poem, his pitilessness is again expressed by an unconventional rhyme-scheme which does not draw attention to itself. For example, his full rhyme in one verse ('face'/'place') is replaced by a half-rhyme in the next ('nests'/'coasts'). By means of this form, Douglas can insist that life is neither eventful nor exceptional. The Egyptian sentry's marmoreal visage reflects Douglas' own sustained impassiveness; the guard is oblivious to the sentient world around him ('does not smell its animal smell') and so is the perfect embodiment of his philosophy:

There is no pain, no pleasure, life's no puzzle
but a standing, a leaning, a sleep between coasts
of birth and dying.

Douglas explains that life is merely a dream – or, rather, a nightmare between the two realities of birth and death. Existence cannot accurately be described as 'sentimental or emotional' since there are no lasting extremities of feeling to remind us that we are truly alive: instead, there occur only transient, 'sentient' moments of 'pleasure' or 'pain' in which we are more alive than at most other instants.

In conclusion, Keith Douglas' pitilessness stands in sharp contrast to Owen's emotional desperateness which is charged with 'pity'. Although both poets aim faithfully to tell 'the truth untold', their views of human warfare are almost diametric opposites. Essentially, Owen perceived the loss of each individual as a tragedy and wrote in the 'hope of a better world' ('All a Poet can do today is warn'). At the opposite extreme, Douglas does not see human life as anything worth saving, for he perceives man as a material creature whose days are inevitably eclipsed by the shadow of death. Owen sees a spiritual element in mankind which Douglas effectively overlooks. Keith Douglas' vision of war has a decidedly Yeatsian emphasis: that is, he casts a cold eye on life and death and comes to the balanced conclusion that past time has been and future time will be a waste of breath. Despite Douglas' affinity with Rosenberg, he shares with Owen one common promise:

Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing
of what the others never set eyes on.

The line is from **Desert Flowers**.

Louise Williams wrote this Bookmark whilst she was an Upper Sixth Form pupil at Newcastle-under-Lyme School in Staffordshire in March 1995.

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