

## The Evolution of Keith Douglas's *Vergissmeinnicht*.

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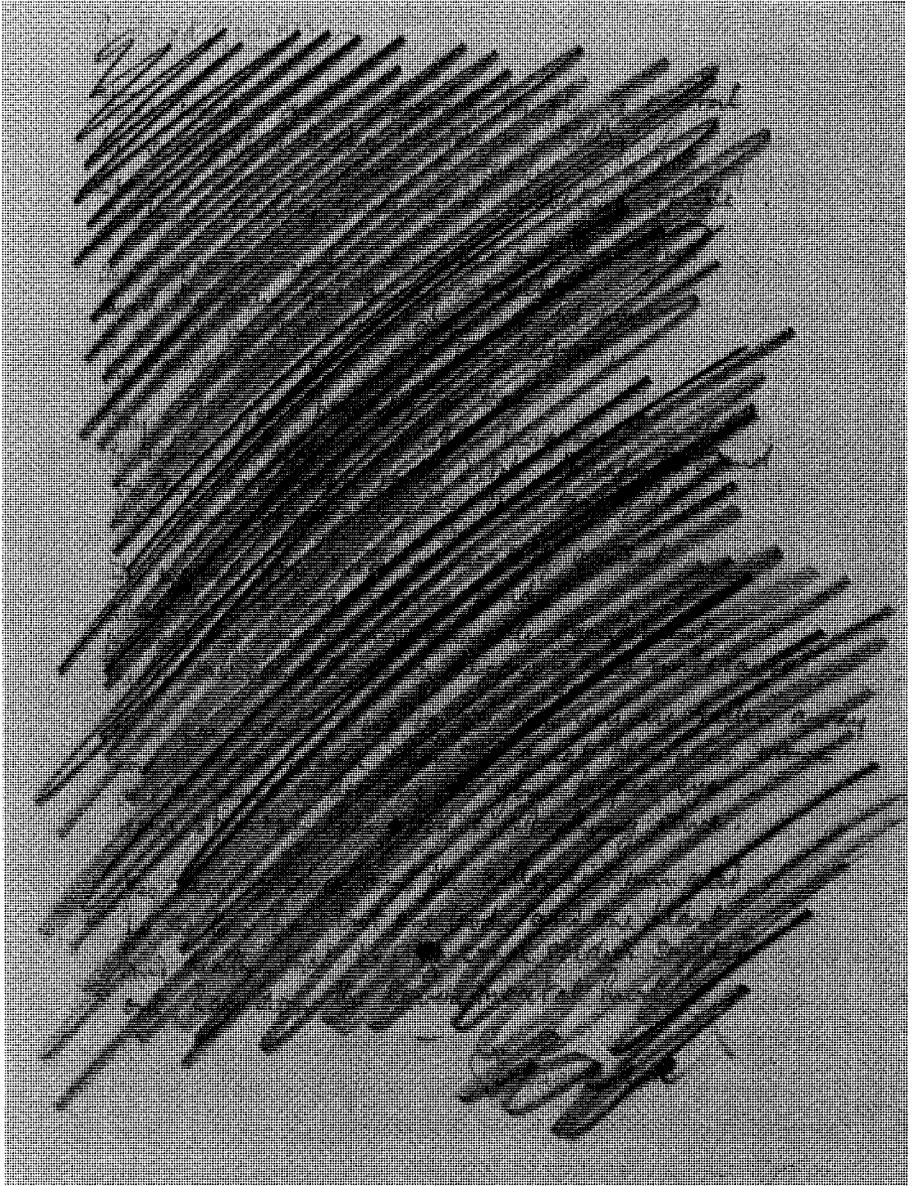
This paper examines the textual history and sources of Keith Douglas's most well-known poem, tracing its evolution from its earliest surviving draft entitled *A Dead Gunner*, through *Elegy for an 88 Gunner* and *The Lover*, to its most refined form in *Vergissmeinnicht*. The first and the last of these versions are then compared and evaluated.

Keith Douglas's posthumous reputation as "the finest British war poet of World War II" and "the finest poet of his generation"<sup>1)</sup> is founded in the main on a handful of poems written between 25th January 1943 and 9th June 1944. His death in action at the age of twenty-four on the second of these dates fulfilled a premonition which had long haunted him that he would meet a violent end.<sup>2)</sup> This foreknowledge colours several of the poems and accounts in retrospect for the compelling sense of urgency with which he embarked on the task of shaping his short life's work for publication in the last few months of his life.

First-hand experience of battle transformed Douglas from a writer of some promise<sup>3)</sup> into a seasoned and versatile poet who had found a powerful inspiration in war. But, for all this, creation never came easy: Douglas was a meticulous craftsman who brought exacting standards to his writing, and who normally carried his poetry through a lengthy process of drafting and revision before settling on

what he wanted. The fourteen pages of drafts of *How to Kill*, one of a number of poems for which his worksheets have survived,<sup>4)</sup> illustrate how radically a poem could alter during this quest. The process can be traced too in his habit of transferring images, lines, stanzas or even whole sections from poem to poem, creating closely related pairs or groups of poems such as *The Sea Bird and Adams; Syria* and *These grasses, ancient enemies; Actors waiting in the wings of Europe* and *On a Return from Egypt*; and *Tel Aviv, Jerusalem* and *Saturday Evening in Jerusalem*.

Such industry has not made life easier for Douglas's editors. Nor has his disconcerting habit of continuing to revise his poems even after sending finished copies to friends or publishers (he had more than fifty of his poems published during his lifetime). It is thus no surprise how widely the texts of several poems have differed in successive editions of his work. One of the more well known of his poems, *Vergissmeinnicht*, is the final product of a particularly complex textual transmission, coming down to us in four distinct versions, two in manuscript and two in printed form. The earliest is an autograph draft entitled *A Dead Gunner* written out neatly in the endpapers of Douglas's copy of *Selected Poems* (comprising poems by Douglas, J. C. Hall and Norman Nicholson, and published in February 1943),<sup>5)</sup> and deleted with bold zigzag pencil strokes so as to render it almost indecipherable. The presence of the sole copy of this version of the poem in the endpapers of a book which we know did not come into the poet's possession until sometime after 10th June, plus the vague ascription "Tunisia 1943" following the poem, are of help in tracing something of its early history. They allow us to narrow down the probable period of its composition to between 6th May and 14th June, the duration of the poet's stay in Tunisia,



The manuscript of *A Dead Gunner*.

and to link its inception with that of his campaign journal, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, and the earliest drafts of *Sportsmen*, *Enfidaville* and *How to Kill*. In corroboration, there seems to be internal evidence for dating in the poem's reference to "the campaign" being over (line 8), presumably an allusion to the surrender of the German and Italian forces on 14th May 1943.

Here is a transcript of the poem, conjectural areas shown in brackets:<sup>6)</sup>

*A Dead Gunner*

Three weeks since pierced by flung metal  
 the sound steel broke beside my belly  
 drew [us back shattered]: the turret in a flurry  
 of blood & Bilby quite still, dribbling spittle,

and we advanced & knocked out that gun  
 and the crew got away somehow  
 to skulk in the mountains until now  
 the campaign over. [But] they left one,

they left you, perhaps the boy  
 to whom Steffi has written *Vergissmeinnicht*  
 on this photograph in the ditch. Perhaps the hand  
 that gave Evans & Bilby their last gift

For we see you with a sort of content  
 Abased, [&] seeming to have paid  
 mocked by your own durable equipment

the metal beneath your decaying head undecayed.

Yet she would weep to see how you are fallen away  
and on your [black skin] the great blowflies move  
and the dust gathering in your paper eye  
your stomach open in a stinking cave.

Yes, here the lover and the killer lie mingled  
for the two had but one body and one heart  
and death, that had a cruel soldier singled  
out, has done the lover mortal hurt.

*Tunisia 1943*

Rough-hewn though this may seem when set beside *Vergissmeinnicht*, the poem which grew out of it, *A Dead Gunner* has all the hallmarks of a finished poem. Its relationship to later versions is most clearly apparent in the last three stanzas which, particularly in the cases of the fourth and sixth, differ in only minor detail. In marked contrast, only a very small fraction of stanzas one to three survived subsequent revision. For these the poet draws on the comparatively recent and still vivid experience, related on pp. 123-5 of his journal, of his tank taking a direct hit and one of his crew being wounded. The poem's recapitulation of the incident provides a crude but effective opening but, eked out to fill gaps in the next two stanzas, it leaves them with an unmistakably provisional feel. Viewed retrospectively, one half needing major revision, the other half only very minor changes, *A Dead Gunner* seems a curiously broken-backed poem. Why Douglas needed to revise part of it so radically I hope to clarify later in this paper. First let us look at the

poem's probable sources and its evolution over the next few months.

A search, in vain, through *Alamein to Zem Zem* for the source of the poem's main incident, the return to the scene of a violent duel with an 88mm gun, suggests that *A Dead Gunner*, like most of Douglas's poems, is a collage of diverse materials imaginatively welded into a single whole. The opening paragraph of his journal reveals how carefully Douglas scanned his battlefield experiences for data of artistic significance, and how the preoccupations of his poetry emerged quite naturally as the turmoil receded in time:

"I observed these battles partly as an exhibition — that is to say that I went through them a little like a visitor from the country going to a great show, or like a child in a factory — a child sees the brightness and efficiency of steel machines and endless belts slapping round and round, without caring or knowing what it is all there for. When I could order my thoughts I looked for more significant things than appearances; I still looked — I cannot avoid it — for something decorative, poetic or dramatic.

The geography of the country in which I spent those few months is already as vague to me as if I had learnt it from an atlas much longer ago. The dates have slipped away. The tactical lessons have been learnt by someone else. But what remains in my mind — a flurry of violent impressions — is vivid enough. Against a backcloth of indeterminate landscapes of moods and smells, dance the black and bright incidents." (*Alamein*, p. 15)<sup>7</sup>

The firm grip on Douglas's imagination of certain heightened moments in his experience is confirmed by the obsessive way they keep reappearing in his work. One such incident took place near the

start of his second week of fighting, during the final phase of the Battle of El Alamein. A night attack on German positions by a combined force of tanks and infantry was repelled with heavy losses. Two further assaults were launched and the Germans were finally dislodged. Here is part of Douglas's account of the third assault:

“We began to creep forward, swinging west again to face the enemy. As we advanced, I remembered how we had sat so long during my first action within a stone's throw of enemy infantry, and I began to look very carefully at the trenches we passed. About two hundred yards from the German derelicts, which were now furiously belching inky smoke, I looked down into the face of a man lying hunched up in a pit. His expression of agony seemed so acute and urgent, his stare so wild and despairing, that for a moment I thought him alive. He was like a cleverly posed waxwork, for his position



suggested a paroxysm, an orgasm of pain. He seemed to move and writhe. But he was stiff. 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. He had tried to cover his wounds with towels against the flies. His haversack lay open, from which he had taken towels and dressings. His water-bottle lay tilted with the cork out. Towels and haversack were dark with dried blood, darker still with a great concourse of flies. This picture, as they say, told a story. It filled me with useless pity." (*Alamein*, pp. 50-1)

This is by far the most harrowing of all the descriptions of dead soldiers in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, and defines an experience which clearly had had a profound effect on Douglas. It provided him with a tale which he would go on telling and retelling almost as compulsively as the ancient mariner told his. In "The Little Red Mouth", a short story which possibly predates the journal,<sup>8</sup> he transfers the experience to a fictional context. The title is a translation of "et la bouche vermeillette", a line in a poem that the narrator (a tank commander like Douglas) is reading during a halt in an offensive. The words prompt a wistful recollection of a girlfriend, Sylvie, "looking up out of the corner of her black eyes, under the long Syrian lashes, saying: 'Je suis jolie, hein? Dis moi, j'ai un joli corps?' in the very tone of voice of the poem." The reverie is cut short by the signal to advance and, as the tank moves forward, the line still echoing in his head, the commander scans some nearby weapon pits for hidden snipers. They contain only "the usual litter of packs, mess-tins, ammunition and letters," but in the last of them there is something more:

“It was like a carefully posed waxwork. He lay propped against one end of the pit, with his neck stretched back, mouth open, dust on his tongue. Eyes open, dulled with dust; and the face, yellowish with dust, a doll’s or an effigy’s. He had a woollen cap on his head. The blood on his shirt was brown, hardened until the cloth was cardboard: he had opened his haversack and taken out towels to wrap round his legs against the flies. But the blood had soaked through the towels and the flies had defeated him. A crowd of flies covered him: there were black congregations of them wherever the patches of blood were, and they were crawling on his face in ones and twos. His left hand was raised, supported in the air apparently by rigor mortis, the fingers crooked as though taking hold. It was this seeming to be arrested in motion, which made the pose so vivid. The right hand clutched together a corner of the towel, as if he had seized it that moment, when a wave of pain washed over him. Pain, a climax or orgasm of pain, was expressed in his face and attitude as I would not have believed a motionless body and countenance could express it. It is not too much to say his position was a cry of pain.

I looked at him, trembling with horror, stunned into involuntary speech, saying over and over again, in an audible whisper: ‘et la bouche vermeillette.’ ”<sup>9</sup>)

And with this the story ends. Though the particulars of setting are different in *A Dead Gunner*, the intensity of the close-up is much the same. It condenses the story’s detail into the affective shorthand of three images: flies crawling over the corpse’s blackened skin, dust gathering in an eye, and a gaping stomach wound. There are also clear resemblances in design: most notably the accommoda-

tion in both of an apparently incongruous romantic inset (prompted by a verse line or inscription in a foreign language) which unexpectedly colours the speaker's reaction to the corpse.

In contrast with these somewhat tenuous connections, the incident which opens the poem, the duel between a tank and an 88mm anti-aircraft gun, is close in certain details to an encounter which took place in the Libyan Desert in January 1943. It was Douglas's first brush with death and, as such, his vivid record of the experience dominates the later pages of his journal. The narrative comes closest to the poem in the passages I have italicised:

"As we passed behind the Grant, labouring in second gear, a 50-mm. shot came through the side of our turret with an immense clang. *The tank stopped and rolled back a few yards.* My first sensation was that the whole turret had collapsed inwards on us and was pinning us in. I couldn't open my eyes, the right side of my face seemed to be very sore, and there was a small pain in my left leg.... Inside Dunn, the driver, lay with his eyes closed, his face chalky and *his mouth open*, showing a few yellow teeth and a *lolling tongue*.... But the engine of my Crusader was still running: the shot had made a clean round hole in the underside of the turret, *and must have passed within a few inches of my stomach* and smashed against the base of the six-pounder." (*Alamein*, pp. 123-5)

Douglas adapts the incident to the poem's needs by altering the calibre of the gun that fired the shell (the 88mm gun was one of the most formidable weapons on the battlefield), contriving the deaths of his two crewmen and by splattering the canvas with a liberal helping of gore. Because he was to expunge most of it from later versions,

the presence of this documentary material gives *A Dead Gunner* the distinction of being the poem, among some three dozen written by Douglas during the North African Campaign, which most directly addresses his experience as a tank commander.

Douglas's regiment moved from Tunisia to Homs in Libya after 14th June, and sometime between this date and the end of July he revised *A Dead Gunner* to produce a radically different poem with a new title, *Elegy for an 88 Gunner*, and a new ascription, "Homs, Tripolitania, 1943." Though it varies in only minor details from the two later versions, its closer proximity to *A Dead Gunner* can be seen both in its title and its retention of the earlier poem's phrasing in certain variant readings (most notably "mocked by his durable equipment", cf. "mocked by your own durable equipment"). It was printed posthumously in the appendix of 16 poems attached to the 1946 edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem*.

The next step in the poem's history is much more conjectural. In a letter of September 3rd to Edmund Blunden,<sup>10</sup> his former tutor at Oxford, Douglas refers to a revised version of a poem, unnamed in the letter, but which seems from the description to fit one or other version of *Vergissmeinnicht*:

"I don't think you have seen this poem — or at least, not the revised version. I am afraid it may be a bit grisly for T. L. S: but on the other hand not 'clever' enough for Tambimuttu and his clan. What I am aiming at is a series of pretty simple pictures."

Blunden had arranged the publication of two of Douglas's poems in the *Times Literary Supplement* earlier in the year (*Devils* and *The Trumpet*) and Douglas seems to be requesting a similar favour

here. But if this does refer to the present poem, it is impossible to tell which version of it (the more than one month old *Elegy for an 88 Gunner*, *Vergissmeinnicht* itself, or another version called *The Lover*) accompanied the letter. Whatever the case, both later versions seem to have been in existence before Douglas left Egypt in November, and with troubling rumours in the air in mid-October of an imminent move to a new battle front, he left copies of most of his war poems with the editors of the Cairo literary magazine, *Personal Landscape*. The bundle of poems included *Vergissmeinnicht*<sup>11</sup> which was eventually published in this magazine in 1944, probably in the summer number. It is this version of the poem which has been printed as its definitive text<sup>12</sup> in every edition of Keith Douglas's poetry since 1951:

*Vergissmeinnicht*

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.

- 5 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  
 10 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  
 15 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  
 20 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.

*Tunisia 1943*<sup>13)</sup>

This leaves just one more version of the poem: a manuscript text entitled *The Lover*, and followed, like *Vergissmeinnicht*, by the misleading ascription *Tunisia 1943*<sup>14)</sup>. Its differences from the other later versions can be seen in the chart of variant readings (minor variations in punctuation ignored) which follows.

*Vergissmeinnicht* shares five variant readings with *Elegy* to *The Lover's* three, while *Vergissmeinnicht* and *The Lover* have only two in common, an equation which seems to indicate that *The Lover* is the latest. But a counter-argument based in part on stylistic impressions would put it second in sequence with as evidence its retention of "durable" in line 16 (salvaged from l.15 of *Elegy*), and the greater

<i>Elegy</i>	<i>The Lover</i>	<i>Vergissmeinnicht</i>
5. his gun	the gun	his gun
6. overshadows him	overshadows him	overshadowing
8. like	it was like	like
9. And smiling	And smiling	Look. Here
10. is a	the soiled	the dishonoured
11. written	written	put
15. mocked by his durable	and mocked at by his own	and mocked at by his own
16. hard and good	durable	hard and good
21. the killer	killer	killer
22. who had	having	who had
23. and Death	here Death	And death

polish of *Vergissmeinnicht*'s readings in lines 9, 10 and 11. Without new evidence, the provenance of *The Lover* must remain as shrouded in mystery as the two lines of literary German (tantalising but inconclusive evidence that Douglas was working from a particular photograph) which follow this version of the poem:

Mein mund ist stumm, aber mein Aug'es spricht  
Und was es sagt ist kurz — Vergissmeinnicht.

Steffi<sup>15)</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Though they vary from each other in only comparatively minor detail, *Elegy for an 88 Gunner*, *The Lover* and *Vergissmeinnicht* are markedly different from *A Dead Gunner*, a fact which invites us to speculate why Douglas should have remodelled this early draft so

radically. Its opening stanzas certainly look makeshift, and seem too literally grounded in whatever objective facts provided data for them. In the third stanza, for instance, the speaker displays a curious hesitancy over the ownership of the photograph, linking it to the corpse only by the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence: “*perhaps* the boy/ to whom Steffi has written *Vergissmeinnicht*/ on this photograph in the ditch.” The reservation has the effect of undermining the account of Steffi’s grief later by accommodating a troubling suspicion that her real lover may be one of those who “got away somehow/ to skulk in the mountains”. There is similar faltering over a matter more directly related to the indictment of the gunner, the question of what rôle he played in the deaths of Evans and Bilby, and but for the curious impression that these conjectures seem to serve a deeper purpose, they might simply be dismissed as signs of carelessness. In fact, they provide markers for a powerful emotional current that surges through the poem, subverting normal logic (“*Perhaps* the hand that gave Evans and Bilby their last gift/ *For* we see you...” ) and muddying its finer feelings and insights. It wells in the violent experience related in the first stanza, and manifests itself as a brooding appetite for revenge and redress, one that its agents, the speaker and his comrades, only half understand or are prepared only half to admit (“a sort of content”). Logic skews under its pressure in the second and third stanzas, which may be crudely paraphrased thus: “I don’t know which of you skulking cowards fired the round that killed our mates, but that makes no difference. You’re still around and you’ll do to work out our anger.” Thus, the dead “boy”, from the temporary innocence in love bestowed by Steffi’s picture, is summarily condemned to fit the rôle of “cruel soldier” (the poem’s precise syntactical echoing: “perhaps the boy...this

photograph...Perhaps the hand...their last gift” catches the mental act of censorship).

There is a similar perversity at work in Steffi’s airing of the lover’s viewpoint in the fifth stanza, where the grim inventory projected through her eyes seems devised less to evoke pity for her or the dead soldier than to feed the speaker’s atavistic “content” at seeing his enemy “paid” back in kind (“stomach open in a stinking cave” echoes “the sound steel broke beside my belly”) for his merciless assault. Steffi thus ornaments the tank crew’s victory with her grief and sorrow, her tears making the more complete their exultation over her dead lover, like the display of battle spoils in a triumphal march. Lending power to this subversive undertow (and all unique to this version) are the speaker’s direct address to his enemy, his unwillingness to mince the more hideous facts of war and his violently reactive language (“the turret in a flurry of blood...dribbling spittle”; “on your black skin the great blowflies move”; “stomach open in a stinking cave”). These narrow and intensify the vehemence of his feelings, and give it an irresistible coercive force that drives the reader before it.

Fine as some of its details undeniably are, *A Dead Gunner* is confused and weakened by this surplus of emotion, and left badly in need of a floodgate (such as the “extrospective”<sup>16)</sup> i.e. laconic, reined, objective reportage which characterises Douglas’s work at its finest) against the energies which pour into the poem from dark sources in the writer’s experience. Douglas was ever apt to learn from his mistakes and, at a period when he was earnestly reflecting on the nature and function of his craft in time of war,<sup>17)</sup> *A Dead Gunner*, soon to be censored and suppressed by its own best critic,<sup>18)</sup> clearly provided a valuable object lesson on the dangers of

a too unguarded attitude to the turbulent forces inherent in his subject: "To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others". The revisions of the next few months were to focus on imposing a more rigid aesthetic distance between poet and poem. A drastic but necessary first step was the excision of the violent incident which opens the poem, and an almost complete reconception of its speaker.

*Vergissmeinnicht* begins with a return journey in space and time to review a nightmare. In a style appropriately austere, the first stanza sketches the dream-like eeriness of the now deserted warscape and the tight-lipped, edgy state of mind of the speaker and his comrades. Their return to this place, though unexplained, seems more than a coincidence: the premise of "found", repeated twice in line 3, is that something has been sought, and there is a hint of a participation in something unutterable in the charged starkness of "the place" and "the soldier". The deferred main clause of the stanza's single sentence, the halting tread of the rhythm, the discordant jangle of rhymes and repetitions, all seem likewise to conspire to put off an unwelcome encounter. When this comes in the final line, we observe that Douglas has eschewed the direct emotional tack of *A Dead Gunner* for the cool, understated reportage of the best of the desert poems:

... 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.

(*Cairo Jag*)

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.

(*How to Kill*)

Thus, the three week old corpse is not described as “decaying” or “stinking”, as in the earlier poem, but as “sprawling in the sun” which, with the absence of a modifier before “soldier”, generates the authentic if unnerving first impression that it is stretched out sun-bathing.

The surreal flavour, which *Vergissmeinnicht* shares with the first group of Douglas’s post-Alamein poems and the most powerful moments in his prose, spills over from this detail (the obscenely life-like posture of the dead man supplying a retroactive gloss on “nightmare” ) into incongruities like the frowning gun barrel which serves as the corpse’s sunshade and the impatient shorthand of “hit my tank with one”. The sight of the unscathed and still menacing gun also activates the terse flashback to the speaker’s duel with it, a trauma aptly framed by sudden leaps of syntax and the hyperbolic impact of “like the entry of a demon”. The flashback is an impressive example of Douglas salvage work, condensing two and a half stanzas of *A Dead Gunner* into as many lines, while coordinating them perfectly with the revised character data and chronology of the

reworked poem.<sup>19)</sup>

“Look”, one of many summons to observe closely in Douglas’s poetry (for another example see the lines from *How to Kill* above), dispels the speaker’s reverie and draws us with him into a closer scrutiny of the scene. His eye moves with a quickening curiosity to a picture of the dead gunner’s girl (“smiling” in *Elegy* and *The Lover*), and if he is touched by compassion as he reads her now ironic words, *Do not forget me*, it is firmly reined back and held in check. Such squandering of emotion would be but “useless pity” to these seasoned fighting men whose stolid pragmatism is seen in their plundering of the gunpit and seizure of this most precious of the dead soldier’s possessions, his lover’s picture.<sup>20)</sup> Though but embodied in a photograph she too is now their “spoil” and perquisite, and theirs to do as they will. Steffi is thus doubly “dishonoured”<sup>21)</sup>: by these, and by her lover who has let her entrusted image fall into degrading hands, and forgotten both her and their contract (her simple, solemn pledge of allegiance is evoked in “copybook gothic script”) in the infidelity of death. But the contract’s obligations do not stop there, for the picture and its inscription impose a moral burden of similar gravity on its new possessors: that of never forgetting the cost in humane values of their military triumph. The injunction *Vergissmeinnicht* thus acquires a special resonance which more than justifies its choice as title for this later version of the poem.

This moment of sharp scrutiny contains a paradigm: the claims of love and life disputing those of war and death, and the lover and the soldier locked in an interminable conflict in which neither can afford to give an inch of ground. The speaker’s inner recoil before this clash of values is not explicitly stated, but its effect is registered in the ideological confrontation of the next two stanzas. The first of

these voices the claims of war and death. The speaker, briefly individualised in the second stanza ("my tank", l.7), here prudently merges his viewpoint back into the collective "we" of the tank crew. They are the upholders of a military code of honour with roots deep in the past, "knights in camouflaged armour"<sup>22)</sup> who, without a single trace of facetiousness, talk of "spoil", "dishonoured" pictures and "abased" corpses. The killing of the gunner they take matter-of-factly, a mere settling of accounts in the impartial ledger of war, and as his allegiance was to the wrong side, his death is nothing more than he deserved. This is no generalised enemy, however, but one who had sought to take their lives and, though tempered by a decent reserve ("almost with content"), they can admit to a darker satisfaction at seeing him at their feet, decaying and degraded. It is manifest in more sinister form in their relishing of the way the dead man's weapon has stubbornly outlasted him, an irony which, since it takes no cognisance of their own mortality, finally shifts the perspective to a bleakly inhuman one, the speaker's perverse misapplication of the word "good" hinting at the callousness involved.<sup>23)</sup>

Mediating between these extremes, and opposing the confident pulse of the stanza's rhythm, are traces of a disquiet similar to that detected in the first stanza. It is picked up first in the speaker's dangling tentativeness: "*almost with content*", "*seeming to have paid*", and then glimpsed sheltering behind the bravado of the tank crew's participation in Death's irony. What is it that limits their content and upsets the figures on the balance sheet? Perhaps the insidious whisper that their own accounts have yet to be paid, and that the gunner's too palpable mortality is the precise figure of their own. Though they model their nonchalance on their tank's ar-

moured plating and their values on their weaponry, this encounter seems to leave these somewhat dented and to lend their triumph a reflective cast.

The fifth stanza, like the fourth, confronts an incongruity: there immutable gun mocked mutable gunner, here a lover tries to fit the cherished memory of her loved one to a vile thing etched with decay. But neither the words nor the tears belong to Steffi: for this is but a mock-up of her viewpoint as constructed by her lover's killer. His version of Steffi is a weeping stereotype, a ventriloquist's doll which can express freely that which for sanity's sake the soldier must suppress. Her grief is thus the shadow of his grief. But though prefaced by the softened cadences of her weeping, the description of the dead gunner is not at all emotional: for even as the speaker's eye selects the details that would touch the girl most deeply, it insists on maintaining a firm objective distance from them. The effect of this strategy can be assessed by placing this stanza beside its counterpart in *A Dead Gunner*. The images of the earlier poem are kinetic and agitating ("the great blowflies move", "dust gathering in your paper eye", "your stomach open in a stinking cave" ), and reach for a single powerful reaction: revulsion. Those of *Vergissmeinnicht*, on the other hand, cohere into a pictorially disciplined tableau, which integrates the participating viewpoints, those of Steffi and the speaker, weighing her impulse to express emotion against his to restrain it, her grief and sorrow against his sang-froid, and her tenderness against a rugged masculine reserve, a synthesis which, by encompassing extremes, allows freer play to the imagination. Vincent Sherry's perceptive commentary<sup>24</sup> on Douglas's remodelling of the early poem's "your stomach open in a stinking cave" into "and the burst stomach like a cave" of *Vergiss-*

*meinnicht* makes a return over the same ground redundant, but a complementary effect can be traced in the simplification of *A Dead Gunner's* visually particular "on your black skin" to "on his skin", with its more sensuous resonance and, coupled with the plaintive music of the stanza's opening, its poignant glimpse of their intimacy. There is similar editing in the second half of the line where "great blowflies" is superseded by "swart flies". The archaism "swart", whatever new connotations it brings (critics refer approvingly to its Teutonic flavour and special associations with evil),<sup>25</sup> clearly fulfils its main task of shifting the attention from the size, egg-laying and similar repellent aspects of the insects onto a single quality, their blackness. Here then, as throughout the poem, there is a trading of immediate affective impact for a broader imaginative accessibility which leaves much more to the reader. Viewed from a slightly different angle, Douglas is observed here dislocating the conventional reactions to scenes of carnage (shock, pity and anger) into a disciplined and thoughtful perspective which is at once the hallmark of his artistic maturation and one of his major contributions to twentieth century poetry.

Beyond their ostensible function of polarising the soldier's and the lover's viewpoints within the formal framework of debate, the fourth and fifth stanzas project a kind of psychomachia whose components are the inner contentions which rack the speaker. Thus the tank crew, though little more than observers on the sidelines of the speaker's *agon*, provide a powerful means of projecting one of the warring voices in his consciousness, while Steffi provides such another. The tank commander's unanimity with his men is, in this sense, a convenient fiction through which he can externalise his darker impulses, in much the same way that the accusing eyes that

look out from the photograph and the weeping eyes that scan the corpse are a means of holding up mirrors to something within him more scrupulous and fine.

Stanza six carries the poem's oppositions and incongruities to a final synthesis. Our mysterious amalgam of flesh and spirit ("one body and one heart") images within its paradox the oneness of the opposed forces, creative and destructive, which impel our being. Thus, "the lover and killer are mingled" both in the troubled heart of the speaker (clearly premised by the merger of rôles in stanza five) and in the gunner's decaying flesh, and though this paradox cannot undo that death, assuage the lover's grief nor expunge the speaker's guilt, his ability to formulate it seems a vital first step in the healing of his inner schism.

From here we might expect the meditation to proceed to some final fusion of self with dead self image, the premonition which haunted Douglas's imagination and concludes so many of his poems. Instead, we move in quite the contrary direction. Death, we are told, when he singled out this soldier, mistook the lover and the killer for one ("singled"), and thus hurt an innocent party. The irony seems as contrived as it is obvious, and if it succeeds in exposing the absurdity of our dualism, it does so at the cost of papering over the inner crisis with a facile resignation before Death's randomness. We are right back where we were at the close of the fourth stanza with the speaker once more taking shelter in the might of Death's mockery, though here for a different reason: he who gave the order to take out the gun (and inadvertently took out the gunner) sounds suspiciously like someone trying to shift the blame. The resolution thus comes a bit too pat and, short of elevating the poem's antinomies to a higher plane, it leaves us merely with a

workaday truth masquerading as something profound.

That the ending manages neither to convince nor satisfy may owe something to the fact that, transferred virtually intact from *A Dead Gunner*, it still carries traces of an earlier version of the speaker: one not overly given to introspection and subject to a certain deviousness in argument. It is likely that Douglas saw no such disjunction and that, unable to resolve the psychomachia by any other means, found in the original ending a ready-made and conveniently tidy cut-off.<sup>26)</sup> Whatever the case, its tranquillizing function seems prepared for by the strategy of stanza five where, peering through the lover's eyes at the man he killed, the tank commander checks the impulse to lay bare his real feelings by his clinically detached reporting. From there it is but an easy step to complete self-possession and stiff upper-lipped immunity, of which the too neatly tailored paradoxes (and subtle untruth) of the final stanza are the tell-tale signs. The horror crouching in the speaker's heart, and immanent from the first, is thus neither confronted nor exorcised.

That task was reserved for *How to Kill* which never falters in its inward scrutiny as, step by step, its sniper protagonist instructs us in the art of killing.<sup>27)</sup> Undoubtedly Douglas's finest poem, it complements *Vergissmeinnicht's* lover/killer paradox with its own compelling vision of our antinomian make-up, and carries his brief life's exploration to its furthest reaches.

### Acknowledgements and Notes

I am grateful to the staff of the Brotherton Collection at Leeds University Library for their assistance in this research project and for permission to reproduce the manuscript of Keith Douglas's *A*

*Dead Gunner*. I am indebted to J. C. Hall and the Keith Douglas estate for permission to reproduce the line drawing of a dead soldier (taken from Douglas's *Alamein to Zem Zem*, ed. Desmond Graham, Faber & Faber, London & Boston, 1992, p. 50). It is one of three similar pen and ink drawings of the scene prepared by Douglas as illustrations for his journal. The passages from *Cairo Jag* and *How to Kill*, and the text of *Vergissmeinnicht*, are taken from *Keith Douglas The Complete Poems*, ed. Desmond Graham, Oxford University Press, London & New York, 1978, and reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.

- 1) These evaluations are taken from Desmond Graham's essay "Keith Douglas" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, volume 27, *Poets of Great Britain and Ireland 1945-60*, ed. Vincent Sherry, Gale Research, Detroit, 1984, p. 81.
- 2) For biographical details about Douglas I am heavily indebted to Desmond Graham's *Keith Douglas, 1920-1944: A Biography*, Oxford University Press, London & New York, 1974.
- 3) T. S. Eliot wrote to Douglas in February 1942 after receiving a selection of his poems through Edmund Blunden: "My impression so far is that you have completed one phase which begins with the very accomplished juvenilia and that you have started on another which you have not yet mastered." Eliot's letter is reproduced on pp. 117-8 of Desmond Graham's biography of Keith Douglas.
- 4) A full account of the extensive archive of worksheets, drafts, and typescripts of Keith Douglas's poems and related materials in the British Library collection is to be found in Jenny Stratford's *The Arts Council Collection of Modern Literary Manuscripts*, Turret Books, London, 1974, pp. 44-61, 118-130.
- 5) This copy of *Selected Poems* is in the Brotherton Collection at Leeds University Library which now contains the main part of Douglas's surviving library.
- 6) Readings in lines 10, 14, 18, 22 and 23, and punctuation in lines 21 and 23 of the present transcript differ from those in the transcript of *A Dead*

- Gunner* given on pp. 123–4 of Desmond Graham's *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, Carcanet Press, Manchester, 1985. The manuscript has two corrections in Keith Douglas's hand: in line 20 one or two letters (possibly "ed") have been blacked out after "open" and in line 23 "the" has been cancelled and "a" substituted.
- 7) All references to *Alamein to Zem Zem* are to the most recent edition, edited by Desmond Graham and published by Faber & Faber, London and Boston, 1992.
  - 8) Douglas submitted his stories to *Lilliput* which chose to publish "Death of a Horse" in July 1944. Appended to the story is a biographical note, presumably by Douglas: "At Wadi Zem Zem he tripped over a mine; and started writing short stories during subsequent convalescence..." If reliable, this would indicate that Douglas may have begun work on "The Little Red Mouth" as early as January/February 1943.
  - 9) The story is reproduced on pp. 139–41 of *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*.
  - 10) The letter is on pp. 130–1, *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*.
  - 11) No manuscript version of the poem has survived.
  - 12) Though no one has disputed the selection of *Vergissmeinnicht* as definitive text, certain critics, most notably Geoffrey Hill ("I in Another Place." Homage to Keith Douglas." *Stand*, vol.6, no.4, 1964), have argued the superiority of certain readings in other versions of the poem.
  - 13) All quotations from Douglas's poetry, except where otherwise stated, are taken from *Keith Douglas The Complete Poems*, ed. Desmond Graham, Oxford University Press, London & New York, 1978. A brief summary of the textual and publication history of *Vergissmeinnicht*, a list of variants, and the full text of *The Lover*, appear on p. 140 of this edition.
  - 14) The manuscript of the poem, on headed notepaper of the Middle East RAC Base Depot, is in the British Library, BL53773, f.65.
  - 15) My mouth is silent, but my eye speaks  
And what it says is brief — forget me not.  
Steffi
  - 16) From Douglas's letter of 10th June 1943 to the poet John Hall, answering Hall's criticisms of his poetry:  
"The nastiest and truest thing I can say is that you are getting too involved and precious, chiefly because you now find yourself in a backwater and have nothing to write about that is relevant. The same applied to me in pre-Alamein days and I reacted differently but if

anything produced worse. With regard to your criticism of my stuff, I think you are beginning to condemn all that is not your own favourite brand, and are particularly anti *réportage* and extrospective (if the word exists) poetry — which seems to me the sort that has to be written just now, even if it is not attractive.” The full text of the letter is reproduced on p. 121 of *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*.

- 17) Douglas sent Hall another letter on 26th June, acknowledging receipt of the copy of *Selected Poems* whose endpapers would soon accommodate *A Dead Gunner*. The advice to Hall here, and in a much long letter of 10th August, reflects Douglas's deep conviction of the need to discipline emotion in poetry by a scrupulous attention to the observed facts:

“I think you need a little more cynicism, or should I say indifference to emotion once felt, in your poetic make-up...You are too much affected. I don't want that you should lose your sensitiveness, or even some of it. But that you should be deeply affected, and yet not show it so much — a little more of the traditional Englishman — however much you deplore him — would make your poetry stronger and more impressive.”

(26th June)

“But my object (and I don't give a damn about my duty as a poet) is to write true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in a line. My rhythms, which you find enervated, are carefully chosen to enable the poems to be *read* as significant speech: I see no reason to be either musical or sonorous about things at present ..... I suppose I reflect the cynicism and the careful absence of expectation (it is not quite the same as apathy) with which I view the world ..... Now I will write of [war], and perhaps one day cynic and lyric will meet and make me a balanced style ..... Perhaps all this may make it easier for you to understand why I am writing the way I am and why I shall never go back to the old forms. You may even begin to see some virtue in it. To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and to others.”

(10th August)

The full texts of these letters are reproduced on pp. 122-3 and 127-8 respectively of *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*.

- 18) Desmond Graham speculates on a very different possible reason for Douglas's deletion of the poem in “Keith Douglas's Books” in *The Book Collector*, no.30, Summer 1981.
- 19) “Perhaps the hand/ that gave Evans & Bilby their last gift” possibly pro-

vided “*Open Open/ Behold a gift designed to kill*” in *How to Kill*.

- 20) Though looting was officially disapproved, soldiers eagerly engaged in looting from enemy tanks, dug-outs and sometimes from corpses. Looted goods or the “dogmess”, as it was called, provided a valuable source of extra rations, clothing and, of course, souvenirs. Douglas described his own participation in looting in several places in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, and as a consequence was criticised by a friend of his mother’s, Jocelyn Baber. In a significant parallel to his warning against sentimentality in the August letter to Hall, quoted above, Douglas replied to her in a letter of 28th May 1944 (reproduced pp. 153-4, *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*):
- “You want “selectivity” again — a suppression of something ugly but true...it’s a picture of a dogmess; so you can’t cut the dogmess out — and I am afraid I refuse to cut it out to suit the connoisseur sensibilities of yourself, Lavender and Stella or for mother, whose objections are based on her incorrigible sentimentality ..... (I’m not sure that the instinct for selectivity isn’t based on sentimentality anyhow).”
- 21) Compare the weaker connotative charge of *The Lover*’s reading, “soiled”.
- 22) From William Scammell’s *Keith Douglas: A Study*, Faber & Faber, London & Boston, 1988, p. 108.
- 23) Scammell, *ibid.* pp. 105-8, comments that “‘his own equipment’ hints at sexual and instinctual drives as well as the literal hardware that outlasts his decaying body”, and traces a broad web of sexual symbolism in the scene: “a soldier sprawled dead beneath the ‘overshadowing’ barrel of his gun; a girl dishonoured in a ‘gunpit’ — suggest a metaphorical rape of both by the destructive forces unleashed by the ‘lover and killer ..... who had one body and one heart’.” For a comparable approach, see Stephen Matterson’s “Douglas’ ‘Vergissmeinnicht’” in *Explicator*, 45, ii, 1987.
- 24) “Hectic Stasis: The War Poetry of Keith Douglas”, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 58, 1988.
- 25) Among recent studies, see Reginald Gibbons’ “A Sharp Enquiring Blade” in *Parnassus*, vol.9, no.1, Spring/Summer 1981, Linda M. Shires’ *British Poetry of the Second World War*, Macmillan, London, 1985, and William Scammell’s *Keith Douglas: A Study*.
- 26) If, as seems likely, the poem referred to in the 3rd September 1943 letter to Blunden is one version or other of *Vergissmeinnicht*, Douglas seems to be going out of his way to emphasise the simplicity of the poem’s conception: “I am afraid it may be a bit grisly for T. L. S.: but on the other

hand not “clever” enough for Tambimuttu and his clan. What I am aiming at is a series of pretty simple pictures. The first of this kind was ‘Christodoulos.’” Is there perhaps an anxiety here that after seeing *How to Kill*, which Douglas had sent him on August 12th, Blunden might consider the present poem rather slight?

- 27) *How to Kill* is examined in a separate paper: “Metaphysics in an Optic Glass: The War Poetry of Keith Douglas” in 広島女学院大学論集, vol. 42, December 1992.