

Keith Douglas, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edmund Blunden

Dawn Bellamy
University of Bristol

In his essay “Poets in This War” (? May 1943), Keith Douglas seeks to explain a perceived lack of Second World War poetry:

Why are there no poets like Owen and Sassoon who lived with the fighting troops and wrote of their experiences while they were enduring them? [...] hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological. (352)

Douglas is voicing his fears concerning the difficulty of writing about war from an original perspective. Speaking ostensibly for all Second World War poets, Douglas betrays his personal doubts, articulating his resistance to writing like the dead, and challenging himself to find what lies beyond the “Almost all”. By naming Owen and Sassoon, Douglas alludes to his struggle to free himself from expectation; the impact of their First World War poetry had led the reading public to expect a certain response from combatant poets between 1939-1945.¹ Douglas attempts to deflect some of the pressure by stating, “it seems to me that the whole body of English war poetry of this war [...] will be created after war is over” (“Poets” 353). However, he is unable to resist a glimpse of the possibility of creating something that is not tautological. In his “Almost all”, Douglas “clear[s] imaginative space for [himself]”, exemplifying Harold Bloom’s notion of the poet trying to free himself from the burden of his predecessors (5). Douglas is aware of the dangers of repetition, and yet maintains an element of belief in his ability to say something new.

Other than “Poets in This War”, Douglas makes little prose comment about the poets of 1914-18, perhaps indicating his wish to be perceived as a poet in his own right rather than one in the continuation of an established tradition. His enlistment and prediction that he would “bloody well make [his] mark in this war”,² alongside his prophesy of his future success as a poet,³ suggest that Douglas had already considered how he

might confront the Great War's poetic legacy in such a way as to maintain his individuality. His essay makes clear his awareness of the soldier-poets of the First World War, and his poetry, too, reflects his association with them, even to the point of a direct address in the instance of "Desert Flowers" (108). Isaac Rosenberg, specifically named by Douglas, and Edmund Blunden, who Douglas knew personally, are among the World War I poets who influenced Douglas's work. These influences and the differing levels of anxiety Douglas's poetry registers in response to them, are the subjects of my inquiry.

Douglas and Rosenberg

The relationship between Douglas and Rosenberg is represented most strikingly in the opening stanza of Douglas's "Desert Flowers": "Living in a wide landscape are the flowers— / Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying—" (*Complete Poems* 108; 1-2). As the poem progresses and the speaker notes how "the body can fill / the hungry flowers" (5-6), Douglas is aware that he is reconfiguring Rosenberg's description in "Break of Day in the Trenches" of "Poppies whose roots are in man's veins" with its connection between the redness of the poppies and the soldiers' blood (Parsons 103; 23). Similarly, Douglas's reference to rodents, the "jerboas" being slain "every hour" by the hawk (3-4), reminds us of Rosenberg's "rat" (4). Consequently, Douglas breaks off at the end of stanza two, declaring emphatically, "But that is not new" (8). By acknowledging Rosenberg's voice, and yet resisting the repetition of his predecessor's observations in order to seek an original response to war, Douglas simultaneously accepts and rejects Rosenberg's legacy. In Bloomian terms, "Desert Flowers" can be seen as a representation of Douglas's anxiety in relation to Rosenberg's influence, an example of "*clinamen*" perhaps — "a swerv[ing] away from his precursor" (Bloom 14) — as Douglas seeks to surpass his predecessor's words by selling his own "secret".

Despite Douglas's striving for difference, significant similarities exist between his poetry and Rosenberg's. Both poets, for instance, have been labelled "detached" owing to their tendency to recoil from explicit sentiment.⁴ When used pejoratively, this description enables critics to question a poet's talent; Geoffrey Grigson, for instance, is unconvinced by Douglas's work, claiming that "his poems transmit no warm, attractive individuality of feeling" (243). On the other hand, detachment can be viewed as a strength, as is evident in F. R. Leavis's comment on Rosenberg:

we must credit him, on the evidence of his best work, with an extraordinarily mature kind of detachment [...]. The spiritual strength manifested in the detachment of his poetry was needed in an almost incredible degree for the writing of it. For it is hardly creditable, though it is an indubitable fact, that he wrote

his best work while a private [...] wrote it in pencil on scraps of paper and in improvised notebooks. (231)

Here, Leavis views Rosenberg's detachment as indicative of his ability to overcome a seemingly impossible situation; that anyone could write poetry under such dreadful circumstances astonishes Leavis, but Rosenberg's ability to write in a "mature" style rather than being overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of his situation only serves to enhance Leavis's admiration for the poet's "genius" (229).

Rosenberg's exceptional creative detachment, particularly in the face of conditions not conducive to artistry, sets him apart from his contemporaries. Wilfred Owen, often read as a poetic spokesman for his generation, exhibits partisan sentiments in his identification with the English soldiers in "Exposure" when he writes "*Our* brains ache" and "*We* only know war lasts" (162; 1 and 12; my emphases). His persona is in the trenches, suffering the exhausting agonies of insomnia as

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...

[...]

Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army

Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey. (11-14)⁵

In contrast, Rosenberg opens "Break of Day in the Trenches" with a less emotive description of the dawn: "The darkness crumbles away. / It is the same old druid Time as ever" (1-2). The effect of the personification is one of familiarity; Rosenberg does not try to separate his experience from that shared by everyone who wakes at dawn, whereas Owen's creation of an alien landscape, a world in which "successive flights of bullets streak the silence" (162; 16), ensures that his personification evokes the unfamiliar for those who had not lived through the horror of the trenches. Unable to detach himself from the soldier's experience in "Exposure" Owen questions, "What are we doing here?", ever alert to the need to emphasise war's futility (162; 10). Rosenberg's persona, unlike Owen's, speaks not only for one army but for both in "Break of Day in the Trenches", relating to the experience of all soldiers, whether English or German. Regardless of nationality, all share the possible fate of being "Sprawled in the bowels of the earth" (17).

Detached from the responsibility of partisan observations, Rosenberg's persona begins by presenting the natural simplicity of the scene. The "queer sardonic rat" (4) exists as a catalyst for the ensuing monologue, and the soldier's reflections imply the futility of war without resorting to explicit polemical rhetoric. Imagining the rat smiling to himself as he passes the soldiers whose lives are at risk, the speaker suggests that something has gone awry in a world which allows a mere animal more chance of survival than those athletic men. His rhetorical questions suggest that the soldiers accept their position; in contrast to Owen's more politically-

motivated queries about the reasons why the soldiers are in the trenches, Rosenberg asks:

What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame [...]

What quaver—what heart aghast? (19-22)

The question implies that such quivering fear will not be seen in the eyes of the soldiers who awake to the threat of death as each new day breaks; it is as if the soldier-persona is daring those looking on even tentatively to suggest that the soldiers might be afraid. Rosenberg's detachment enables him to see with more clarity the routine existence of the soldier. Eschewing the trend for dogmatic protest against the propaganda held responsible for morale-boosting lies, Rosenberg looks instead at the reality of the soldier's existence, the acceptance of death's inevitability, acknowledging that the blood-nourished poppies "Drop, and are ever dropping" (24). He claims, in a letter to Edward Marsh, that "Break of Day in the Trenches is "surely as simple as ordinary talk"; it is possible to assume that, on one level, he believed his life in the trenches to be as simple as ordinary life, if not more so (Rosenberg, 239). In his *Life of Isaac Rosenberg 1890-1918* Joseph Cohen notes that Rosenberg was experiencing more stability in the army than he had ever had at home, particularly as he was no longer a financial burden (156).

Unwilling to follow trends and eager to write without constraint, both Rosenberg and Douglas exhibit an individuality which, somewhat paradoxically, connects them. For example, Rosenberg resisted Edward Marsh's attempts to mould him into a model Georgian,⁶ and Douglas, too, was determined to write in his own way, even going so far as to dismiss T. S. Eliot's advice as that of a "dear unimaginative man".⁷ His reaction to Eliot's advice may be interpreted as an example of arrogance. Equally, his audacity serves as evidence of his commitment to write in his own way, to be different. As his persona expresses in "Words", his is an individual approach:

I keep words only a breath of time
turning them in the lightest of cages—uncover
and let them go: sometimes they escape forever. (*Complete Poems* 107; 16-18)

Unlike those poets "who capture [words] | in hundreds" (13-14), allowing them only temporary freedom, the persona here views them as "instruments" rather than "servants" (1). Resembling a butterfly-catcher, he awaits their arrival, and gives the impression of feeling superior to those who imprison words. In spite of this, he simultaneously recognises the fallibility of his method as revealed by the poem's closing phrase, "sometimes they escape forever". This recognition of an individual's risk-taking, a turning away from traditionally accepted approaches, as inextricable

from potential failure can be read as a synecdoche for Douglas's poetics: his sense of superiority and powerful self-belief are accompanied by a pervasive doubt about his ability to remain in control. This is evident in his essay, "On the Nature of Poetry" (1940):

Poetry is like a man, whom thinking you know all his movements and appearance you will presently come upon in such a posture that for a moment you can hardly believe it a position of the limbs you know. (*Prose Miscellany* 44)

Open to the unpredictable idiosyncrasies of poetry, Douglas's anthropomorphic imagery is indicative of his propensity to focus on and describe the effects of war on the human body. This concern with the visual provides another point of contact between Douglas and Rosenberg. Vernon Scannell refers in *Not Without Glory* to Douglas's Middle East poetry and notes his "exact painter's eye for detail" (40). It is this quality of looking closely, of observing as an artist might in preparation for a drawing or painting, which creates the visual link between Rosenberg and Douglas. Both were artists but each expressed his preference for poetry, with Douglas reportedly telling Lt. Col. John Stubbs while in hospital in El Ballah:

There are lots of people who dabble with poetry, they don't really understand it, but I insist, I am going to be a major poet come what may: I like it, I enjoy doing it, I like to throw the words around, I like to write poetry and I like to draw, but I like writing poetry, I think, more than drawing. (Stubbs 27)

His self-belief echoes Rosenberg's sentiments expressed in a letter to Marsh: "I believe in myself more as a poet than a painter. I think I get more depth into my writing" (223). Whether a matter of increased enjoyment or confidence, each poet ultimately focused more closely on his writing than on his drawing or painting, but their artists' background cannot be separated from their writers' lives. Douglas's biographer, Desmond Graham, could almost be describing either poet in *The Truth of War* when he writes:

[he] views each scene as a visual artist, attempts to capture in shapes and colour and movement the essence of what the eye sees. The human body is his essential subject: the energies its postures and movements express and prove; the meanings behind words which the body can so immediately and completely convey and then shift, in an instant of movement. (139)

These words, in fact, refer to Rosenberg, and they emphasise the pictorial quality of his poetry; although Douglas also focuses on the human body, his poetry is generally less colourful. In Rosenberg's "Marching (As Seen from the Left File)" the soldiers are described as a "red brick moving glint" with hands reminiscent of "flaming pendulums" (95; 3-4). Those elements identified by Graham ("shapes and colour and movement") combine to

suggest an inherent power juxtaposed with danger; the “pendulums” mark time, but it is time which will eventually burn out for Rosenberg’s soldiers as they march towards an “immortal darkness”(15). The incongruity of the “red brick”, an image of stability and protection, alongside the inevitable march towards a battle with the “hoofs of death” (12) represents Rosenberg’s confusion regarding the purpose of war. He refers to “the ancient glory” (8) embodied by the marchers whilst struggling to reconcile this with the knowledge that something more cunning is conspiring to engulf this glory in “an iron cloud” (14), the oxymoron betraying his uncertainty regarding permanence and transience. In a 1915 letter to Edward Marsh, Rosenberg admits to liking this poem. However, in the same letter, he tells Marsh, “I never joined the army for patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war” (227). Rosenberg’s belief that the war was indefensible, voiced in a letter which makes specific reference to “Marching (As Seen from the Left File)”, intensifies the sense of futility voiced in the poem; the vibrancy of the soldiers’ “ruddy” (1) skin and “Mustard-coloured” (6) uniforms is no match for the darkness to come.

The attention to visual detail in Douglas’s work is emphasised by Tim Kendall’s definition of his poetry, prose, and drawings as “photographic in their ambition” (431); Douglas was, in fact, one of the few soldiers permitted to use a camera owing to his qualification as a Camouflage Staff Officer.⁸ Scannell’s reference to Douglas’s “painter’s eye” perhaps misses the true nature of the poet’s vision. Nevertheless, the similarity between Rosenberg and Douglas which has its basis in their concern with what readers will “see” in their poetry is fundamental to the recognition of a further difference between their approaches. The *OED* gives the Latin origin of the verb “paint” as “pingere” (a word which also has connotations of embroidery and decoration); the Greek origin of “photograph” connects “light” and “written”, suggesting something perhaps more directly representative of the original image. This is not to suggest a dishonesty in Rosenberg’s poetry but to emphasise Douglas’s obsession with accuracy; in a letter to Tambimuttu outlining his vision for “a book containing prose, verse, photographs and drawings”, Douglas defines his vision: “the idea being entirely to give a vivid picture” (*Letters* 313). He does not want simply to write “an account” but strives instead to show others what he has seen. As he suggests in the opening paragraphs of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, the impact of war on his sight seems more defined than that on any other sense: “Against a backcloth of indeterminate landscapes of moods and smells, dance the black and bright incidents” (15). Here, the significance of the link between the etymology of “photograph” and the pictorial quality of Douglas’s writing is evident: the absence and presence of light are pivotal aspects of his memory.

It is Douglas’s “pictorial” discipline that leads Vincent Sherry to con-

clude that his best poems are informed by the combination of this visual component with Douglas's controlled style. Focusing on the way in which Douglas juxtaposes "realistic violence" with "emotional composure", Sherry alleges that Douglas's ability to "disconcert" is responsible for his having been critically "'avoided'" (295). The disconcerting jolt of Douglas's elegy to himself, "Simplify me when I'm dead," epitomizes his visual appeal as his persona confronts euphemism with the image of his "skeleton [...] stripped" (*Complete Poems* 74; 9-10). It also demonstrates the "emotional composure" to which Sherry refers in the regular tetrameter of the couplet which both opens and closes the poem: "Remember me when I am dead / and simplify me when I'm dead" (1-2; 27-28). Rejecting Brooke's allusion in "The Soldier" to "a richer dust" (81; 4), Douglas's persona makes no claim to the afterlife as a Brooke-like "pulse in the eternal mind" (10), but instead predicts the "collapse" of "particular memories" (12-13), and voices the possibility that the passage of time may eventually make him "seem [...] nothing" (21-22). His honesty is unsettling; the traditional consolation of elegy is dismissed, replaced by a repeated request for realism and dignity. Whereas Rosenberg's pictorial focus upon the body concurs with the descriptive brutality of his contemporaries, with verbs such as "splattered" (Rosenberg), "flound'ring" (Owen) and "jolting" (Sassoon)⁹ contributing to the purposefully shocking nature of some of the poetry of the First World War, Douglas's is deliberately stripped down, as in "Dead Men", to equate with the detached and candid effect of a photograph:

Then leave the dead in the earth, an organism
not capable of resurrection, like mines,
less durable than the metal of a gun,
a casual meal for a dog, nothing but the bone
so soon. (*Complete Poems* 100; 25-29)

The shocking truth is unembellished. Flesh and bone are presented without colour, sound, or motion, as Douglas gestures towards the image of skeletons in "shallow graves" (15).

Douglas and Blunden

Douglas's poetic artistry, a feature which both connects and distances him from Rosenberg, was noted by Edmund Blunden, a poet who survived the First World War and went on to become Douglas's tutor at Merton College, Oxford. Blunden expressed his admiration for the uniqueness of the younger poet's "pictorial sense",¹⁰ and yet the artistic aspect of Douglas's poetry defines one of the primary differences between his and Blunden's work. Whereas Blunden's pictures of war often betray his emotional response to the destruction of both man and nature, the "extrospective" style of Douglas's poetry allows no explicit space for such feelings.¹¹ For instance, the deflection of emotion towards Steffi, the soldier's sweetheart,

in “*Vergissmeinnicht*” (118) allows the persona to focus solely on the visual image of the “swart flies” (18) moving on the dead man’s skin, thereby disconnecting himself from any direct remorse. Conversely, Blunden in “Third Ypres” highlights his persona’s emotions with the repetitive, “Poor signaller [...] poor daredevil” (152; 42-43) before revealing the source of his sympathy: “I pass you again and shudder / At the lean green flies upon the red flesh madding” (45). The profusion of emotional and sensuous detail reduces the impact of Blunden’s image when contrasted with the unembellished brutality of Douglas’s vision, and Blunden’s colours align him more closely with Rosenberg’s painter’s approach than with Douglas’s monochrome photography. Walter Benjamin’s question, “How does the cameraman compare with the painter?” leads to the conclusion that “The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web” (235). “*Vergissmeinnicht*” enacts this penetration both explicitly, through Douglas’s vision which breaks the surface and sees into “the burst stomach like a cave” (20), and implicitly, via the sexual imagery of the soldier’s “equipment / that’s hard and good” (15-16). Blunden, in contrast, finds ways in which his persona can distance himself from the horror of the scene; instead of focusing on the death and destruction that surround him, he watches “a score of field-mice” (107) and, in a parenthetical aside which achieves formally a simultaneous distancing, describes how “(these / Calmed me, on these depended my salvation)” (108-09). Despite these differences, in repeating Blunden’s flies-on-flesh image, Douglas alludes to his predecessor, and the evidence of allusion is further strengthened by the context of the returning soldier in each poem; Blunden’s persona reveals, “I pass you again” (44); Douglas’s is “returning over the nightmare ground” (2). Within this return, Douglas recalls more directly another piece of Blunden’s work; as Scammell points out, Blunden, in *Undertones of War*, writes “I must go over the ground again” (qtd. in Scammell 105).

Christopher Ricks defines allusion as “the calling into play – by poets – of the words and phrases of previous writers” (1), and he goes on to dispute Harold Bloom’s “melodramatic sub-Freudian parricidal scenario” (6) by claiming that “the great instances of allusion are often those where that to which allusion is liable ceases to be any kind of liability and becomes a source of energy and gratitude” (12). Central to Ricks’s definition of allusion is the necessity to create something new from something old (85), as Douglas does in “*Vergissmeinnicht*” from the lines of “Third Ypres”.¹² Ricks’s view of allusion as “a way of looking before and after” (86) summarises the relationship between “Third Ypres” and “*Vergissmeinnicht*” not only in the sense of Douglas’s having reached back to Blunden’s work in order to create something new in his own, but also by referring indirectly to the different ways of seeing enacted by the texts. Whereas Blunden’s

persona looks back to a pre-war idyll when “The ploughman whistled as he loosed his team” (71), Douglas’s looks ahead. He is able to envisage a universal consequence of future deaths in war from his particular situation; his observation in “*Vergissmeinnicht*” that “death who had the soldier singled / has done the lover mortal hurt” (23-24) is as relevant to twenty-first century conflict as it was to the single moment about which it was written in 1943.

Further evidence of Blunden’s influence on Douglas exists in the latter’s description of “the mosquito death” in “How to Kill” (119; 24), which is resonant of Blunden’s “steel-born bees” from “A House in Festubert” (139; 24). It seems that Douglas is able to allude to his tutor’s poetry without self-reproach. Instead of viewing traces of Blunden’s work as indicative of a failure to be original, Douglas is able to move unselfconsciously from Blunden’s images towards his own, a process identified by Ricks as central to the practice of allusion. As Peter McDonald maintains in his review of Ricks’s book, “*Allusion to the Poets* takes very seriously the possibility of writing original poetry in which allusion features as a creative ingredient rather than the sign of some dismal burden” (12). One of the reasons that Douglas is not burdened by Blunden’s influence is because Blunden survived the war. Blunden never achieved the martyr-like status of men such as Owen and Sassoon whose poetic protests had dominated perceptions, post-1918, of what it really meant to fight and die for your country. Basing his argument on perceptions of Brooke and Owen, Joseph Cohen argues that a twentieth-century war poet is expected to be “a lyrically adept military hero whose life had been sacrificed to an honourable cause in the not too distant past” (23). This definition places Douglas in direct competition with Owen – Cohen claims that “the Second World War [...] did not produce any soldier poets capable of bringing [Owen’s] reputation to an eclipse” (25). Blunden, on the other hand, posed no such threat. Nevertheless, Douglas still aims to go beyond the achievements of his predecessors, whether living or dead, and although engaged in a less hostile dynamic with Blunden, he continually strives to establish his uniqueness in relation to the First World War poet’s legacy.

Blunden’s “A House in Festubert” establishes contrasts between the past and present, setting the survival of the house, once a happy, family home, against the fate of the soldiers who now occupy its rooms. He imagines the “happy hours” (139; 6) of the house’s history and juxtaposes that memory with the current laughter of the “unkilled” soldiers (9). He sounds an ominous prediction of the men’s future, and it is this sense of foreboding which resounds in the closing rhetorical question, “Could summer betray you?” (25). What appears as a celebration of the house’s endurance – “Amazing still it stands its ground” (4) – is tainted by the persistent yet semi-concealed presence of death; Blunden ensures that the

deadly instinct of the “steel-born bees” (24) is implied in the description’s aural proximity to “stillborn”, thus intimating the pessimism which infiltrates much of his war poetry. This contrasts directly with the resistance of such subjective responses in Douglas’s work. Rather than reconfiguring Blunden’s imagery in a similar setting, Douglas’s individual perspective, shaped by and articulated during a different conflict, provides the foundation for an original vision. Into this, Douglas can assimilate his allusions to Blunden without feeling threatened by the curse of appropriation.¹³

Though there is a lack of explicit documentary evidence of Douglas’s reaction to Blunden’s poetry, Douglas’s essay “Poets in This War” concludes with what may be read as an implicit reference to Blunden’s work. Stimulated by his understanding of the way in which the First World War continued to disturb his tutor long after the conflict’s end, Douglas claims that

the soldiers [of World War II] have not found anything new to say. Their experiences they will not forget easily, and it seems to me that the whole body of English war poetry of this war, civil and military, will be created after war is over. (“Poets” 353)

Here, it is possible to infer an acknowledgement of the power of Blunden’s post-war poetry; unlike those poets who were prompted to write in an unprecedented manner by what Douglas describes as “the nature of the cataclysm” (“Poets” 350), Blunden’s reaction to the horror of war is concerned more with its aftermath than its immediate effect. Often focusing upon details of the natural location, his wartime poetry does, occasionally, depict gruesome reality, as in “Third Ypres”: “forty or more, the nine-inch came right through, / All splashed with arms and legs” (152; 117-118). However, it is only after the war that his articulation of the brutality becomes overtly personal. The recognition of war’s psychological impact inspires Blunden to write of his nightmares in “La Quinque Rue”:

Why lead me then
Through the foul-gorged, the cemeterial fen
To fear’s sharp sentries? [...]

How is that these flints flame out fire’s tongue,
Shrivelling my thought? (173; 9-16)¹⁴

Blunden’s inability to escape the legacy of war compels him constantly to look back, as he does in his prose memoir, *Undertones of War* (1928). In contrast, Douglas looks backwards in order to look ahead, using the example of Blunden’s post-war poetry to inform his prediction for the future of poetic responses to conflict. Also, although he did not live to see the outcome of his prophecy, it is possible that Blunden’s propensity to revisit the past exerts an influence on the poetry that Douglas writes during the war.

As a poet who, in Geoffrey Hill's words, "possessed the kind of creative imagination that approached an idea again and again in terms of metaphor, changing position slightly, seeking the most precise hold", Douglas re-enacts stylistically Blunden's attachment to his previous experience (10). John Hollander notes that "Echoes can be so faint and fragmentary that they seem to enter a poem as tonal quality, or shading of voice," and it appears that Douglas's voice has been shaped in some way by echoes of Blunden's poetics (108). Shades of Blunden's traumatic relationship with the past are visible in Douglas's work; "The Knife", for example, recalls a passionate relationship, but ends with painful uncertainty: "This I think happened to us together / though now no shadow of it flickers in your hands" (*Complete Poems* 95; 21-22). However, whereas Blunden seems trapped by his experiences, Douglas is determined to escape. His detachment is not only symptomatic of his conviction that he would die a war-time death; he is also guarding against a future haunted by the experiences of the past. One of his last poems, "To Kristin Yingcheng Olga Milena," exemplifies this instinct for separation as his persona bids farewell to four of the women he has loved. His words, "Here I give back perforce / the sweet wine to the grape" (*Complete Poems* 131; 7-8), reveal the necessity of his actions. This lack of choice is motivated by his premonition of death, but he is also driven by an irresistible need to free himself from the past. Defying the temptation to dwell on failure and disappointment, Douglas turns to the future in the closing stanza of his final poem, "On a Return from Egypt":

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 [...]

I fear what I shall find. (*Complete Poems* 132; 19-24)

These lines illustrate Douglas's departure from Blunden's way of seeing but they also point to the way in which both poets articulate a relationship with the past. It is in the combination of these individual echoes that the subtle resonance of Blunden's influence on Douglas exists.

This article points to similarities between Douglas's photographic *réportage* and the painterly approaches evident in the work of both Rosenberg and Blunden. Yet it is important to recognise one significant difference. Douglas's reaction to Blunden's influence is less antagonistic; there are no declarations of repetition similar to that in "Desert Flowers" in which Rosenberg is named and, therefore, identified as a source of anxiety. Evidently, Douglas perceived Blunden's influence differently, and this is revealed by an absence, rather than a presence. Neil Corcoran reads Douglas's "Poets in This War" as an "unillusioned recognition of [...] obstacles, [...] testimony to a fairly comprehensive anxiety of influence" (61),

and in such a context it is especially notable that Douglas does not mention Blunden within his list of “poets of the last war” (“Poets” 350), the list which forms the roll call of potential challengers for the position to which he ultimately aspires.

Notes

1. See Cyril Connolly, “Why Not War Writers? A Manifesto”. Articles such as this illustrated the weight of expectation exerted by British magazine and newspaper editors. Questions were raised when writers appeared to fail to respond in the same way as those involved in the First World War and solutions were proposed: “*Creative writers should be used to interpret the war world so that cultural unity is re-established and war effort emotionally co-ordinated*” (237).
2. Desmond Graham’s biography of Douglas, *Keith Douglas 1920-1944*, reports that he made this remark shortly after enlisting on 6 September 1939 (79).
3. See Desmond Graham (ed), *Keith Douglas: The Letters*. Douglas enclosed the poem “Stranger” in a letter to his girlfriend, Betty Sze, claiming in a mock-retrospective on himself, “These lines, written by the famous poet in his youth [...] are more sincere than they sound” (70).
4. Their rejection of sentimentality is evident in their individual reactions to Rupert Brooke’s poetry as recorded respectively in *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg* (237) and *Keith Douglas: The Letters* (261). Rosenberg, in a letter to one of his patrons, Mrs Cohen, calls Brooke’s poetry “begloried sonnets” which “should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels”. Douglas wrote his sharply satirical poem “Gallantry” while in hospital at El Ballah in an attempt to “shock [the] sentimentality” of a nurse who appeared to admire Brooke’s poetry.
5. Jon Stallworthy notes that Owen’s image of the “shivering ranks of grey” refers to the Germans who “wore grey uniforms and, like the dawn, came from the east” (Owen 163).
6. See Cohen’s *Life of Isaac Rosenberg*. He writes of Marsh’s efforts to influence Rosenberg’s poetry: “Marsh would go on underestimating Rosenberg’s determination to be himself” (115).
7. Douglas attacks Eliot in a letter to Jean Turner (*Letters* 208), reacting against Eliot’s response to his poetry (Eliot’s letter is quoted in Graham’s *Prose Miscellany* 76).
8. See Douglas’s letter to Jean Turner: “I have a camera and a permit to use it, being a camouflage king” (*Letters* 251).
9. See Rosenberg, “Dead Man’s Dump” (110), Owen, “Dulce Et Decorum Est” (117), and Sassoon, “A Working Party” (124).

10. See Blunden's tribute to Douglas, enclosed in a letter to Hector Buck on 5 October 1944 (reprinted in Rothkopf and Webb, 127).
11. Douglas describes his poetry as "extrospective" in a letter to J. C. Hall (*Letters* 287). See Kendall's discussion of Douglas's "extrospective" approach (431-32).
12. Ricks argues that "allusion depends upon apprehending a newly true combination of similitude and dissimilitude" (85).
13. Bloom argues that whilst "weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves." He goes on to explain that the latter realise that they have failed to create and are, therefore, unable to overcome their anxiety of influence (5-6).
14. Barry Webb, in *Edmund Blunden: A Biography*, refers to "La Quinque Rue" in an endnote as one of Blunden's "Poems relating to events of 1916 but probably written after 1918" (335). This comes in response to his reference to the difficulty of dating Blunden's poems precisely (90).

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