

The World Wars Embodied:
The Body in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen and Keith Douglas

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Abstract

This thesis explores the way the human body is represented in the works of two English World War poets: Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and Keith Douglas (1920-1944). In particular, the aim of this paper is to explore differences and similarities in the ways in which these poets approach this subject matter, and also how for instance the cultural and historical background, military technology etc. of each war are represented in connection with the subject of the human body. This analysis is carried out through a close reading of a selection of these poets' works. It also draws from existing research into the poets and their works.

Keywords: Owen, Wilfred; Douglas, Keith; War Poetry, World War One, World War Two

Abstrakti

Tässä tutkielmassa käsitellään tapaa, jolla kaksi maailmansotien ajan englantilaisrunoilijaa, Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) ja Keith Douglas (1920-1944), käsittelevät ihmiskehoa runoissaan. Tutkielman tavoitteena on erityisesti erojen ja samankaltaisuuksien etsiminen näiden runoilijoiden tavassa lähestyä ruumiillisuuden aihetta. Tähän liittyen käsitellään myös tapaa, jolla muun muassa sotien kulttuurillista taustaa ja sotateknologiaa on esitetty ruumiillisuusaiheen yhteydessä. Tutkielmassa analysoidaan runoja tavalla, joka ammentaa lähiluvusta. Myös olemassa olevaa tutkimusta runoilijoista ja heidän töistään hyödynnetään.

Avainsanat: Owen, Wilfred; Douglas, Keith; sotarunous, ensimmäinen maailmansota, toinen maailmansota

1. Introduction: The Body of Work

The First World War (1914-1918) was, in many ways, a watershed in history: it wreaked unprecedented havoc in Europe, leaving some seventeen million casualties, as well as a vast amount of the mentally or physically injured, in its wake ("The Poetry of World War I"). In addition to this, the Great War also profoundly changed the political landscape of Europe and had a lasting impact on culture. Interestingly, amidst this chaos and cataclysm of steel, mud and blood, poetry flourished: an immense corpus of poetry was produced during the Great War ("The Poetry of World War I"). There are many possible reasons for why this happened. One practical – albeit perhaps prosaic – explanation has been suggested by C. Day-Lewis, namely, that the single most conducive thing to writing during the Great War was the long pauses between bursts of fighting, which allowed the soldier poets to write (Day-Lewis, p. 22).

Today, English poet Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) is probably the best-known poet of that era, although he only rose to fame after his death (Day-Lewis, p. 11). The clashes between heroism and misery, propaganda and reality are often at the forefront of his poetry.

Second World War (1939-1945) poetry is not as widely quoted as that of the First World War, and the corpus is smaller. Again, Day-Lewis has suggested that this was due to the war being more dynamic in nature, in that it involved more mobility and was thus not as conducive to literary pursuits (Day-Lewis, p. 22). However, the shifting of genre conventions and the rising popularity of the prose memoir in the 20th century (Armitstead) are notable factors that probably contributed to the decrease in the popularity of poetry as a primary form of life writing before and during the Second World War. A small corpus of Second World War poetry, however, exists. Keith Douglas (1920-1944), also English, is likely the most well-known Second World War poet, whose fame – much like Owen's – was also posthumous (Hughes, p. xviii). His popularity, once it had been established, was perhaps due to the fact that he knowingly sought to latch on to the poetic tradition set by popular First World War poets, including Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg (Graham, p. v). Despite this, Douglas could be considered a more modernist poet than those he sought to emulate.

War is a very physical experience. It involves practices and anxieties heavily focused on the body, such as the need to camouflage one's person, the handling of dead and injured bodies, physical discomfort brought on by exposure to cold, heat and damp; and importantly, the mandate to hurt and kill and the risk of being hurt and killed oneself. The two World Wars are of particular interest with regard to forces affecting the body, since new and experimental warfare-related technology was used, and these newly introduced weapons (such as machine guns, gas, and grenades) could effectively annihilate an entire human body (Punter, p. 95). This thesis will focus on how the body appears in the poetry of these two World War poets – for example, how the constant threat and reality of physical injury and death come across in it, and how these affect the language and imagery used. This thesis has four foci, each of which forms a separate section: the *living body*, the *body as a site of death and suffering*, the *body with inorganic additions*, and the *body as a site of eroticism, tenderness and love*. In the course of this paper, through close reading, I will highlight for example stylistic and tonal differences in these poets' works, as well as explore similarities in their approaches to this subject matter.

2. Living Bodies, Living Hands

Both Wilfred Owen and Keith Douglas wrote a poem about the human hand. In both of these poems, "Maundy Thursday" by Owen and "The Hand" by Douglas, the hand is used as a synecdochic motif to represent the whole body. Furthermore, both poems seem to argue that human hands, and by extension, human bodies, are the only actors in war – although in public discourse and propaganda this may be obscured by the idealisation of war.

Wilfred Owen's sonnet "Maundy Thursday" depicts a divine service taking place in an Orthodox congregation, where everyone taking part must kneel and kiss a crucifix held by an altar server. The speaker, however, chooses not to kiss the actual crucifix, but rather the altar boy's "warm live hand that held the thing" (Owen, 14). "Maundy Thursday" is not physically set in the battlefield, and in *Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* it is not included under the category "War Poems". It should also be noted that the dating of the poem is uncertain, and there thus remains the possibility that it was actually written before the war broke out (Day-Lewis, p. 136). Regardless of this, "Maundy Thursday" echoes some of the same themes as the poems that Owen certainly wrote during the war: a melancholy sentiment brought on by the loss of life, criticism towards the attitudes surrounding the war, and tender reverence towards the body. Thus, I argue that reading the poem against the context of World War I makes sense.

The first two lines establish the setting of the poem:

Between the brown hands of a server-lad
The silver cross was offered to be kissed. (Owen, 1-2)

The poem then goes on to list three groups of people who, each in their own turn, come to kiss the crucifix: men, women and children. First, the men come gloomily, seeing the "emblem of a creed" (Owen, 5), for which reason they are hesitant to kiss it. The women, who are mentioned to be mourning – which suggests they may be widowed, or have lost their sons or other male relatives in the war – kiss "the Body of the Christ indeed" (Owen, 7). The children see neither a religious symbol nor the ravaged body of a martyr, but rather a fascinating "silver doll, immensely bright" (Owen, 9). From the children's perspective the crucifix is likened to a toy, suggesting innocence: they are shown to be unaware of what the figure actually represents.

Lastly, it comes the speaker's turn to kiss the crucifix, but he chooses to kiss the altar boy's hand instead:

Then I, too, knelt before that acolyte.
Above the crucifix I bent my head:
The Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead:
And yet I bowed, yea, kissed — my lips did cling
(I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing). (Owen, 10-14)

The tactile affection in the last line of the poem can be seen as an homage to the living body. The Christ is “cold, [-] dead” and the hand, in contrast, is “warm”, “live” (Owen, 12; 14); their difference is thus spelled out in antonyms. The speaker refuses to pay his respects to a dead object; it seems that he considers it more important to honour the living body. The contrast between the image of the dead Christ, and the living altar boy, is thus quite stark.

Adrian Caesar, who has explored the sadomasochistic implications in the poetry of both Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, notes that the Crucifix as an emblem of Christianity bears the message of love through the subjection of oneself to suffering (Caesar, qtd in Omid, pp. 122-123). This suffering must be endured so that a higher end can be attained: and, according to Caesar, the British government also exploited this idea in order to justify the immense loss of life in the Great War. (Caesar, qtd in Omid, pp. 122-123). Thus, when the speaker in “Maundy Thursday” rejects the effigy of the ravaged Christ, he rejects it as a symbol of the ultimate self-sacrifice, and also as a representation of the government-issued, ready-made, glorified *idea* of that self-sacrifice in service of others. The reality of war, as Owen's speaker here seems to say, is different from this idea. The kissing of the hand of the boy – the “warm live hand” (Owen, 14) – brings attention to the fragile humanity that this aforementioned glorification of war, suffering and patriotism is threatening to put to the slaughter. This tangible human body that the speaker thus encounters cannot undergo what could be termed a death by proxy, unlike government officials – and, it might be noted, like the representatives of the church, who are time after time evoking the death of the Christ in divine services. The living bodies of men are the true instruments of war, which is perhaps why the speaker refuses to worship the idea rather than the real thing. Thus, the speaker would rather kiss the living sacrificial thing standing in front of him.

In the context of military discipline, there is another possible reason for the speaker's disdain for the metal Christ. According to Paul Fussell, a disciplinary action called “Field Punishment No. 1”,

which involved the offender being strapped onto something of a convenient shape and size (such as a large wheel) evoked in many of the soldiers' minds the image of crucifixion (Fussell, p. 119). Thus, for a soldier, the image of crucifixion could also have been a reminder of a tangible corporeal punishment, for which reason it might have evoked unpleasant associations in his mind (Fussell, p. 119). However, this piece of military history, albeit interesting, is quite tangential to the overall theme of this poem.

Furthermore, the kissing of the hand rather than the crucifix can also be seen as elevating the human (and more specifically, male) body to a divine position – worthy of worship in its own right. This kiss, while being an act of reverence towards the living body, may also suggest some homoerotic undertones – although, as will be discussed in more detail in Section 4, these kinds of interpretations can, in some cases, prove somewhat anachronistic. In addition to this, the age of the server-boy is uncertain – he may well be a child, which would render the basis for erotic interpretations of this passage very unlikely. The kiss can, after all, also be a friendly or respectful gesture; but regardless of what its purpose is, in this poem it is nevertheless a gesture that conveys tenderness, kindness, and respect.

Like “Maundy Thursday”, Keith Douglas’ “The Hand” is similarly an ode to the human hand. Douglas’ poem opens by extolling the perfection of the hand, both living and dead: its shape and function are seen as an example of near-mathematical perfection while it is still living and moving – and even in death, the bones of the hand retain their shape and proportions (Douglas, 1-6).

The sentiment in “The Hand” is, in some ways, rather reminiscent of that in “Maundy Thursday”. Firstly, the hand is treated with reverence and wonder. Secondly, in the second stanza, the speaker sees the transformation of the hand, “[–] changing/Each finger to a man or a woman” (Douglas, 7-8). In this way, the hand becomes an emblem of the whole human body, echoing the speaker’s preoccupation with the altar server’s “warm live hand” as a stand-in for his body in Owen’s poem (Owen, 14).

Furthermore, “The Hand” can also be seen to juxtapose, or contrast, the human with the divine:

and we, [—]

look for the proportions, the form of an immense hand. (Douglas, 22; 26)

The position of the hand is here shown to evolve from an individual human hand in the first stanza (its humanity suggested by the fact that it is discussed in the context of death also) to a representation of humanity as a whole, to a representation of landforms, and finally, to "the form of an immense hand" (Douglas, 7-9; 26). This hand the poem's speaker and his comrades look for suggests that they are trying to find evidence of something greater or beyond human interfering in, or orchestrating, the events – possibly a god of some kind. Perhaps, then, they are trying to convince themselves that there exists some higher reason or justification for the war – that maybe there is a god present in the battlefield, in its very landforms. The poem ends with this line; there is no resolution as to whether they do find that for which they are looking. The question as to what they do (or do not) find is thus open for interpretation. However, Paul Fussell has noted that Second World War poetry "[refuses] to reach out to any myth" (Fussell, p. 57). In light of what Fussell says, it could be conjectured that what the last line of the poem is trying to convey is that the search for some kind of divine, or otherwise just higher, justification is in vain. If the search is indeed fruitless, perhaps the sentiment here is that there is actually no god in the battlefield pulling the strings and directing the events towards some righteous, pre-ordained end. The omnipresence of the hand, and in particular, the fact that the human hand is the only tangible and observable kind of hand in the poem, seems to suggest that in the end, it is the *human hand* that is both the initiator and the instrument of war – a notion shared by Owen in "Maundy Thursday". The war is thus reducible to human action.

In this way, "The Hand" also contains a note of cynicism and disillusionment towards war as a means to attain some greater good. Furthermore, in likening the human hand to that of a god, the poem suggests that the human hand can both give and nurture life, but also take it away. However, "The Hand" is still quite different in tone when compared to "Maundy Thursday". It is more contemplative and much less carnal. It also lacks the tactility of "Maundy Thursday": the touching of the hand and the kiss. Neither is the hand, unlike in Owen's poem, explicitly described as "warm" or "live" (Owen, 14), but rather the concept of living human hands is approached through abstraction: the final sentiment of the poem seems to be that the living hands of men start and fight wars.

3 Dead, Dying and Suffering Bodies

3.1 The Dehumanised Soldiers

In Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est" (from heretoforth referred to as "Dulce"), suffering is a very prominent theme. "Dulce" is perhaps the poem where the "Pity of War", which, according to Owen himself (Owen, 31), was his main concern in writing war poetry, appears in its most ruthless form: the description of a band of soldiers marching barely alive, as well as that of the dying soldier, is graphic and unforgiving. It eschews all romanticisation of warfare, and the exaltation of heroism. The speaker's view, for example, figuratively enters the soldier's body in describing his "froth-corrupted lungs" (Owen, 22). While this is perhaps the most visible description of suffering in "Dulce", the poem's descriptions of physical and emotional plight can be divided up into three distinct foci.

Firstly, the poem opens with a description of weary soldiers marching on.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge
[—]
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind. (Owen, 1-8)

This description evokes an image of the living dead: moving almost automatically, with great difficulty, not hearing the shells that fall around them, ignoring the coldness of marching with their own blood as the only barrier between their bare skin and the cold earth (Owen, 1-8). Their misery, while no doubt also psychological, is described in thoroughly physical terms. Their mobility is compromised, their breathing arduous; and their perhaps most important senses, sight and hearing, defunct.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that the Industrial Revolution started a progress which eventually led to the creation of an "anonymous, dehumanised man" in the First World War (Gilbert & Gubar, qtd. in Cole, p. 7). In light of this, Owen's description of the fatigued soldiers

rather seems to point towards a state where the human has been stripped away: the passage quoted above suggests an immense bodily strain, a state of such extreme fatigue that the senses have partially shut down and basic functions, such as walking, have become laborious. All that seems to matter to them is the movement forward. Yet, even in this effectively senseless state, they are able to spring into action when a gas attack begins:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time [–] (Owen, 9-10).

What is expressed here seems somewhat contradictory: the soldiers are "drunk with fatigue", "lame", "blind", yet able to act "just in time" (Owen, 6-7, 10) when they come under attack. Following Gilbert and Gubar's argument (Gilbert & Gubar, qtd. In Cole, p. 7), it seems that what the poem is trying to suggest is that the humanity of the soldiers is draining away, their very senses shutting off. The human aspect, in turn, seems to be replaced by soldierly protocol, leading to a rather robotic state of existence.

The second focal point is the soldier who does not manage to get his gas mask on in time. He inhales some gas, which begins to fatally corrode his lungs (Owen, 11-14). The gratuitous depiction of the soldier's death throes is merged with the third focal point, which is the speaker's emotional burden of remembering all this: in nightmares resembling the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (or "shell-shock", as it was called then), he relives the "white eyes writhing in his face", and the "gargling from his froth-corrupted lungs" (Owen, 19-22). Of these lines, the word choices and sound patterning in the latter give it a very foamy sound; "gargling" is an onomatopoeic expression, while the fricative and sibilant sounds of "froth" and "lungs" (Owen, 22) sound like a simulation of the sounds emanating from a failing respiratory system melting into a bloody mass. These linguistic choices add to the overall effect of the poem's description of suffering: they make it tangible by allowing the reader to essentially hear the sounds present in the situation this passage describes.

In addition, guilt factors into the third focal point, the speaker's psychological plight. According to Jahan Ramazani, "underwater imagery" is present in the scene of the soldier's death (Ramazani, p. 81). Indeed, in the second stanza, the speaker sees his dying comrade in a scene that is depicted thus:

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. (Owen, 13-14).

This, according to Ramazani, signifies the gap between the speaker-spectator and the dying soldier, containing a note of guilt from the speaker's side (Ramazani, p. 81). Unable to help his dying comrade, as if separated from him by a body of water, the speaker can only watch again and again, in his dreams, as the other man essentially drowns on dry land, "before [his] helpless sight" (Owen, 15).

Furthermore, on the topic of guilt, Ramazani has noted that in Owen's poetry, the dead people depicted in it, the readers, and the poet himself are each given a role: "the audience is often guilty, the dead person innocent, and the poet split between the two poles." (Ramazani, p. 81). It seems that in "Dulce", the position of the poet is that he has been mentally wounded by the traumatic events and thus in a way a victim himself, but also guilty at not being able to do more to save his comrade: indeed, the dying soldier "plung[ing]" (Owen, 16) at him in his nightmares, as if to attack or accuse, may be read as an embodiment of this guilt (Ramazani, p. 81).

While some of Owen's poems that depict suffering contain some sweetness – affection, the possibility of healing, or some elegiac bittersweetness – the same cannot be said for "Dulce". This is understandable, considering that the poem was originally intended to retort Jessie Pope, whose own war poems, first published in a volume in 1915, were pro-war propaganda: she likened the war to a sport, urging young men to join the fight with the tantalising promise of heroism and recognition ("Jessie Pope"). However, the dedication, first "To Jessie Pope", and in a later draft amended to "To a certain Poetess", was eventually fully removed (Day-Lewis, p. 55). The ruthlessness of the poem can thus be contextualised by its original mission, which was very likely to rebuke the misguided notions of those who took the war too lightly, seeing it as a feast of manliness and gallantry, and to show them the gory reality of what they were idealising.

Similarly, and perhaps precisely considering the history and message of the poem, it does not have the undertones of affection or consolation that are sometimes present in other examples of Owen's poetry. Instead, it is preoccupied with pity and rage – against the glorification of war and the

mindless slaughter of young men. This is conveyed vividly through the description of suffering bodies and minds: alive, but drained of energy by the machinery of war; dying, but impossibly still clinging to the last, painful vestiges of life – and the observer-speaker's mind tortured, trying to reconcile with helplessness.

3.2 The Anxieties of the Desert

While Keith Douglas' "Desert Flowers" is quite different in tone compared to "Dulce", it is also somewhat similar in its subject matter. Noticeably, it lacks the bloodiness and anger of Owen's poem: its sentiment is spelled out in language that seems more detached compared to the language used in "Dulce". Despite this, it still talks about the war and its effects on the human body and psyche in an unidealistic way: Ted Hughes has pointed out that Douglas' poetry "confront[s] reality undeluded ... and yet maintain[s] detachment and self-control" (Hughes, p. xix). Furthermore, according to Tim Kendall, Douglas seems to have foreseen his death, and this fatalistic outlook calmed him (Kendall, p. 169). It seems that this attitude towards life affected his poetry by introducing into it a certain cold realism, which did not lend itself to desperation or overt rebellion against the *status quo* of the war (Kendall, p. 169). In this regard, Douglas' poetry is more distanced than Owen's, and has less of the direct, sense-lead observation that is present in the latter's poem. In the language of "Dulce", a physical immediacy is used to discuss the ugliness of death and suffering. In contrast, while "Desert Flowers" also is in many ways a very physically-oriented poem, it also turns to death as a mystery in places. For example, the speaker yearns for:

the little coin it will take
to buy the secret I shall not keep. (Douglas, 11-12)

This is a reference to the fee paid to Charon, the ferryman of the river Styx in Greek mythology, in return for a safe transport to the underworld. The speaker wishes to see what is beyond the curtain of death. "To buy the secret I shall not keep" (Douglas, 12) may either refer to the speaker's wish to return to tell of what is behind the veil, or his inability to know or remember as a corpse. It is also possible that this longing to experience death is a reference to suicide, as the yearning for the coin

on the tongue could be read as a veiled expression for the desire to shoot oneself in the mouth. This would suggest an emotional and psychological strain and resignation, which echoes the band of fatigued soldiers in the beginning of "Dulce".

The aforementioned, distanced manner of depiction applies to the way the poem treats the subject of the human body and suffering, as well: the language used is not carnal, but rather abstract. This abstraction reaches its peak on line 13, where the speaker remarks:

I see men as trees suffering
or confound the detail and the horizon. (Douglas, 13-14)

Trees are immobile, they do not bleed, and they certainly cannot fight back, which makes this a somewhat conflicting choice of image to represent a soldier. It seems to underline passiveness instead of activeness: as a tree, one is unable to defend oneself, but must take whatever cruelties and abuse one is subjected to. It might be noted that this metaphor also renders its subjects fleshless and de-sexed – something which certainly cannot be said for Owen's poems, which are often explicitly preoccupied with the living, bleeding or suffering bodies of young men.

While epitomising the linguistically different ways in which Douglas' and Owen's poems treat the human body, at the same time the tree metaphor provides a touchstone for analysing the one major similarity between these poems: the helplessness of human beings in the face of war. Owen's speaker cannot help his dying friend and is doomed to relive the experience of watching him die in nightmares; Douglas' speaker sees his comrades blending in with the landscape of the battlefield, as unable to escape and as immobile as trees.

This blending together of the subject and the milieu (or certain elements in it) is repeated several times in "Desert Flowers", and also seems to be closely tied to the representation of human bodies. For example, on lines 3-4 the speaker remarks thus:

the shell and the hawk every hour
are slaying men and jerboas [–]" (Douglas, 3-4).

This juxtaposition of man and rodent (the jerboas) seems to suggest passivity – it is almost emasculating, since jerboas obviously have no natural defences against human warfare, and are

small and helpless. It also suggests that like the jerboas, the soldiers are also animals of the desert: they have become an endemic part of it, and so they must also die together with the local fauna – and also that the war is an extraneous, destructive intrusion in the lives of both. Furthermore, the hawk preys on the jerboas; and the shell not only preys on the man, but also the hawk and the jerboas (Douglas, 3-4). Thus, this juxtaposition that equates the bird of prey feeding on the rodent with the shells killing the soldiers, suggests that all four – "the shell and the hawk" as the predators, and the "men and jerboas" (Douglas, 3-4) as the prey – have an ecological niche of their own in the desert, further consolidating the idea that the fighting men have somehow become part of the landscape.

Another example of this becoming one with the desert is in the second stanza, beginning halfway through line five:

[–] but the body can fill
the hungry flowers and the dogs who cry words [–]
But that is not new (Douglas, 5-8).

Thus, the speaker remarks, the dead body becomes fodder for the flowers and wild dogs, its matter returning to the earth of the desert, as it is reused by the local plants and animals. This seems a rather practical and organic view on death, appearing quite resigned in the face of its inevitability. The fact that bodies essentially become fertiliser and dog food does not seem to come across as a scandalous act of defiling the sacredness of the human body, or even something worthy of dwelling in: "But that is not new" is like a poetic shrug, with which the speaker accepts that this is just the way this war is (Douglas, 8). This part of Douglas' poem appears to be in stark tonal contrast with Owen's "Dulce", with its elegiac language and gratuitous depictions of suffering and death, and particularly the way the language in "Dulce" underlines the horribleness and ugliness of that suffering and death.

However, it is worth considering that this apparent resignation could also be a way of deliberately scandalising the reader by invoking a sense of absurdity, and thus conveying the horror of war: the loss of life is so immense that death and desiccating bodies are already such common things that it is not worth dwelling on the subject: the speaker has been desensitised to it all. Wilfred Owen said the same thing, albeit in more explicit terms than Douglas, in "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo": he

described the battlefield as a place "Where death becomes absurd and life absurder" (6). The treatment of constant dying as something so banal can come across as absurd, and this is perhaps a deliberate device, used to reveal, by ostensibly initially concealing, a profound emotional involvement in the events.

In conclusion, While Wilfred Owen's "Dulce" is a very graphic and vivid elegy for the young men whom the speaker witnesses suffering and dying, Keith Douglas' "Desert Flowers" takes a more distanced, observer-like attitude to the events it depicts. Indeed, Tim Kendall has noted that the speaker's perspective in some of Douglas' poems is so distant as to be spectre-like (Kendall, p. 172). The same cannot be said for Owen's "Dulce", where the speaker confronts what is in front of him in a much more immediate, here-and-now style. The primary site of the differences between these poems is the language and style in which these poets approach the subject of the human body: Owen's depiction is immediate, bloody and based on direct observation, Douglas' more abstract, as evidenced by, for example, the tree metaphor discussed above. Despite these differences, there are some similarities, too: both poems depict physical and psychological plight; and both also seem to criticise the war for being a mindless slaughter and sacrifice of lives. In Owen's case, this criticism is brought to us by the horrible "gargling" (Owen, 22) sound of the dying soldier's dissolving lungs and other similarly vivid poetic images; and Douglas' poem can be read as an attempt to convey similar sentiments with a more detached and abstract style.

4 Beyond the Human: The Body and the Inorganic

4.1 Gunk and Gunmetal

There are occurrences in both Owen and Douglas' poetry where human bodies are contrasted with, or added to, by something else. These images would seem to function to the end of solidifying the war in the poems: war, and the suffering it brings, are epitomised in a substance, or some other addition that latches and sticks onto the bodies of the soldiers. In Owen's case, these concrete things are mud, gauze bandage and the thong of a rifle (Owen, 2; 22-23); in Douglas' poem, they are dust and the shadow of a discarded gun (Douglas, 5-6; 19).

Owen's "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" (from heretoforth referred to as "Apologia"), for instance, opens with a description of soldiers' mud-caked faces, the mud cracking as the "wretches smiled" (Owen, 2). The ever-present mud in the battlefields of the Great War has, in many ways, become emblematic of the war itself: and in these lines by Owen, it can be interpreted to mean that the war has become a physical addition to the soldier himself. The cracking is also significant, in that the mud must be already drying to be cracking: this suggests that the soldier has not had the chance to wash his face. The war is thus hardening onto his face, settling into his pores.

The sixth stanza also alludes to a synthesis of the human body and the tools of war, this time, markedly, in the context of romantic love. In the preceding fifth stanza, the speaker has denounced love associated with soft, feminine things – "the binding of fair lips" and "the soft silk of eyes that look and long" (Owen, 19-20) – in favour of (and here we move to the sixth stanza):

[love that is] wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong (Owen, 21-23).

The juxtaposition of metal, cotton gauze, living human bodies, leather, and metal again in the rifle itself, puts the wounded human body markedly in the *middle* of, and among, the inanimate things associated with war. The line about the human body is thus sandwiched between the lines about "war's hard wire" and "the rifle-thong" (Owen, 21; 23) – this suggests that the human body is, similarly, wrenched between deadly weapons, and at their mercy. As the "arm that drips" is

wrapped in bandages, the whole body is also made to seem like it is wrapped in the “hard wire” and the leather thong of the rifle (Owen, 21-23), both emblematic of the war as a whole. While the order of the lines may well be incidental in this regard, it does, however, meld them together by this association that arises from their juxtaposition.

There is also a subtle, soothing note in the soft bandage protecting the blood-dripping arm: it evokes nurturing, care, and the possibility of healing. Interestingly, the interpretation of passages like these in Owen’s poetry seems to be a disputed matter among some scholars. For example, Stephen Guy-Bray has claimed that Owen's poetry "lacks consolatory passages" (Guy-Bray, p. 219). While it is certainly possible to interpret his poetry in this way, some exceptions, such as the one above, may still be found.

Despite this, the overall feel of this stanza is grim: the soldier’s body can be seen to become part of the machinery of war which, when it comes to usefulness, does not differentiate between an inanimate object and a living body capable of bleeding, of feeling pain.

4.2 Embraced by Sand

Keith Douglas’ “Vergissmeinnicht” (German for “forget me not”) also has a passage which contrasts the body of a soldier – albeit a German one, and dead at that, unlike the one Owen wrote about in “Apologia” – with earth and gunmetal. The poem’s speaker comes across a dead German soldier who has been lying dead for quite some time, his body already in a state of decay. Some guns are laying scattered on the ground, and so is a photograph of the dead soldier’s beloved, “Steffi” (Douglas, 11). The speaker notes how the dead soldier’s equipment seems to “mock” him by being in a pristine condition, while his body is decaying (Douglas, 15). The “frowning barrel of his gun” is “overshadowing” quite likely the body itself, which is otherwise fully exposed to the sun (Douglas, 5-6). If that is indeed the case, then it is quite concretely shown how the shadow of the weapon is melding together with the image of the soldier sprawling dead on the ground, all the while contrasting its own unaffectedness by time with the far-progressed decay of the dead soldier. This fact that the gunmetal is unaffected by time and decay also

underlines its difference in comparison to the soldier's body, perhaps suggesting that war is, to some degree, eternal, while individual soldiers come and go.

The decay of the soldier's body is described thus:

how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave. (Douglas, 18-20).

In Owen's *Apologia*, the soldiers' bodies meld with the mud. In the passage by Douglas quoted above, it is not mud but dust that coats the eye: however, the idea of earthy matter reclaiming a soldier's body, indeed becoming part of it, can be seen here, as well. Furthermore, the likening of the soldier's stomach to a cave is also evocative of earth imagery (Douglas, 20). It is perhaps noteworthy that this cave metaphor is also echoed in "The Knife", as well as in "Desert Flowers", which was discussed in the last chapter. "The Knife", which I will analyse more closely in section 4, is a love poem: in it, the speaker compares his lover's eyes to the mouths of caves (Douglas, 2). The tone is, however, different: in "Vergissmeinnicht", the body is concretely and figuratively becoming part of the earth again; it has literally caved in (Douglas, 20) – and, it is definitely dead, unlike Owen's mud-caked fellow soldiers, and the treatment of the body as the subject of the poem definitely lacks the erotic and amatory sentiment of "The Knife". Thus "Vergissmeinnicht" is perhaps thematically closer to "Desert Flowers" than it is to "The Knife", as both poems explore the theme of the body of a soldier becoming one with the landscape.

Although the poem is about a German – and thus enemy – soldier, it is not altogether without compassion. While it might be argued that the depiction of the body's state of decay could be seen as dehumanising or jeering, the juxtaposition of the girlfriend's picture with the dead soldier introduces an aspect of humanity and sympathy to the poem. Indeed, the last stanza reads:

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. (Douglas, 21-24)

The German soldier's body is not thus only a dead enemy body, but also a body capable of love. The speaker also notes that by having killed this soldier, they have also destroyed the romance between him and Steffi (Douglas, 23-24). Furthermore, in describing how the body is desiccating, the speaker can also be seen to humanise him, perhaps borrowing from some above-human sentiment: friend or foe, everybody (indeed, every body) is eventually rendered the same by death. With this reading, we might see echoes from Owen's "Dulce", where the description of suffering is very detailed, to convey dismay, but also sympathy towards the suffering soldiers.

However, despite this show of compassion, the poem does not imply any amatory disposition from the speaker's side, unlike Owen's "Apologia" perhaps does. In fact, the speaker once remarks that he and his comrades are "almost content" in seeing the dishonoured state of the soldier (Douglas, 13). Regardless, the tone of being almost satisfied seems guilty, as it is followed directly, in the fifth stanza, by the speaker's assuming Steffi's viewpoint by musing about how sad she would be to see her boyfriend dead and rotting in the ground (Douglas, 17-20). This somewhat abates the sneer expressed in the fourth stanza.

5. Soldiers in Love: The Body, Intimacy, and Eroticism

5.1 Exploring the Unsaid

The theme of erotic affection in Douglas' and Owen's poetry has been mentioned in some of the previous sections. Due to the interesting idiosyncrasies in the ways each poet approaches this theme, I believe that a separate chapter to dissect them is in order. This section is going to focus on the body especially as a site of romantic and/or erotic reverence, and, in Owen's case, also discuss the poetic, subtextual implication of love and tenderness between men.

For this purpose, I will briefly return to Owen's "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo", which I already discussed in the last section in the context of bodies and their additions, for some lines in the poem are have notable suggestions of love or intimacy between men. For instance, the passage "I have made fellowships— Untold of happy lovers in old song" in the fifth stanza suggest that the speaker has discovered, and been able to explore, love towards other men in the trenches (Owen, 17-18). The following two lines,

For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long (Owen, 19-20)

can be seen to denounce the conventional romantic imagery used to represent (usually, but not always) heterosexual love. This imagery is replaced by the constant threat of death, the essential ambience of the battlefield. The "arm that drips", for instance, suggests the very fragility of the bodies of the fellow soldiers (Owen, 23). The "eyes" and "lips", and then the contrasting "arm" (Owen, 19-20; 23), as well as some other instances of dwelling in details in the poem, seem to create a suggestive, contrasting language of minutiae. It would seem that the speaker replaces the traditional love imagery with the details of war, and the juxtaposition of these sets of images stands out. These details and events of the battlefield can be seen to step in to take the place of the "fair lips" and "eyes that look and long" (Owen, 19-20).

In the England of Owen's days, attitudes relating to homosexuality were intensely intolerant, possibly even more so than in the Victorian period; interestingly, Graham Robb has noted that

while attitudes towards homosexuality in England were, in fact, relatively tolerant at the end of the Victorian period, in comparison, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a change for the worse (Robb, pp. 31-32, 39; Cole, p. 6). One of the reasons for this was that the invasive medicalisation of male and female homosexuality became more commonplace: for instance, new theories in the field of psychoanalysis on the perceived causes of homosexuality appealed to already pre-existing prejudices, thus validating them (Robb, 9, 65).

Thus, the time was not welcoming expressions of sexual attraction between men. While Owen's poetry may, to some readers, come across as bravely explicit in this regard, one can easily detect signs of plausible deniability in his choices of words. It is fully possible, for instance, to interpret the "fellowships" bigger than the ideal of heterosexual love (Owen, 17) in "Apologia" as nothing more than close comradeship between soldiers – but then again, reading the text through a "queer lens" (and it is difficult not to do so), one can similarly see the theme of homosexuality implicit in the poem. This duality or outright vagueness of expression is not uncommon in texts that were written during times when homosexuality was still illegal: gay readers, who were likely to be well-versed in the conventional hints and euphemisms for homosexuality, would have been likely to quickly pick up on these themes; heterosexual readers, who might have lacked this knowledge, would likely have interpreted the text very differently (Robb, p. 224).

However, it should be noted that literary conventions pertaining to the representation of male friendship have greatly varied over time. For example, language that conveys deep intimacy has been used in the context of friendship; and while exploring the homoerotic implications of said language may of course be pertinent, it is wise to remember that it may also describe friendships (Cole, p. 2). Keeping this in mind, there is always a risk of interpreting texts anachronistically. There are some biographical facts that suggest that Owen himself was gay – for instance, he was a member of a gay writer's circle in London (Parfitt, p. 657). Of course, a poem's author is not always its speaker; yet, the otherwise autobiographical themes of Owen's poetry suggest that he drew from his own life quite a lot. This particular poem, "Apologia", is, however, ambiguous and possible to interpret in several ways. An early draft of the poem was titled "The Unsaid" (Day-Lewis, p. 39), which is also an interesting thing to consider in terms of the ambiguity that was previously discussed.

5.2 The Lover of Nature

While the poetry of Keith Douglas analysed in the previous chapters comes across as quite detached, and less carnal than that of Wilfred Owen's, this detachment does not seem to extent to his love poetry. A fine and, when compared to some of his other poems, very physically immediate example of his love poetry is "The Knife". The poem has a female addressee, and none of the vagueness of expression, or possible double interpretations, that characterises Wilfred Owen's "Apologia". "The Knife" also has an interesting, reoccurring theme of a body/landscape-comparison and juxtaposition throughout it, but unlike in, for example "Desert Flowers", in this poem it does not seem to exude helplessness, but rather a desire to be understood. The first stanza of the poem reads thus:

Can I explain this to you? Your eyes
are entrances the mouths of caves.
I issue from wonderful interiors
upon a blessed sea and a fine day,
from inside these caves I look and dream. (Douglas, 1-5)

At the beginning of the stanza, the speaker appears to be confessing his difficulties in explaining the depth of his feeling to his beloved (Douglas, 1). Then, beginning on the first line, he compares his lover's eyes to the mouths of caves; and at the end of the first stanza, on line 5, he curiously merges their respective viewpoints by asserting that "from inside these caves I look and dream" (Douglas, 2; 5). Suddenly, it is not his lover that looks out from inside herself, but the speaker. It is as if the beloved's body becomes a concrete and safe dwelling-place, a comfortable cave, for the speaker to be inside. From the safety of her he then emerges, as lines three and four suggest, into a beautiful world – perhaps he means to suggest that after having been with his beloved, the world shows itself to him as more beautiful and peaceful.

In the next stanza, the speaker describes his lover's hair:

Your hair, explicable as a waterfall
in some black liquid cooled by legend
fell across my thought in a moment
became a garment I am naked without

lines drawn across through morning and evening. (Douglas, 6-10)

"[E]xplicable as a waterfall" (Douglas, 6) seems to be an attempt at solidifying the speaker's impression of the beloved's hair. Like the comparison of her eyes to caves in the first stanza (Douglas, 1-2), the comparison of her hair to a waterfall makes the speaker's vision of this part of her seem concrete by comparing it to a natural phenomenon. Maybe, then, with these observations the speaker is trying to answer the question with which the poem opens – "Can I explain this to you?" (Douglas, 1). He tries, it seems, to demonstrate his adoration by equating parts of his lover's body to the spectacles of nature: in this way he makes his emotion visible, almost palpable, in the form of observable natural phenomena.

The following third stanza differs in tone and structure from the first two discussed above. Firstly, it abandons the nature imagery utilised in the first two stanzas. Secondly, whereas the first two stanzas introduce one feature of the lover's body each, the third stanza has two: her thighs and breasts (Douglas, 12; 14). Consequently, the third stanza also uses more explicitly erotic language than the first two:

And in your body each minute I died
moving your thigh could disinter me
from a grave in a distant city:
your breasts deserted by cloth, clothed in twilight
filled me with tears, sweet cups of flesh. (Douglas, 11-15)

Whereas in the first stanza the body of the beloved was a safe living place for the speaker, here the line between living and death, in relation to the lover's body, seems to become more blurred. The first line seems to suggest that the body becomes a place for the speaker to die; but the next line, in turn, appears to contradict this by saying that just the movement of the beloved's thigh could, in fact, bring him back to life (Douglas, 11-13).

Thus, in embarking on a journey of erotic and poetic exploration of his beloved's body, the speaker attempts to explain the extent of his sentiment for her by comparing her physical qualities to natural phenomena. This imagery has an interesting effect on the way the poem conveys intimacy. At the same time, the poem paints in broad strokes the adoration of a vast landscape by an observer, something more public than private; but also manages to convey the sense of the speaker's being inside the addressee, one with her – so close are they that they even see through

the same eyes, those “entrances the mouths of caves” (Douglas, 2). Likewise, it could be assumed that since the speaker is reminded of natural formations and phenomena when thinking of his lover's body, those things, in turn, remind him of her: hence, she *is* the landscape he sees, and so he carries this image of her around with him.

6. Conclusion

In Wilfred Owen's poetry, the body is often at the forefront. It is through the human body that the mindlessness and the dehumanising effect of the war is conveyed; and, as the findings in this paper point out, language vividly expressive in terms of sound patterning, and word choices, as well as sense-led impressions, seems to have been the vessel through which he conveyed this effect.

While many of Keith Douglas' poems also focus on the body, his overall style is quite different. His war poems retain a distanced observer's perspective to the events they depict; and they are not as fleshy as Owen's poems seem to be. Furthermore, the poems by Owen that were analysed in this paper tend to be temporally straightforward, recounting events in the order that they happened, leaning heavily on immediate sensory observations; whereas Douglas' poems seem to rather focus on abstracted experiences, ideas and impressions extrapolated from the events they depict.

What both poets have in common, however, is the utilisation of the human body as a means to convey the reality of war. Since every human being shares the experience of physicality, and have all experienced pain, it can be easier to relate to physical experiences than it is to some other aspects of war – few of us have ever killed someone, for instance. For this reason, I believe that, especially in these times of continuous international conflict, it is important to contemplate the works of poets like Douglas and Owen, who remind us of the beauty, fragility and humanity of the body on the battlefield.

Sadly, neither of these men lived to see the end of the wars in which they fought: Owen was killed in action only days before the peace in November 1918 (Day-Lewis, p. 23), Douglas in 1944, shortly after the Normandy invasion (Hughes, p. xvii). Yet, decades later, their voices still speak of horrors endured, friends and loves found and lost, and the human body under the flatiron of the war.

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