

Truth, Introspection and Extrospection

Jon Glover

Biography

Jon Glover's recent book of poems, *Magnetic Resonance Imaging* (Carcenet 2008), was Ian McMillan's book of the year (BBC 'The Verb'). His *Glass Is Elastic* was published by Carcanet in 2012. Glover is the Managing Editor of *Stand* and Emeritus Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Bolton. He edited *The Penguin Book of First World War Prose* (1989) with Jon Silkin, and has written and lectured extensively on the literature of war.

Abstract

Poems written 'about' war, and those written by soldiers and others who participate in warfare, are often judged on qualities of representation, narrative and propaganda. How far were these issues predominant in the motives of the writers themselves? How far are their actual concerns relevant and understandable to a modern readership? The following paper was delivered at the conference 'For the Fallen' and 'For the Unfallen' at the University of Caen, in 2005.

Résumé

Les poèmes sur la guerre posent les question de narration, de propagande et de qualité de représentation. Dans quelle mesure le lecteur antérieur au conflit, peut-il saisir les divers enjeux ?

Keywords

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The poet of the Great War mostly widely read and studied in England is Wilfred Owen. In his Preface to the book of poems that he never saw through the press, since he died just a week before the armistice in 1918, he wrote, 'My subject is War and the pity of War. / The Poetry is in the pity....All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.'

Discussion of the multiple meanings of these famously brief and suggestive sentences is endless. On the one hand Owen is perhaps claiming that pity is not simply a feeling that we have *about* what we see but is something that inheres in the activity of warfare itself. Not internal, emotional, subjective pity felt by soldier, poet or reader towards war but the pity *of* war. And poetry is not a detachable separate description of war but is in some way related to, or an actual part of, the pity inhering

in the war. Of course, for Owen, it is assumed that he, as poet had himself, been an active participant. He was a soldier who not only saw the most dreadful things but took part in them - he characterised the sense of activity in battle as 'sheer': exhilarating, transcendent and, surely, *separate* from ordinary experience. Indeed, the 'sheer' quality of battle was something that we might hope we will never know or experience ourselves.

But notice Owen's next two points. The defining, and in some way limiting, purpose of the poet is to warn: '*All a poet can do...*'. One gets the feeling that this is partly because the times demanded this focus, and the focus is in some way concerned with the social, political and possibly religious need for this message. Yet the warning can only take place on the basic premise of truthfulness. The poet's tool for being able to look to the future in the process of warning is to be truthful about the present and also, one assumes, the past.

How is a war poet - how is any poet - 'truthful'? Is being 'truthful' to be, in literary terms, a realist? Photography is often used as a model of 'realism' but it is easy to think of ways in which the image offered by photographs may be chosen because of the photographer's political viewpoints and be intended to have an effect. They may come from the photographer's pity or shock and they may be conventionally described as showing events that are inherently pitiful, almost as though the postures of the dead can be caused by forces that are part of a moral, sacrificial or sacramental landscape. In other words, the moral slant is in what is seen 'out there', it is not only in the text. Hence, to read what we see truthfully or realistically may be to accept inhering moral and emotional reasons for what we put in the frame. At least, I think that is what Owen himself implies. And perhaps it is more than an indirect implication, he states it as though it were painfully obvious. He does not argue the case at length; he surely felt it was true as both cause and effect of his own poetry.

I want to problematise this notion further through the eyes of two more recent poets before returning to Owen and the Great War: Keith Douglas and Geoffrey Hill. And in doing this I want to suggest that what I may have set up as a problem well known to addicts of recent literary theory is actually a practical problem of technique for many poets.

Douglas was born in 1920, went to Oxford University where he was an active poet, but joined the army before completing his Degree. By 1941 he was a tank commander in North Africa. He died in the Normandy landings on 9th June 1944.

He was well aware that amongst fellow poets writing at home and in battle there was a sense of frustration—if the poets of the Great War had done it so well, what was there left to do?

The poets who wrote so much and so well before the war, all over the world, find themselves silenced, or able to write on almost any subject but war. Why did all this happen? 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?

They do not write because there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war except its mobile character. There are two reasons: hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now.

Meanwhile the soldiers 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 will be created after the war is over.
(Douglas, 'Poets in this War', *A Prose Miscellany*, 119)

It is perhaps strange to us to think that the poetry of Owen and Sassoon was seen by Douglas as 'natural enough' (Douglas, 'Poets in This War', 118). On the other hand, he was equally aware that he had been offered a solution to his problem—how to write with originality in the Second World War—which he subsumed into a technical problem—what seemed necessary to put into poems and how should he do it? To J.C. Hall in June 1943 he wrote:

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 anti reportage and anti extrospective (if the word exists) poetry...
(*Keith Douglas*, 10 June 1943, *The Letters*, 287)

But was this merely technical? Was he really re-discovering William Carlos Williams' famous dictum 'no ideas but in things' from the force of being made to look anew in the Western Desert at battle?

Open Open
Behold a gift designed to kill.

Now in my dial of glass appears
the soldier who is going to die.
He smiles, and moves about in ways
his mother knows, habits of his.
The wires touch his face: I cry
NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears

And look, has made a man of dust
of a man of flesh. This sorcery
I do.
(*The Complete Poems*, 'How to Kill', 112)

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
The dishonoured picture of his girl
Who has put: *Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht*
In a copybook gothic script.
(*The Complete Poems*, 'Vergissmeinnicht', 111)

On the one hand he offers poems that, at the very least, seem to function as though they were what we might call 'voice over' for a film. The record of the scene, what is there to be experienced, is in some ways subject to, or subordinate to, the external data. Douglas is a participant narrator in these awful events. The film maker, or extrospective poet, is there to record the gift that fell in his hand.

But, on the other hand, as soon as one uses the word 'gift', as soon as we read 'designed to kill'. As soon as we read that the killer is the viewer is the poet and that the killer and viewer and poet is 'damned' we see the profound ambiguity in Douglas's extrospection if we wanted to read a naive, simplistic realism in his technique.

Indeed, we might also assume, as I feel sure that Douglas understood it, that this poem is 'in the pity' and the pity is shared, culpably, by society at large and by each reader since 1943 of 'How to Kill'. In other words, the poem records objects and actions that assume active moral values 'in themselves', as it were. But the making of the poem implies an act of pity, similar to Owen's; a form of self-identification with the horror before him.

I want to look now at how a contemporary poet, Geoffrey Hill, has looked at these issues and I will start with an essay written by him in 1964. It was a review of a new selection of Douglas's poems made by the poet Ted Hughes with an introduction by him. Perhaps the problem that Hill had seen in Douglas, and in Hughes' interpretation of him, was this: is the truth seen through the gun's telescopic sights or the war-photographer's camera's viewfinder a universal truth applicable to all life? Or is it a truth unique to the absurd theatre of war, a 'special' truth?

Hill quotes Hughes's remarkable universalising digest of Douglas's message: 'not truth is beauty only, but truth kills everybody' (Hughes in *Douglas, Selected Poems* 12, in Hill 'I in another place' 8). Hill contests the generalisation. Each of the phrases he quotes from Douglas,

far from asserting a unifying generalisation about experience, conveys a sense of alienation, exclusion, of a world with its own tragi-comic laws, like *Alice* with all the sinister suggestions exaggerated. And much of the acuteness of the perception is in the recognition that not everyone has to go through with this...

(Hill, 'I in Another Place', 9)

One might think of many poems by Owen including 'Mental Cases' and 'Strange Meeting' which discover and attempt to record life beyond or behind the barriers of the absurd world of battle.

What was Owen's truth? Are 'Strange Meeting', 'Mental Cases' and 'Spring Offensive' only truthful because they are at least looking at worlds that poetry did not have the words, the textuality, to accept in 1917 and 1918? (Remember, although Douglas saw Owen's subject matter and language as 'natural' many earlier readers and writers felt that this subject matter and this language was, by definition, not poetry.) Does the text become useable because it has been determined through the extrospective recording of what is visible? Or are these texts truthful and pitiful because they actually offer an experience which is clearly part of another world, as detached from this ordinary world as Alice is when she passes through the looking glass?

How far was Douglas's apparent abandoning of his own earlier 'lyric approach' similar to Owen's? For both, being 'truthful' involved a degree of extrospection which validated language and experience not accepted in the academy at the time. Again, we can find a parallel version of this experienced in Rosenberg's writing about his poetry. Hill finds a vital link between perception and reality in Rosenberg and Douglas and quotes Rosenberg in a way which might offer a fittingly deferred conclusion to my questioning of truth and perception in war poetry:

I am dertimined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poeting; that is, if I am lucky enough to come through all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of

this life, and it will refine itself into poetry later on. (Rosenberg, *Collected Works*, 373 quoted by Hill in 'I in Another Place', 13)

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