

‘When there are so many we shall have to mourn’:
Poetry and Memory in the Second World War

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Abstract

In this thesis, I consider the representation of memory and mourning in the work of a number of poets, written during, or in the years immediately before and after, the Second World War. I consider the notion of memory in relation to the First World War and the early part of the twentieth century, observing the ways poets use existing literary models of mourning, remembrance and commemoration to write about the Second World War. My introduction presents the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the thesis. In Chapter 2, I examine the influence and impact of the work of Freud on Auden and H.D., arguing that mourning Freud's death in their work is a way to write about the war. Likewise, Chapter 3 looks at the impact of an influential individual, examining the 'Rilke craze' of the late thirties and early forties in relation to the war poetry of Auden, Keith Douglas, Hamish Henderson, Sidney Keyes and Alun Lewis, showing how Rilke's work opened up new possibilities for writing about death. Chapter 4 is dedicated to a study of Hamish Henderson's long poem *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* and the multitude of voices and fragments which it draws upon. The final chapter considers ekphrastic poetry about war memorials, looking at works by Auden, Henderson, Douglas, Jarman, Sassoon, and Lewis. I argue throughout that poets seek a precedent for the trauma and upheaval of the Second World War by turning or returning to the literature of other conflicts and ruptures in a multidirectional and palimpsestic attempt to make sense of the present and to represent it in poetry. The conclusion follows this idea into the post-war years and up to the present moment, by showing how the work of Keith Douglas has become a touchstone for more recent writers of conflict.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work, apart from those instances in which I quote or draw upon the work of others, where acknowledgement is clearly given through references in footnotes. Very early versions of chapters that appear in this thesis have been aired as short conference papers at the War-Net Biannual Meeting at Birkbeck in 2012, and Modernism at War, a conference of the Scottish Association of Modernist Studies, University of Glasgow, 2014. No other work in this thesis has been published and no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other institution. In the conclusion I briefly refer to material which I have published in the following article, which is cited accordingly: Owen, Sebastian. "‘From One April to Another’: Remembering and Acknowledging the Holocaust in the Poetry of Michael Longley." *Irish Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (July 2014): 358–73.

1. Introduction

In W.H. Auden's 'For us like any other fugitive', from the 1940 collection *Another Time*, the poet reflects on how the public conceives of its relation to the present moment:

So many try to say Not Now
So many have forgotten how
To say I am, and would be
Lost if they could in history¹

Between the second and third lines, the fact that we, the multitude, have 'forgotten how/ To say I am' is uttered at the same time as the poem momentarily forgets how to say its own iambs. The tight iambic tetrameter of the first two lines lapses after the 'I am' iamb, dropping a stress from the end of the third line. The fourth picks up the missed step, simultaneously emphasising this lost syllable with the trochaic '*Lost* if', before recovering the metre in time for the final rhyme.

The fugitives of the poem are fugitives from the present, unable to say 'I am' without stuttering and getting lost. Whilst 'I am' orients the speaker in the present, it is also an articulation of situation and self: I am British; I am in America; I am grieving; I am lost. This is a poem about those who are unable to say who or what or where they are. Yearning for the past, these people 'bow [...] with such old-world grace/ To a proper flag in a proper place.'² In his commentary on the poem, John Fuller notes that Auden was, at the time of writing, much impressed by Eugen Rosenstock-Hussey's *Out of Revolution* and the sense it gives of time in war: 'In war there is no time. In war people have lost control over time.'³ As in so much of *Another Time*, Auden is thinking in this poem about lost epochs, about the failure of the old world to come to terms with the rise of new forces like fascism and communism. It is a question of ownership as a world-view - 'of mine and his, of ours and theirs' - and the necessary loss that such an ideology must entail: 'No wonder then so many die of grief.' Yet loss, or being lost, is desired: they 'would be/ Lost if they could in history.' The people of this poem are grieving, lost, temporally dislocated; as the final line suggests, giving title to the collection, 'another time has other lives to live'.⁴ This is a public eager to

¹ W. H. Auden, "For Us like Any Other Fugitive," in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 50.

² Loc.cit.

³ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden : A Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 274.

⁴ Auden, "For Us like Any Other Fugitive", 50.

defer the present in expectation of a more accommodating future which looks, perhaps, nostalgically, like the more agreeable past.

Why is it so difficult to say ‘I am’? Why is it so difficult to be someone or something in 1940? Why the wish to live in ‘another time’? Auden gives something of an answer of his own in the famous opening lines to ‘September I, 1939’:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.⁵

The beginning of the new war brings with it the uncertainty, fear and anger that accompany the loss of hope and the reassuring certainty of ‘a proper flag in a proper place.’ Auden would later write that ‘war is an overt eruption of tensions and malaises which have long been present, and to which the poet has, or should have, long been sensitive.’⁶ The opening lines of ‘September I, 1939’ exemplify much of the Second World War’s early poetry: they speak of betrayal and the failure to prevent another war, and the sense of foreboding and uncertainty. One thing is for sure, such eruptions prompt Auden to write in the present tense, to make present the ‘long present’ malaises and tensions. ‘September I, 1939’ is a poem which foregrounds its place and making. It has the journalistic and epistolary voice which Auden had spent the latter part of the ‘low dishonest decade’ honing in *Letters from Iceland* (1937) and *Journey to a War* (1939). It has what modern readers might recognise as the ‘where were you when...?’ quality now so commonly associated with the culturally shared memories of great and terrible events in the age of mass media. The poem’s title resonates presciently with the significance of the date, the day when Germany invaded Poland and plunged Europe into another war. This time, there was no illusion that it would be over by Christmas.

⁵ W. H. Auden, “September I, 1939,” in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 103–6.

⁶ W. H. Auden, “W.H. Auden Speaks of Poetry and Total War,” in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, ed. Edward Mendelson, vol. II. 1939–1948, *Complete Works of W.H. Auden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 152–53.

‘Spain 1937’, an earlier war-time poem also collected in *Another Time*, similarly insists upon the moment of action and demonstrates, more explicitly than any other work in the collection, the danger of deferring the present to ‘another time’.⁷ ‘Yesterday all the past’, Auden writes, and ‘Tomorrow, perhaps, the future’, but it is ‘to-day, the struggle’ in which the indispensable action takes place, the fateful moment of decidability. And in ‘Spain 1937’, the outlook is bleak:

To-day the inevitable increase in the chances of death;
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the fact of murder;
 To-day the expending of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

To-day the makeshift consolation; the shared cigarette;
The cards in the candle-lit barn and the scraping concert,
 The masculine jokes; to-day the
Fumbled and unsatisfactory embrace before hurting.

The stars are dead; the animals will not look:
We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and
 History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.⁸

Auden’s catalogue of today’s struggles comprises poetics and politics, the quotidian and the extraordinary. There is little distinction between the acceptance of murder or the acceptance of being killed, between the unsatisfactory project of writing propaganda and the unsatisfactory embrace of a lover. The phrase ‘and the time is short and’ shortens time by containing between a caesura and line-break the uncontainable accumulative ‘ands’. All that there is time to say between the past before the first ‘and’, and the future beyond the second, is that there is not enough time in between to comprehend one and influence the other.

⁷ Auden struggled with ‘Spain 1937’, which was criticised by George Orwell, among others. In the first version, published as a pamphlet in 1937, Auden writes of the ‘conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder’. Orwell scathingly comments that this ‘could only be written by a person to whom murder is at most a *word* [...] Mr Auden’s brand of amoralism is only possible, if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled.’ Auden did not include any version ‘Spain’ in *Collected Poems* (1966), citing the inclusion of lines purely for rhetorical effect as ‘inexcusable.’ See Fuller, *W. H. Auden*, 286-287; George Orwell, “Inside the Whale,” in *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000), 122-123.

⁸ W. H. Auden, “Spain 1937,” in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 96.

John Fuller's commentary on the poem suggests Carl Jung as a probable source behind Auden's conception of the present as an 'ever-present moment of choice in human life'. Fuller cites the following passage from Jung:

It is sheer juggling to look upon a denial of the past as the same thing as consciousness of the present. 'Today' stands between 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow', and forms a link between past and future; it has no other meaning. The present represents a process of transition, and that man may account himself modern who is conscious of it in this sense.⁹

Not only is Auden 'conscious' of the importance of human action in the moment of transition from past to future, but also the importance of encoding this transition. Expanding Jung's terms, we might usefully view the thirties as one long 'today', as Auden's poem also authorises us to; a period of transition between yesterday's rupture during the Great War, and the growing expectation that it would happen again. Indeed, it is this sense of fulfilled expectation and repetition that characterises many of the poems that will be discussed in this thesis, and why Auden's works of the late thirties are such a useful place to begin. If there is, in Auden's work, a pervasive sense of inaction, missed opportunity, malaise and anxiety, it is a sense sharpened by the shadows cast behind the present moment, and those rising to meet it.

T.S. Eliot's wartime poetry is also concerned with writing the present moment and how it fits into a continuum of traumatic history and uncertain future. At the beginning of the war Eliot is reported to have said of writing that 'It doesn't seem to me to matter very much whether one isn't able to do anything very good. The important thing is to keep going. Probably it is impossible to do excellent work while things are so disturbed.'¹⁰ Despite such obstacles, Eliot spent the war years writing the greater part of the work that would be published in 1944 as *Four Quartets*. 'East Coker' (1940) describes the process of writing in terms of the 'wasted' inter-war period and the skirmishing of war, and echoes Eliot's sentiment that the poet must 'keep going':

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of l'entre deux guerres
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure

⁹ Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, tr. Dell and Baines, (1933), 229, as recorded in Fuller, *W. H. Auden*, 283.

¹⁰ Stephen Spender, *Journals, 1939-1983* (London ; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985), 23.

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate—but there is no competition—
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.¹¹

Eliot's 'general mess of imprecision of feeling' chimes with Auden's 'fumbling and unsatisfactory embrace', with both writers describing a widespread malaise that affects poetry. Indeed, Eliot's 'shabby equipment always deteriorating' and 'undisciplined squads of emotion' are reminiscent of the disorderly but passionate international brigades of the Spanish Civil War in a turn of phrase which is Audenesque on a subject familiar from Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). In this sense, Eliot is enacting exactly the predicament that his verse identifies: he renders today's struggle in yesterday's language, has 'only learnt to get the better of words/ For the thing one no longer has to say'.

In its anxious attempt to remain in the present and to keep writing, 'East Coker' turns to poetic predecessors: the 'men whom one cannot hope/ to emulate'. It is a variation on the theme of the influential early essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), in which Eliot writes 'the existing order is complete before the new work arrives.'¹² But he now portrays the relation of the living poet to the dead in terms of conflict and conquest, specifically the inadequacy of the new work: 'what there is to conquer [...] has already been discovered'. The optimism Eliot had for new works of poetry in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', their ability to enter and change that tradition, seems to be at stake in 'East Coker'. To write now is tautological perhaps, and certainly too late. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' similarly celebrates artistic predecessors whose works perhaps offer a better

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 182.

¹² T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919–1926*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 106.

picture of the present than any contemporary artist is capable of: 'About suffering they were never wrong./ The Old Masters.'¹³

Elsewhere in *Four Quartets*, 'Little Gidding' (1942) takes up the theme of the poetic predecessor in wartime, finding inspiration where the speaker of 'East Coker' finds unassailable competition. Eliot's speaker encounters the 'familiar compound ghost' in a deserted Blitz-scape-London street in a famous episode which borrows heavily from Dante and recalls, among others, W.B. Yeats.¹⁴ It is also reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's 'Strange Meeting', a poem described by Eliot as 'one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war', which also stages a Dantean encounter of partial-recognition away from the battlefield.¹⁵ In 'Little Gidding', the speaker encounters a figure with 'the look of some dead master/ Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled.'¹⁶ The whole episode takes place in 'the uncertain hour' and is oriented in a state of being in-between the latest part of the night and the first stirrings of dawn:

For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.
But, as the passage now presents no hindrance
To the spirit unappeased and peregrine
Between two worlds become much like each other,
So I find words I never thought to speak
In streets I never thought I should revisit
When I left my body on a distant shore.
Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight,
Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.¹⁷

Eliot uses the liminal space of the 'uncertain hour' to explore poetry's own inter-war liminality. This is a purgatorial experience of the in-between, wherein speech promises purification and revelation. Like Auden, Eliot sees the poet as one who should be attentive to 'tensions and malaises,' impelled by speech to 'urge the mind to aftersight and foresight.' The energy of poetry that Eliot describes works from the centre out, in the voice of the present moment rather than last or next year's language.

¹³ W. H. Auden, "Musée Des Beaux Arts," in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 35.

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 193.

¹⁵ See J.T. Walsh, ed., *A Tribute to Wilfred Owen* (Birkenhead: Birkenhead Institute, 1964).

¹⁶ Eliot, "Little Gidding", 193.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 194.

The First World War had been one of the major factors shaping modernist thought and writing in the early twenties; by the late thirties, the onrushing Second World War was a similarly powerful driver of late modernism. But, as Keith Douglas would write in 1940, ‘hell cannot be let loose twice’, and the Second World War did not represent for the imagination such a rupture in the rationale of liberalism and progress as that associated with the First World War.¹⁸ If the devastation of the First World War was as unprecedented as it was unpredictable, the Second World War was distinctive precisely because it was anticipated, unprecedented because it had a precedent. Auden and Eliot are both timely in their un-timeliness. Their work had set them apart from their contemporaries as the unofficial poet laureate and the grand old man of English poetry, and as such they were the prototypical writers for emerging voices in the late thirties, as well as writers of the Second World War in their own right. If the First World War had shaped their work, now their work would shape the literature of the Second World War.

The poets in this thesis are many things and write from many perspectives, but all of them write (happily) after Eliot and Auden, after Freud or after Rilke. Several recent commentators have found the Second World War to be a modernist consummation of sorts. ‘What the Great War initiated, the Second World War realised’ writes Marina MacKay, in *Modernism and World War II*, ‘Britain’s political culture finally caught up with its interwar avant-garde, and this closing gap means there’s a historical moment at which the polemical conflation of poetry and protest, literary and political dissent, ceases to ring true.’¹⁹ Similarly, Leo Mellor’s study of wartime culture, *Reading the Ruins* (2011), finds modernism to be ‘utterly and hauntingly proleptic’: ‘throughout the 1920s and 1930s British writing was filled with ruins and fragments [...] But from the outbreak of the Second World War what had been an aesthetic mode began to resemble a template.’²⁰

¹⁸ Vincent Sherry has argued that the language of modernism, particularly in the post-war works of Pound, Eliot and Woolf developed directly in response to the increasingly pronounced tension between the rhetoric of liberalism and its achievements, or failures, in the years 1914-18. See Vincent B. Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Keith Douglas, “Appendix B Poets in This War (May 1943),” in *The Letters*, ed. Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 352.

¹⁹ Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9.

²⁰ Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5.

Staying in History

For Lyndsey Stonebridge, in *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture*, anxiety characterises much of the literary and psychoanalytical output of the thirties and early-forties: ‘Anxiety tilts us towards the hammerlike blows; as breathlessly paralysed as we might be in the face of a history that seems incomprehensible, anxiety is also the affective register of a form of historical anticipation.’²¹ Stonebridge’s book studies novelists of the forties, including Henry Green, Muriel Spark and Rose Macaulay, and psychoanalysts working in the same period, notably D.W. Winnicott and Melanie Klein. The context identified by Stonebridge, of a period characterised by uneasy transition from ‘incomprehensible’ past towards an unknowable but terrifying future, is also a useful point of departure for interpreting the poetry of the Second World War.²²

Stonebridge presents two immediate problems: how can one live with an ‘incomprehensible’ past, and how can the ‘incomprehensible’ be expected to repeat itself in the future? For Sigmund Freud, fear could mitigate trauma. If trauma is a matter of temporal disruption, the anticipation symptomatic of anxiety prevents such a catastrophic temporal shock. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes that “‘Anxiety’ describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one.”²³ To prepare for the unknown is, of course, almost impossible, but it is this state of recognising that the trauma is coming that prevents what Freud calls traumatic neurosis: ‘I do not believe anxiety can

²¹ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

²² In the recent book *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (2015), Paul K. Saint-Amour is the latest thinker to shift the focus of war scholarship from memory to anticipation. Total war, Saint-Amour argues, ‘weaponiz[es] anticipation, making the future seem a predetermined site of catastrophic violence.’ Saint-Amour claims that his work examines the culture of anxiety in the twenties and the thirties for the first time, which, as this section shows through the work of Lyndsey Stonebridge, is overstating the book’s distinctiveness. Nevertheless, Saint-Amour’s claim that the study of modernism sheds light on these interwar years is useful and the present study shares with Saint-Amour’s book the ambition to elucidate modernism’s inter-war years, but in this case by tracing the development of modernist principles and ideas as they develop and permeate culture before and during the Second World War. See Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in James Strachey and Anna Freud, eds., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 18 (1920–1922), 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1981) 12.

cause a traumatic neurosis. There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and fright-neuroses.²⁴

In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* Freud gives voice to the anxious unconscious: ‘The present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences I have had before. Therefore I will anticipate the trauma and behave as though it had already come, while there is yet time to turn aside.’²⁵ It links what we know can happen (because it has happened before) and what we think is about to happen. For Stonebridge, anxiety ‘fills the gap between reason and imagination’.²⁶ It is not, as in the case of trauma, a state of missed experience or being out-of-time, but instead a kind of attempt to stay in time by weighing pasts and futures against one another. Stonebridge continues:

The writing of anxiety, then, can be read as describing a kind of historiography of trauma; a writing which treats history not so much as enigmatic or unresponsive (common tropes in much trauma writing), as a form of imaginative provocation. A provocation is how I think that many writers and artists thought about history in the 1940s: from the shocking power of the first photographs to emerge from the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s, to the perpetual crises of aerial warfare during the war, to the numbing horror of the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal; the decade was characterized not only by the shocks of history, but by a demand that the imagination should continue to discover ways of being in history – or perhaps of *staying in it*.²⁷

Stonebridge’s work on anxiety is one of the important departure points for this thesis, and the notion of writers finding ways for the imagination to ‘stay in history’ is a crucial line of enquiry. Stonebridge identifies ‘new primitivisms’ and ‘the late flowering of mythic modernism’ as two facets of the anxious literature of the period.²⁸ In each chapter, I discuss the ways poets look backwards in order to comprehend something about the present, or survey the cultural desolation of the present and apprehend the revenants, ruins and remembrances of the past. Stonebridge’s identification of anxiety as a historical condition and literary discourse during the war helps to explain the tendency towards memory, mourning, commemoration and remembrance that is my main enquiry. After all, ‘normal’

²⁴ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 13.

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, 1926, in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey, vol. 20 (1925–1926) (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 166.

²⁶ Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety*, 2.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 5-6.

²⁸ *Loc.cit.*

mourning according to Freud is a case of being in historical relation to the lost object: the ‘withdrawal of the libido from th[e lost] object and a displacement of it on to a new one.’²⁹ But, as Stonebridge suggests, the question is perhaps not a matter simply of ‘being’ in history, but ‘staying’ in it. It is not simply a state, but an ontological process or struggle. As this thesis finds repeatedly, imaginative representations of memory and mourning negotiate the terms of their articulation across times and places, and in dialogue with other writers, artists and traditions.

One of the most prominent of those traditions is pastoral elegy. This thesis is not a genre study, but elegy is an important category throughout and the conventions of the pastoral tradition are a source of allusion and play in many of the poems studied here. The rustic landscapes and peaceful, meditative animal herders of Hellenistic Greek poetry, and later, the Arcadian visions of Virgil, have largely disappeared from modern elegy in their conventional form, appearing instead in pastiche or through ironic allusion. Nevertheless, these conventions have a long history in English verse, and survive through Milton, Shelley and Arnold right up to the cusp of the twentieth century. They are present often enough in war poetry to situate many works directly within this tradition of elegy. As this thesis explores, T.S. Eliot and Wilfred Owen both reconfigure elegy in response to the no-man’s land of the First World War, and the influence of their work bears out in the poetry of Hamish Henderson and John Jarman.

Whilst the shepherds have mostly fallen away, the psychological and social structures which they enabled have remained. The mediation between internal and external worlds, life and death, loss and consolation, past and future, are all features of the poetry of mourning examined here in relation to the Second World War. This thesis studies the elegiac mediation of life to legacy in the chapter on Freud’s death, of losses to remembrance in the battlefield elegies of Hamish Henderson, and of memory to commemoration in the chapter on war memorials. Such mediations are characteristic of elegy, and are an example of Stonebridge’s notion of a historical relation to the world and to loss. But whilst elegies conventionally move in a linear fashion from loss to consolation, this thesis considers instead the emergence of different times and spaces in the poem’s present, a layering of experience and temporality that complicates rather than consolidates loss and mourning.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (1914–1916), 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1981).249.

It is my contention that engagements and encounters with discourses of memory and mourning represent poetry's imagined relationship to time, place and history. The texts studied here are almost always ambivalent about these relationships.

Elegy underwent major changes during the twentieth century, a development identified and traced by Jahan Ramazani in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. The next chapter of this thesis discusses one very specific instance of this changing practice, the elegiac poetry and prose written for Freud by Auden and H.D. at the outbreak of the war. These are poems which struggle with the very language of mourning, subverting elegiac conventions and seeking to understand Freud's death and the start of the war concurrently as the end of an epoch. Without Freud, they ask, what language will be left for understanding loss? Chapter 3 examines a widespread grasping for a newly available language of death. Poets of the late thirties and early forties were the first generation of writers to have access to the works of Rainer Maria Rilke in English, and access him they did. 'Rilkean' allusion and style appears in a great deal of Second World War poetry, making him briefly as influential as the likes of Yeats and Eliot. This chapter is concerned with the unlikeliest manifestations and apparitions of Rilke, particularly in the North African desert war, and the ways in which the fashion for Rilke's work occasions a new mode of expressing loss in British war poetry.

One of those for whom Rilke's work was particularly important is the Scottish poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson, an Intelligence Officer in North Africa and Italy during the war and the single-author subject of Chapter 4. Henderson's long poem *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* has been somewhat overlooked by scholars, if not anthologists, although it has recently attracted renewed critical attention.³⁰ As well as Rilke, Henderson draws from a wide range of European modernists and romantics in a work of critical complexity and modernist collage. Reading through these allusions reveals the North African landscape of the poem to be a complex cultural palimpsest, in whose terms the death and destruction of the Second World War is another layer of literary and commemorative discourse. Henderson's self-professed duty in that poem is to commemorate and memorialise the soldiers killed in North Africa, and the poem's speaker tracks down monuments in the desert wastes. The final chapter examines the emergence of memorials in poetry as sites of

³⁰ See for example Corey Gibson, "In the Midst of Our Human Civil War: Hamish Henderson's War Poetry and Soldier's Songs," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 40, no. 1 (2014): 146–66; Eberhard Bort and Margaret Bennett, *Borne on the Carrying Stream: The Legacy of Hamish Henderson* (Perthshire: Grace Note Publications, 2010).

overlapping memory in which the losses of the First World War are mapped onto contemporary experience. As ambivalent sites of exchange and negotiation, particularly for poets like Siegfried Sassoon, whose anxious poetry of the thirties angrily denounces the failure of a culture of remembrance to prevent the impending catastrophe, memorials and monuments enter war poetry in a form of awkward ekphrasis. This chapter considers the engagement of a number of works and writers with memorials, from prominent and established voices on the home front like Siegfried Sassoon and W.H. Auden to nascent talents on active service like Keith Douglas, John Jarman and Hamish Henderson.

For Auden and Eliot, as argued at the start of this chapter, the present moment was a site of transition, but also of disillusionment, disassociation, and displacement. For Eliot, the ‘tradition’ offered some hope of writing this malaise. Likewise, in much of the poetry considered here, looking back is a strategy for articulation (if not always eloquence): of finding ways to stay in time. When Keith Douglas writes in ‘Desert Flowers’, ‘Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying’, he draws attention to the temporal distance, the feeling of déjà-vu and the predecessor as an interlocutor.³¹ In Douglas’s famous line, the process of articulation foregrounds the emergence of poetic memory in the present tense of wartime. Freud wrote of anxiety that it reminds the subject of a trauma suffered in the past. The Second World War, particularly in its early stages, appeared to be a repetition of the First, and certainly this is how many poets wrote about it. This is not to say that their writing is tautological. Rather, it seeks to understand conflict by recourse to other conflicts, and, by extension, to the literature of other conflicts. ‘Experience’, as Norman Holmes Pearson writes of H.D.’s understanding of the thirties and the Second World War, ‘was a palimpsest.’³²

Palimpsests and Multidirectional Memory

The problem of the present moment, with which Auden and Eliot’s speakers grapple, is the condition of Elizabeth Bowen’s protagonist Louie, in the novel *The Heat of the Day* (1948). For Louie, the present is a place of refuge, but also paralysis:

³¹ Keith Douglas, “Desert Flowers,” in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 108.

³² Norman Holmes Pearson, “Preface to the First Edition (1973),” in *Tribute to Freud*, by Hilda Doolittle, ed. Adam Philips (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2012), 199.

Louie had, with regard to time, an infant lack of stereoscopic vision; she saw then and now on the same plane; they were the same. To her everything seemed to be going on at once; so that she deferred, when she did, in a trouble of half-belief to either the calendar or the clock.³³

Louie here is infantilised by her inability to differentiate different layers of time. For her, the world is, in a temporal sense, flat. It is not difficult to imagine her as one of Auden's fugitives from the present who yearn for proper flags in proper places; Louie is unable to interpret the complexity of time, and defers to those devices designed to measure it without regard for events or experience, the calendar and clock. The stereoscope is a complex metaphor for the perception of time. Popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a stereoscope is a device for viewing 'right-eye' and 'left-eye' versions of the same image to produce a three-dimensional picture. Time, a fourth dimension as it were, is not automatically a part of the equation. Furthermore, Louie in fact *is* looking at things in a stereoscopic way – 'everything seemed to be going on at once'; 'they were the same' – but simply failing to perceive the single image, let us say the present, as a conflation of different layers of time. For Louie, experience is, to reframe the stereoscope image in terms of writing, an indecipherable palimpsest.

Bowen's imagery here is an innovative take on the palimpsest, a concept which was proving useful to a number of writers and thinkers between the wars, and that continues to be useful in cultural studies today. It is appropriate perhaps that the 'palimpsest' as a critical concept has itself become palimpsestic, written-over and over-written, described and re-described and now, altogether muddled. It is not a term I wish to deploy systematically, wary as I am of its ability to flatten and to write-out. To describe H.D.'s poetry as 'palimpsestic' is entirely proper and useful, and she saw it this way herself. To use it in relation to say Hamish Henderson, is another matter. His poetry is palimpsestic, but also intertextual, mediated, scavenged: he is a collector, an archivist, a plunderer of word-hoards. Derrida was critical of Freud for the rigidity of the 'writing-pad' metaphor, one of psychoanalysis's foundational palimpsests.³⁴ Nevertheless, it is a term with a great deal of descriptive power, and its deployment in recent studies of the representation of the Holocaust has brought the palimpsest squarely into discussions of contested and traumatic memory.

³³ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Vintage, 1998), 17.

³⁴ See Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 246–91.

Whilst Freud's short 1925 piece 'Note on the "Mystic Writing Pad"' represents the most direct discussion of a palimpsestic phenomenon as an analogy for the processes of memory, recent theorists have sought instead a re-description of Freud's earlier essay 'Screen Memories'. This vignette on the ways repressed memories re-emerge into consciousness was written in 1899, around the time that Freud coined psychoanalysis and was 'work[ing] through the material in his and his patients' dreams, reading them as riddling palimpsests that re-work, indeed re-write, childhood memories and desires.'³⁵ For Freud, a screen memory presents itself in the place of another memory whose content is objectionable; it is a memory 'whose value consists in the fact that it represents thoughts and impressions from a later period and that its content is connected with these by links of a symbolic or similar nature.'³⁶ In the case study provided by Freud in this essay, the subject, a thirty-eight year old man, recalls the apparently mundane content of his earliest memory. In his introduction to the essay, Hugh Haughton notes that Freud 'plays the role of Sherlock Holmes', reading content from later impressions as evidence that the early memory was not from childhood, but projected onto it during adolescence. Freud argues:

That it is not the experience itself which provides the memory image – in this respect the resistance carries the day – but another psychical element, which is closely associated with the one that proved objectionable. Here again we see the power of the former principle, which seeks to establish important impressions by creating reproducible memory images. Hence, the result of the conflict is that, instead of the memory image that was justified by the original experience, we are presented with another, which is to some extent associatively *displaced* from it. [...] We find it unintelligible because we would like to see the reason for its retention in its intrinsic content, when in fact it resides in the relation between this content and another, which has been suppressed.³⁷

The implications of this discovery are enormous for Freud. Essentially, no childhood memory can be assumed accurate and might be the site of traces of repressed impressions from an altogether different moment. Memory works for the needs of the present, and as such, censors or exaggerates details according to the needs of the individual at the time.

The link between the development of the screen memory and the repressed memory which it veils is not arbitrary, as Freud continues:

³⁵ Hugh Haughton, "Introduction," in *The Uncanny*, by Sigmund Freud, ed. Hugh Haughton, trans. David McLintock, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 2003), xv.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," in *The Uncanny*, ed. Hugh Haughton, trans. David McLintock, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 2003), 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 7.

You've heard me say that every suppressed fantasy of this kind has a tendency to escape into a childhood scene. Now, add to this the fact that it can't do so unless a memory-trace is present, whose content offers points of contact with the fantasy, which meets it halfway, as it were. Once such a point of contact is found [...] the remaining content of the fantasy is remodelled by the addition of any admissible intermediate idea [...] until new points of contact with the content of the childhood scene have emerged. It is quite possible that during this process even the childhood scene itself will be subject to modifications; I think it is certain that memories can be falsified in this way.³⁸

The notion of 'points of contact' which Freud mentions here emerges again, as discussed above, almost thirty years later in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*: 'The present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences I have had before.'³⁹ Anxiety appears to work in a similar manner to the screen memory, but the mitigation of trauma is achieved less by repression and screening, than by the acceptance of the perceived repetition of the traumatic conditions. Freud describes the mediation of memories which occurs in the process of screen memory in terms of a reciprocal remodelling: the childhood/screen memory is altered as much as the objectionable traumatic memory in a process of a give-and-take articulation. The points of contact become sites of negotiation for different memories and different versions of the past and present.

Recent scholars of the Holocaust have adapted Freud's concept of the 'Screen Memory' to understand the emergence of Holocaust memory in other traumatic sites, notably in French and Algerian representations of the Algerian struggle for independence. Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* (2009) discusses Freud's 'Screen Memories' at some length, and appears to take its name from Hugh Haughton's comment in the introduction to the essay that 'the notion of the 'screen' or 'cover' becomes increasingly many-layered or multi-directional.'⁴⁰ Rothberg's influential study challenges the notion of collective memory competing in a 'zero-sum struggle for pre-eminence', arguing that rather than memory rigidly constituting group identity in public and cultural spaces and memorial sites, memory is instead 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive not privative.'⁴¹ Shared memories of one event contribute to the articulation of others, for

³⁸ Ibid. 17.

³⁹ Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, 166.

⁴⁰ Haughton, "Introduction." xix.

⁴¹ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

example, the emergence of Holocaust imagery in the representations of the Algerian War of Independence. As the name of the book suggests, *multidirectional* memories involve a dynamic interplay of sites and codes of memory, and Rothberg shows how the memory of the Holocaust itself emerged in dialogue with post-war events, specifically struggles against colonial powers.

Rothberg maps 'Screen Memories' onto a model of shared memory which understands, after Maurice Halbwachs, that 'all memories are simultaneously individual and collective: while individual subjects are the necessary locus of the act of remembrance, those individuals are imbued with frameworks common to the collectives in which they live.'⁴² In his assessment, Freud's concept does not involve a conflict between two memories competing for consciousness, but rather a 'remapping of memory in which links between memories are formed and then redistributed between the conscious and unconscious.' The significance of such cross-referencing, such multidirectionality, is that it 'both hides and reveals that which has been suppressed.'⁴³ Rothberg's take on screen memory, and the dynamic process of borrowing and negotiation that accompanies it, helps to frame the struggle for articulation which faced the poets of the Second World War. The problem of 'staying in history' proposed by Stonebridge sets in motion a scramble for appropriate models and referents, as we have seen from the poetry of Auden and Eliot already. This thesis will show the dynamic interplay across a range of Second World War poetry.

Max Silverman's *Palimpsestic Memory* (2013) builds on Rothberg's model, reinstating the palimpsest as a useful figurative device for understanding the interplay of memories in a text. The palimpsest returns memory to a single spatio-temporal site, which corresponds, according to Silverman, with Walter Benjamin's 'constellation', superimposing memory traces into the same space. Silverman writes:

This process draws together and creates correspondences between different elements so that the 'oppositions' between fragment and the totality, past and present, here and elsewhere, and movements and stasis are not in fact oppositions but in permanent tension, or rather that one can be seen within the other.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid. 15.

⁴³ Ibid. 14.

⁴⁴ Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 26.

For Silverman, artistic works are the site where such interplay is observable and he calls the ‘anxious relationship’ between traces ‘the poetics of memory.’⁴⁵ In the works of both Silverman and Rothberg, the politics of identity is crucial to understanding the interplay of memories of the Holocaust in the era of decolonisation, a project that is quite different to mine here. Nevertheless, this chapter began with Auden’s stuttering attempts to say ‘I am’, and the multidirectional and palimpsestic mnemonics of the poetry studied here is part of the attempt to survive in relation to an anxious or traumatic historical moment. The simple binaries of war – us/them, friend/enemy – are blown apart by poetry which negotiates the shared cultural inheritance of European literature, as the chapter on the influence of Rilke shows. Hamish Henderson’s poetry also refuses to treat Germans as anything other than comrades in the battle against the desert, and his superimposition of the Highland Clearances onto the desert battles with Nazi Germany poignantly articulates Europe’s struggle in broader historical terms. H.D.’s poetry, explored in Chapter 2, repeatedly returns to the palimpsest as a figurative device, and Chapter 5 considers memorials and monuments in poetry as sites of the multidirectional articulation of mourning, bringing the memorialised subject into realms of fresh loss and devastation.

The Anticipation of Memory

One of the primary sites of the negotiation between past and present is the memory and legacy of the First World War, the literatures of which were well known to the generation of writers who fought in the Second World War. As such, the cultural production of the First World War plays an important part in this study as a precursor. In his seminal study *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argues that:

Every war is alike in the way its early stages replay elements of the preceding war. Everyone fighting a modern war tends to think of it in terms of the last one he knows anything about. That tendency is ratified by the similarity of the uniform and equipment to that used before, which by now has become the substance of myth [...] The act of fighting a war becomes something like an unwitting act of conservative memory, and even of elegy.⁴⁶

Eliot may have had something similar in mind when he armed his raid on the inarticulate with ‘shabby equipment’, and certainly the perceived similarities in the ‘uniform and equipment’ of poetry have been noted by critics. The trope identified by Fussell here was a

⁴⁵ Ibid. 28-29.

⁴⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 340.

concern for poets at the time as well. Keith Douglas, a poet keen to ‘bloody well make my mark on this war’, was all too aware of both the blueprint left by the First World War poets, and the expectation that poets could or should follow that blueprint.⁴⁷ In the poem ‘Desert Flowers’, citing one of these predecessors, Douglas writes ‘Rosenberg, I only repeat what you were saying’, and in an unpublished essays ‘Poets in This War’ he states that ‘Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological.’ Both Dawn Bellamy, in the *Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, and Fran Brearton, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, are quick to seize upon Keith Douglas’s comments about what Fussell calls ‘an unwitting act of conservative memory.’ Bellamy is keen to point out the qualifier in Douglas’s proclamation: ‘within Douglas’s ‘Almost all’ is the space for the poets of the Second World War to write of their own experiences, influenced, rather than silenced, by those others who had come before’ [Bellamy’s emphasis].⁴⁸

Fran Brearton explicates ‘Desert Flowers’, demonstrating how the legacy of the First World War might be read in Second World War poetry. Douglas writes:

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers –
 Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying –
 the shell and the hawk every hour
 are slaying men and jerboas, slaying

the mind: but the body can fill
 the hungry flowers and the dogs who cry words
 at nights, the most hostile things of all.
 But that is not new.⁴⁹

According to Brearton, Douglas ‘reinvokes the familiar landscape of 1914–18 – the rats, Rosenberg’s ‘poppies whose roots are in man’s veins’, the continual bombardment, a hostile ‘enemy’ other than the opposing army (in the Great War, rats, lice, mud).’⁵⁰ Adam Piette, in

⁴⁷ Douglas’s comment is recorded in Desmond Graham, *Keith Douglas, 1920-1944; a Biography* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 79.

⁴⁸ Dawn Bellamy, “‘Others Have Come before You’: The Influence of Great War Poetry on Second World War Poets,” in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 314.

⁴⁹ Douglas, “Desert Flowers.”

⁵⁰ Fran Brearton, “‘But That Is Not New’: Poetic Legacies of the First World War,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, ed. Santanu Das, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 229–41.

Imagination at War, notes the similarities felt by soldiers between the Western Desert and the trenches of the First World War: ‘Minefields, barbed wire, featureless landscape, [...] the impression of being lost in another world, a world of mechanical war: the similarities struck many, and concentrated the soldiers’ memories on a generational irony.’⁵¹ These similarities, Piette continues, ‘only made the differences more keenly felt. [...] It was commonly felt to be an empty, theatrical rerun of [the First World War].’⁵² Piette also finds evidence for the perceived similarity in Douglas’s work where frequent theatrical metaphors suggest that ‘the poet, crippled by war discourse, and most of all by fear of emptily rewriting First World War concerns in this strikingly similar scene, writes in pain at his own heartless (melo)dramatizing of other men’s’ deaths.’⁵³

If ‘emptily rewriting’ was a concern for Second World War poets, the tropes and myths by which to do so were already ingrained in the popular consciousness. One of the central goals of Fussell’s writing on war is myth-identification. In *Wartime*, Fussell’s follow-up to *The Great War and Modern Memory* about the war in which he himself fought, he discusses the place of myth and rumour in the Second World War. Fussell argues that the widespread mismanagement and confusion of war, as well as its more sinister official cover-ups, made way for popular narratives: ‘A world in which such blunders are more common than usual will require large amounts of artful narrative to confer purpose, meaning, and dignity on events actually discrete and contingent.’⁵⁴ Fussell’s mythology has been a target for criticism and Kate McLoughlin argues that his books create myths as much as they claim to catalogue them.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the idea of myth is useful here for the ways it enriches Stonebridge’s notions of writing anxiety and of palimpsestic or multidirectional memory. ‘Mythical speech’, according to Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, ‘is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication’ [Barthes’s emphasis].⁵⁶ If the imaginative interplay of time and place is one way to mitigate the anxiety occasioned by wartime unreason, myth is, according to Fussell, one of the most immediate

⁵¹ Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry, 1939-1945* (London: Papermac, 1995), 16.

⁵² Loc.cit.

⁵³ Ibid. 18.

⁵⁴ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35.

⁵⁵ See Kate McLoughlin, “The Great War and Modern Memory,” *Essays In Criticism* 64, no. 4 (2014): 436–58.

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2009), 133.

and widespread manifestations of the collective imagination: ‘demotic social narratives and prophecy flourish as compensations.’⁵⁷

The compensations provided by the myths Fussell identifies are diverse and often diametrically opposed to the environment out of which they are borne: stories of fear and excitement during the boring phases of the war, stories of escape for prisoners, movement for stationary units, leave for those on active service, active service for those in training. But perhaps the most pervasive consolatory narrative of either war is that of death and remembrance. It is the subject of Geoff Dyer’s *The Missing of the Somme*, a text which sheds light on the inter-war period and elucidates the link between anxiety and anticipation on the one hand, and loss, mourning and remembrance on the other. For Dyer, the Great War’s chief cultural mode was remembrance, and it was this that stood in for everything else missing in wartime, the anxious or ludicrous gaps described by Stonebridge and Fussell:

In the early twenties everything about the war – except the scale of loss – was suspended in a vacuum which all the memorials and rites of Remembrance were in the process of trying, in many different ways, to fill. Husbands, sons, fathers were missing. Facts were missing. Everywhere the overwhelming sense was a lack, of absence.⁵⁸

This thesis considers the legacy of the First World War’s cultures of remembrance in Chapter 5. For many poets of the Second World War, the monuments to the missing and the mass cemeteries of France were the most visible reminder of the First World War and became especially poignant, or confrontational, at the beginning of the Second World War. The war’s poetry and its rituals of remembrance were the vehicles by which the young generation of Second World War poets knew it, and which provided a framework through which to understand their own situation. Writing over these sites is a process of palimpsestic memory: the absence which they signify is filled with the present situation. The cultures of remembrance left over from the First World War help poets negotiate the impending losses of the Second.

This thesis builds on the essays by Bellamy and Brearton to expand the genealogy of Second World War poetry. I consider the influence of Freud and Rilke as well as Owen and Sassoon, considering how the impact of the First war on their writing and reception carried over into the understanding and literary representation of the Second war. This line of

⁵⁷ Fussell, *Wartime*, 35

⁵⁸ Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London, etc: Penguin Books, 1995) 43.

enquiry argues that an appreciation of Second World War poetry can expand and redescribe what we understand by the literary legacy of the Great War. Chapter 5 also adds to the field of memory studies. Since the mid-1990s there has been a great deal of critical attention given to the practices and rituals of war memorials and sites of memory, with pioneering studies on the memorials of the Great War and the Holocaust prompting an outpouring of scholarship on memorial architecture, social policy, history and literature.⁵⁹ My contribution to this field is to consider an early and widespread reassessment of the First World War's massive project of remembrance in the poetry of the Second World War. As a second war became increasingly certain and eventually broke, much of the rhetoric of remembrance extolling the ideals for which soldiers died became ironic, sinister and even offensive.

Whilst this approach emphasises poetry which looks back, it does not suggest that these poets do so in a derivative or facile manner. Keith Douglas, the most technically competent and innovative among them, was the most concerned that his poetry was tautological, or at least so he seems to suggest in 'Poets in this War' and 'Desert Flowers'. In fact, this heightened sense of repetition encourages poets to adopt new models, such as Rilke, or towards incisively parodic or awkwardly self-conscious allusion as in the works of John Jarmain and Hamish Henderson. For Geoff Dyer, reflecting upon the influence of Wilfred Owen, there is a danger that the poetry of the First World War has become one of its dominant narratives, as distortive, if unchallenged, as the 'official' narrative against which Owen and Sassoon write. Dyer identifies the emergence in the thirties of a hybrid remembrance, as it were, wherein it *is* sweet and right to die your country *and* horrible that men 'die as cattle', a model of remembrance still readily discernible and perhaps more pronounced today than when *The Missing of the Somme* was published twenty years ago, and certainly also a factor in the cultural fabric of the thirties.

Dyer notes, citing such figures as Orwell, Spender and Isherwood, that whilst Owen had exposed the lie, the 'revealed truth was not without its own allure' for the new generation of writers; as Phillip Toynbee put it, 'we were half in love with the horrors we cried out against.'⁶⁰ Lorrie Goldensohn, in *Dismantling Glory*, similarly points out that one of the 'paradoxical effects' of the protest poetry of the First World War poets was 'to render their

⁵⁹ See especially Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁶⁰ Quoted in Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London, etc: Penguin Books, 1995), 39.

experience as something fatally attractive to young men.’⁶¹ Richard Hillary’s account of his service in the RAF in *The Last Enemy*, famous for its account of his horrific injuries and the subsequent innovative reconstructive surgery, revels in the opportunity provided by the war:

We were disillusioned and spoiled. The press referred to us as the Lost Generation and we were not displeased. Superficially we were selfish and egocentric without any Holy Grail in which we could lose ourselves. The war provided it, and in a delightfully palatable form. It demanded no heroics, but gave us the opportunity to demonstrate in action our dislike of organized emotion and patriotism, the opportunity to prove to ourselves and to the world that our effete veneer was not as deep as our dislike of interference, the opportunity to prove that, undisciplined though we might be, we were a match for Hitler’s dogma-fed youth.⁶²

Hillary’s autobiographical character, composed with hindsight, was glad for ‘purely selfish reasons. [...] As a fighter pilot I hoped for a concentration of amusement, fear, and exaltation which would be impossible to experience in any other form of existence.’ He adds portentously, ‘I was not disappointed.’⁶³ Similarly, Keith Douglas, in his memoir *Alamein to Zem Zem*, considers the war an opportunity rather than an abomination:

I am not writing about these battles as a soldier, nor trying to discuss them as military operation. I am thinking of them – selfishly, but as I shall always think of them – as my first experience of fighting: that is how I shall write of them. To say I thought of the battle of Alamein as an ordeal sounds pompous: but I did think of it as an important test, which I was interested in passing.⁶⁴

If tautological poetry is itself undesirable, there is nevertheless something appealing in the war for the young generation of writers who fought in it, even if it is a glamour derived from the warnings of First World War poetry.

There was a sense among emerging writers of having something to live up to, a model for experience as well as for poetry. The most visible reminder of that experience was the numerous monuments and memorials across Britain, and Chapter 5 considers the ways in which these monuments were available to poets. From Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘On Passing the New Menin Gate’ in 1928, to the speaker of Hamish Henderson’s *Elegies* repairing a makeshift grave marker in the desert a decade later, the monumental imagery of death in war

⁶¹ Lorrie Goldensohn, *Dismantling Glory: Twentieth-Century Soldier Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 31.

⁶² Richard Hillary, *The Last Enemy* (London: Random House, 2010), 24.

⁶³ Loc.cit.

⁶⁴ Keith Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 15.

has appealed to poets. Indeed, the First World War provides any number of theoretical or imaginative models for speaking about death. If the anxiety of the Second World War was that it would repeat the trauma of the First, its writers were also furnished with new representational tropes, from the maturation of modernist principles, to the heyday of Freudian thought, or the discovery (in English at least) of Rilke's new configurations of the individual's relation to death. Poetry does not deal with such models passively or simply imitate them. As Jahan Ramazani has argued in *Poetry and its Others*, 'even though poetry has an especially long and deep memory of earlier works and forms, it is also "born and shaped in a process of interaction and struggle" with other discourses, other genres, other kinds of utterance.'⁶⁵ Poetry's interaction and struggle with both itself and its others is framed in this thesis in terms of its encounters with discourses of death and mourning.

From Anxiety to Memory and Mourning

Even as the Second World War got underway, the anxieties of those who had feared the worst were not realised immediately. In the period of the phoney war, little happened for long periods at first, and the Blitz meant that for a time the most dangerous sites of conflict were on the home front rather than abroad. London's literary magazines ran articles asking 'where are the war poets?' As late as 1943, Keith Douglas would write:

Those who wrote of war looked back to the last even when they spoke of the next, which was a bogy to frighten children and electors with: the poets who were still at the height of their fame before this war, who were accustomed to teach politics and even supposed themselves, and were supposed, versed in the horrors of the current struggles in Spain, were curiously unable to react to a war which began and continued in such a disconcerting way.⁶⁶

Douglas's notion that there was nobody writing anything worthwhile has retrospectively been shown false countless times, but he was certainly not the only person who held this belief. As the anxieties of the thirties slowly and painfully transformed into material losses as the war progressed, poets did find ways to articulate those losses, and looking back was a key part of their strategy for addressing their time and place. This thesis reads the poetry of the Second World War against its precedents, against the First World War and the interwar

⁶⁵ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 6. Ramazani is invoking Bakhtin, whose understanding of the 'dialogic' was dismissive of poetry, in order to redress this oversight.

⁶⁶ Douglas, "Appendix B Poets in This War (May 1943)", 350-351.

years, to elucidate the ways in which new archives are made and new memorials forged in the writing of the Second World War. Each chapter considers the formation of a unique register of remembrance and mourning which emerges from materials seen afresh, or renewed, or deployed for the first time in English poetry, be it Freud's work, or Rilke's, or war memorials newly apprehended in the light of the new conflict.

Returning to Auden's 'For us like any other fugitive' brings this introduction back to where it began, with the elucidation of Auden's temporal dislocation. Auden writes:

For us like any other fugitive
Like the numberless flowers that cannot number
And all the beasts that need not remember,
It is today in which we live.

So many try to say Not Now
So many have forgotten how
To say I am, and would be
Lost if they could in history.

Bowing, for instance, with such old-world grace
To a proper flag in a proper place,
Muttering like ancients as they stump upstairs
Of Mine and His or Ours and Theirs.

Just as if time were what they used to will
When it was gifted with possession still,
Just as if they were wrong
In no more wishing to belong.

No wonder then so many die of grief,
So many are lonely as they die;
No one has yet believed or liked a lie,
Another time has other lives to live.⁶⁷

Auden and his fugitives live in the present, and this is something they share with 'numberless flowers that cannot number' and 'beasts that need not remember'. This sideways glance at the pastoral mode is no Arcadian vision. The significance of the beasts is that *not* remembering is a luxury that we do not share. For 'numberless flowers' we read 'countless poppies' perhaps, a strategy of commemoration unable to number the dead. 'Number' and 'remember' struggle to reconcile sound into rhyme as convincingly as fugitive/live, suggesting that displacement is easier to achieve than connection. At the end of

⁶⁷ Auden, "For Us like Any Other Fugitive," 50.

the poem 'grief' chimes discordantly with 'live', setting against those lives the symptom of loss which will be their obstacle. Auden is overt about politics, about flags and identity, but death and war haunt the poem and remain only partially articulated. Indeed, 'grief' is crucial to Auden's representation of Freud in *Another Time*, the subject of the next chapter. This thesis seeks to elucidate the partially articulated and identify the work of mourning and manifestations of remembrance which emerge in the poetry of the Second World War.

2. Freud's Corpus

In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D.'s intimate memoir of the time she spent undergoing psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud, the poet recalls an early episode in their relationship in which the professor's behaviour stands out as markedly different from his norm. 'The professor is speaking to me very seriously' she writes, 'I felt like a child, summoned to my father's study or my mother's sewing room or told by a teacher to wait in after school.'¹ Summoned to Freud's office, H.D. is filled with anxiety: 'what can he possibly be going to say? What can he ask me to do? Or not to do?'² Freud's usual manner of intimation in which he 'does not lay down the law' is suspended in order to make this one request, this one '*shalt not*': 'He says "Please, never - I mean, never at any time, in any circumstance, endeavour to defend me, if and when you hear abusive remarks made about me and my work."³ As he goes on to explain 'every word spoken in my defense, I mean, to already prejudiced individuals, serves to drive the root in deeper.'⁴ For H.D. the request appears to come as a relief; for the reader it might even constitute an anti-climax, H.D.'s narrative having built a great deal of tension before the revelation. H.D. herself does not dwell on the words afterwards, rather letting the request speak for itself.

So what is Freud asking? Or, more to the point, who or what is he trying to protect? And why does this comment strike H.D. as significant a decade later in 1944 when she composed the memoir? This was a man who had, after all, spent much of his career defending himself and the discipline he invented; surely an eloquent advocate like H.D. would be an excellent candidate to carry the torch for psychoanalysis? Perhaps his paternal instinct is to keep her from harm, for her to remain outside the heated debates of psychoanalytical circles – which H.D. calls the 'rather formidable body of the International Psycho-Analytical Association' – and away from the threat posed to the 'Jewish science' by the acceleration of fascist politics.⁵

¹ Hilda Doolittle, *Tribute to Freud*, ed. Adam Philips (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2012). 85.

² *Ibid.* 85.

³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴ *Ibid.* 87.

⁵ *Loc.cit.*

I contend, however, that Freud is in fact motivated by a desire to protect himself. The excess of Freud's words - 'never, I mean, *never at any time*' - suggests to me, and I believe also to H.D., that Freud is insinuating specifically that he does not wish to be spoken for after his death. It is this that triggers the urgency of the memory in H.D.'s posthumous account: 'even as I write these words [in 1944] I have the same sense of anxiety, of tension, of imminent responsibility that I had at that moment.'⁶ The anxiety of imminent responsibility is that of possessing a kind of authority over the deceased. It is the authority to write and to speak on their behalf: to defend, to remember, to advocate. But to do so responsibly, to do justice to the absent friend, is an ethical challenge. It is the challenge that the poet accepts when she picks up the pen and writes an elegy and a tribute.

Freud famously took pains to elude his future biographers, destroying papers so that 'none of them come to the notice of so-called posterity'; when Arnold Zweig suggested that he write Freud's biography, Freud quickly rejected the idea: 'anyone who writes a biography is committed to lies, concealments, hypocrisy, flattery and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth does not exist, and if it did we could not use it.'⁷ *Tribute to Freud* contributes to the wealth of sources which suggest that Freud was making arrangements for his death throughout much of his working life.⁸ Indeed the years immediately following his death would see a renewed struggle for the legacy of psychoanalysis between Melanie Klein and Anna Freud, as well as the more devastating struggle for the future of European and world power. With the 'biography' and the 'defense' - whatever literary or non-literary form these might take - purportedly forbidden to the students of Freud, many potential manifestations of literary mourning are precluded. Can Freud's life be described in eulogy, or his praises sung in elegy without disobeying his wishes? And if one does disobey his wishes, can the work really claim to respect the memory of a man who deliberately obstructed such remembrances?

This chapter explores works by H.D. and W.H. Auden which remember Freud, the pre-eminent modern theorist of mourning. Auden's 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud' (*Another Time*, 1940) and H.D.'s prose memoir *Tribute to Freud* and the poetic sequence 'The Walls

⁶ Ibid. 85.

⁷ Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Norton, 1988), 614, and Ernst L. Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, trans. Robson Scott, Elaine and Robson Scott, William (New York: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 127. Both quoted in Madelon Sprengnether, "Reading Freud's Life," *American Imago* 52, no. 1 (1995): 10.

⁸ A useful summary can be found in Sprengnether, "Reading Freud's Life."

do not Fall' (1944) are all wartime works, and both poets treat Freud's death as part of the loss of war. For Auden, the death of Freud marks the end of an epoch; one of the last glimmers of individuality snuffed out in a darkened continent. H.D.'s response is twofold: *Tribute to Freud* is a sustained autobiographical account in which Freud represents a complex and, at times, adversarial relationship of mutual admiration and affection, while in 'The Walls do not Fall', Freud's presence haunts the poem's defence of writing in wartime. The rising tide of fascism which H.D. had witnessed in Vienna in 1933 emerges from these texts in the light of everything that H.D. had lived through since – Freud's exile and death, the Blitz, and the creeping news of atrocities later in the war. For both writers, Freud and everything he stood for represented a threat to totalitarianism, and mourning Freud demanded a defence of the intellectual.

For both writers Freud presents a unique problem as the subject of elegy. This was, after all, a man who had done more to influence the modern understanding of death and mourning than perhaps anyone before him. Both Auden and H.D. were old enough to have lived through the First World War, but young enough never to have known a world without Freud. Their work registers his loss in these terms, as a forefather of an almost mythical status. Indeed, H.D.'s work likens Freud to the Egyptian deity Thoth, originator of writing and science. Yet, for both poets Freud is important precisely because he is human: Auden writes 'he wasn't clever at all' without a hint of the pejorative.⁹ These works are an important enquiry for this thesis because of the ways they innovate elegiac writing in response to the war.

The death of Freud becomes, in these works, a way to articulate the loss and losses of the Second World War. Freud's death marks the end of an era. H.D.'s writings about Freud are alert to the close association between his death and the beginning of the war:

I was in Switzerland when, soon after the news of a World at War the official London news bulletin announced that Dr. Sigmund Freud, who had opened up the field of the knowledge of the unconscious mind, the innovator and founder of the science of psychoanalysis, was dead.¹⁰

Similarly, for Auden in New York, Freud represents 'a whole climate of opinion.'¹¹ The works considered in this chapter incorporate Freud, his ideas and achievement into the body

⁹ W. H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 107–11.

¹⁰ Doolittle, *Tribute to Freud*, 12.

¹¹ Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud."

of the literature. These are texts which are about Freud, but are also fundamentally *Freudian*. This is an unprecedented strategy for remembrance, and I discuss Auden's innovations in elegiac form in his poem 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud'. H.D. encodes Freud through an intricate and palimpsestic topography of ancient figures in her works about the war. For both, writing about the death of Freud is a way to find a language for writing about loss and war. The works discussed here are among the first posthumous digestions of Freud's corpus and the first memorials to the father of psychoanalysis, deploying its language and ideas in pursuit of a poetic strategy for the Second World War.

‘An important Jew who died in exile.’

W.H. Auden's 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud' was written at the end of a remarkable year in the poet's life and work. Having relocated to New York in January 1939, the death of W.B. Yeats set in motion the first in a series of elegiac poems which would be published together in *Another Time* in 1940, including the elegies for Yeats and Freud, 'In Memory of Ernst Toller', and Auden's response to the German invasion of Poland 'September 1, 1939'. These works, collected as 'Occasional Poems' are among the best short poems that Auden produced in his career, their lyrics intensified by the fusion of the anxiety of the thirties with the reference points provided by the events of 1939. Auden's antidote for the impersonality of 'Spain 1937' was to remake the occasional poem, reverting to a form of public speech which was less explicit in its politics and marking elegy as the key mood of Auden's 'Occasional Poems' in *Another Time*.

Auden's understanding of Yeats's occasional verse is perhaps the most useful starting point for our approach to these works. In 'Yeats as an Example' (1948), Auden writes:

[...] he transformed a certain kind of poem, the occasional poem, from being either an official performance of impersonal virtuosity or a trivial *vers de société* into a serious reflective poem of at once personal and public interest.

A poem such as *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory* is something new and important in the history of English poetry. It never loses the personal note of a man speaking about his personal friends in a particular setting – in *Adonais* for instance,

both Shelley and Keats disappear as people – and at the same time the occasion and characters acquire a symbolic public significance.¹²

If ‘Spain 1937’ was too close to ‘an official performance of impersonal virtuosity’, the elegies in *Another Time* go some way to redressing this balance. Jahan Ramazani has said of Auden’s work in *Another Time* that the elegy ‘as modified by Yeats, permitted Auden to shed the problematic impersonality of his recent poems. [...] To elegize Yeats was to write about a public figure, yet it was to write about him in a potentially intimate and emotive genre.’¹³ Writing about Yeats in 1939 also allowed Auden to reclaim the occasional poem in order to write about the looming war. Like Yeats’s ‘In Memory of Major Robert Gregory’ and ‘Easter 1916’, the occasional poems in *Another Time* adopt the role of a public voice, using the ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘us’ of the eulogist to share the loss. Of Yeats he writes that ‘you were silly like us’, and in ‘In Memory of Ernst Toller’ he claims ‘existence is/ believing/ We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving.’¹⁴ The rhetorical gesture is clear enough: the occasional poem casts the poet as a spokesperson for the public. Whilst earlier in *Another Time* Auden had identified those who had ‘forgotten how to say I am’, he now writes in a voice which assumes the responsibility of saying ‘we are’. But speaking on behalf of an imagined public also allows Auden to open up a space in which to explore the ideas of public mourning and mourning publicly.

Auden’s elegy for Yeats marks not just the passing of the man into death, but the passing of his life and work into the hands and mouths of others:

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.¹⁵

Chief amongst those now responsible for Yeats’s legacy is the author of this poem, who modifies the words of the dead man by adopting his style: incorporating, almost literally

¹² W. H. Auden, “Yeats as an Example,” in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, vol. II. 1939–1948, *Complete Works of W.H. Auden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 388.

¹³ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 184.

¹⁴ W. H. Auden, “In Memory of Ernst Toller,” in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 102.

¹⁵ W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 97.

receiving the corpus of Yeats, into the body of the elegy. In Yeats, Auden had found, and lost, a father figure, a patriarch with whom conflict was inevitable and identification complex. On the event of his death, Auden writes that ‘he became his admirers’, suggesting that Yeats would now become the product of other people’s discourse, exemplified by the impassioned defence which Auden himself would fashion in ‘The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats’. In that essay Auden effectively builds a case for and against the man and a case for his work, separating the one from the other.¹⁶ The elegy also makes this separation, performing the burial of the ‘vessel [...] emptied of its poetry’.¹⁷

This elegiac technique, of personal identification with the ‘gift’ of the subject through a stylistic imitation whilst maintaining a critical distance from the man, suggests that Auden is as much concerned with the birth of a definitive oeuvre and its maintenance as with the death of its author per se. The ‘gift’ of Yeats – ‘you were silly like us; your gift survived it all’ – describes both the poetic talent bestowed upon him, and that which outlives him, the remains of Yeats, which is his work, a gift to the reader.¹⁸ But as Auden writes, Yeats himself, in death, is ‘wholly given over to unfamiliar affections’, suggesting that the ‘gift’ is not bequeathed as such, but rather unavoidably relinquished.

The elegy for Sigmund Freud is similarly concerned with the legacy of the mourned subject, although Auden does not describe Freud’s work as a ‘gift’ but rather as ‘a whole climate of opinion’:

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
when grief has been made so public, and exposed
to the critique of a whole epoch
the frailty of our conscience and anguish,

of whom shall we speak? For every day they die
among us, those who were doing us some good,
who knew it was never enough but
hoped to improve a little by living.¹⁹

¹⁶ W. H. Auden, “The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats,” in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, ed. Edward Mendelson, vol. II. 1939–1948, Complete Works of W.H. Auden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–8.

¹⁷ Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.”, 98.

¹⁸ Loc.cit.

¹⁹ Auden, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud.”

Auden's poem begins by adopting the wartime rhetoric that Geoff Dyer calls 'the *anticipation of remembrance*: a foreseeing that is also a determining' (Dyer's emphasis).²⁰ It is almost a parody of Laurence Binyon's 'For the Fallen', which, published in *The Times* just two months into the First World War, quickly became a benchmark of a mode of a public mourning whose mood has changed little in the century since. After presenting the young soldiers in all their glory – 'Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow' – Binyon's poem resolutely states 'We will remember them.'²¹ Auden's speaker is less certain about the dead and our duty to mourn. Warfare had changed since 1914: the Spanish Civil War had demonstrated all too clearly the capacity for aerial bombardment, placing civilians directly in the line of fire so that many of those killed would not automatically die in the glory of battle. Besides, the glory of battle itself had been shown for a lie by the poets who described the later parts of the First World War, and the years building towards the Second World War constituted a 'low, dishonest decade' according to this poem's author.²² So it is with foreboding that Auden proclaims that 'there are so many that we shall have to mourn', not purely for the anticipated loss, but for the uncertainty about who will be mourned and how to go about it in the current climate of grief-made-public.

Auden opens his elegy with a question which epitomises the role which Freud had come to play in society: 'when there are so many we shall have to mourn [...] of whom shall we speak?' This is a question enabled by Freud, who had publicly investigated grief, who had contributed significantly to the 'whole epoch' and identified the 'frailty of our conscience'. But more importantly, this is a question *addressed to* Freud, enquiring of him how best to mourn for a society in collapse. Making grief public is not merely the result of trends in psychology; it is the by-product of war. As Auden argues in 'Psychology and Art Today', Freudian thought has undoubtedly permeated the work of the artist, and, faced with the renewal of violence and mass-death, it is to Freud that Auden turns to ask how one can cope.²³ Mourning has, by 1939, become the product of psychological discourse, has perhaps even become dependent upon it, and now that one of the most prominent voices on the subject of death has been silenced, to whom shall we speak?

²⁰ Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London, etc: Penguin Books, 1995), 9.

²¹ Laurence Binyon, "For the Fallen," in *A Laurence Binyon Anthology* (London: William Collins Sons & Co, 1927), 45–46.

²² W. H. Auden, "September I, 1939," in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 103.

²³ W. H. Auden, "Psychology and Art To-Day," in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, ed. Edward Mendelson, vol. I. 1926–1938, *Complete Works of W.H. Auden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 384–90.

An elegy for Freud, then, is bound by a responsibility to be Freudian, to think about the problem of representing death through the man himself, and it is my contention that Auden's poem engages with some of Freud's most prominent works on loss in wartime. In the 1915 essay 'Thoughts for the Time on War and Death', Freud elucidates some notions of our attitudes towards our own death and the deaths of others: 'It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death', Freud writes, 'and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.'²⁴ For Samuel Weber, reading this moment in Freud's work, the imagination is precisely that which keeps us from the thought of death:

the paradox here lies in that to think of death as one normally thinks of other things, namely, by representing it, is to transform it into spectacle and ourselves into spectators and thereby to miss precisely what is at stake in death: the cessation of our being in the world. Imagining death thus becomes the opposite of what it seems: a way of ostensibly overcoming the threat of non-being, of no longer being there, in the world.²⁵

One's own death is unimaginable and unrepresentable because death is precisely the cessation of those imaginative and representational faculties.²⁶ Freud describes an imaginative distancing from the idea of death, and he ventures 'that at bottom no-one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.'²⁷

The crisis of the imagination in the face of one's own death leads Freud to conclude that people seek a means of survival in literary representation. For Freud:

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (1914–1916), 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 289.

²⁵ Samuel Weber, "Wartime," in *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997), 97.

²⁶ Tim Kendall has suggested that Keith Douglas reaches the same realisation regarding the paradox of imagining one's own death in the poem 'Dead Men':

you would forget
but that you see your own mind burning yet
and till you stifle in the ground will go on
burning the economical coal of your dreams.

Keith Douglas, "Dead Men," in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 100–101. Discussed in Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 172.

²⁷ Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death", 289.

It is an inevitable result of all this that we should seek in the world of fiction, in literature and the theatre, compensation for that which has been lost in life. There we still find people who know how to die – who, indeed, even manage to kill someone else. There alone too the condition can be fulfilled which makes it possible for us to reconcile ourselves with death: namely that behind the vicissitudes of life we should still be able to preserve a life intact. For it is really too sad that in life it should be as it is in chess, where one false move may force us to resign the game, no return-match. In the realm of fiction we find the plurality of lives which we need. We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safely with another hero.²⁸

The loss of a fictitious hero might be felt, but poses no threat to one's own mortality, indeed quite the reverse. In fiction we can even entertain the thought of murder and personal gain from death without guilt, we can face death and survive. The individual desires the death of the other because it offers the assurance of survival, the promise of mastery and power over the voice of the other. Freud notes that 'the civilised adult can hardly even entertain the thought of another person's death,' but a whole world of meaning is contained in 'hardly': the thought is a guilt-inducing taboo, certainly not to be entertained, but perhaps not entirely repressed either.²⁹ The death of the other offers to the ego the reassurance of its immortality. Each death is a survival, what Freud describes as dying 'safely'. Literature makes the death of the other palatable, a realm where the desire of the individual to outlive the other is an acceptable social condition. Lyndsey Stonebridge writes that it is 'because our own deaths are impossible to figure that the deaths of others acquire such significance as representations. [...] Fiction's appeal is that "it makes sense out of something intolerably senseless."³⁰

Freud goes on, however, to say that 'it is evident that war is bound to sweep away this conventional treatment of death. Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it.'³¹ War makes us face the unimaginable: it removes the illusion of the element of chance, the ability of individuals to isolate a death of someone close to them as a freak occurrence. Freud notes that 'A number of simultaneous deaths strikes us as something extremely terrible', and this is not for the horror of those deaths or the magnitude of the loss, but because death on such a scale can no longer be comfortably dismissed as coincidence.³²

²⁸ Ibid. 291.

²⁹ Ibid. 289-90.

³⁰ Lyndsey Stonebridge, "What Does Death Represent to the Individual?" *Psychoanalysis and Wartime*, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2009): 103.

³¹ Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death." 291.

³² Ibid. 290-91

Death is more visible in war, our distance from it is narrowed or removed completely, and our ambivalence toward it challenged. Weber likens it to the positioning of the reader in relation to the dead in literature: ‘there is a profound complicity between art and war: both turn death into a spectator sport.’³³ For Stonebridge, war ‘reveals the violence through which we deny our own deaths through the representation of the deaths of others. [...] War thus institutionalizes the hostility that, for psychoanalysts, always accompanies the death of the other.’³⁴ If art turns death into a spectator sport, it must do so in a way that writes against war’s violence.

Auden’s poem ‘In Memory of Sigmund Freud’ places psychoanalysis in precisely the role that Freud ascribes to fiction, of making sense out of the senselessness of death. When Auden asks ‘of whom shall we speak’, it is a question not about whom, but about *how* to mourn. Auden’s poem attests to the literary debt to psychoanalysis and its widespread absorption of Freud: it is now in the realm of psychoanalysis where we ‘find people who know how to die [...] which makes it possible to reconcile ourselves with death.’ The Freud of this poem is not just the patriarch of a pervasive mythology, but a vulnerable man imagined on his deathbed, haunted by the very symptoms he had himself identified. Jahan Ramazani suggests that ‘Auden is at pains to make Freud seem very human’ by delaying his entry into the poem and making him one amongst many.³⁵ But I would go a step further and argue that Freud is not just ‘very human’ but represents *every* human:

[...] he closed his eyes
upon that last picture, common to us all,
of problems like relatives gathered
puzzled and jealous about our dying.

For about him till the very end were still
those he had studied, the fauna of the night,
and shades that still waited to enter
the bright circle of his recognition

turned elsewhere with their disappointment as he
was taken away from his life interest
to go back to the earth in London,
an important Jew who died in exile.³⁶

³³ Weber, “Wartime”, 99.

³⁴ Stonebridge, ““What Does Death Represent to the Individual?” 104.

³⁵ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 1994., 194.

³⁶ Auden, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud.”, 107.

Freud dies a ‘normal’ death, and one plagued by the unresolved and banal problems ‘common to us all’. Freud’s is the archetypal death, and Auden inhabits the inclusive ‘we’ of this public voice to transform his deathbed scene into ‘ours’. By making the death ‘ours’, Auden creates the very scene in which we, as the reader, are present at our own death as spectators, with Freud as a proxy. What Freud had argued we seek in fiction – that is, people who know how to die – we find in Freud himself. The father of psychoanalysis dies the prototypical human death, and we gather around, die with him, survive him and live on. Our fear of death, Stonebridge concludes, ‘is not our death, which we can never quite imagine, but the punishment about to be visited upon us by secretly desiring the deaths of others.’³⁷

Most poignant of all in the circumstances of Freud’s death is that which will most afflict those who survive him and the reason for his dying in exile: the Nazi threat to Europe. Exile was a common theme in Auden’s *Another Time*, with the elegy for Ernst Toller contemplating the writer’s suicide in exile and wondering ‘had the Europe which took refuge in your head/ Already been too injured to get well?’³⁸ Auden’s understated epitaph for Freud – ‘an important Jew who died in exile’ – refers here and now to the Professor, who left Austria for London after the *Anschluss* in 1938, but might also describe Toller, or any member of the Jewish diaspora at any time.³⁹ The war provides Auden with further metaphors for Freud’s discoveries; he describes the ‘dingy clientele/ who think they can be cured by killing/ and covering the garden in ashes’, figuring violence and repression as one action.⁴⁰ Freud hereby becomes an enemy of fascism and the war, and Auden’s manipulation of psychoanalysis for political poetry starts to become apparent. As he goes on to say ‘If he [Freud] succeeded, why, the Generalised Life/ would become impossible, the monolith of State be broken.’ As in ‘Psychology and Art Today’ where Auden championed a form of socialism which would recognise the psychological needs of the individual, these lines highlight Auden’s belief in the anti-totalitarian promise of Freud’s work.⁴¹

Nevertheless Auden is quick to note, as previously with Yeats, the moments when Freud’s work and personality clashed:

[Freud] showed us what evil is, not, as we thought,
deeds that must be punished, but our lack of faith,

³⁷ Stonebridge, “What Does Death Represent to the Individual?” 104.

³⁸ Auden, “In Memory of Ernst Toller”, 101.

³⁹ Auden, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud”, 107.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 108.

⁴¹ Auden, “Psychology and Art To-Day”, 384-90.

our dishonest mood of denial,
the concupiscence of the oppressor.

If some traces of the autocratic pose,
the paternal strictness he distrusted, still
clung to his utterance and features,
it was a protective coloration

for one who'd lived among enemies so long:
if often he was wrong and, at times, absurd,
to us he is no more a person
now but a whole climate of opinion

under whom we conduct our different lives:
Like weather he can only hinder or help.⁴²

The sinister intimation of 'our lack of faith' and 'the concupiscence of the oppressor' as consequences of both the tyranny of the state and of the despotic analyst offers a critique of psychoanalysis through its internal inconsistencies. Despite the 'autocratic pose', Auden ultimately finds psychoanalysis to be democratizing at the institutional levels of both family and state, which he combines in the image of the beehive:

till the child, unlucky in his little State,
some hearth where freedom is excluded,
a hive whose honey is fear and worry,

feels calmer now and somehow assured of escape.⁴³

As with the elegy for Yeats, Freud is no longer a man but the sum of his works, in this case works which constitute the 'climate of opinion' which so hindered Auden's attempts to begin the elegy. Freud is a figure who can topple princes, but whose own capacity for power might equally be feared. As Ramazani notes, Auden effectively psychoanalyses Freud, diagnosing his combativeness as a response to 'liv[ing] among enemies so long'. Ramazani assumes these to be enemies of the Jews, but, as I have mentioned above, much of Freud's belligerence was employed in defence of psychoanalysis.⁴⁴

The question remains of how mourning is performed by Auden's poem. As I have contended above, the elegy begins with an aporia – the question 'of whom shall we speak' when 'there

⁴² Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud." 109.

⁴³ Ibid. 110.

⁴⁴ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 193.

are so many we shall have to mourn', and Freud is the figure who both necessitates and frames this question. Freud's own conception of 'normal' mourning as it is presented in the essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', is the 'withdrawal of the libido from th[e lost] object and a displacement of it on to a new one.'⁴⁵ For Peter Sacks, in his seminal study *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, elegy performs the work of mourning in the terms very similar to those set out in 'Mourning and Melancholia': 'The movement from loss to consolation thus requires a deflection of desire, with the creation of a trope both for the lost object and for the original character of the desire itself.'⁴⁶ In Sacks's study, elegy is a ritual of performance, the working-through of loss. In this conception of elegy, the generically consistent movement of Auden's elegies would be for the death of the man (Yeats or Freud) to displace affection and identification onto his work.

Jahan Ramazani revises the Freudian concept of 'normal mourning' and challenges Sacks's interpretation of elegy, arguing that both make an 'overly rigid distinction between 'mourning' and 'melancholia.' Ramazani proposes instead the concept of 'melancholic mourning' – 'conceivable as a term for the kind of ambivalence and protracted grief often encountered in the modern elegy.'⁴⁷ Melancholia, according to Freud, occurs when the libido is withdrawn from the lost-object but does not complete transference onto a new object, instead becoming withdrawn into the ego:

There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. In this way object-loss was transformed into ego-loss (original emphasis).⁴⁸

For mourning to occur death must be carried out by our own hand – the lost object must be killed again in consciousness to prevent such misidentifications. Freud's work, in both 'Mourning and Melancholia' and 'Thoughts for the Time or War and Death', places the subject in a position whereby desire for, or (imaginative) participation in, the death of the other is crucial to the survival of the ego. Part of the work of the elegy then, is to assure the

⁴⁵ James Strachey and Anna Freud, eds., "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, by Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (1914–1916), 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 249.

⁴⁶ Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

⁴⁷ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 29.

⁴⁸ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 249.

speaker of the death of the other by assuming responsibility for the remains and speaking on behalf of the dead. Auden's works are particularly sensitive to this responsibility, and both the elegies for Yeats and Freud grapple with the ethical responsibility of mourning. If the legacy of the dead is to be modified in the guts (in the poetry) of the survivor, then what must that poetry look like? How should it perform mourning?

Auden's incorporation of his subjects, his inhabitation of Yeatsian form, his embodiment of Freudian ideas, is his answer to the demands for ethical elegy. R. Clifton Spargo has described this ethical dimension to mourning and elegy in terms of an openness to the other, to an ongoing reception of the other which, though melancholic, perhaps also signifies a movement towards ethics: 'might not the mourner's wishful revisioning of the past, through which she unrealistically sustains relationships, also signify profoundly as an ethical openness to the other?'⁴⁹ Spargo reads melancholia as an ongoing relationship with the lost person. Auden's staging of just such a sustained identification with Yeats and with Freud represents just such a relationship. Derrida's writings on mourning, from which Spargo partially departs, are scattered throughout his oeuvre. His eulogy for Paul de Man demonstrates something similar to Auden's elegies, the ethical imperative of thinking about death in terms of an ongoing conversation. Indeed for Derrida, loss itself is the cessation of this conversation with the dead:

from now on we are destined to speak *of* Paul de Man, instead of speaking *to* him and *with* him. [...] Whereas the most vivid desire and the one which, within us, has been most cruelly battered, the most forbidden desire from now on would be to speak, still, to Paul, to hear him and respond to him, not just within ourselves (we will continue to, I will continue, to do that endlessly) but to speak to him and to hear him, himself, speaking to us. That's the impossible, and we can no longer even take the measure of this wound.⁵⁰

For Derrida, the aporia, or the impossibility of mourning is in being able to speak as if the dead were still with us. We hear Yeats in Auden's poem, we respond to Freud with Auden, but the dead can no longer speak for themselves, and their voice is the responsibility of their survivors.

For Derrida, all mourning is characterised by interminable melancholy: as Joan Kirkby summarizes: 'whereas the classic psychoanalytical account of mourning demands that we

⁴⁹ R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 9.

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, "In Memoriam: Of the Soul," in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 72–75.

revive, relive and then relinquish the memories that tie us to the dead, Derrida argues that the death of the other is constitutive of our self-relation and the occasion for an ongoing engagement with them, for they are now both ‘within us’ and ‘beyond us’.⁵¹ Derrida’s own ‘graveside orations’, collected in *The Work of Mourning*, manifest this ‘ongoing engagement’ as a conversation with the dead, but one which retains fidelity to their life. If we speak for the other we must speak as though the other has already spoken. J. Hillis Miller crafts his own ‘graveside oration’ after Derrida’s death, in turn explaining the structure of Derrida’s eulogies:

Derrida wants to fulfil the survivor's debt to the other by securing, as best he can, the survival of the other's remains, in this case, what he or she wrote, in recompense for those writings, though they are a gift that can never be repaid [...] On the other hand, Derrida's memorials are inhabited by a desire to put the dead friend in his or her place, to have the last word, to pay back a debt in a less benign sense.⁵²

Auden’s elegies for Yeats and Freud assume a responsibility for the voice of the other, and for fidelity to that voice. In both poems the work of the dead master is now in the hands of his survivors, and Auden pays tribute to those works by identifying himself with the other and incorporating his language and thought. However, Auden is equally quick to put Freud and Yeats in their place, using the occasion of their deaths to seize a platform for his own poetry. This is not to suggest that Auden’s elegies are callous but quite the opposite. His poetry self-consciously examines the very practice of elegy, considering how his voice adopts the responsibility for the memory of the dead and the power he has over their legacy.

Auden’s incorporation of Freud after the Professor’s death seems to be just the kind of situation which worried Jacques Derrida about his own passing away. Like Freud, Derrida was keen to have the last word, be it in his arguments with others or on his own work. J. Hillis Miller makes a compelling case for Derrida’s almost obsessive attempts to secure his legacy as far as was possible, noting that although Derrida had exhibited a tremendous outpouring of activity of thought and writing upon the deaths of many of his friends and colleagues, he all but prevented a similar response to his own death. According to Miller, in a passage which reprises Auden’s ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’, forbidding any speech at his funeral was perhaps Derrida’s way of precluding the burden of responsibility which would be placed on someone to speak on his behalf:

⁵¹ Joan Kirkby, “‘Remembrance of the Future’: Derrida on Mourning,” *Social Semiotics* 16, no. 3 (2006): 461–72.464.

⁵² J. Hillis Miller, *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 93.

To be dead, Derrida goes on to say, in a characteristically hyperbolic or emphatic way, is to have one's remains, not just one's body, but everything one leaves behind, totally at the mercy of others, to be exposed, in what remains of him, in all his remains, to be delivered over to the others, without any possible defense, to be at once totally disarmed.⁵³

Indeed J. Hillis Miller uses the occasion of the essay, in a collection paying tribute to the man, to 'take advantage in my turn of Derrida's present helplessness', contending as he does so that Derrida had been able to conclude arguments with the likes of Foucault and Paul de Man after their deaths. Despite his sincerest efforts to ensure the survival of dead friends, Derrida had nevertheless put them in their place, ensured himself of their deaths. This is the aporia of mourning for Derrida – to say nothing is impossible but to speak on the behalf of the dead is to kill them again.

Auden's works offer an innovative and challenging exploration of mourning. The war occasioned his reappraisal of occasional poetry, and an opportunity, perhaps an imperative, to consider the practice of elegy and eulogy. Freud, and Derrida as his inheritor, both strived to keep a grip on posterity, to preclude or precondition mourning. Auden is quick to volunteer himself as a custodian of the remains of public figures, but he uses the occasion of the death to think carefully about the occasion of an intellectual's death and what follows. The second part of this chapter considers H.D.'s work on the death of Freud, which, like Auden's, thinks through what it is to speak about Freud in his own terms. If Freud had ordered H.D. not to speak on his behalf she, like Derrida, finds silence impossible.

'A Roman Centurion before the gate at Pompeii'

H.D. remembers Freud in the face of the grief of war. His death is not a metonym for the war in H.D.'s work, but rather a rupture in the discourse through which the war might be understood. As Norman Holmes Pearson remarks in his introduction to *Tribute to Freud*: 'Freud had helped [H.D.] to remember and to understand what she remembered [...] Remembering Freud was significant, for remembering him was remembering what she has remembered with him.'⁵⁴ Pearson's explanation here is somewhat convoluted, but it is useful because of the direct links it suggests between psychoanalysis and literature, and the way in which both of these are access points for memory in H.D.'s work. For Adam Phillips, 'H.D.

⁵³ Ibid. 72.

⁵⁴ Pearson, "Preface to the First Edition (1973)."

tells the story of someone trying to make a new kind of sense of living in the aftermath of a catastrophe, with the (accurate) foreboding of there being another catastrophe in the offing.⁵⁵ Writing in 1944, it was important to H.D. to reach back imaginatively to Freud's death and the outbreak of war in 1939, his exile after the *Anschluss* in 1938, and her period of analysis during the rise of fascism in Germany and the dissolution of democracy in Austria in 1933. Remembering these distinct moments is a way to access the past which H.D. has explored with Freud, her childhood and the First World War. In doing so, H.D. represents experience as repetitive, particularly the traumatic upheavals of war and the anxious powerlessness of the bystander in the 1930s.

As I suggested in my introduction, much of the writing of the Second World War recycles, revisits and re-describes the events of the First World War and the inter-war years, anxiously fixated upon the traumas of the past and the trauma to come. The second half of this chapter considers how the works composed by H.D. at the end of the war think about the place of Freud in her personal experience of the events of the thirties and forties, and his role in society more broadly. *Tribute to Freud* explicitly represents these experiences and memories, but does so in a mythologizing poetic register which transforms Freud into a series of figurative surrogates. Of these, the Egyptian god of writing, Thoth, is one of the most prominent. H.D. was composing 'The Walls do not Fall' in the same moment as *Tribute to Freud*, and the reprisal of Thoth as a figure in the poem demands an interpretation which cross-references these two works. I argue here that the depiction of Freud as Thoth in the memoir helps inform a reading of Thoth-as-Freud in the poem, a reading which enriches the poem's discussion of writing in relation to the war.

From the vantage point of 1944, H.D.'s poetry and prose deals with the war by attempting to find its place in a sweeping historical continuum. H.D. said of her experience of the war that 'the past is literally blasted into consciousness with the Blitz in London.'⁵⁶ In her poetry from this period, H.D. maps ancient ruins on to the blitzscape of London, and these in turn onto the mind:

the shrine lies open to the sky [...]
ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof
leaves the sealed room
open to the air,

⁵⁵ Adam Phillips, "Introduction," in *Tribute to Freud*, by Hilda Doolittle, ed. Adam Phillips (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2012), x.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Pearson, "Preface to the First Edition (1973)", 199.

so, through our desolation,
thoughts stir⁵⁷

The blitz exposes and strips away layers of traumatic pasts in a single destructive movement. The ‘All-clear siren’ was the worst part of the air-raids, H.D. writes, ‘which coming as a sort of aftermath or afterbirth of the actual terror is the more devastating. Released from the actual danger, we have time to think about it.’⁵⁸ The trauma of the war is always temporally dislocated for H.D., and to comprehend it she attempts to work through experience in terms of its vast historical and mythical precedents. As Pearson writes, for H.D. ‘Experience was a palimpsest.’⁵⁹

But myth is made material in H.D.’s memories of Freud, and the historical artefacts from which she draws in her accounts of her time with him can be found in his office which housed a substantial collection of antiques. She writes: “He did not know – or did he? – that I looked at the things in his room before I looked at him; for I knew the things in his room were symbols of Eternity and contained him then, as Eternity contains him now.”⁶⁰ The ‘things in his room’ to which she refers are the many statuettes and figurines of ancient gods which littered Freud’s desk. His archaeological hobby has become the subject of much scholarship: as Griselda Pollock puts it, ‘no one approaching Freud’s collection of antiquities can resist some psychological speculation about the meaning of the collection per se and the significance of what he collected in Freud’s own psychic life.’⁶¹ The artefacts, like the palimpsest, blur the distinctions between pasts and futures, life and death. They are the remains of ancient civilisations, collected, curated and cultivated into contemporary cultural appropriations. H.D.’s poetry and Freud’s desk have a lot in common. *Tribute to Freud* is concerned with the transition from life to legacy, from Freud the man, through memory, to Freud the myth.

In order to express his transformation in death, H.D. creates a mythical topography to refer to Freud. He is equated with Thoth, Hermes and Moses, all originators of languages and discourses which threatened the established order, and Janus, god of origins and the

⁵⁷ Hilda Doolittle, “The Walls Do Not Fall,” in *Trilogy* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1973), 3.

⁵⁸ Doolittle, *Tribute to Freud*. 101-3.

⁵⁹ Pearson, “Preface to the First Edition (1973),” 199.

⁶⁰ Doolittle, *Tribute to Freud* 101.

⁶¹ Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 78.

gatekeeper. This topography carries over into H.D.'s wartime poem 'The Walls do not Fall', which was written around the same time as *Tribute to Freud*. The symbiotic genesis of these two texts demands an approach which accounts for the figurative language which carries from one into the other. This chapter will consider the figuration of Freud as Thoth and Janus in *Tribute to Freud* as authorisation to read the appearance of these figures in 'The Walls do not Fall' as a surrogate for Freud, allowing H.D. to encode the Professor in her account of war. Reading these figures in this way allows an interpretation of the poem which accounts for the role of psychoanalysis in H.D.'s wartime melee, a force, like poetry, of resistance and survival.

Death is explicit in H.D.'s relationship with Freud as it is represented in *Tribute*, and he frequently reminded her of his advanced age – 'You think I am an old man *you do not think it is worth your while to love me.*'⁶² Indeed the question of legacy is one which H.D. had discussed with Freud directly. Immortality in the Judaic tradition seems to H.D. to be the Professor's preferred fantasy of the afterlife:

He would live forever like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in his children's children, multiplied like the sands of the sea. That is how it seemed to me his mind was working, and that is how, faced with the blank wall of danger, of physical annihilation, his mind would work [...] He was looking ahead but his concern for immortality was translated into terms of grandchildren. He would live in them; he would live in his books of course; I may have murmured something vaguely to the effect that future generations would continue to be grateful to his written word [...] But though a sincere tribute, those words were, or would be, in a sense, superficial. It was so very obvious that his work would live beyond him. To express this adequately would be to delve too deep, to become involved in technicalities, and at the same time it would be translating my admiration for what he stood for, what actually he *was*, into terms a little too formal, too prim and precise, too conventional, too banal, too *polite*.⁶³

Despite Freud's insistence on his familial afterlife, H.D. is nevertheless keen to write his work into memory. She appears almost disgusted at the notion of politely congratulating Freud on his life's work, yet articulating the notion of a life outlived by its work is not a viable option either. Freud's writing is the important thing here – the 'blank wall of danger, of physical annihilation' is partially mitigated by his writing. Indeed, we might think of the memoir's subtitle, 'Writing on the Wall', as a remedy for the 'blank wall' of annihilation. But his writings are not the same as *writing*, and H.D.'s title is suitably ambiguous about this

⁶² Doolittle, *Tribute to Freud*, 62.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 63.

noun/verb. Freud's books perhaps appear prim, formal and precise by virtue of being finished. The messy, organic process of words coming alive in the act of writing is halted by death – his work is no longer a conversation but an artefact.

Writing is at the centre of H.D.'s memory of her time with Freud. The subtitle, 'Writing on the Wall', also alludes to a memory from early in her time in Vienna. If the writing was on the wall for Europe in 1933 figuratively speaking, it was also quite literally on the walls of Vienna as H.D. visited Freud's office:

There were other swastikas. They were chalk ones now; I followed them down the Berggasse as if they had been chalked for my benefit. They led to the Professor's door [...] no one had brushed these swastikas out. It is not so easy to scrub death-head chalk-marks from a pavement.⁶⁴

This fascist graffiti is menacing not purely because of its message, but because of its authority. Although the signs are written only in chalk, they cannot be scrubbed out because to do so would be to present a challenge to an emerging authority, one which would soon exercise its own powers of censorship through the burning of books, Freud's own work included, and the outlawing of certain types of speech act. H.D. remembers Freud's own reflections on the book burnings, and it is a memory that seamlessly returns her to Blitz-time London: "At least, they have not burnt me at the stake." Did the Professor say that of himself or did someone else say it of him? I think he himself said it. But it was a near-miss... even literally... and last night, here in London, there were the familiar siren-shrieks.⁶⁵ The violence of censorship and the violence of bombs emerge in the same space, a reminder that the war on ideas and the war on people were one and the same. Freud then, whose ideas were considered subversive, appears here like an almost-martyred saint.

Freud's importance as a writer manifests in H.D.'s mythical figurations of him, primarily as Thoth, the Ancient Egyptian god of writing and science. She writes that the memoir was started on September 19th, close to the anniversary of Freud's death on 23rd, and 'a day sacred to Thoth. I did not consciously select this date, though, as I glance at the calendar from time to time, my subconscious mind might have guided me to it.'⁶⁶ In her indirect way, H.D. establishes a link here between Freud and Thoth. H.D. notes that Freud was working on *Moses and Monotheism* at the time and also discusses a link between Moses and Thoth:

⁶⁴ Ibid, 59.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 102.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 99-100.

‘It was in the desert that Moses raised the standard, the old *T* or Tau-cross of Thoth of the Egyptians.’⁶⁷ September 19th is also the day of St Januarius, which also strikes H.D. as important: ‘we know of *Janus*, the old Roman guardian of gates and door, patron of the month of January which was sacred to him, with all “beginnings.”’⁶⁸ So the subconscious guidance which prompted H.D. to start writing on this day makes manifest the association of Freud with two figures: Thoth, originator of writing, and Janus, the gatekeeper, and it is through this figuration that he enters H.D.’s poetry.

Power resides in writing, this much has been known since its invention. In ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, Derrida discusses the origin of writing as it is related in the Socratic dialogue, and the centrality of Thoth to this text. Derrida notes that Thoth was censured by authoritarianism when the invention of writing was presented to the king:

The value of writing will not be itself, writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god-the-king approves of it. But god-the-king nonetheless experiences the *pharmakon* as a product, an *ergon*, which is not his own, which comes to him from outside but also from below, and which awaits his condescending judgment in order to be consecrated in its being and value. God the king does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. He has no need to write [...]

From this position, without rejecting the homage, the god-king will depreciate it, pointing out not only its uselessness but its menace and its mischief. Another way of not receiving the offer of writing. In so doing, god-the-king-that-speaks is acting like a father. The *pharmakon* is here presented to the father and by him rejected, belittled, abandoned, disparaged. The father is always suspicious and watchful toward writing.⁶⁹

The invention of writing, then, is a menace because absolute power has no need for heterogeneity and nuance. By extension, writing always challenges the established order. Thoth is dangerous, and so too are any writers whose ideas subvert or challenge authority. The equation of Freud with Thoth is, in this sense, entirely proper. Few writers have done as much as Freud in challenging received thinking, a fact recognised by the Nazis, who burnt his books and, as he suggests himself, would probably have burnt him at the stake if they could.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 107.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 99.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London and New York: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 82.

The Nazis not only censored works which they considered threatening or undesirable, but also created their own destructive forms of writing – propaganda, new histories and science – to legitimise their rule and actions. The chalk swastikas on the streets of Vienna, staking a claim upon a new territory, represent one such form of writing. The very concept of language itself is a palimpsest, a conflict of writing and over-writing. In war, the palimpsest becomes a contested site, just as writing becomes a political act. In the sequence ‘The Walls do not Fall’, Thoth (and his Greek incarnation Hermes) appears as the patron of resistance writing in the war:

Thoth, Hermes, the stylus,
the palette, the pen, the quill endure,

though our books are a floor
of smouldering ash under our feet;

though the burning of the books remains
the most perverse gesture [...]

yet give us, they still cry,
give us books,

folio, manuscript, old parchment
will do for cartridge cases;

irony is bitter truth
wrapped in a little joke

and Hatshepsut’s name is still circled
with what they call the *cartouche*.⁷⁰

These lines attest to both the struggle of poetry to survive in wartime, and its own potency as a weapon. Thoth is invoked as the patron and protector of writing in a world where books are burned and paper is used in the manufacture of bullets. Paper cartridges for bullets had largely been phased out by the twentieth century in favour of metal cases, but these lines are an interesting echo of the opening of the poem where metal railings from town squares have been repurposed for weapons. It suggests a cultural landscape stripped back to manufacture violence. H.D. places a figure of feminine power into this landscape: Hatshepsut, one of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt’s more successful rulers. Hatshepsut outlived her husband Thutmose II, and ruled with her nephew Thutmose III. The name Thutmose, common in the Eighteenth Dynasty, means ‘Born of Thoth.’ Hatshepsut’s name, H.D. writes, is *still*

⁷⁰ Doolittle, “The Walls Do Not Fall,” 16.

contained in a cartouche, the bullet-shaped hieroglyph indicating that a royal name is contained within. Stone hieroglyphics are reimagined as their own form of ammunition: enduring, feminine, and coupled with a male line descended from the god of writing.

Writing in wartime is not a simple form of resistance. War is rife with myth, propaganda, and other manipulative forms of writing that compete for space. The space of paper itself is limited, quite literally, due to shortages and embargos. A voice in 'The Walls do not Fall' repeatedly presents this as a challenge to poetry:

your rhythm is the devil's hymn,

your stylus is dipped in corrosive sublimate,
how can you scratch out

indelible ink of the palimpsest
of past misadventure?⁷¹

War's palimpsest here serves to drown poetry out. It flattens meaning, staining the present with the past. According to this voice, pasts and presents merge so as to become indistinct, and assimilating their mythology into any kind of meaningful narrative of the self is impossible. Poetry is, according to this voice in the poem, 'trivial'; 'intellectual adornment'; 'useless'; 'non-utilitarian'; 'pathetic'.⁷²

But the palimpsest is invoked as a model rather than a hindrance for poetry, a way to articulate complex historical moments and events. H.D. derides 'overworked assonance, nonsense/ juxtaposition of words for words sake' and the 'incongruent monsters' which spew forth from the sub-conscious. The palimpsest is thus disposed of, and a fresh 'papyrus or parchment' is prepared for a fresh writing:

scrape a palette,
point pen or brush,

prepare papyrus or parchment,
offer incense to Thoth,

[...]

⁷¹ Ibid. 6.

⁷² Ibid. 14.

let him (Wisdom),
in the light of what went before,

illuminate what came after,
re-vivify the eternal verity⁷³

The invocation of Thoth here is done once again in a wholly Freudian mode. By extricating the temporal layers of the palimpsest, the Thoth/Freud figure affirms life and truth, and does so through writing. Like psychoanalysis, Freud's invention, wisdom is arrived at by illuminating the past. It is a powerful tribute to Freud, encoding in poetry precisely the poetic spirit that his life and writing encouraged. It is a tribute wholly of its time, with war's threat to speech and poetry as its backdrop. The fixation on burning books and the god of writing is transplanted from *Tribute to Freud* directly into the poem of H.D.'s most concerned with the war.

As well as Thoth, Janus is also a figure which H.D. associates with Freud in her memoir and who emerges in 'The Writing on the Walls' as well. In *Tribute to Freud* she writes of Freud:

This old Janus, this beloved light-house keeper, old Captain January, shut the door on transcendental speculations or at least transferred this occult or hidden symbolism to the occult or hidden regions of the personal reactions, dreams, thought associations or thought 'transferences' of the individual human mind[...]As to what happened, after this life was over... we as individuals, we as members of one race, one brotherhood of body that contained many different, individual branches, had profited so little by illuminating teaching of the Master who gave his name to our present era, that it was well for a prophet, in the old tradition of Israel, to arise, to slam the door on visions of the future, of the after-life, to stand himself like a Roman Centurion before the gate at Pompeii who did not move from his station before the gateway because he received no orders to do so, and who stood for later generations to wonder at, embalmed in hardened lava, preserved in the very fire and ashes that had destroyed him.⁷⁴

Freud was stubborn about the extent of the threat from the Nazis, refusing the opportunity to flee until it was almost too late. H.D. renders him as a stalwart of an older world, equating the onrushing tide of war with Pompeii. H.D. likens Pompeii to London in her poetry as well, writing of the Blitz and the fires that 'Pompeii has nothing to teach us.'⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid. 48.

⁷⁴ Doolittle, *Tribute to Freud*, 101-102.

⁷⁵ Doolittle, "The Walls Do Not Fall", 4.

Janus is a figure who also appears in 'The Walls do not Fall'. H.D. writes of the 'subconscious ocean where Fish/ move two-ways', invoking in the same breath Janus's two-directional faces and Freud's discovery of the subconscious.⁷⁶ Janus is also invoked like Thoth as a patron of writing, and the association with Freud as an explorer and discoverer is clear here too:

but gods always face two-ways,
so let us search the old highways

for the true-rune, the right-spell,
recover old values⁷⁷

Janus and Thoth are both discussed as surrogates for Freud in *Tribute to Freud* and both are invoked in 'The Walls do not Fall', which H.D. wrote at the same time. That these figures were so closely linked with Freud at the time of the poem's composition adds a useful interpretative tool for approaching the poem as a Freudian, war-time text.

The poem is not an elegy in any conventional sense, but its evocation of Freud through H.D.'s wartime mythical index places the Professor and the discipline he invented right at the heart of H.D.'s war. If *Tribute to Freud* was professedly a 'tribute', the defence that Freud had prohibited his student, 'The Walls do not Fall' is an altogether more cloaked and opaque tribute of its own, which casts Freud in the melee of wartime associations and figurations. Thoth and Janus appear at key moments in which poetry might be salvaged from the ruin. The figure of the Roman Centurion, hardened in lava, enshrines Freud's body for later generations, making of him an idol or figurine worthy of his own collection.

Conclusion

The death of Freud marks the end of an era and the beginning of the war for both H.D. and Auden. Incorporating Freud into the eulogies is a way for both writers to safeguard his legacy: by adopting the role of custodians and curators, the power of Freud's work to resist the threat of totalitarianism is preserved. Freud was a major part of the upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century. He helped to understand the trauma of the modern world and the losses and scars of First World War. Within his lifetime, Freud's work became one of the

⁷⁶ Ibid. 40.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 5.

main drivers behind modernist movements and aesthetics. For H.D. and Auden, he was one of the most important voices. Auden's work would change direction in the forties, moving away from psychoanalysis and socialism, and his elegy for Freud really did mark a point of culmination, departure and closure. Mourning Freud at the outset of the Second World War recognised his achievement and helped articulate the war in a way that encapsulates a vast cultural movement: Auden's 'whole climate of opinion'. The introduction to this thesis described the culture of the Second World War in terms of the attempts made by writers to 'stay in history', to attempt to come to terms with the coming rupture in terms of the traumas of the past. Writing about the death of Freud refreshes the discourses of remembrance available to poets: Auden reinvents elegy as he writes in a way that premeditates post-structuralism. Derrida would become one of Freud's most remarkable readers, and *Archive Fever* in particular would attempt to understand the creation and maintenance of Freud's legacy. The field of memory and trauma studies which developed in the latter part of the twentieth century, a school of thought in which my own work undoubtedly has its roots, would also revisit and reframe Freud in the long aftermath of the Holocaust. But as this chapter has shown, such thinking can be found early in Freud's afterlife, as the seeds of Europe's deepest trauma were beginning to germinate and enter the popular consciousness.

Auden's conscious and explicit turn to Freud as a means to articulate the grief of war demonstrates a tendency among poets to re-describe and redeploy models of mourning through the voices that have opened it up to representations and literature. H.D.'s writings about Freud's death return to sites of memory to comprehend the significance of those memories in the present. The next chapter of this thesis considers both of these approaches to questions of memory and mourning in relation to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke and the influence of his work on the poets of the thirties and forties. Like Freud for Auden, Rilke is an authoritative and guiding voice on grief, memory and mourning. Like Freud for H.D., Rilke's work becomes an important marker of the past and present tense of experience, particularly for the poets who encounter his work whilst on active service.

3. The Rilke Connection

In the two decades between his death in 1926 and the end of the Second World War, the status of Rainer Maria Rilke grew exponentially in Britain. The encounter with Rilke was earlier on the continent, with his time in France and Italy contributing to his recognition in those countries, and his reputation in Germany second only, among his generation, to Stefan George. In Britain, his work was largely consigned to readers of German until around 1930, at which point it started to appear in English: first in John Linton's version of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1930), and then, with increasing frequency throughout the thirties, in J.B. Leishman's translations of the poetry.¹ By the beginning of the Second World War, Rilke was widely read and studied, and scholarship was readily available alongside the poetry. In July 1939, Leishman and Stephen Spender published a version of *Duino Elegies* with an extensive introduction and gloss; in 1940, C.F Macintyre published *Fifty Selected Poems*; and in 1942, the Anglo Egyptian Bookshop in Cairo published Ruth Speirs's *Selected Poems*, fourteen of which also appeared in the Cairo-based literary magazine *Personal Landscape*.

Given his vogue in the late thirties, it is perhaps unsurprising that Rilke influenced the writing of many of the best known poets of the period, including Stephen Spender, Edith Sitwell, Geoffrey Grigson, and Cecil Day-Lewis. Adam Piette has described the moment as a 'Rilke craze.'² Rilke was important among Cairo's literati, one of the war's most fertile outposts; the poets and editors of the Cairo-based journal *Personal Landscape*, Bernard Spencer and Terence Tiller, were inspired by Ruth Speirs's translations, and so too was Hamish Henderson, who knew and loved Rilke in the original German.³ Another Scottish poet and soldier, Sorley Maclean (Somhairle MacGill-Eain), discussed Rilke in his

¹ Prior to *Duino Elegies*, Leishman had published several translations of Rilke, including *Requiem and Other Poems* in 1935 and *Sonnets to Orpheus* in 1936, both with The Hogarth Press.

² Adam Piette, "War Poetry in Britain," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina MacKay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.

³ Roger Bowen's study of *Personal Landscape* discusses the influence of Speirs's translations on Terence Tiller's poem 'Egyptian Dancer' and Bernard Spencer's 'Egyptian Dancer at Shubra' which he hypothesises derive from Rilke's 'Spanish Dancer'. See Roger Bowen, *Many Histories Deep: The Personal Landscape Poets in Egypt, 1940-45* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), 52-3.

correspondence with Hugh MacDiarmid in 1940.⁴ Rilke featured in MacDiarmid's work, prominently in the poem 'The Seamless Garment' in 1931. On another wing of Scottish literature, Edwin Muir drew from Rilke's poetics, suggesting that Scottish modernists may have been a couple of years ahead of the English in their absorption of Rilke's work. Dylan Thomas reportedly read *Duino Elegies* in 1941, and his unfinished *In Country Heaven* has drawn comparison with Rilke's work.⁵ Rilke came to Auden's mind in China; Sidney Keyes thinks of him on the Home Front; Alun Lewis writes 'To Rilke' in India; and Keith Douglas alludes to his works in the poems he produced during his final months in North Africa in 1943.

The appeal of Rilke has not waned since the forties, but this chapter will show that his works were held in particularly high regard by the young generation of poets faced with the Second World War. For Karen Leeder, Rilke is the epitome of the German poetic tradition and thus 'it could be argued that the extraordinary extent of the reception owes its existence to the fact that Rilke represents something largely absent in English poetry, but not beyond its reach.'⁶ Rilke's work, *Duino Elegies* in particular, is an exploration and staged exemplification of the role of the poet in the uncertainty of the early twentieth century. For the critic Kathleen L. Komar, Rilke is one of the artists for whom aesthetic experimentation was an attempt to 'understand how human consciousness can relate to such a disorientating world.'⁷ For the poets writing at the end of the 'low, dishonest decade', the catastrophes of the modern age were happening again; the trauma of the First World War, which had

⁴ Maclean writes that he is fascinated by the antithesis in Rilke's attitude to life in comparison with his own, but finds that 'no modern poet has at all expressed the whatever-is-is-right feeling with anything like his subtlety and consistency and poignancy.' In Hugh MacDiarmid and Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *The Correspondence Between Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley MacLean* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 186.

⁵ See Eric J. Sundquist, "In Country Heaven: Dylan Thomas and Rilke," *Comparative Literature* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 1979): 63–78. Vernon Watkins gives an account of his and Thomas's readings of Rilke in Dylan Thomas and Vernon Phillips Watkins, *Letters to Vernon Watkins* (New York: New Directions, 1957), 105.

⁶ Karen Leeder, "Rilke's Legacy in the English-Speaking World," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, ed. Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2010), 190. Leeder's article offers a very useful summation of Rilke's influence in the forties, including a discussion of Auden's *New Year Letter* which I do not cover in any great detail here.

⁷ Kathleen L. Komar, "The Duino Elegies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, ed. Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 80–94. 81.

interrupted Rilke's composition of *Duino Elegies*, was being repeated: the ordering principles of the modern world were once again disintegrating.

This chapter shows how frequently Rilke became the voice which promised a poetic strategy for combating the widespread structural loss of peace, security and lives. It discusses Auden's short-lived turn to Rilke as an exemplar of the wartime poet in *Journey to a War*. It considers the impact of Rilke in North Africa, amidst the nexus of Cairo poets, and those who passed through this literary melting pot. Ruth Speirs's translations of Rilke had a significant impact on the poets around her, all, like Rilke, living in various degrees of exile. One of the war's most undervalued poems, Hamish Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, draws extensively from Rilke, and, arguably the most famous poem to emerge from battle, Keith Douglas's 'How to Kill', is unexpectedly infused with Rilke, as I shall show. Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes also both turn to Rilke for a strategy for expressing the loss of war, but are faced with the paradox of being a Rilkean 'war poet': to compose like Rilke and Rilke's figure of the poet from the *Elegies* is impossible given the urgency and emergency of war. These poets both find themselves trapped between Rilke's poet and Rilke's figure of the 'hero' from *Duino Elegies*, the antithesis of the poet, consumed by action rather than inaction.

Adam Piette has argued that the poetry of the Second World War represents a turning point in the development of British poetry:

The Second World War is now recognized as a watershed for British poetry, breaking the dominance of high modernist orthodoxies (signalled by the death of Yeats), transforming the openly political poetics of the Auden group into a war poetry of symptom and reportage (inaugurated by the emigration of Auden and Isherwood to the US), releasing a contained and self-censored British surrealism in the form of the New Apocalypse, and seeing the redefinition of formal genres such as the religious ode, sonnet sequence, elegy, and ballad within a range of new registers, from Rilkean-Jungian (Sidney Keyes) to psychoanalytic-demotic (G. S. Fraser).⁸

The Rilkean register is the subject of this chapter, a register which, if not *new* exactly, was newly assimilated. Articulating the trauma of the Second World War meant, in some cases, revisiting and redescribing the trauma of 1914-1918. Rilke had struggled to write during those years, but the poem that was forming in his mind and whose latency period is one of the most significant and best documented in literary history, *Duino Elegies*, would inspire a

⁸ Piette, "War Poetry in Britain", 13.

new register for death and elegy in English poetry deep into the mid-century. Like Auden and H.D.'s turn to Freud in the Second World War, the turn to Rilke signals an attempt to represent the impending grief of the new war through one of the most eloquent and influential voices of the previous war.

Rilke in Wartime

J.B. Leishman's translations of Rilke for the Hogarth Press set a high standard in the 1930s, with editions of *Poems* (1934), *Requiem and Other Poems* (1935) and *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1936) appearing in quick succession. These were closely followed by Leishman's 1939 version of *Duino Elegies* in collaboration with Stephen Spender, a work that has become 'a literary landmark in its own right.'⁹ The timing of this publication may well have contributed to the appeal of Rilke to the young poets faced with the prospect of active service. The arrival of Leishman's *Duino Elegies*, a poem quite unlike anything in English from the early part of the century, at precisely the moment that young men in Britain were faced with the prospect of their early deaths, would secure Rilke's influence on the poets who reached maturity in the early forties. Rilke was not without his critics as his works began to appear in English. In *Criterion* in 1934, Samuel Beckett notes Rilke's 'breathless petulance' and claims that he 'has the fidgets, a disorder which may on occasion give rise, as it did with Rilke on occasion, to poetry of high order. But why call the fidgets God, Ego, Orpheus and the rest?' He adds of Leishman's translations that the 'numerous deviations are unwarrantable.'¹⁰ Nevertheless, the encounter with Rilke was timely for other writers and contributed significantly to the development of English poetry in this period. In 1948, the poet and critic B.J. Morse, himself a translator of Rilke in the early forties, argues that Rilke's work encouraged and enabled poets to search for new forms of expression. For Morse: 'since [the war] made the younger poets who were whirled into the maelstrom of war more susceptible to Rilke's ideas of Death, it lay in the very nature of things that their approach to his work should have been different, and that his influence should have branched out into new directions.'¹¹

⁹ Karen Leeder, "Rilke's Legacy in the English-Speaking World," 190.

¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, "Poems. By Rainer Maria Rilke," in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 66–67.

¹¹ B.J. Morse, "Contemporary English Poets and Rilke," *German Life and Letters* 1, no. 4 (July 1948): 272.

W.H. Auden's interest in Rilke may also have helped to bring him to the attention of young writers in the late thirties and early forties. In his review of Leishman's translation, which was published in *The New Republic* just days after the declaration of war, Auden writes: 'It is, I believe, no accident that as the international crisis becomes more and more acute, the poet to whom writers are becoming increasingly drawn should be one who felt that it was pride and presumption to interfere with the lives of others.'¹² Even if war does elicit a feverish collectivism, it is perhaps individual soul-searching which should inform the work of the artist: 'if the writer is not to harm both others and himself, he must consider, and very much more humbly and patiently than he has been doing, what kind of person he is, and what may be his real function.'¹³ For Auden in 1939, Rilke embodied the independence of art and the artist from the pressures of government and nationalism.

Nevertheless, celebrating Rilke, who did not see active service in the First World War due to his health, and whose contribution to the German war effort was short-lived due, partly, to his fame, could easily make the poet, or poets generally, a target for the accusation of self-interest and ivory towerism. The fact that Rilke had completed *Duino Elegies* in a tower, albeit a tower of stone, could have done little to assuage this impression. Thus, less than a year later, when Auden was called upon to review volumes of Rilke's poetry - this time C.F. MacIntyre's *Fifty Selected Poems* - and letters, he saw fit to defend the German poet from accusations of aloofness. The stakes for this piece, entitled 'Poet in Wartime', could not have been much higher: Auden defends the non-combatant poet for doing nothing at the very moment when everybody was being called upon to do something for the national interest. During the years 1914-1918, Rilke spent his time 'waiting in Munich, always thinking it must come to an end, not understanding, not understanding. Not to understand: yes, that was my entire occupation in these years.'¹⁴ Auden writes:

To call this an ivory-tower attitude would be a cheap and wicked lie. To resist compensating for the sense of guilt that every noncombatant feels at not sharing the physical sufferings of those at the front, by indulging in an orgy of patriotic hatred all the more violent because it is ineffective; to be conscious but to refuse to understand, is a positive act that calls for courage of a high order. To distinguish it

¹² W. H. Auden, "Rilke in English," in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, ed. Edward Mendelson, vol. II. 1939-1948 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 25-27.

¹³ Loc.cit..

¹⁴W. H. Auden, "Poet in Wartime," in *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, ed. Edward Mendelson, vol. II. 1939-1948 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 73-75.

from selfish or cowardly indifference may at the time be difficult for the outsider, but Rilke's poetry and these letters are proof enough of his integrity and real suffering.¹⁵

So the importance of Rilke, for Auden, is nothing less than the manifestation of the very question of what it means to be an artist in the time of war. What Auden sees as a refusal to allow his craft to become a tool for propaganda, to make simple sense of the war, preserves the very integrity of poetry: Rilke is an exemplar of the non-combatant poet.

Auden's own poetic borrowings from Rilke were substantial in the late thirties and early forties. 'In Time of War', the sonnet sequence in *Journey to a War*, is Auden's chief contribution to the travel book in verse, prose and photographs which he authored with Christopher Isherwood in China in 1937. It is a sequence shrouded in 'Rilkean obliquities' which John Fuller argues is the 'principle stylistic influence' on the work.¹⁶ For Fuller, Auden's borrowings from Rilke serve to 'counterbalance' the self-deprecation and feigned ignorance of the travel diary which Isherwood wrote for *Journey to a War*. But further than this, Rilke underpins Auden's innovation of the war poem. 'In Time of War', as Auden's commentary suggests, is a poem about 'the epoch of the Third Great Disappointment' and the first eleven sonnets follow an oppressed and disconnected figure passing through a modern world in its final throes: 'Sonnet XII' opens by declaring boldly 'And the age ended'.¹⁷ In its rendering of the modern age as a period of upheaval and loss, and its attempt to follow an individual caught in the impending storm, Auden's poem resembles Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, a sequence which 'explores how the human consciousness can respond when confronted with the loss of ordering principles and of access to any unified transcendent realm.'¹⁸ If not an elegy as such, Auden is here experimenting with forms and ideas to express the end of an epoch, ideas to which he would return in *Another Time*.

But, like more conventional elegiac works, Auden finds some solace in poetry in the same sequence. In 'Sonnet XXIII', Auden writes:

When all the apparatus of report
Confirms the triumph of our enemies,

¹⁵ Loc.cit..

¹⁶ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden : A Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 235.

¹⁷ W. H. Auden, "Sonnet XII," in *Journey to a War*, by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood (New York: Random House, 1939), 270.

¹⁸ Komar, "The Duino Elegies." 82.

Our bastion pierced, our army in retreat,
Violence successful like a new disease,

And Wrong a charmer everywhere invited,
When we regret that we were ever born:
Let us remember all who seemed deserted:
To-night in China let me think of one,

Who through ten years of silence worked and waited,
Until in Muzot all his powers spoke,
And everything was given once for all.

And with the gratitude of the Completed,
He went out in the winter night to stroke
That little tower like a great animal.¹⁹

The ‘one’ here is Rilke and the ‘ten years of silence’ is the gap between his composition of the first part of *Duino Elegies* in 1912, and the hiatus during the war that would delay their completion until a frenzy of work in Muzot in 1922.²⁰ Auden recasts the Great War era which interrupted Rilke’s creativity onto his own post-war, mid-war, pre-war moment in China. Its tone and the feigned arbitrariness of Rilke’s appearance foreshadow ‘In Memory of Sigmund Freud’, another poem which tries to make sense of the end of an epoch, and Rilke’s ‘ten years of silence’ is echoed in the ‘low, dishonest decade’ which Auden would describe in ‘September I, 1939’. The simple suggestion here is that art can be a source of hope and power in the face of violence and defeat. Like his elegies for Yeats and Freud, Auden mixes his characteristic rhetorical and lexical fields with those of his subject. Here, Auden’s language of politics and science – denoted by ‘apparatus of report’, ‘like a new disease’, ‘a charmer everywhere invited’ – clashes and melds with Rilke’s spirituality – ‘all his powers spoke/ and everything was given.’

The sonnet equates Rilke’s writer’s block with the situation which, somewhat mythologically, caused it: the unrest, upheaval and war of 1914-18, and by extension, the unrest of the late thirties, and the new wars in Spain and China that threaten a descent into global conflict. The strength of one, of Rilke, to wait out this urgent situation, to suffer silence and in silence, and to do so in the face of the jingoistic pressures to speak for a cause, encourages Auden not to feel deserted. The call to memory here, ‘let us remember all’, with its provocative echo of Binyon’s ‘we will remember them’ and the sonnet’s homo-eroticism,

¹⁹ W. H. Auden, “Sonnet XXIII,” in *Journey to a War*, by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood (New York: Random House, 1939), 281.

²⁰ Auden would also famously measure failure decimally in the phrase ‘that low dishonest decade’.

instils a counter-mode of remembrance, the privileging of poetic memory, with its show of intellectual strength as opposed to physical.

Auden's turn to Rilke on that night in China speaks to the power of Rilke's appeal. In that moment he seemed to Auden to be the go-to poet for finding a means to write in the midst of the very worst manifestations of human nature and violence. The appeal of Rilke was widespread for this reason and the rest of this chapter considers poets who, like Auden, thought of Rilke when they thought of the war. But Auden, always one step ahead of the tastes of his time, predicted Rilke's decline in English poetry almost as soon as it reached its peak. By 1941, in *New Year Letter*, Auden's attitude to Rilke had cooled considerably. Describing Rilke as the 'Santa Claus of loneliness', Auden demotes, perhaps even diminishes, his work.²¹ This thesis has discussed the 'gift' of Yeats; if Rilke's gift is delivered by Santa Claus perhaps it is too neat and convenient a package. Later in the poem Rilke becomes a poet of choice for the devil who, handing a book to the speaker, says 'you know the *Elegies* I'm sure.'²² But if Auden's patience for Rilke had run thin, and English poetry was saturated with Leishman's translations, new versions of Rilke were emerging in one of English poetry's most lively and innovative expat communities.

Rilke in Egypt

Rilke's impact on the small but extraordinarily active literary scene in Cairo was just as marked as it was in Britain. Represented there in the early forties by the translations of Ruth Speirs, a Latvian refugee married to the Leavisite medieval scholar John Speirs, Rilke's poems circulated in the periodicals *Personal Landscape* and *Citadel* in 1942, and in book-form, published by the Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop in Cairo. When Tambimuttu's *Poetry London* published Speirs's complete version of *Duino Elegies* over two issues in 1947, it claimed that she 'Has made new, and, we think, the best translations yet of Rilke into English.'²³ Speirs's translations were not destined to be as widely read as Leishman's (the fourth edition of Leishman and Spender's *Duino Elegies* came out in 1963 and has been

²¹ W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 1941), 24.

²² *Ibid.* 35.

²³ Tambimuttu, "Editorial," *Poetry London* 3, no. 11 (October 1947): 2.

reprinted several times), but as this chapter shows, the influence of Speirs and Rilke on the poets of wartime Cairo was considerable.

This section looks at the direct influence of Speirs on two of the war's best-known poets, Keith Douglas and Hamish Henderson. Both borrow directly from Speirs, Henderson even quoting her translation at some length, but the use they each make of this version of Rilke is quite different. For Henderson in *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, it is part of his project of literary collection and collage. The borrowings from Rilke and Speirs are like scraps in a scrapbook or artefacts in a museum; his is a poem of fragments collected during his time in Egypt, and Chapter 4 examines this work in greater detail. For Henderson, it is clear that Rilke is a lifelong interest, but the encounter with him in North Africa is portrayed in very local terms, as part of a process of memorialisation. This chapter shows Henderson's elegiac method as a result of the influence of Rilke, a documentation of Rilke's appearances and hauntings in Egypt in the early forties. Like Freud for Auden and H.D., Rilke becomes a point of orientation and a focus for memory and commemoration.

Stylistically, Keith Douglas's work could not be further removed from Henderson's, and unsurprisingly the two poets approach to Rilke very differently. Douglas is spare where Henderson is abundant, and where the Scottish poet emphasises his borrowing as poetic strategy, Douglas very rarely acknowledges his influences and predecessors. Nevertheless, they both found something worth taking from Ruth Speirs's translations. My approach to Douglas is also forensic, and reads what is arguably his most important work about death, 'How to Kill', through its Rilkean allusions. Rilke was a poet of significance for both Henderson and Douglas whilst they were in North Africa and understanding the ways they use his work can help elucidate their work from this crucial and intense literary moment in the war.

i. Henderson

The influence of Rainer Maria Rilke on Hamish Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* has been well documented. Richard E. Ziegfeld's 1981 article 'The Elegies of Rilke and Henderson: Influence and Variation' observes the major structural similarities between Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* and Henderson's *Elegies*, such as the sequence of ten

poems, and the unusual act of elegising a multitude rather than an individual.²⁴ Ziegfeld's attentive readings reveal further parallels between the two sequences, and he notes the influence of Rilke on Hugh MacDiarmid as a possible contributing factor to Henderson's encounter with the German poet. Ziegfeld also mentions John Speirs's awareness of, and interest in, Rilke, and with information now available to scholars we can enrich this part of Ziegfeld's thesis on Rilke and Henderson. In particular, I can develop the enquiry beyond *Duino Elegies* to other poems by Rilke with which Henderson worked, and to autobiographical and archival material on Henderson. Henderson's poetry, which I describe in the next chapter as the work of a self-professed 'scavenger', situates its borrowings from Rilke in a framework of commemoration and witnessing whose intertextuality operates as a memorial collage. That is to say, the allusions to Rilke are not only literary, but experiential as well; Rilke was part of Henderson's war, and thus part of his testimony.

First of all, in response to Ziegfeld's observation that John Speirs's interest in Rilke may have spurred Henderson's Rilkean poetics, it is clear now that Ruth Speirs was probably more influential than her husband in keeping Rilke at the front of Henderson's mind during his experiences of the war. Tim Neat, in his biography of Henderson, writes that during the summer of 1942, the poet would recite his poetry late into the Cairo night with the Speirses, and he helped Ruth complete her translations of Rilke 'with a rare mix of linguistic accuracy and poetic empathy.'²⁵ Henderson recorded several observations and opinions about Speirs and Rilke in one of the notebooks he kept during the war, and, although it is impossible to date these with exact precision, the relevant entries were most likely written in late 1942, after the publication of Speirs's *Selected Poems* of Rilke. Henderson's assessment of Speirs's translations was very favourable, especially in comparison to Leishman, of whom he writes 'Infelicitous translator, infuriating translation.'²⁶ Speirs, conversely, 'has not translated Rilke with the idea of climbing to literary celebrity on his shoulders' but instead 'has set herself the formidable single task of translating him *exactly*, forgoing rhyme but keeping as far as possible to the original metre.'²⁷ Henderson wrote to John Speirs from Sicily in 1945, during the completion of the main part of his own *Elegies*, to request another

²⁴ Richard Ziegfeld, "The Elegies of Rilke and Henderson: Influence and Variation," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 1981): 217–34.

²⁵ Timothy Neat, *Hamish Henderson: The Making of the Poet* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), 81

²⁶ Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Library Special Collections, MS Coll-1438, Box 63, Notebook 6, (ca. 1942).

²⁷ Hamish Henderson, "Notebook '6', Box 63 in Hamish Henderson Archive" (University of Edinburgh Library Special Collections, ca 1942).

copy of Ruth's translations as well as any new ones.²⁸ He also asked for E.M. Forster's *Alexandria* and 'any edition' of Cavafy, whose works also feature in Henderson's long poem, giving the distinct impression that he was collecting the sources he needed to complete the work. As he set about working on *Elegies* in earnest, Henderson returned to the writers who had illuminated his time in North Africa and whose work populates the poem like fragments in collage, an intertextual palimpsest representing the North African campaigns.

Henderson's debt to Rilke is explicitly acknowledged in the *Elegies*, but his debt to Ruth Speirs is somewhat cloaked: she is directly quoted, but it is by no means explicitly recognisable. Henderson names Rilke in the 'Eighth Elegy', and quotes Speirs's translation of one of Rilke's lesser-known works as an epigraph to the 'Tenth Elegy', a quotation which is unattributed to either Rilke or Speirs. As with other allusions in the poem, as discussed in Chapter 4 below, these moments of assemblage or 'scavenging' embed the *Elegies* in the North African desert; their inclusion allows us to map the poem historically and geographically, and as such to chart Henderson's translation of the experiences and memories of his service. In late 1942, shortly after his summer with the Speirses during which Ruth's translations of Rilke were published, Henderson made the excursion south from Cairo to Karnak, following in the footsteps of Rilke. Rilke had himself travelled to Egypt in 1911 and lived a 'rootless, expatriate life', making him 'something of an archetype for a wartime generation of poets.'²⁹ For Karen Leeder, 'Rilke embodies the paradigm of the itinerant or homeless poet.'³⁰ Henderson was also a wandering poet and would have found in Rilke a kindred spirit. The Ancient Egyptian cultures of death and the eternal, which so fascinated the German poet, permeate the second half of Henderson's *Elegies*, as they do for H.D. in 'The Walls do not Fall.'

In a published note to the 'Eighth Elegy' Henderson recalls a passage recorded in his notebook during the trip to Karnak:

This civilisation was filled, so great was its unshaken complacency on this earth, with a profound death-longing – it longed, dreamed, lusted, went a-whoring after death.

Karnak, smashed, is the ironic image of *Vollendung*. The tombs in the Valley of the Kings are as good a sketch as man made of "the eternal".

²⁸ Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Library Special Collections, MS Coll-1438, Box 63, Notebook 11 (ca. 1945).

²⁹ Bowen, *Many Histories Deep*, 52-53.

³⁰ Leeder, "Rilke's Legacy in the English-Speaking World," 190.

I do not let myself be weighed down by the impassive timeless effrontery of this civilisation. I realise that all of us, from Hellenes to Gaelic outlanders of the western world are in a sense beside Thebes half civilised clod-hoppers, hairy men with a lop-sided slant on time, half-baked hurried ignorant Yank tourists with a kink about progress mechanical or social.

But you can have Luxor – it solves none of the problems, it doesn't even pose them. If we of the modern west devote a tenth of the time to life that Karnak devoted to death, we'll bring a tangible hope, even to the inhabitants of the Nile Valley.³¹

The entry in Henderson's notebooks to which this note refers is flanked by notes about Ruth Speirs, including Henderson's sketched review of the translations. It is clear that Rilke's work and Speirs's translation were on Henderson's mind as he approached the ancient sites of Egypt which were to become the subject of his poetry. He sees the landscape through the lens of Rilke and the poems which bear witness to his time in Egypt suggest that Rilke was a significant guiding principle for him.

In the 'Eighth Elegy', in which Rilke is invoked by name, the 'irony' of the smashed edifices of Karnak, a failed project of eternity and perfection (*Vollendung*), reminds Henderson of the German poet's wanderings in Egypt. Henderson writes:

But still, in utter silence, from bas-relief and painted tomb
this civilisation asserts
its timeless effrontery.
Synthesis is implicit
in Rilke's single column (die *eine*)
denying fate, the stone mask of *Vollendung*.
(Deaf to tarbushed dragoman
who deep-throatedly extols it).³²

The passage alludes to *The Sonnets to Orpheus* II (22), and Henderson's refers specifically to 'die *eine*' as it appears in the original German:

O die eherne Glocke, die ihre Keule
Täglich wider den stumpfen Alltag hebt.
Oder die *eine*, in Karnak, die Säule, die Säule,
Die fast ewige Tempel überlebt.³³

³¹ Hamish Henderson, "Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica," in *Collected Poems and Songs*, ed. Ross, Raymond (Edinburgh: Curly Snake Publishing, 2000). n 159

³² *Ibid.* 68.

³³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 2009), 176.

Ruth Speirs translates the passage thus:

O the bell of bronze that raises its club
Daily against a dull everyday.
Or the *one* in Karnak, the column, the column
Outlasting almost-eternal temples.³⁴

Recalling his visit to Luxor in an interview in 1992, Henderson describes how he ‘walked for hours all over Karnak to see if I could find a definite pillar’ corresponding to ‘die *eine*’ in Rilke’s poem.³⁵ Henderson scrutinises the silence of the work of art whose purpose is to defy time. The irony of Karnak’s smashed edifices is as applicable to poetry as to architecture. Henderson suggests that the ‘tarbushed dragoman’, the figure of a guide and interpreter, a translator perhaps, now speaks on behalf of the ancient ruins which are deaf to his voice. It is the moment in the *Elegies* perhaps most reminiscent of W.B. Yeats, whose late work Henderson has acknowledged as an important influence and whose *Last Poems* Henderson carried with him throughout the war.³⁶ The assertive bas-relief recalls ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, where the speaker asks to be gathered into the ‘artifice of eternity’, to be hammered out of gold to last forever rather than take form from nature.³⁷ So if Yeats is present in this passage, it is Yeats via Auden, the dead man whose words are ‘modified in the guts of the living’. But it is another dead poet who is explicitly summoned by Henderson here, and the Scot is not modifying Rilke so much as following in his footsteps. It is a wild goose chase perhaps, to find a man-made piece of art which outlasts the almost eternal. As the epigraph to the *Elegies* from Goethe suggests, the *unendlichen* is the preserve of the gods.³⁸

³⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. Ruth Speirs (Cairo: The Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 1942), 88.

³⁵ Hamish Henderson, *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Songs, Folk and Literature*, ed. Finlay, Alec (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), n346.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 451..

³⁷ William Butler Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” in *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Cedric Watts, Wordsworth Poetry Library (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2008), 163.

³⁸ Although Henderson couldn’t locate it, Rilke did have a specific column in mind for ‘die *eine*’. This is from a letter to Clara Rilke, January 18, 1911: ‘On the eastern (Arabian) bank, against which we are lying, is the temple of Luxor with the high colonnade of budlike lotus columns, a half hour farther on that incomprehensible temple world of Karnak which I saw the very first evening and yesterday once more, in the moon just beginning to wane, saw, saw, saw, dear Heaven, one summons up one’s strength, looks with all the will to believe of two focused eyes and still it begins above them,

Henderson turns to Rilke again in the epigraph to the ‘Tenth Elegy’, this time extolled by the dragoman-esque Ruth Speirs:

*One must die because one knows them, die
of their smile’s ineffable blossom, die
of their light hands³⁹*

The quotation is unattributed, either to Speirs or Rilke, but it comes from Rilke’s poem ‘Man muß sterben weil man sie kennt’ (1914) and the translation is amongst those published in Speirs’s *Selected Poems* of 1942. Rilke’s poem describes a young man’s attempt to sing of a deadly and unattainable woman and a grown man’s deeply harrowed silence. As with ‘die eine’, however, the factor which draws Henderson to this poem is its relation to Rilke’s Egypt. ‘Man muß sterben...’ has the parenthetical subtitle: ‘*Papyrus Prisse. From the sayings of Ptah-hotep, manuscript from ca. 2000 B.C.*’ Ptah-hotep, a vizier in the 5th Dynasty of Ancient Egypt in the 25th and 24th centuries BC, is the author of one of the world’s oldest books, known as *The Instruction of Ptah-hotep*. It is a conduct guide written by the aged vizier for his son and young men more generally, offering advice such as ‘follow thine heart during thy lifetime, do not more than is commanded thee’ and ‘bend thy back unto thy chief.’⁴⁰

The Instruction of Ptah-hotep is preserved on the Prisse Papyrus, which was, and still is, on display in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, where Rilke spent many hours working during his time in Paris in 1902.⁴¹ Rilke’s poem is only very loosely based on the *Instruction*, deriving from it the idea of male wisdom and the potential problems posed by women. In his quotation from ‘Man muß sterben...’, Henderson refocuses Rilke’s poem slightly, eliding the theme of unrequited love. But there is something in Rilke’s original which is instantly recognisable in Henderson’s *Elegies*; the grown man’s silence, Rilke

extends everywhere beyond them (only a god can work such a field of vision) there stands a calyx column, solitary, surviving, and one does not encompass it, so out beyond one’s life does it stand, only together with the night can one somehow take it in, perceiving it all of a piece with the stars, whence it becomes human for a second human experience.’ Jane Bannard Greene, trans., *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke - Vol II: 1910-1926* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Incorporated, 1947), 22.

³⁹ Henderson, “Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica,” 2000. 71

⁴⁰ Battiscombe G. Gunn, *The Instruction of Ptah-Hotep and the Instruction of Ke’Gemni The Oldest Books in the World* (Library of Alexandria, n.d.). 6, 16

⁴¹ Ibid. Introduction, 6, and Donald Prater, *A Ringing Glass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 92.

writes, is attributable to his being ‘pfadlos’, pathless: ‘he who has, pathless, strayed in the night/ on the mountain-ranges of his emotions.’⁴² The figure presents the silence of unbearable knowledge, as opposed to the young man’s attempts to put language to the lost object of desire. The grown man, Rilke continues, is mute like a seaman, another pathless figure, ‘the mastered horrors/ playing in him as in quivering cages.’⁴³

Henderson must have been drawn to Rilke’s poem for a number of reasons. First of all, the fact that Ruth Speirs translated and published the poem in Cairo in 1942, whilst Henderson was stationed in the city, marks its inclusion in the *Elegies* as a monument to a particular time and place, and a very personal monument at that, given Henderson’s close relationship with the Speirses. Secondly, Henderson’s love of Rilke had roots in Egypt, through Rilke’s own travels and wanderings in the country and the emergence of Egyptian sites and texts in his poetry. Henderson collects these moments in the *Elegies*. Finally, the most ‘local’ facet of ‘Man muß sterben...’ is the most temporally remote. Ptah-hotep, the ancient author whose voice is filtered and mutated through both Rilke and Speirs before speaking from the *Elegies*, is buried on Henderson’s doorstep. The mastaba of Ptah-hotep is located at Saqqara, about 10km south of the Maadi Military Base where Henderson’s CSDIC interrogation centre was based (see Figure 1, overleaf). We know from letters that Henderson visited the pyramids before May 1942, although he doesn’t specify whether these are the Great Pyramids of Giza, which are also close to Maadi, or whether he knowingly or unknowingly made a pilgrimage to Ptah-hotep’s tomb at Saqqara.⁴⁴ Rilke had also travelled to Saqqara in 1911.⁴⁵

The quotation, along with the many other allusions in the *Elegies*, gives Henderson’s work the quality of a collage, but a deeper investigation suggests that the poems resemble a palimpsest. If ‘collage’ suggests the flattening of fragments into a single surface image, Henderson’s work rewards an archaeological reading which untangles his layering of times and places. The allusions to Rilke and Speirs link the poem to the precise events of its conception and composition. Rilke becomes a way for Henderson to articulate the war by bearing witness to a time and a place. The landscape of Egypt is a poetic palimpsest for

⁴² Rainer Maria Rilke, “One Must Die Because One Knows Them,” in *Selected Poems*, trans. Ruth Speirs (Cairo: The Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 1942), 95.

⁴³ Loc.cit.

⁴⁴ Hamish Henderson, airgraph to the Armstrong family, Cairo, May 1942, in *The Armstrong Nose: Selected Letters of Hamish Henderson*, ed. Finlay, Alec (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), 3.

⁴⁵ Bannard Greene, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke - Vol II*. 26.

Henderson, its ancient history bubbles up in Rilke's work, and emerges again several decades later in Henderson's. It is a landscape which is, at times, barren and unforgiving, but Henderson finds within it a lush and fertile soundscape of poetry and of human cultural history. Roger Bowen borrows a phrase from Bernard Spencer's poem for the title of his study of the *Personal Landscape* journal in Cairo which is appropriate for Henderson's poetry as well: *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* is 'many histories deep' and Rilke is a key to unlocking them.⁴⁶

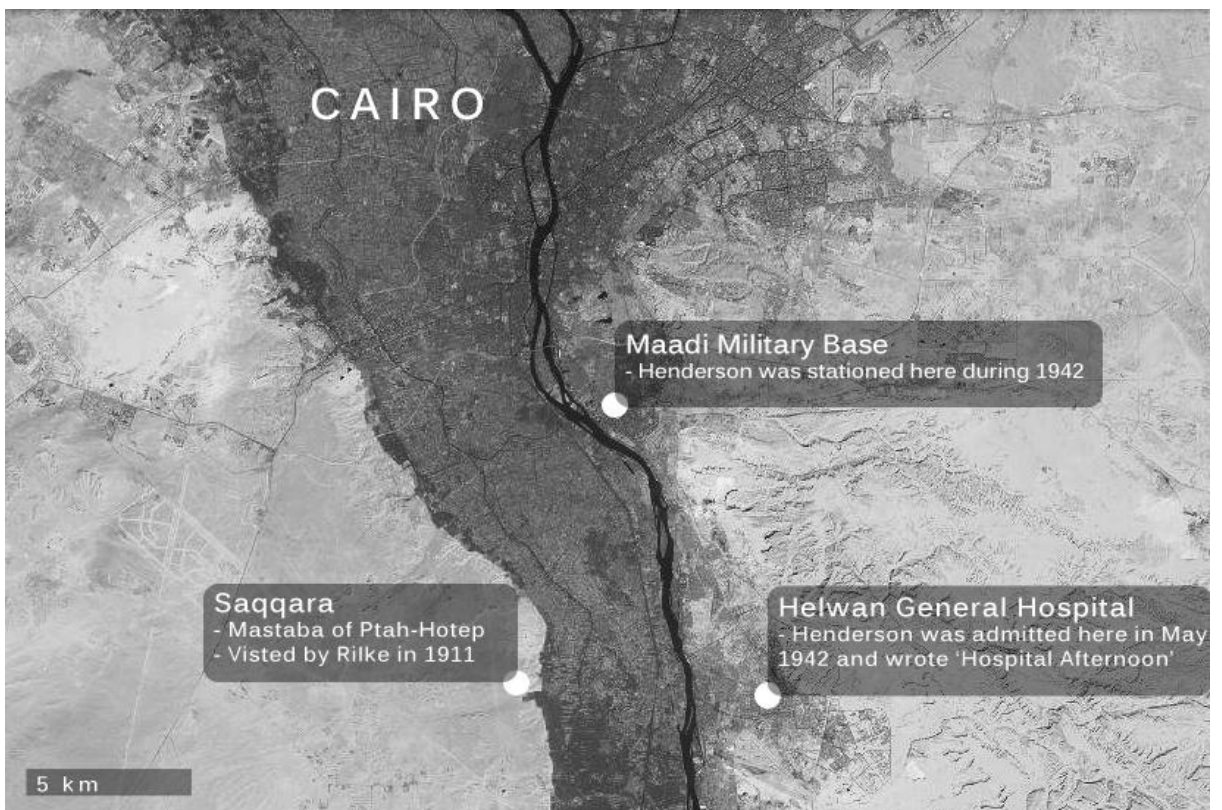


Figure 1. Map showing Hamish Henderson's locations around Cairo in 1942 in relation to Saqqara.

⁴⁶ Bowen's title is taken from Bernard Spencer's poem 'Out of Sleep'. Bowen, *Many Histories Deep*. 203.

ii. Douglas

The full extent of Keith Douglas's engagement with Rilke's work has not hitherto been fully documented. Desmond Graham's biographical research on Douglas has recorded his interest in Rilke, and Geoffrey Hill also considered it worthy of mention in his essay 'Sidney Keyes in Historical Perspective'. It is from Hill that I derive my title 'the Rilke connection', a coinage which he considers crucial to the development of British poetry in the forties, and, as I try to show in the chapter, this is the case with war poetry in particular.⁴⁷ This section considers the influence of Rilke's shorter poetry on Keith Douglas's spare and intense style, and, through archival materials and close-reading, I suggest the significance of the connection is more integral than has previously been proposed. Bearing in mind Douglas's influence on the poets that came later, notably Ted Hughes and Hill, Douglas and Rilke provide an important genetic link between British pre-war and post-war poetry. Hill notes that Douglas did not ground his work in a Rilkean ontology the way that Sidney Keyes did, and it is certainly true that his famous demand for 'extrospection' runs contrary to the metaphysical mode of Rilke that Keyes found appealing.⁴⁸ But there is a hitherto unexplored dimension to one of Douglas's most widely-anthologised and important poems that draws directly from Rilke's shorter poetry.

It is difficult to assess exactly when Douglas first encountered the works of Rilke, but in North Africa he certainly had access to translations of Rilke in the pages of *Personal Landscape* from 1942 onwards. Among the periodicals known to be owned by Douglas is a copy of *Personal Landscape* vol. 1.4 (1942), which contained several of Ruth Speirs's translations. An edition of *Selected Poems* by Rilke and translated by Speirs also appeared in 1942, but Douglas does not appear to have acquired a copy of his own until the following summer – his copy, which is in the possession of Desmond Graham, is autographed and dated 'July 1943 Homs'. Speirs's translation of 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' appeared in *Citadel* in February 1943, alongside Douglas's 'Offensive 1' and 'Offensive 2', which were published there as a single poem under the title 'Reflections of the New Moon in Sand'. Douglas considered Speirs's translation significant enough to copy out, and his hand-written duplicate has survived among the manuscripts of his own poems.⁴⁹ That issue of *Citadel* was published when Douglas was convalescing in Palestine from injuries sustained in a mine

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Hill, "Sidney Keyes in Historical Perspective," in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 408.

⁴⁸ Loc.cit.

⁴⁹ London, British Library, Additional MS 53773.

explosion, and he was digesting the three months spent in battle at the end of 1942. During this short period in recovery, Douglas quickly produced his first batch of truly significant war poems, including 'Dead Men' and 'Desert Flowers'.

It is among these poems completed at El Ballah that the first traces of Rainer Maria Rilke appear in Douglas's works. As well as 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', Douglas had time to revisit the copies of *Personal Landscape* published the previous summer, and he incorporates several veiled references to Rilke's 'The Panther' in his works. Ruth Speirs's translation of 'The Panther' had appeared in *Personal Landscape* 1.3, June 1942.⁵⁰ In 'Desert Flowers' Douglas writes: 'the night discards/ draperies on the eyes and leaves the mind awake.'⁵¹ The metaphorical curtained eyelids are very similar to an image from 'The Panther': 'Only at times the curtain of his pupil noiselessly rises.'⁵² The panther of Rilke's poem, observed in the Jardin des Plantes, Paris, is caged, and the energy of the poem revolves around the numbing confinement of such a powerful creature. For the wounded Douglas, frustratingly trapped in hospital and, ineligible for sick leave, the appeal of the poem is clear. Speirs translates Rilke's poem as follows:

His gaze has grown so weary of the passing
of bars that it no longer anything retains.
It seems to him there are a thousand bars,
behind a thousand bars no world.

The soft gait of his supple powerful steps
revolving in the smallest of all circles
is like a dance of strength around a centre
in which there stands, stunned, a great will.⁵³

The cage of this poem also appears in Douglas's 'Words', composed in hospital around the same time as 'Desert Flowers':

But I keep words only a breath of time
turning them in the lightest of cages — uncover
and let them go: sometimes they escape for ever.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ No copy of this issue survives amongst Douglas's possessions, but his copy of *PL* 1.4 is held in Leeds, Brotherton Special Collections, BC MSc20 DOUGLAS.

⁵¹ Douglas, "Desert Flowers."

⁵² Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Panther," in *Selected Poems*, trans. Ruth Speirs (Cairo: The Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 1942), 25.

⁵³ Loc.cit.

⁵⁴ Keith Douglas, "Words," in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 107.

Douglas leaves battles and death behind temporarily in 'Words', instead expounding a philosophy of composition. His re-appropriation of Rilke's 'The Panther' uses the image of a cage to momentarily capture the energy of words in sequence. Douglas's words 'turn' where Rilke's panther 'revolves', imbuing them with a transformative power rather than a repetitive motion. Strikingly 'Words' begins with an image straight out of Rilke's life:

Words are instruments but not my servants;
by the white pillar of a prince I lie in wait
for them.⁵⁵

One can only speculate as to the extent of Douglas's knowledge of Rilke – perhaps he had read Auden's articles, or *New Year Letter*, or had access to Leishman's extensive introductions – but these lines are reminiscent of the circumstances of completion of the *Duino Elegies* at Muzot. Certainly this figure, if not Rilke himself, is Rilkean. In the months that followed his convalescence, Douglas displays a renewed interest in theatrical conceits. The poems 'Landscape with Figures', 'Jerusalem', 'Fragment', 'Enfidaville' and 'This is the dream' all employ the figures of dancers or actors to a greater or lesser extent, that is to say that half of Douglas's significant output in his remaining time in North Africa used a conceit which he had certainly used in the past, but which found new life after he discovered Rilke. It is certainly one of Rilke's favoured metaphors and it appears to enter Douglas's work with new energy in 1943.⁵⁶

It is clear that Rilke was very much at the forefront of Douglas's mind when he composed one of his best known and most remarkable poems, 'How to Kill'. Douglas had acquired Rilke's *Selected Poems* translated by Ruth Speirs in Tripolitania where he was stationed after the victorious North African Campaign, and signed and dated it 'July 1943 Homs'. On July 11th, Douglas wrote to Tambimuttu of his new energy for writing: 'I had given up all hope of writing in the army until your efforts and John Hall's nerved me to try again.'⁵⁷ A

⁵⁵ Loc.cit.

⁵⁶ In, for example, the 'Fourth Elegy', which dwells on puppets and stages, and the poem 'Spanish Dancer'. Speirs translates both in *Selected Poems*, trans. Ruth Speirs (Cairo: The Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 1942), 29; 67. Roger Bowen has suggested that 'Spanish Dancer' inspired poems by Bernard Spencer and Terrence Tiller. Bowen, *Many Histories Deep*, 52-3. See footnote 2 in this chapter.

⁵⁷ Keith Douglas, "To Marie .J. Douglas, N.d (ca. September 1943)," in *The Letters* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 297–300.

the similarity between the path of a ball and a shell, also elevated it to the opening stanza of the poem, and the finished version begins:

Under the parabola of a ball,
a child turning into a man,
I looked into the air too long.
The ball fell in my hand, it sang
in the closed fist: *Open Open*
*Behold a gift designed to kill.*⁶¹

There is a striking similarity between this and the eighth sonnet in part two of *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which was published in *Personal Landscape* 1.4 in Ruth Speirs's translation, and in *Selected Poems*:

What was, in the universe, real?

Nothing. Only the balls, their magnificent curves.
Nor were the children... But sometimes one,
Ah one that was fading, stepped under the falling ball.⁶²

The 'parabola of a ball' appears to be an image borrowed directly from one of the poems to which Douglas almost certainly had access to at the time of writing. Indeed, it is an image present in several of the poems selected and translated by Speirs: later in the *Sonnets* Rilke speaks of the 'curves of flight through the air', and the poem 'Childhood' also uses the fading memory of a child playing with a ball as a metaphor for the loss of childhood innocence, an idea which is central to *Duino Elegies*. In the poem 'The Ball', Rilke writes, addressing the ball, 'when you rise/ you take the throw with you, as if you raised it too, and set it free [...] you fall to meet the goblet of high hands'.⁶³ It is a pervasive image in Rilke's work, the paths, the flight of balls, and what happens beneath them, growth and loss.⁶⁴

In 'Sonnet 8.2', which is dedicated to the memory of Rilke's cousin, Egon von Rilke, who died in childhood, the magnificent curves of balls, the only real thing in the universe,

⁶¹ Keith Douglas, "How to Kill," in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 119.

⁶² Rilke, *Selected Poems*. 82.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 51.

⁶⁴ A similar observation is made briefly in David Irvine Masson, *Keith Douglas's Phonetic Rhetoric and Phonetic Lyricism: A Study of Three Poems*. (Leeds: Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, 1991), 12.

suggests the paths of planets and stars. In Douglas's poem, a boy grows into a man under the rotations of the sun. In both, man seems insignificant beneath such cosmic manoeuvres, his life transitory. Yet the human figure is central to such movements, it is through the lens of the individual that the world is interpreted. Douglas's 'parabola of a ball' is an image with an extraordinary kind of elegiac power: the child under the ball and the man under the shell are rolled into one; it is a war game, reminiscent perhaps of the language of cricket which Douglas has described and identified as a characteristic of the Second World War's officer class.⁶⁵ The child is forced to grow up too quickly in wartime, and as his innocence is lost a new kind of power is instilled in the man who grows out of him, the power of the killer.

Another of the poem's parabolic features is Douglas's characteristic ABCCBA rhyme scheme. But rather than the centripetal shape suggested by the parabola of a ball, 'How to Kill' has, to borrow Tim Kendall's well-chosen term, a centrifugal force.⁶⁶ Douglas would have found a reduced version of this scheme in Speirs's translation of 'The Panther', and, crucially, it is employed in the description of an image with a dense energetic centre, exploding outwards. In 'The Panther' Rilke writes:

The soft gait of his supple powerful steps
Revolving in the smallest of all circles
Is like a dance of strength around a centre
in which there stands, stunned, a great will.

Only at times the curtain of his pupil
Noiselessly rises – Then an image enters,
Moves through the concentrated stillness of his limbs –
And in his heart it ceases to exist⁶⁷

The centre/will/pupil/enters rhyme is Speirs's own, as Rilke's original is composed in ABAB. Indeed, it is quite rare for Speirs's translations to include rhyme and it seems that the subject matter here presented too good an opportunity for the form to directly reflect the content. The neat confluence of rhyme and meaning must have caught Douglas's ear because it is replicated, in different terms, in the ABCCBA scheme of 'How to Kill':

⁶⁵ Douglas gives a vivid and humorous account of radio discipline in his squadron and the unofficial metaphorical codes: 'we have two main sources of allusions, horses and cricket. 'Uncle Tom, what's the going like over this next bit? Can we bring the, er, unshod horses over it?' See Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*. 112-113.

⁶⁶ Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 176.

⁶⁷ Rilke, "The Panther."

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. Being damned, I am amused
to see the centre of love diffused
and the waves of love travel into vacancy.
How easy it is to make a ghost.⁶⁸

Each six line stanza works towards a strong central couplet, but the rhymes of the first and the last line are so distant that they almost fail to resonate. Speirs describes ‘a dance of strength around a centre’, and at that centre an image exists momentarily before evaporating into nothingness. In ‘How to Kill’ this form captures the energy of a ‘centre of love diffused’, with the image of the soldier ‘travel[ing] into vacancy’ on Douglas’s command. All Douglas’s borrowings from ‘The Panther’, here and in ‘Words’, work with this movement from the containment of an image or idea to its dissolution, the turning of words in the lightest of cages. Here the speaker fixes his gaze long enough to receive the soldier, to bring him into the realm of language, only to banish him from it. Douglas’s ‘now’ and ‘NOW’ are also Rilkean, anchoring the poem in the lyric present.

Douglas’s speaker sees the same way that the panther sees (‘the image enters’; ‘in my dial of glass appears’) as a passive receptacle. The analogy with photography here is compelling too; the image is captured in Douglas’s ‘dial of glass’ and we know that he watched the war through the periscope of his tank, and recorded it with the camera he was issued for his work as a camouflage officer. Killer and victim merge in the figure of the panther, and Douglas’s work at this time, in ‘How to Kill’ and ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’, was preoccupied by the duality of the soldier. As Joanna Bourke has pointed out, and such a blatant fact needs repeating, ‘the characteristic act of men at war is not dying, it is killing.’⁶⁹ Douglas’s poetry acknowledges this fact here by the conflation of Rilke’s predator with his soldier.

⁶⁸ Douglas, “How to Kill.”

⁶⁹ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 2000), 1.

Richard Sheppard argues that Rilke's so-called 'object poems' (*ding gedichte*), of which 'The Panther' is the exemplary example, simultaneously pull in opposite directions, at once he 'affirms and seeks to conserve the reality of things and the ability of language to grasp them and distil a metaphysical essence from them [...] on the other hand, he does this in a situation where the reality of things and the ability of language to grasp them is under radical threat.'⁷⁰ Douglas repositions himself in this dichotomy in 'How to Kill': his poet is a sorcerer, making ghosts is easy. The reality of things is only under threat from the speaker whose language commands the attention of Death. So Douglas combines two crucial aspects of Rilke's work. First, the passage of time is denoted by the curved flight of balls beneath which childhood innocence is lost, an idea which is central to Rilke's elegiac mode in *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*. And secondly, the appearance and description of an image which disappears the moment it is captured, only contained in the lightest of cages. Douglas takes from Rilke the means to describe two modes of loss; the distinctions between creation and destruction, existence and non-existence, killer and victim are all broken down in 'How to Kill'.

Rilke is an unlikely source for Douglas here: he borrows from an introspective poet at the very moment he was calling for 'extrospection', but he transforms his borrowings in ways that have made them almost unrecognisable.⁷¹ If Douglas deals with Rilke's metaphysical and modernist angst over the language's ability to be representational, he does so in a way that is abrupt and violent, and emerges from reading Rilke on the North African front. Rilke's most famous line is the opening to *Duino Elegies*: 'Who, if I cried out, would hear me/ out of the orders of angels?' Douglas's killer knows that when he cries, he will be heard: 'I cry/ NOW' he writes, 'and death, like a familiar, hears.'

'Who, if I cried out, would hear me?'

The famous opening lines to Rilke's *Duino Elegies* feature explicitly in the work of two of the Second World War's best known soldier poets, Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes. Both were killed in the war, and neither wrote a line about the experience of combat, Keyes

⁷⁰ Richard Sheppard, "Modernism, Language, and Experimental Poetry: On Leaping over Bannisters and Learning How to Fly," *The Modern Language Review* 92, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 111.

⁷¹ Douglas to J.C. Hall (Airgraph), 10th June, 1943, in Keith Castellain Douglas, *The Letters* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 286-87.

having been killed soon after mobilisation in North Africa, and Lewis dying in an accident in Burma after having served for a long period in India without seeing front-line action. Nevertheless, these two poets rose to prominence during the Second World War as war poets; Alun Lewis became the darling of Cyril Connolly's influential magazine *Horizon*, and Sidney Keyes won the Hawthornden Prize in 1943, an award whose previous recipients include David Jones, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden. Both poets were avid readers of the works of Rilke, and this is evident in their poetry. Geoffrey Hill argues that 'Keyes grounded himself in Rilke – it is the source of his strength and of his vulnerability to later British critics.'⁷² Indeed, Samuel Hynes suggests that Keyes's heavily indebted poetry owes more to his reading of Rilke than to the war itself.⁷³ Alun Lewis had a deep connection with Rilke's poetry and thought, and in his letters home he often tried to work through war's inexpressibility with Rilke as his guide.

For both Keyes and Lewis, Rilke's work inflects the ways in which they represent the war. In the poems discussed here, this encounter is entirely conscious – Rilke is invoked directly when Keyes and Lewis face up to the war in their poetry. Keyes's 'The Foreign Gate' and Lewis's 'To Rilke' both reappropriate Rilke's line 'Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic/ Orders?'⁷⁴ These poems present their own crisis of crying out and being heard, dramatising the paradox of the Rilkean poet in war time. If Auden was keen to posit Rilke as a model for a non-combatant 'war poet' as suggested earlier, Keyes and Lewis both attempt to understand the condition of the soldier through Rilke's work. As I have discussed, Rilke's influence was ubiquitous in 1940. Keyes and Lewis were both card-carrying Rilkeans, but they also anguished over what that meant for war poetry. What did Rilke's work enable, and what might it obstruct?

For Sidney Keyes, perhaps the most direct engagement with Rilke occurs in his long poem 'The Foreign Gate'. Geoffrey Hill's description of 'The Foreign Gate' is witty and apt, and accounts for the poem's brilliance as well as its intermittent immaturity:

The style of this long poem is a twentieth century heroic style: suppose that Yeats had uncharacteristically translated Rilke into a form of loose Pindaric and that a nineteen-year-old Oxford undergraduate had modified this with the rhetoric of a poem by the locally celebrated Charles Williams [...] Keyes read widely and deeply,

⁷² Hill, "Sidney Keyes in Historical Perspective." 408

⁷³ Samuel Hynes, "Sidney Keyes, Poet," *The Sewanee Review* 98, no. 2 (April 1, 1990): 298.

⁷⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. J.P. Leishman and Stephen Spender, Third Edition (1957) (London: The Hogarth Press, 1939). 25.

a characteristic that has been held against him by critics who fancy that books are not part of real life [...] Keyes's vision, in short, is a vision of 'a European catastrophe of the spirit', and in his poetry he makes, I believe, a deliberated choice of words, metres, and rhythms in order to accommodate this vision.⁷⁵

Hill is right to point out the influence of Yeats as well as Rilke, and it is hard to ignore the Irish poet in a discussion of Keyes's elegiac poetry. Nevertheless, 'The Foreign Gate' is unlike Keyes's other elegies, those for Schiller, Virginia Woolf and Wordsworth for example, which bear a much closer resemblance to Yeats's style. Whilst it bears the hallmarks of Yeats's influence, 'The Foreign Gate' is a significant departure from the elegiac mode which Auden inherited from Yeats and pursued in the late thirties. Like Hamish Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, it is a long, modernist sequence as close to epic as it is to lyric poetry. Auden had given public voice to multitudes and mourned epochs in his elegies for Yeats and Freud. Keyes's poem is a kind of introverted epic, treating in broad historical strokes the deaths of past conflicts and swathes of the past, whilst all the same retaining lyric poetry's sense of a privately constructed and introspective imaginative world.

Adam Piette has argued that the Second World War saw the 'redefinition' of genres such as elegy, and that the Rilkean-Jungian style of Keyes was one of the new registers innovated by poets in 'breaking the dominance of high modernist orthodoxies.'⁷⁶ Keyes's inhabitation of Rilkean modes, along with Yeatsian and Jungian symbols and archetypes, and a coding of the medievalism of the Inklings, is, according to Piette, part of an attempt to articulate the 'difficulties of expression at a heartbreaking time, whilst translating wartime conditions into other times, other places.'⁷⁷ In the introduction I discussed what Lyndsey Stonebridge describes as the attempts of writers to 'stay in time' in the writing of the anxieties and losses of war. It is debateable whether Keyes's work represents an attempt to stay in time exactly; as Michael Meyer writes in his memoir of Keyes, he preferred the company of Blake, Schiller, Wordsworth, Yeats and Rilke 'to that of the living.'⁷⁸ Keyes himself wrote that 'the poets I feel kinship with are dead.'⁷⁹ In some of Keyes's work, the derivations from the

⁷⁵ Hill, "Sidney Keyes in Historical Perspective." 408-409

⁷⁶ Adam Piette, "War Poetry in Britain," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II*, ed. Marina MacKay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 15.

⁷⁸ Michael Levenson Meyer, "Memoir," in *The Collected Poems of Sidney Keyes*, by Sidney Keyes, ed. Michael Levenson Meyer (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), xiii.

⁷⁹ Keyes, to Richard Church, January 1943. Quoted in *Ibid.* xvi.

Romantics or from Medievalism give the poetry the sense of being out of time, unconcerned with the contemporary moment. But at its best his war poetry achieves a synthesis which was new to English poetry in which epic and lyric are fused in a form of modernist elegy descended from Yeats and Rilke. It is a palimpsestic approach to the problem of articulating war, and according to Keyes, Rilke provides the best solution to the death wish ‘short of actually dying.’⁸⁰

The aspect of war which Rilke makes accessible to Keyes’s poetry is the paradox of war poetry itself. For Rilke, in *Duino Elegies*, the poet is in a sort of Catch-22 situation: the work of the poet is to watch, to wait and to contemplate life in order to represent it, but in so doing, life passes him by. Auden writes of the First World War that, for Rilke, it ‘was no experience at all [...] those four years were a negative and numbing horror that froze his poetic impulse, a suspension of the intelligible.’⁸¹ In the early twenties, Rilke completed *Duino Elegies* and wrote *Sonnets to Orpheus* in a matter of weeks, one of the greatest and most feverish attacks of creative productivity in literary history. In ‘In Time of War’, Auden describes Rilke’s ‘gratitude of the Completed’ at the moment the *Elegies* were finished, but, with the bestial and phallic image of him stroking the tower like an animal, ‘completed’ ominously suggests death as much as fulfilment.⁸² For the introverted Keyes, both Rilke’s work and his life represented a model for composition in times of catastrophe.

In the ‘Fourth Elegy’, Rilke describes a concept of action, of *happening*, which is missed by the poet in his very attempt to comprehend it. This action is a moment of unity between doll and angel, figures in which Rilke instils respectively the qualities of corporeality and appearance, and ineffable and sublime energy. Their meeting is a moment of quasi-Vorticist energy, bringing alive the sublime essence of life in the object of the body. But for the poet, that moment ‘unites what we continually/ part by our mere existence.’⁸³ That which goes astray, which cannot be captured because it cannot be contemplated, is a quality of simply *being* without pretext. The very aspect of the world that the poet must capture is destroyed by the poet’s attempts to capture it, and this is experienced as a loss. The ‘Fourth Elegy’ continues:

we entertained ourselves
with everlastingness: there we would stand,

⁸⁰ From an unpublished diary entry, quoted in *Ibid.* xvi.

⁸¹ Auden, “Poet in Wartime.”

⁸² Auden, “Sonnet XXIII.”

⁸³ Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 1939, 52-53.

within the gap between world and toy,
upon a spot which, from the first beginning,
had been established as a pure event.⁸⁴

What is lost, Rilke explains, is the pureness of the perception which characterises childhood. Childhood then, is characterised by a state of perception which the poet yearns for, but lacks, a state of seeing things without prejudice or anxiety.

Later in the sequence, in the ‘Sixth Elegy’, Rilke singles out ‘the hero’, one figure who, in adulthood, possesses this quality. The hero is not concerned with the cycle of life and death: ‘duration/ doesn’t concern him’. Rather his is a ‘rising existence’ of ‘dull-thunderous tone.’⁸⁵ The hero is uninhibited, he, like the child, perceives things as they are *happening*. The hero is the only man, the unusual man who ‘manages to escape the seductive delight in, and entrapment by, endless contemplation.’⁸⁶ In imagining the hero, Rilke returns to himself as a child, *reading* about heroes: the realms of the poet and the hero are separate, but the poet might yet depict the hero.⁸⁷ As Komar argues however, the hero is not just unconcerned by death, but his own destruction is ubiquitous, it is what marks him as the hero. Hence, in the poem, of all the possible heroes the child Rilke could read, Samson is carefully selected: ‘Samson does not just die as a result of his heroic activity (as in battle for example), but his dying itself represents a heroic gesture.’⁸⁸ The same is true of the symbol of the fig tree, with which Rilke begins the ‘Sixth Elegy’:

Fig tree, how long it’s been full of meaning for me,
the way you almost entirely omit to flower
and into the early-resolute fruit
uncelebratedly thrust your purest secret.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Loc.cit..

⁸⁵ Ibid. 65-67.

⁸⁶ Kathleen L. Komar, “Rilke’s Sixth Duino Elegy or the Hero as Feige(n)baum,” *Monatshefte* 77, no. 1 (April 1, 1985): 29

⁸⁷ Here we might recall Freud’s claim that the individual turns to literature to find people who know how to die and Rilke’s figure of the hero is precisely this. See my discussion of this in relation to Auden’s ‘In Memory of Sigmund Freud’ in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (1914–1916), 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), 291.

⁸⁸ Komar, “Rilke’s Sixth Duino Elegy or the Hero as Feige(n)baum.” 32.

⁸⁹ Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 1939. 65.

The fig tree gives fruit often and early: ‘as if impatient to reach its full participation in the world.’⁹⁰ For Rilke, this is the epitome of the poetic, to create and contain meaning, to bear fruit early, earnestly and without pause.

Keyes wrote ‘The Foreign Gate’ in a Rilkean frenzy and added it late to *The Iron Laurel* (1942), and it begins with an allusion to Rilke’s concept of the hero.⁹¹ Keyes’s poem is prefaced with untranslated lines from the ‘Fourth Elegy’, rendered here in Leishman’s translation: ‘Yes, the Hero’s strangely akin to the youthfully dead [...] but fate [...] enraptured all of a sudden,/ sings him into the storm of his roaring world’ (elisions are introduced by Keyes).⁹² Keyes sees a similarity between the young soldiers sent to the front and Rilke’s figure of the ‘hero’, and prefacing ‘The Foreign Gate’ work with lines from *Duino Elegies* firmly signal his adoption of a Rilkean elegiac model. The poem’s own ‘early dead’ occupy the grey area between speech and silence, an area described by Rilke’s ‘hero’:

Remember too the way
Of speaking without lips, you early dead.
The brother plucked out of a foreign sky
To lie in fields of wreckage and white marble—
He will remember easy speech again.⁹³

Death offers the comfort of speech: the fields of white marble, figuring the cemeteries of France and Belgium, signify the commemoration of the dead. The poem teeters on the border between speech and silence however, and for the dead to remember easy speech, the living must play their part: ‘their words/ will rise to comfort all the thin voiced dead.’ It is a poem about the voice of memory, and the figure of the poet provides the means to speak on behalf of the dead in a voice with music fitting the gravity of such a performance: ‘cry through the trumpet of my fear and rage.’⁹⁴

Keyes’s plea for poetry to remember the voices of the dead is tempered by ambivalence about the voice of the poet borrowed from the opening lines of *Duino Elegies* which begins:

⁹⁰ Komar, “Rilke’s Sixth Duino Elegy or the Hero as Feige(n)baum.” 27.

⁹¹ See Michael Meyer’s gloss in Sidney Keyes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Levenson Meyer (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002). 132.

⁹² Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 1939., 65-67.

⁹³ Keyes, *Collected Poems*, 57.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 58.

‘Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic/ Orders?’⁹⁵ The fifth section of Keyes’s ‘The Foreign Gate’ provides a semi-translation, or paraphrase of Rilke’s words:

[...] were I to speak out clear
In that high house, a voice of light might answer.
Once a man cried out and the great Orders heard him:
A pale unlearned poet out of Europe’s
Erratic heart cried out and was filled with speech.
Were I to cry, who in that proud hierarchy
Of the illustrious would pity me?
What should I cry, how should I learn their language?
The cold wind takes my words.⁹⁶

Keyes brings Rilke into a tradition of English war poetry, transforming the order of angels into a military ‘hierarchy’, and replacing Rilke’s ‘who would hear me’ with a Wilfred Owen-esque ‘who would pity me.’ To be heard, but not acknowledged or understood, is not really to be heard at all. Action and articulation might be separable for Rilke, but for Keyes’s generation, familiar with the multitudes of dead and forgotten soldiers from the First World War, the glory of heroism has been scrutinised and exposed. Keyes repeatedly offers to act as a ‘bridge’ for the articulation of the dead. Himself facing the possibility of death as a soldier, and the possibility of speech as a poet, his work promises to reconcile the action of Rilke’s hero with the articulation of the artist, and by so doing, return voice to the dead.

Keyes and Lewis were not poets itching to make their mark on the war like Keith Douglas, but the latter was perhaps more representative of his generation. As Geoff Dyer has shown, the young men of the thirties were keen to prove themselves equal in battle to their fathers’ generation.⁹⁷ Keith Douglas was convinced that he would be killed, and vowed to burn brightly if his life must be cut short. Komar concludes that: ‘The poet dreams not of becoming the hero, but of being able to experience him through language so as to paint him

⁹⁵ Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 1939. 25.

⁹⁶ Sidney Keyes, “The Foreign Gate,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Levenson Meyer (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 57–66. 64. All further quotations from this work will be denoted by the page number in the main body of the text.

⁹⁷ Dyer cites several writers who profess to envy or shame at not having fought in the Great War; Isherwood recalls that ‘we young writers of the middle twenties were all suffering [...] from a feeling of shame that we hadn’t been able to take part in the European War’, and Phillip Toynbee suggests that Owen’s poems ‘produced envy rather than pity for a generation that had experienced so much.’ See Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London, etc: Penguin Books, 1995), 31-32.

in the imagination.’⁹⁸ For the poet swept up by the war, faced with the hero’s early death, there is no choice – he cannot be a war artist but must be an artist at war. Keyes and Lewis are poets with the temperaments of poets, not heroes – Keyes was quiet and bookish, Lewis struggled with periods of depression and did not join in with the rough and tumble of the barracks room – yet they had to reconcile their work with their circumstances. As Tim Kendall has said of Keyes’s fascination with Rilke: ‘even as it fights for life, his poetry is always tempted by that desire to ‘go under.’’⁹⁹ To align the self with the Rilkean hero, even imaginatively, is to court fantasies of self-destruction.

For Alun Lewis, seven years Keyes’s senior but no better known as a poet until the war, Rilke seemed to promise speech for Lewis, who found his poetic voice during the war. Lewis was an avid reader of Rilke; his wife, Gweno Lewis, was a German teacher, and his wartime letters to her often mention their shared love of Rilke’s work. Indeed, the letters reveal the extent to which Rilke acted as a link between Lewis and home: in 1941, Alun wrote to Gweno ‘don’t let absence eat up too much of your heart. Play the piano and read Rilke [...] and write to me when you can.’¹⁰⁰ Rilke was one of the few writers to whom Lewis had access after he shipped for India in 1942: ‘I should have brought more books with me – Rilke is the only one I’ve got, really, the only beloved one.’¹⁰¹ From hospital in Poona, where Lewis recovered from a broken jaw sustained in a soccer match, he writes to Gweno of his depression, of composing poems, and of the place Rilke occupied in his work and thought:

It’s very restful, if one’s mind is at rest. I’ve had one or two spells of rest in it, but mostly I’ve been chasing my thoughts helter skelter through the universe. I think the resultant poems are probably more morbid than usual. I was reading my (your) Rilke this morning – he says a poet cannot write of joy until he has lamented; and that he has no right to lament unless he has the power of joy. I know I’ve the power of joy in me: you know it, too: so Rilke *will* authorise my black tone poems.¹⁰²

While Rilke’s influence is traceable through much of Lewis’s work, he is most prominent in the poems written after embarkation for India. Just as Edward Thomas had explicitly

⁹⁸ Komar, “Rilke’s Sixth Duino Elegy or the Hero as Feige(n)baum.” 35.

⁹⁹ Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry*. 188.

¹⁰⁰ Alun Lewis, to Gweno Lewis, Longmoor, January 14, 1941. In Alun Lewis, *Letters to My Wife* (Bridgend: Seren Books/Poetry Wales Press Ltd, 1989), 95.

¹⁰¹ Alun Lewis, to Gweno Lewis, Aboard the Athone Castle, November 1942. In Lewis, *Letters to My Wife*, 273.

¹⁰² Alun Lewis, to Gweno Lewis, Poona, February 1st, 1943. In Lewis, *Letters to My Wife*. 299-300.

influenced Lewis's earlier flourish of work, discussed below in Chapter 5, particularly when he shared Thomas's countryside in the South Downs, Rilke becomes more important when Lewis left behind the familiar landscapes of England.

On board the Athlone Castle, during his passage to India, Lewis began a poem which honoured his debt to Rilke, and simultaneously differentiated himself from him. 'To Rilke', written from a first-person perspective reminiscent of the *Duino Elegies*, begins with a direct reference to the *Elegies*, but one which is strangely inflected: 'Rilke, if you had known I was trying/ to speak to you perhaps you would have said...' ¹⁰³ Where Rilke had wondered if the angels would answer his cry, here Lewis imagines that Rilke could answer his. Lewis's ventriloquised version of Rilke replies 'Humanity has her darlings to whom she's entrusted [...] perception/ of what can develop and what must be endured.' ¹⁰⁴ Lewis here is referring to a sentiment similar to that of the fourth *Elegy* of the relationship between creativity and endurance: Rilke writes 'I am sitting on/ Even if the lights go out, Even if I am told/ "there's nothing more" [...] I'll still remain.' ¹⁰⁵

Jeremy Hooker has argued for a difference between Rilke and Lewis: 'Rilke stresses the creativity of waiting patiently for the gestation of the experience 'in the dark' and Lewis, though perhaps for circumstantial rather than temperamental reasons, stresses the action of seeking in the unknown.' ¹⁰⁶ The poem's impatient tone, which puts words into Rilke's mouth, is symptomatic of such 'seeking'. As Lewis continues:

I have to seek the occasion.
Labour, fatigue supervene;
The glitter of sea and land, the self-assertion
These fierce times insist upon. ¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, there is a yearning for Rilke: 'I hungered and sweated for the silence you acquired/ And *envied* you, as if it were a gift.' Situating his poem very much in the immediate moment, he describes the conditions of India from which he writes, which

¹⁰³ Alun Lewis, "To Rilke," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Jeremy Hooker and Gweno Lewis (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981), 67.

¹⁰⁴ Loc.cit.

¹⁰⁵ Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 1939. 51.

¹⁰⁶ Jeremy Hooker, "Afterword," in *Selected Poems*, by Alun Lewis, ed. Jeremy Hooker and Gweno Lewis (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981), 23–24.

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, "To Rilke", 67.

correspond with those of the poet in the 'Fourth Elegy': I sit within the tent, within the darkness/ Of India, and the wind disturbs my lamp.¹⁰⁸ Where Rilke promises to remain even if the lights go out, Lewis sits in darkness despite the lamp which, threatened by the wind, threatens to go out.

'To Rilke', like Keyes's poems, treats the Rilkean figures of poet and the hero together – the one static, the other thunderous. But unlike Keyes, Lewis does not attempt to reconcile or synthesize the two. Rather, he presents a poet faced with the 'onrushing world', yearning for a time when he could write. That time, which the poem's last line recalls with a painful nostalgia, is lost:

And Vishnu, carved by some rude pious hand,
Lies by a heap of stones, demanding nothing
But the simplicity that she and I
Discovered in a way that you'd understand
Once and forever, Rilke, but in Oh a distant land.¹⁰⁹

The poem finishes on an elegiac note, but unlike 'To Edward Thomas', it is not an elegy for the eponymous poet. Rather this is a poem of separation; Lewis's poems and letters had often spoken of this separation, but now, in India, Gweno seems more remote than ever.

Lewis cannot be accused of misreading or underestimating Rilke. His rendering of Rilke's work for a poem of estrangement and love is not an immature reduction of Rilke's metaphysics. Rather, it is an entirely self-reflexive attempt to make sense of his situation in the war. The statue of Vishnu appears before him as if to reflect the work he is trying to produce. To create an idol from stones is not unlike the creation of a poem. That the artwork then demands the ecstatic fusion of life and death, embodied in the love for Gweno, perhaps asks too much from this particular 'rude, pious hand', particularly given the tough circumstances in which he writes. The statue of Vishnu also reveals something else about Lewis's poetry, which is indebted to Rilke: a late letter to Gweno states:

I feel very near to you when you write so closely of your day and your thoughts: you're very real. I keep on realizing that. Your reflections are always very closely related to what you are describing: and although you refuse to leap into the metaphysical or pensive as far as I tend to, you make a deep impression by keeping your thoughts in the same proportion as the deeds. Like the overpowering effect

¹⁰⁸ Loc.cit.

¹⁰⁹ Loc.cit.

Rilke makes with his ‘small’ poems – ‘Isn’t he hard on her? Isn’t she rather young’ or ‘He for her sake grows commensurate’. I always realise this when I’m trying to write a poem or story – if I get too far away from the *thing*, the *thought* becomes flabby and invalid, and it weighs on me with a dead weight and all the creative vitality dies in me.¹¹⁰

Rilke’s ‘things’ are vital to Lewis’s understanding of poetry in wartime. For the war poet, the balance between the journalistic and the aesthetic, the introspective and metaphysical is difficult to find. Part of the appeal of Lewis’s poetry to the wartime market was perhaps the way he struck this balance. Robert Graves, in a letter, noted that he liked *Raiders’ Dawn* ‘despite the disturbing sensuality’.¹¹¹ This is a characteristic which speaks implicitly of the debt to Rilke, as well as to Thomas and Yeats.

Conclusion

This chapter has located and categorised a number of Rilkean traces and intertexts, but to what end? What does the Rilkean turn during the Second World War reveal about its poets and poetry? It is unsatisfactory perhaps, to draw the same conclusions from the work of Sidney Keyes as from Keith Douglas, or to suggest, like B.J. Morse in 1948, that Rilke’s appeal to young poets was entirely a matter of his explorations of death. As this chapter has shown, Rilke meant very different things to different poets. In 1942/43, some of the war’s best and most enduring ‘soldier poetry’ was written or, in Henderson’s case, conceived of and stored for later, and Rilke left a mark on a significant part of it. Part of this story is clearly circumstantial. Rilke’s rise to prominence in the late thirties, with the help of Auden, Spender and Leishman, surely contributed to his vogue among the younger generation. Ruth Speirs’s translations in Cairo brought this interest to the North African front, making Rilke part of Keith Douglas’s and Hamish Henderson’s field of reference during that campaign.

For Henderson, the scavenger, the scraps he picks up from Rilke are sewn into his account of the war like patches on a quilt: we can read them as chapters almost, flashbulb memories which, as part of the larger work, form the series of vignettes that constitutes his war poem. Conversely, Douglas’s borrowings are like threads woven into the fabric of his poetry: impossible to extract and isolate. In both cases, Rilke’s work is part of the experience of the war, and thus a crucial part of bearing witness to it. Henderson did not discover Rilke at the

¹¹⁰ Lewis, To Gweno Lewis, February 1st 1943.

¹¹¹ Robert Graves to Alun Lewis, February 20th, 1942. In Alun Lewis, *Alun Lewis: A Miscellany of His Writings*, ed. John Pikoulis (Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1982), 140.

front as Douglas appears to have done (if not a discovery then Douglas's encounter with Rilke is a rediscovery) yet the Rilke Henderson brings to his poetry is Ruth Speirs's Rilke, or the Rilke who travelled in Egypt. Douglas's Rilke is also a product of his environment; when he reads Rilke's descriptions of how balls curve through the air as the child beneath is lost he sees the trajectory of shells. The intertextuality of these war poems then, is a case of the intertext being precisely that which is witnessed in war. It is not just a mode by which experience is expressed, but part of the experience too. For Keyes and Lewis, temperamentally more like Rilke than Henderson and Douglas, Rilke's works are brought into dialogue with their own voices more consciously.

Rilke is a new kind of elegist, whose works express a personal and generational lament in the early part of the twentieth century. Rilke's lyric 'I' converges with the world that he laments in his visionary elegies. Although his discovery in Britain was somewhat belated, it occurred at a moment in the late thirties and early forties wholly suited to his works. The international crisis was felt at the individual level, and poets experimented with new ways to express grief and loss. Rilke was not the only voice available to them, as the next chapter on Henderson's many intertextual encounters shows, but his rise to prominence was timely.

4. Hamish Henderson, ‘Remembrancer’

In the summer of 1943, the Scottish poet and folklorist Hamish Henderson wrote a valedictory poem called ‘So Long’, bidding farewell to the North African desert where he had spent the previous eighteen months:

To the sodding desert – you know what you
can do with yourself.

To the African deadland – God help you –
and goodnight.¹

Henderson’s war was far from over, and he spent its remainder engaged in the Italian campaign, but his time in the ‘sodding desert’ of North Africa inspired an extraordinary outpouring of poetry in a very different register to ‘So Long’. The most significant is the long poem *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, which won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1948, and this chapter considers the poem as one of the most significant contributions to the changing shape of elegy during the Second World War. The reception of the poem was mixed, and undoubtedly there are moments of immaturity, but this is a poem whose value has often been overlooked, both as a formally pioneering work of late modernism and a critically engaging record of WWII’s most literary campaign. Since his death in 2002, the poem has been championed by Henderson scholars, but in the main the focus in the literature on Henderson has been on his major contributions to the study of Scottish folk song. In this chapter, I read the poem through its rich tapestry of literary allusion, demonstrating that an archaeological approach reveals fresh lines of enquiry into the ways this poem bears witness to the North African campaign.

The first book which Henderson would complete after the war was *Ballads of World War II* (1947), which he edited and in which several of his own soldier songs were recorded, including the popular, grossly obscene and politically inflammatory alternative lyrics to the Egyptian national anthem in ‘Ballad of King Faruk and Queen Farida’:

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Henderson’s poetry, including *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, are from Hamish Henderson, *Collected Poems and Songs*, ed. Ross, Raymond (Edinburgh: Curly Snake Publishing, 2000). Page numbers are marked in the main body of the text. The quotation from ‘So Long’ is on page 77.

O we're just fuckin' wogs, but we *do* love him so,
And we'll all do without just to keep him on the go –
From Sollum to Solluch
Tel el Kebir to Tobruk,
O you can't fuck Farida if you don't pay Faruk.²

The *Elegies*, whilst wildly different in tone to the bawdy soldier ballad, and far more intellectually ambitious than the ditty 'So Long', nevertheless borrow something important from both of these works. The portrayal of the desert as enemy in 'So Long' also underpins *Elegies*, and its formulation as a 'dead land' is recycled three times, in the 'First', 'Seventh' and 'Tenth' elegies. The ballad, in common with many of the other ballads written during Henderson's service, records place names familiar to the troops. In a different key, *Elegies* also immortalises the important places of Henderson's war, and placing and displacement are central to my enquiry here.

The diversity of registers in which Henderson writes about the Second World War is striking, and his interest in balladry is crucial to the composition of *Elegies*, which, much like T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', incorporates fragments from popular song alongside canonical literary allusions. Henderson ends the 'Seventh Elegy: Seven Good Germans', with a refrain from the popular song 'Lili Marleen', also collected in *Ballads of World War II*, the quotations from which Henderson places in italics:

Seven poor bastards
dead in African deadland
(tawny tousled hair under the issue blanket)
wie einst Lili
dead in African deadland

einst Lili Marlene (66)

The refrain lifted from the original song '*wie einst Lili Marlene*', which Henderson translates in *Ballads of World War II* as 'as we used to do, Lili Marleen', is nostalgic and hopeful, remembering a lover left behind. The German song tells of how the lovers used to meet outside the barracks gate under the light of a lamp-post, and who hope to reprise their romance upon the soldier's return. At the end of the song, the soldier, now dead and forgotten by Lili Marlene, imagines returning from the front to this time and place:

² Hamish Henderson, ed., "Ballad of King Faruk and Queen Farida," in *Ballads of World War II* (Glasgow: The Lili Marleen Club of Glasgow, 1947), 19–22.

Aus dem stillen Raume, aus der Erde Grund
Hebt mich wie im Traume dein verliebter Mund.
Wenn sich die spaeten Nebel drehn
Werd' ich bei der Laterne stehn
Wie einst Lili Marleen
Wie einst Lili Marleen

Out of the silent resting place, out of the earth's
embrace I'm lifted as in a dream by your mouth.
When the night mists are drifting I'll stand again by
the lamp-post, as we used to do, Lili Marleen.³

Henderson's translation is significant because of the way the earth is rendered as 'deadland' in 'Seven Good Germans'. The hopeful nostalgia and the dream-like posthumous reunion of 'Lili Marlene' are thwarted by the reality of death in the desert. Whilst soldier songs provide an insight into the cultural life of the barracks room to which Henderson bears witness, the dénouement of the bitter-sweet ballad is reconfigured by the brutal desert, and seven dead soldiers.

Nevertheless, the very presence of the song in Henderson's work signals his poetic intentions. This kind of collage aligns Henderson with the modernist aesthetic associated with Pound and Eliot, a manoeuvre which distances him from the soldier poetry of the First World War. Henderson's collage is differently assembled however, with emphasis on a German canon with fragments of Scottish poetry. As this chapter will show, Henderson's allusions are usually chosen with the very specific locale of North Africa in mind. He describes a poetic landscape, and solicits poets who have also travelled this land to assist in extracting and describing the layers of history and civilisation he finds beneath the war-torn surface. In 'Chapter 3: The Rilke Connection' I discussed how Henderson's encounter with Rilke was grounded in his immediate locale in Egypt, and this chapter expands the enquiry across *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*. Henderson maps his poetry onto North Africa in a similar way to the parts of 'The Waste Land' that are mapped onto the city of London. Indeed, Henderson's prioritization of locations is more extensive than Eliot's, and, as this chapter will show, the places of and in the poem are important sites of memory and mourning.

³ Hamish Henderson, ed., "Lili Marleen," in *Ballads of World War II* (Glasgow: The Lili Marleen Club of Glasgow, 1947), 31–36.

The work of Jay Winter has shown how the problem of where, and how, to bury the dead of the First World War inspired an imaginative cultural response and a major social project. For Winter, ‘the need to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, symbolically or physically, was pervasive.’⁴ Unusually for elegy, Henderson’s poem grieves the mass dead rather than individuals, and does so by describing or inscribing sites of mourning. The ‘deadland’ of the North African desert is a place of extreme hostility, of mirage and capricious dunes, characteristics which make sites unidentifiable and ephemeral when the instinct is to render them permanent places of pilgrimage, like the war cemeteries of France and Belgium discussed in the next chapter. Not unlike Eliot’s no-man’s land of Europe ‘where the dead men lost their bones’, the desert is a place almost devoid of landmarks, where the dead themselves might be lost.⁵ The only things which protrude from the sand and scrub, for Henderson, are the great Egyptian monuments of death, the pyramids of Giza and Saqqara and the temples of Karnak. The Second World War adds its own modest monuments to those of the Ancients, the cemeteries at Fort Capuzzo and Acroma, names which Henderson immortalises in his poem. This tendency to locate, mark and inscribe is crucial to Henderson’s palimpsest-like elegy.

In ‘Seven Good Germans’, Henderson describes a farmhand killed ‘as fresh fodder for machine guns’; the only remainder of this man’s life are ‘His dates inscribed on the files, and on the cross-piece’ (65), a line which draws attention to both the archive and the cemetery as sites of memory and mourning. Henderson’s self-professed project in *Elegies* is:

to perform a duty, noting an outlying
grave, or restoring a fallen cross-piece.
Remembrancer. (72)

To note and to restore is a project of writing to memorialise, to restore to memory and to renovate quickly forgotten graves. Jay Winter’s work identifies the remoteness of war cemeteries, in France or Gallipoli for example, as a factor preventing closure for the families of the dead. The ‘duty’ of Henderson’s poem is to create a mourning site closer to home in the here and now of the poetic text. Whilst the poem emphasises the hostility of the desert, it also attempts to map it, finding sites familiar from poetry and creating new sites of

⁴ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 28.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 65.

mourning. In these poems, Henderson returns to the 'deadland' where he fought and recasts it as a land of the dead.

Yet, this is a duty which Henderson performs in the face of opposition, or at least indifference. He begins by asking 'why should I not sing *them*, the dead, the innocent?', confronting the reader with 'the dead' almost as an accusation: 'laughing couples at the tea dance/ ignore their memory [...] the queue forming up to see Rangers play Celtic/ forms up without thought to those dead' (63), showing a certain animosity towards civilians reminiscent of the Great War poets. Henderson's project is quite unlike the works of Auden and H.D. examined in Chapter 1, although it shares with Auden the sense of searching for a new language in a time of upheaval. The poems for Freud, discussed in Chapter 1, ask 'how will Freud's remains survive?'; Henderson's *Elegies* asks instead *if* the remains of the dead will survive, or indeed, if there are any remains at all. If there are no remains then how can we speak of the dead? This is the question which ultimately remains unresolved in the sequence, faced with the exquisite irony of the monuments of Ancient Egypt, a society whose 'death-longing', Henderson writes, came at the expense of life (159n).

Elegies to the Dead in Cyrenaica, then, is not so much a monument to the dead as an act of witness to those lives lost in the desert. 'Remembrancer' is a very active noun, the duty of whom is to encourage the activity of remembering, even to enforce it. The origins of the term can be traced back to the courts of the late medieval period, wherein a 'remembrancer' was a collector of debts, and certainly there is a debt of memory to the fallen in this work.⁶ The term takes on a multi-layered application in *Elegies*. A 'remembrancer' is also a chronicler, and Henderson's poem bears witness not just to the dead, but to the North African desert during the Second World War. Indeed, it is a chronicle of the stratified history and memory of the desert, extracting poetry and people who help to make some sense of the landscape. Rather than a featureless scrubland, the desert in the text becomes a rich and complex palimpsest on top of which Henderson, as a self-appointed remembrancer, writes the most recent layer of history.

This chapter undertakes an excavation of Henderson's poem, unearthing the poetic and historical allusions in the work, some of which protrude above the surface and some which are submerged beneath. I argue that reading Henderson's intertexts elucidates his elegiac project. *Elegies* is itself a palimpsest, and the superimposition of times and places bears witness to the trauma of the very specific time and place about which Henderson writes. The

⁶ "Remembrancer, N.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed June 22, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162143>.

poem is too long for the work of this chapter to deal with it exhaustively, but I will traverse some key moments. Beginning at the beginning, I consider Henderson's early influences and the figuration of the acts of reading and writing in *Elegies*: Henderson renders the poet as a collector or archivist whose project works against the destruction of lives in war. In order to bear witness to these lives and the trauma of war, Henderson seeks precedent in Scottish history, and finds in the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin a kindred spirit in historic longing: the second section examines the encounter between the German poet and the Scottish highlands. T.S Eliot also provides a key influence as well as a model, and the third section shows how Henderson reaches back through 'The Waste Land' to Ezekiel for a Biblical model for lamentation, desert exile and a siege poetic utilised for the contemporaneous siege of Tobruk.

The chapter ends with a brief look at Cavafy, whose valediction on Alexandria also looks back, and in doing so, helps Henderson look to the present. For Michael Rothberg, writing after Maurice Halbwachs, 'all memories are simultaneously individual and collective: while individual subjects are the necessary locus of the act of remembrance, those individuals are imbued with frameworks common to the collectives in which they live.'⁷ Henderson, a collector for whom collective cultural memory was paramount, finds in the desert an existing cultural framework of shared language and culture in an otherwise barren and hostile wilderness. Literary allusion becomes a way to juxtapose and superimpose history and memory, and Henderson's figuration of the desert as a literary palimpsest lays to rest 'the dead' of the Second World War in a new landscape of poetic commemoration.

Ob Littera

Hamish Henderson was born in Perthshire, Scotland on the 11th November 1919, the first anniversary of the Armistice. His mother Janet had served as a nurse in France during the First World War and died when Hamish was 13 years old, and the identity of his father is unclear, although probably known to Henderson himself.⁸ In any case, this resulted in a good deal of movement during Henderson's teenage years. Henderson had first left Scotland at the age of nine, but would always identify strongly as Scottish, and was a lifelong Scottish

⁷ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 15.

⁸ Discussed in Timothy Neat, *Hamish Henderson: The Making of the Poet* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), 13-17.

nationalist. He was schooled first in Devon, then Dulwich College, and Cambridge, and he travelled in Germany, where he honed an already excellent command for the language, and developed an empathy with the people which is perfectly evident in his poetry. In the juvenile poem ‘Ballad of the Twelve Stations of my Youth’, Henderson gives a strong sense of his peripatetic poetics, and though the ballad seeks to announce the end of Hamish’s apprenticeship, it already demonstrates Henderson’s instinct to record places. Echoing Auden’s ‘September I, 1939’, Henderson begins by introducing himself: ‘born like Platen in an evil decade/ and in one still more evil grew for war’ (23). The poem finishes at the beginning of Henderson’s war, announcing also his political allegiances:

From Spain return the Clyde-red brave Brigaders.
I clench my fist to greet the red flag furled.
Our hold has slipped – now Hitler’s voice is rasping
From small square boxes all over the world.

There’s fog. I climb the cobbled streets of Oldham
With other conscripts, a report to one
Who writes with labour, and no satisfaction
That I’ve turned up. – From now, my boyhood’s done. (24)

Henderson had thought that war was to be the enemy of writing, but it is present in the vast majority of his poems. The war would also bring Henderson into contact with a number of folk traditions, particularly German and Italian, and it was this that would become Henderson’s life work.

In late 1941, Henderson won a commission in military intelligence due to his excellent language skills and despite his socialism and Scottish nationalism. He shipped to Africa in January 1942, reading Keidrych Rhys’s *Poems from the Forces* anthology on board and writing poetry to send to Rhys. Many of these early war poems have not survived, but Henderson was finding material everywhere he looked. His duties as an intelligence officer included censoring letters, and later, working in Cairo and Alexandria as an interrogator, Henderson would continue to encounter the most personal of documents. The *Elegies* repeatedly turn to written records, and letters and marginalia in particular, to recover something of the dead. In ‘Seven Good Germans’, the motif of the written revenant is prominent:

The first a Lieutenant.
When the medicos passed him
for service overseas, he had jotted in a note-book
to the day and the hour keep me steadfast there is only

the decision and the will

the rest has no importance (64)

That Henderson found value in written traces of lives attests to his overall project in the *Elegies*. An eye witness testimony as well as a memorial, the poem changes tense, time and voice frequently, from the detached narrator and impartial observer to the warrior whose war cry ‘mak siccar’ (‘make sure’) reverberates in the poem’s core. The poem is shaped like Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, its main body consisting of ten elegies mostly in the region of 50 lines each. The ‘Eighth Elegy’ is double the length of the rest, and the ‘Ninth Elegy’ is a slightly expanded sonnet. Written in free verse, *Elegies* is metrically irregular, but the default mode is for lines of around twelve to fifteen syllables. This places Henderson’s poetry broadly in the vicinity of the Alexandrine metre, just as the poet himself was broadly in the vicinity of Alexandria.

Where it is markedly different in form to Rilke’s *Elegies* is in the content that frames the elegies themselves. A host of thresholds and barriers surround the poems: a prologue dedicates the poem; an epigraph from a quatrain by Goethe introduces Part One; a poem by Sorley MacLean begins Part Two, directly in dialogue with Goethe. Individual poems have various types of epigraph as well: quotations attributed or not, and prose explications. In addition, *Elegies* has a cacophonous interlude, ‘Opening of an Offensive’, and an afterword of sorts in ‘Heroic Song for the Runners of Cyrene’, followed by a section of explanatory notes. Auden is also a prominent influence, and Henderson’s tendency to drift from the aloof impersonal narrative voice (‘There are many in the brutish desert,/ who lie uneasy’), to the collective witness (‘There were our own, there were the others’), to the first-person poetic voice (‘I will bear witness for I knew the others’), operates in a very similar manner to the ‘Verse Commentary’ in Auden and Isherwood’s *Journey to a War*. Much of this chapter will examine the edges of Henderson’s *Elegies*, the epigraphs, dedications and embedded quotations which do not form a fringe so much as an elaborate sarcophagus. It is a modernist collage in its way; Henderson encounters in the desert what the speaker of Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’ finds in the streets of blitzed London: a ‘familiar compound ghost.’⁹

Henderson begins *Elegies* with an epigraph quoted from a quatrain by Goethe:

Alles geben Götter, die unendlichen,
Ihren Lieblingen ganz,

⁹ Eliot, “Little Gidding”, 193.

Alle Freuden, die unendlichen,
Alle Schmerzen, die unendlichen, ganz. (51)

In the notes, Henderson translates the poem: ‘The gods, the unending, give all things without stint to their beloved: all pleasures, the unending – and all pains, the unending, without stint’ (n 158). He also explains that this poem appeared in a poetry anthology ‘for the front’ carried by German soldiers. Henderson writes, that ‘[the poem’s] thought lies very near the mood of many of them’ (n 158), suggesting that the inclusion of these lines at the outset of his poem is as much to record its place in the desert as it is to invoke Goethe directly. Furthermore, it is the militarily motivated notion that all suffering is bestowed upon men by the gods, and not by the generals who manoeuvre them around the desert, that occasions the quotation here. Like Orwell, Henderson is an impassioned leftist with a good ear for, and little patience with, propaganda. Of the dead he writes ‘what they regretted when they died had nothing to do with/ race and leader, realm indivisible,/ laboured Augustan speeches or vague imperial heritage’ (52), lines which refer as much to Allied propaganda as they do to German. Henderson fought against the Nazis but was certainly not fighting for England or the British Empire.

The appearance of Goethe at the beginning of the *Elegies* allows us to place Henderson at an intersection between the war, the desert and the literary tradition. Henderson alludes to a number of other writers more or less explicitly in the course of *Elegies* which, like Goethe here, appear specifically *in situ*. Carefully and deliberately removed from the position he occupies in literary history, Goethe is reintegrated into Henderson’s war through the pages of a German military poetry anthology. The militarily motivated manipulation of Goethe is placed in direct opposition to Somhairle Mac Ghill-Eatha in’s (Sorley MacLean) poem ‘Glac a’ Bhàis’ (“Death Valley”), which Henderson quotes in the original Gaelic, offering Maclean’s translation in his note to the poem (where it is delineated as prose):

Sitting in ‘Death Valley’ below the Ruweisat Ridge, a boy with his forelock down about his cheek and his face slate-grey. I thought of the right and the joy he had from his Fuehrer, of falling in the field of slaughter to rise no more... Whatever his desire or mishap, his innocence or malignance, he showed no pleasure in his death below the Ruweisat Ridge. (158n)

Also a veteran of the North African campaign, Maclean writes his poem in a very similar mode to Henderson, insisting that the German dead are humans before they are Nazis. Like Wilfred Owen, the poem seeks to expose the ‘old lie’, and Henderson’s quotation of it ‘set

against' Goethe (as he puts it in the notes) asserts the role of the poet witness in showing the value of human life, beyond the assigned role as cannon fodder.

As well as the Goethe epigraph, Henderson introduces *Elegies* with a Prologue dedicated to John Speirs. Henderson got to know Speirs, who was close to F.R Leavis and T.S. Eliot, in Cairo where they spent many nights discussing Scottish poetry. Henderson was also close to John's wife Ruth, and the importance of her translations of Rilke in the composition of *Elegies* we have already noted in the previous chapter. The first line of the 'Prologue' describes the effect of the weaponry that reduces the communicative parts of the body to nothing:

Obliterating face and hands,
The dumb-bell guns of violence
Show up our godhead for a sham. (51)

War destroys bodies and thus prevents that body bearing witness. The destruction of the face in particular precludes the relation between people and is reminiscent of *les gueules cassées*, the 'smashed faces' of the First World War.

Encoded in the first line is another, more literary interpretation. 'Obliterating' comes from the Latin prefix *ob* meaning 'against', and *littera*, meaning 'letters'. The destruction implied by 'obliteration' then, is the opposite of inscription, an erasure or effacement of the written trace. Both 'face' and 'hands' also pertain to the letter and lettering, the face of a typescript and the hand in which something is written. Against letters, printed and written, then, are 'the dumb-bell guns of violence', the oxymoronic 'dumb-bell' silences voice as well as stifling writing. Henderson's supplication at the end of the prologue resolves to redress, to stitch up, this wounded language:

Let my words knit what now we lack
The demon and the heritage
And fancy strapped to logic's rock.
A chastened wantonness, a bit
That sets on song a discipline,
A sensuous austerity. (51)

We might discern something of Eliot's 'The Waste Land' here as this is Henderson shoring fragments against his ruin. 'A bit/ that sets on song a discipline' invites such a comparison. In this interpretation 'a bit' connotes a fragment which enriches, through song, the austere discipline of the army. It also connotes the mouthpiece of a horse's bridle, a technology

designed to pull forward, but which also gags and prevents speech. Thus Henderson's project is perhaps thwarted by its own progress – the attempt to piece together a language of mourning is a mouthful, and the excesses of the long poem force the poet to chew his words.

'Bit' derives from 'bite' and 'biting', as in the biting edge of an axe blade; 'the axe fell' is one of Henderson's favoured euphemisms for death. As well as knitting, Henderson introduces cutting to the work of the poet, and tellingly it is also the work of Death. 'Death made his incision,' Henderson writes in the 'First Elegy', biting through the life he has just knitted together from fragments of letters and photographs:

What they regretted when they died had nothing to do with
race and leader, realm indivisible,
laboured Augustan speeches or vague imperial heritage.
(They saw through that guff before the axe fell.)

Their longing turned to
the lost world glimpsed in the memory of letters:
an evening at the pictures in the friendly dark,
two knowing conspirators smiling and whispering secrets;
or else
a family gathering in the homely kitchen
with Mum so proud of her boys in uniform:
their thoughts trembled
between moments of estrangement, and ecstatic moments
of reconciliation: their desire
crucified itself against the unutterable shadow of someone
whose photo was in their wallets.
Then death made his incision. (52)

This is the obliteration of war: to 'obliterate' is to destroy in memory as well as in body. Henderson's elegy begins not with the memory of those who survive, but with the memory of those killed; the unique and unknowable lives which are lost with each death. Letters are a window into these lives but serve only to cast a 'shadow' of what has been lost. Nevertheless, it is letters which provide an artefact or a remainder for the elegist. Henderson's military duties as censor put him in touch with the shadowy lost worlds and words of soldiers.

As an Intelligence Officer, Henderson would spend much of the North African campaign interrogating German prisoners and scouring their possessions for information, or censoring the letters of Allied soldiers. Of his work he writes, 'for a scavenging writer like myself these letters are a treasure trove [...] I find something to write about in every room and attic

of the human house.’¹⁰ In the above passage from the ‘First Elegy’ the lexicon of military intelligence is redeployed in the intimate surroundings of the worlds that the IO enters in his work: ‘secrets’ between ‘conspirators’ are altogether less threatening in this context. It ends with lines based on just such a scavenged artefact. Timothy Neat, Henderson’s biographer, notes that Henderson found and translated a poem by Corporal Heinrich Mattens, in which Mattens writes ‘today the swallows have come here, far over the mountains and seas – we took/ it as a happy omen, for they came from the North.’¹¹ In Henderson’s poem this becomes an omen of return, and, as such, of laying the dead to rest: ‘the birds are drawn again to our welcoming north/ why should I not sing *them*, the dead, the innocent’ (53).

Henderson spent the war as he would spend much of his civilian life, collecting and documenting lives and cultures. His elegiac strategy is to give a glimpse of the ‘lost worlds’, like a curator or an archaeologist seeking to promote an understanding of otherness. Henderson noted in his Preface to *Elegies* that a German officer had said to him that the reality of the situation was that all the troops in North Africa had a common enemy in the desert itself.¹² Indeed, an empathy with the Germans, who were supposed to be the enemy, is one of the starting points of the poem. Henderson writes that ‘reading diaries, one realizes the imaginative worth, the rich potential genius that the German people could contribute to Europe. What an extraordinary people it is. An abstract intellect flowering into music, a sensitive genius twisted under the martyrdom of history.’¹³ Henderson’s eagerness to remember the German dead seems to stem from the access he had to the human face of the enemy, access of a kind, as Neat writes, ‘usually only gained by doctors, psychiatrists and policemen. Like them he was looking for information, but unlike them, he was also seeking to digest the totality of the life-experience [...] he felt privileged to have open access to the surreal depths of minds at once hugely disturbed and strangely controlled.’¹⁴

Henderson’s empathy with the German people is evident from his allegiance to a German literary tradition ahead of ‘Allied’ poetic canons, a factor which I consider in relation to Hölderlin in this chapter and which we have seen in Henderson’s appreciation and assimilation of Rilke. Henderson’s ‘Third Elegy’ pushes this empathy further, to a complete

¹⁰ Neat, *Hamish Henderson*, 63

¹¹ *Ibid.* 71-72.

¹² ‘It was the remark of a captured German officer which first suggested to me the theme of these poems. He had said: “Africa changes everything. In reality we are allies, and the desert is our common enemy.’ Hamish Henderson, *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (Edinburgh: EUSPB, 1977) 59.

¹³ Neat, *Hamish Henderson*, 69

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 71.

breakdown of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, or the very notion of enemies. The ‘enemy’ becomes a mirage, ‘ourselves out of a mirror?’ Henderson rhymes ‘them’, ‘the others’ with ‘us’, ‘the brothers/ in death’s proletariat’ (56). The elegy ends by ‘send[ing] them our greeting out of the mirror.’ The notion of looking into a mirror and seeing a German has a biographical precedent for Henderson, who was twice mistaken for a German in the Highlands of Scotland. Henderson’s penchant for singing folk songs in bars made him a recognisable figure, but he did not limit his repertoire to Scots and sang German folk songs as well. His command of the language eventually caught the attention of the authorities and he was challenged first by a policeman, and then by the Home Guard, ending up in a cell for the night.¹⁵ Henderson comments in an interview in 1992 that in the desert ‘people capture equipment from each other so that everything , tanks, armoured vehicles, lorries, might be used coming in the opposite direction [...] so it was a kind of mirror existence.’¹⁶ Henderson’s mirror stands in stark contrast to the lenses through which Keith Douglas’s poems distance himself from the ‘enemy’, as do the ways both writers treat the personal effects of Axis soldiers. In ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’, in which Douglas’s speaker looks ‘with content’ upon the dead body of a German, the photograph of a girl found upon his person is ‘dishonoured’ and treated like a trophy. For Henderson, such documents represent lives and diminish difference.

Henderson’s project is anti-oblitative. He works *from* letters rather than against them, as an archivist or biographer of sorts. It is not difficult to detect the figure of the collector in the *Elegies*, and the literary allusions and fragments of letters which litter the poem feel like scavenged ‘bits’. The collector becomes a metaphor for the poet, and as such works *towards* letters as well. Henderson’s elegist goes in search of poetry, indeed is still searching for poetry suitable for the task of mourning:

So the words that I have looked for, and must go on looking for,
are words of whole love, which can slowly gain the power
to reconcile and heal. Other words would be pointless. (63)

Whilst we can read ‘obliteration’ through its root to mean ‘against letters’ (correspondence), *ob littera* can usefully be understood to mean ‘against literature’ or ‘against learning’. ‘Obliteration’ commonly refers to the effacement of memory, a particular type of destruction particularly pertinent to Henderson’s duty of ‘remembrancing’. In resisting obliteration as

¹⁵ Loc.cit.

¹⁶ Colin Nicholson, *Poem, Purpose, and Place: Shaping Identity in Contemporary Scottish Verse* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), 142.

‘remembrancer’, Henderson’s *Elegies* repeatedly turns to canonical poets to counter the obliteration of war. By summoning and mobilising poetic memory through allusion, Henderson counters the desolate desert and the devastation of warfare, seeking instead a tapestry, or palimpsest, of human experience and thought which itself becomes a project of memorialisation.

Highland Jebel

The poem is a collage of sorts, but in this section I want to consider the archaeological depth of the works rather than the patchwork surface. Henderson, as a poet, is a wanderer and a collector. The implied poet of the poem traverses landscapes and picks up fragments, and the effect is something between a map and a palimpsest. Henderson writes over the top of places with the artefacts which he picked up along the way. The sequence is expansive and ambitious, encompassing many stylistic influences whilst traversing the hostile terrain of the desert and its perimeter. The poems are situated very specifically in both time and place, incorporating the influence of a number of prominent poets, as well as fragments from lesser-known writers or unknown soldiers. This section follows some of those fragments, unearthing the work they do in Henderson’s elegiac model, a model which in turn enacts a kind of archaeological method.

The ‘Fifth Elegy’ is subtitled ‘Highland Jebel’; ‘jebel’ is transliterated from the Arabic for hills or mountains. The title merges the Scottish Highlands with the highlands of the desert, and the epigraph suggests the anachronistic displacement of the poet. This is Henderson’s epigraph to the ‘Fifth Elegy’:

*Was ist es, das an die alten seligen Küsten mich
Fesselt, dass ich sie mehr liebe als mein eigenes Land? (58)*

The epigraph is accredited to Hölderlin and it is actually a misquotation from the poem ‘Der Einzige’ (‘The Only One’), a poem which describes a longing for classical Greece and which, despite the title, exists in two versions. Hölderlin’s original looks immediately distinct from Henderson’s imitation and Henderson does not offer a translation of his version in his notes. The translation I give here is by Michael Hamburger:

Was ist es, das
An die alten seligen Küsten

Mich fesselt, daß ich mehr noch
Sie liebe, als mein Vaterland?¹⁷

What is it that
To the ancient happy shores
Binds me, so that I love them
Still more than my own homeland?¹⁸

In Henderson's epigraph, Hölderlin's lineation is dropped and there is a subtle change to the words and their order, which does not radically alter the sense. The reasons for this are unclear, and the other epigraphs in the poem are not tampered with in this way. The altered lineation brings Hölderlin's line closer in length to Henderson's, creating two lines of thirteen syllables, similar to many of those in the *Elegies*. Given the metrical irregularity of *Elegies*, however, this is a somewhat strange manoeuvre – why not allow Hölderlin his own lineation as with the epigraphs from Goethe and Sorley MacLean? A clue to what Henderson is doing is in the alteration of Hölderlin's 'als mein Vaterland?' to 'als mein eigenes Land?' The removal of the patriarchal nationalistic term 'Vaterland' – soured by Nazi propaganda perhaps, and in any case suggestive of a genetic link between people and their place – and its replacement with the more subjectively inflected 'mein eigenes Land' (my own land), allows Henderson to map Hölderlin's longing for classical Greece onto his nostalgia for Scotland.

In a notebook entry in 1940, collected among Henderson's papers at the University of Edinburgh Special Collections, Henderson wrote 'why do I long for Scotland as Hölderlin for Greece?'¹⁹ Henderson spent most of his teenage years in England, away from the country he thought of as home, but this is not simply homesickness on the part of the poet. In Hölderlin's poem (and his poetry more generally) Greece appears not simply as a figure, but as a real living presence, out of time and place, wholly present nevertheless. Such is Scotland for Henderson in the 'Fifth Elegy'. In the preface to the 1948 edition of *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, Henderson offers the following explication of the poem:

In the first part of the cycle, echoes of earlier warfare and half-forgotten acts of injustice are heard, confusing and troubling the 'sleepers'. It is true such moments

¹⁷ Friedrich Holderlin, *Holderlin*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 1961), 446.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 447.

¹⁹ Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Library Special Collections, MS Coll-1438, Box 63, Notebook 5 (ca. 1940).

eponymous elegy, but also bubbling up through the language. The oppressive weight of the ‘half-forgotten’ past is particularly intriguing in Henderson’s project, and it demands some further enquiry here. The ‘First Elegy’ deals with the memory of the Glencoe massacre, and the ‘Fifth Elegy’ examines the emergence of a traumatic past in relation to the highland clearances which Henderson mentions in the preface. The poem articulates violence and trauma through a palimpsestic manoeuvre, which is to say the superimposition of one ‘memory’ onto another. The introduction to this thesis considered the multidirectional articulation of trauma, and it requires some further elucidation in Henderson’s work here.

In the final stanza of the ‘First Elegy’, Henderson writes:

There were our own, there were the others.
Therefore, minding the great word of Glencoe’s
son, that we should not disfigure ourselves
with villainy of hatred; and seeing that all
have gone down like curs into anonymous silence,
I will bear witness for I knew the others. (53)

Henderson’s mention of Glencoe refers the reader to the Massacre of Glencoe in 1692, in which 78 of the MacDonald clan were murdered on the grounds of delaying to pledge allegiance to King William of Orange. In an interview with Colin Nicholson, published in *Poem, Purpose, and Place* in 1992, Henderson elaborates further upon the source for these lines:

It comes from a story told to me in my childhood by my grandmother, a sentimental Jacobite to whom the Jacobite Episcopalian tradition meant a great deal and for whom the Glencoe massacre had brought great shame upon Scotland. She said that when the Jacobite troops occupied Edinburgh in 1745, a son of old Glencoe, who must have been an old man himself at that time – it was either his son or grandson – asked permission of the Prince to guard the house of the Master of Stair. The Master of Stair was a kind of secretary of state for Scotland, and he was thought of as having organised the Glencoe massacre. In seeking such permission the son or grandson had said that he did not want his family to be ‘stained with the villainy of hatred’. I thought what a wonderful phrase; if ever there was a heroic, magnanimous statement, here it was. And I thought it applied to the desert. Why should we hate this enemy? Don’t misunderstand me: I went right through the war trying to be instrumental in killing as many Germans as possible. But the two feelings could co-exist.²²

²² There were Hendersons amongst those massacred from the MacDonald clan. *Ibid.* 141.

Henderson has stated that the inspiration behind the *Elegies* came from the comments of a captured German officer who insisted ‘in reality we are allies, and the desert is our common enemy.’²³ The invocation of the ‘word of Glencoe’s son’ is a duplicitous manoeuvre by the poet; it alludes to a traumatic history, but it does so through a gesture which cuts through tribalism and feuds. It is a cliché perhaps, but death is a leveller in Henderson’s *Elegies*. Both Allied and Axis dead deserve better than ‘anonymous silence’ in death, and Henderson appoints himself as their witness.

Henderson’s allusions to the Massacre of Glencoe invite a comparison with the poem ‘Rannoch, by Glencoe’ from T.S. Eliot’s 1934-5 sequence ‘Landscapes’. Eliot’s poem begins ‘Here the crow starves, here the patient stag/ Breeds for the rifle’, suggesting, through the image of hunting, that in this Highland waste land the life cycle serves generational slaughter:

The road winds in
Listlessness of ancient war,
Langour of broken steel,
Clamour of confused wrong, apt
In silence. Memory is strong
Beyond the bone. Pride snapped,
Shadow of pride is long, in the long pass
No concurrence of bone²⁴

Eliot’s listless road is similar to Henderson’s descriptions of the quickly forgotten African war, the planes which fly over the desert in the ‘Tenth Elogy’: ‘the airliner’s passengers [...] remember/ little, regret less’ (71). In both poems the landscape gives little indication of the trauma which it hosted in the past. Both poets acknowledge that, whilst events might be forgotten quickly, the ‘shadow of pride is long’, and it is this ingrained hatred that Henderson seeks to challenge with the ‘great word of Glencoe’s son.’ The two poets differ on the response to traumatic histories however; for Eliot silence is ‘apt’, whereas Henderson cannot help but fill his poem with self-conscious attempts to bear witness.

Colin Nicholson describes Henderson’s use of ‘Scottish reference and experience’ as ‘transfiguring’ the desert war. In light of recent scholarship in the fields of memory, trauma and Holocaust studies, ‘transfiguration’ does not do justice to Henderson’s mobilisation of

²³ See note 12.

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, “Landscapes,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 141.

Scottish memory during the Second World War. Works by Max Silverman and Michael Rothberg have helped to reconfigure such manoeuvres as sites of negotiation rather than transformation. A traumatic event in Scottish memory does not stand in as a metaphor for the North African war, but rather operates in dialogue with it. Max Silverman prefers the term ‘palimpsestic memory’ over alternatives such as ‘analogy, metaphor, allegory, montage’, because ‘the palimpsest captures most completely the superimposition and productive interaction of different inscriptions, and the spatialization of time central to the work of memory.’²⁵ Henderson’s palimpsestic poem is a work of superimposition, and, as I will discuss below, the desert itself is often the site of the palimpsest, precluding the imaginative migration necessary in the negotiation of Scottish history in the desert. The palimpsestic gesture is interesting politically as much as poetically, due to its insistence upon the similarities of distant Scottish rivalries and the contemporaneous enemy, insisting that such binaries be challenged in the hostile desert environment that is an enemy to both sides in the conflict.

It is the desert that becomes Henderson’s primary palimpsest through much of the poem, and an explication of the histories, legends and poems that surface in the *Elegies* demonstrates both the archaeological impulse of the poet for digging things up, and the role of gravedigger, or ‘remembrancer’ as Henderson puts it, whereby the poet accepts the responsibility for burying the dead.

The ‘Fifth Elogy (Highland Jebel)’, introduced as mentioned above by Hölderlin, is haunted by the Highland clearances. Again the ideas of migration and flight are prominent, and it begins:

Strong winged
our homing memory held us
on an unerring course

[...]

It found the treeless machair,
took in bay and snub headland, circled kirkyard and valley
and described once again our love’s perfect circuit
till, flying to its own,
it dashed itself against the unresponsive windows. (58)

²⁵ Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 4.

Memory is figured here as a bird, soaring high over the desert and flying north to the familiar scenery of Scotland. But like a careless, or short-sighted bird, it collides with the invisible but all too physical barrier of the window. This blockade on the nostalgic is explained later in the poem:

In our ears murmur
of wind-borne battle. Herons stalk
over the blood-stained flats. Burning byres
come to my mind. Distance blurs
motive and aim. Dark moorland bleeding
for wrong or right.
Sons of the hounds
*come here and get flesh.*²⁶ Search, bite! (59)

The ‘dreadful memory’ of the clearances is ever present, its echoes carried on the wind. The bird who soars above, separated from the realities of the battlefield, makes way instead for a wading bird who is always wallowing in the bloodied mud of the past. The window thus operates as a kind of unseen wound, an ever-present trauma through which the past is viewed and which obstructs the free bird-like flights of memory. In an allusion to the ‘red rock’ of Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’, which I will discuss in the next section in this chapter, Henderson wonders if there is an end to the cyclical violence of history:

In what deep antre
of death is there refuge
from this living rock? (59)

Eliot and Ezekiel: from Pastoral to Palimpsest

As a collector, as I have configured him, or a ‘scavenger’ as he describes himself, Henderson’s *Elegies* operate differently to the conventional pastoral style exemplified by Milton in ‘Lycidas’. Unlike Milton, Henderson does not expect the elegy to be delivered by the muse: ‘to justify them’, Henderson writes of the dead in the ‘Sixth Elegy’, ‘what byways must I follow?’ This is the poet as collector and explorer, traversing the desert again to seek out the graves of fallen comrades and to find the songs that do justice to the dead. Unlike

²⁶ “*Sons of the hounds/ come here and get flesh*” is a translation of the war cry of Clan Cameron, a rival of clan Campbell during the English Civil War. It is worth noting, in a poem dedicated to a Campbell, John Lorne Campbell, a folklorist and Gaelic translator, the invocation of such rivalries.

Milton's elegy, the WWII poet is not granted the 'lucky' duty of singing for the dead but instead he must forge a space for his voice: Milton's 'who would not sing for Lycidas?' becomes in Henderson's poem 'why should I not sing *them*, the dead, the innocent?' (53).²⁷ It is a matter of singing against resistance, or indifference; 'the queue forming up to see Rangers play Celtic/ forms up without thought to those dead' (63). Nor is it a case of singing *for* the dead as Milton sings for Lycidas, as nothing can be done for the dead. Rather Henderson 'sings them, the dead' as he would sing folk-songs, bearing witness to their lives in the ears of the living. Again the project is that of the collector, seeking to preserve the fragile remnants of lives.

In the English tradition of literary mourning, the pastoral elegy endured for centuries as the dominant mode of poetic grieving. Among other factors in the twentieth century, the First World War changed the way poets approach the pastoral mode. For Sandra M. Gilbert, the First World War '[annihilated] three assumptions about death and grief': the notion of an idealized 'pastoral' landscape, the idea of the mourner as shepherd exercising control over that landscape, and the link between the natural cycles of renewal and the Christian promise of resurrection.²⁸ The line 'what passing bells for these who die as cattle', from Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', reconfigures the pastoral mode by figuring the dead not as shepherds but as the beasts sent to slaughter.²⁹ T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' might also be considered an anti-pastoral elegy, its invocation of the infertile 'stony rubbish' compromises springtime renewal, suggested by the 'little life' fed to 'dried tubers'.³⁰

Like Owen and Eliot, Henderson's wartime elegies subvert the pastoral mode. The anti-Arcadian landscape of the desert is one of the barriers to the poetic consolation which Henderson purportedly seeks. As the poet seeks a language for grief, we sense that the conventions of pastoral elegy have been lost in the shifting, treacherous sands of the desert. In 'Ballad of the Snow-White Sandstroke', in which Henderson describes the aftermath of the fall of Tobruk, an event whose significance in *Elegies* we will return to momentarily, Henderson gives an account of the harsh desert and its effect on the poetic humours: 'froth-wet words of songs I've sung/ Are frizzling to death on my furnace tongue' (48). In a note to

²⁷ John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Yerkes Hughes (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 120.

²⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert, *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (New York, London: W W Norton & Company Incorporated, 2007), 371.

²⁹ Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth," in *Collected Poems*, ed. C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), 44–45.

³⁰ Eliot, "The Waste Land", 61.

the ballad, Henderson describes his job counting wrecked vehicles in the desert: ‘because of the uncertain distances and directions I ticked them off with a piece of chalk, in order to make sure I was not counting the same ones twice’ (158n). The instinct in *Elegies* to map the desert is obstructed by the treachery of the landscape. Whilst the previous section examined Henderson’s palimpsestic poetics and the attempt to reach Scottish memory through Hölderlin and the desert highlands, this section considers the frame of reference provided by the poetry of T.S. Eliot. ‘The Waste Land’, as well as providing a model for Henderson’s developing style of modernist poetics, also become a lens through which the desert begins to make some sense: it is a ‘wrong-way telescope’ to borrow from Keith Douglas, or perhaps a ‘multidirectional’ telescope, traversing times and places to find a language of witness.³¹

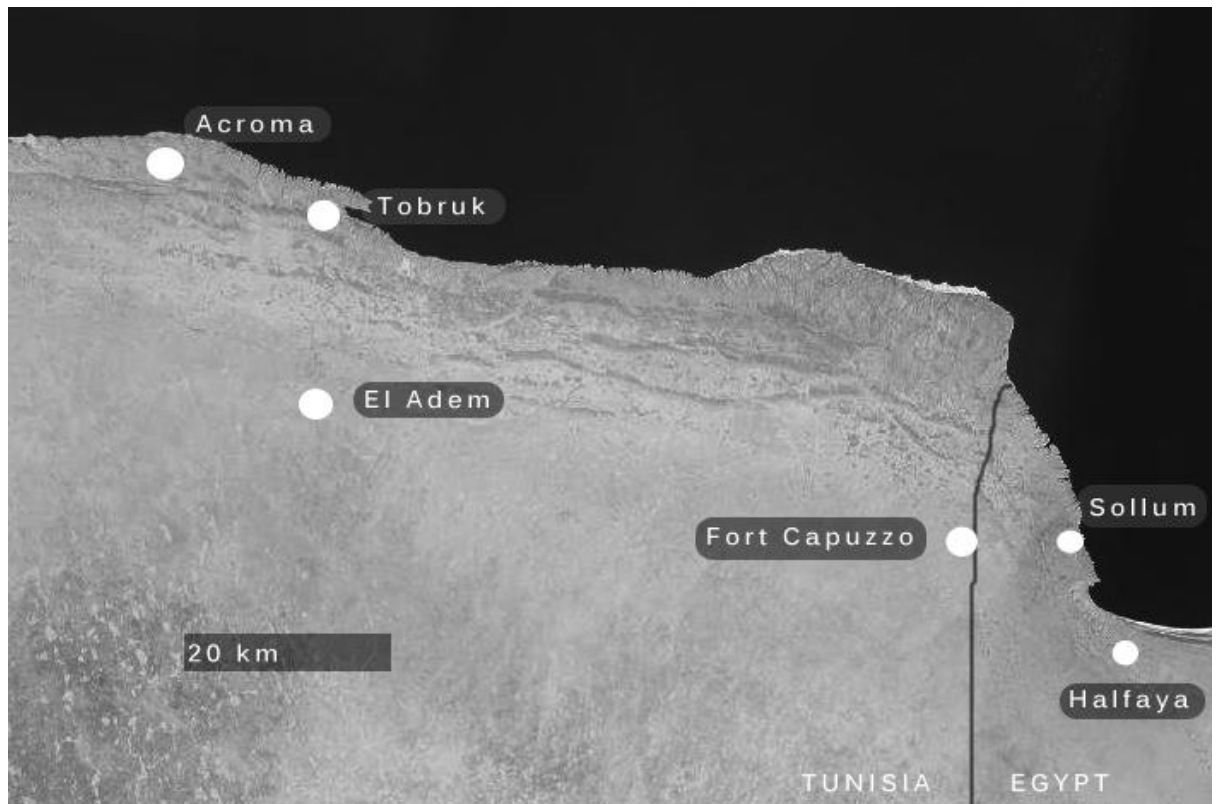


Figure 2. Map showing locations on the North African coast mentioned by Henderson in *Elegies*.

³¹ Keith Douglas, “Simplify Me When I’m Dead,” in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 74–75.

Throughout the *Elegies*, the Allied and Axis soldiers face a common enemy in the desert landscape. Describing the desert in the ‘Second Elegy’, Henderson writes that it is ‘impartial/ hostile to both’ (54). The desert environment is mapped carefully by the poems, with four of the *Elegies* subtitled with place names of military significance. Figure 2 shows the places named in, and associated directly with, the second, fourth, and sixth *Elegies* on a hundred-kilometre stretch of the North African coast from the Egyptian border in the direction of Benghazi in Tunisia.

Halfaya is the site of a battle and El Adem an RAF station, but Acroma and Fort Capuzzo are both cemeteries, for the Allied and German dead respectively. Naming these sites is important to Henderson’s project in the *Elegies*, an onomastic ritual which brings some sense of order to the desert. As the ‘First Elegy’ points out,

There are many dead in the brutish desert,
 who lie uneasy
among the scrub in this landscape of half-wit (52)

Henderson’s poems bring some sense to the half-wit landscape; a cartographic impulse which civilizes the ‘brutish desert.’ The word ‘brutish’ is chosen carefully: this landscape is alive enough to have an appetite for the dead and is described as ‘insatiate and necrophilous’, but is designated a ‘brute’ for its animalistic qualities. Rather than masters of nature and beasts, the men in Henderson’s desert are subject to the violence of their environment.

Of all the *Elegies*, the ‘Fourth’ plays out this struggle between man and earth most explicitly, seeking a space for the poet in the various conflicts at this historical juncture. The elegy begins by juxtaposing the condition of loss with seasonal change and addressing the promise of renewal through poetry and cyclical growth, but it does so with a desolate ambivalence alien to the pastoral mode:

Sow cold wind of the desert. Embittered
reflections on discomfort and protracted absence.
Cold, and resentment stirred at this seeming
winter, most cruel reversal of seasons.
The weather clogs thought: we give way to griping
and malicious ill-turns, or instinctive actions
appearing without rhyme or reason. (57)

The ‘cruel reversal of seasons’ reminds the reader of Eliot’s invocation of springtime April as the ‘cruellest month’, but also renders the temperate seasonal trope ineffective in the desert climate. Rather than a model on which to build poetry, the desert climate makes thought difficult for Henderson, defies the order promised by literature’s ‘rhyme and reason’.

As well as the seasonal trope, the ‘Fourth Elegy’ also borrows livestock from the pastoral. ‘Brutes’ appear again, this time as beasts of burden:

The sons of man
grow and go down in pain: they kneel for the load
and bow like brutes, in patience accepting of the burden,
the pain fort and dour... (57)

The image subverts the notion of a pastoral scene, imagining men enslaved and forced into labour rather than the peace and simplicity of tending to flocks. In ‘The Waste Land’, Eliot writes ‘Son of man/ you cannot say, or guess, for you know only/ A heap of broken images’, and Henderson’s allusion to this moment is explicit, but again *Elegies* relocates and recasts Eliot’s modern waste land to the North African desert.³² If Henderson’s allusion is traced through Eliot to its original source in the Biblical book *Ezekiel*, then it can be contextualised in the specific locale of the ‘Fourth Elegy’, which Henderson’s sub-heading identifies as El Adem, Libya.

Located sixteen kilometres south of Tobruk, El Adem was an RAF station and part of the Allied perimeter before the Siege of Tobruk in 1941. After Rommel had forced a retreat, the Allies held Tobruk, a port town strategically vital for the defence of the Suez Canal, for 241 days between 11th April and 27th November 1941. Henderson conjures a mood of tedious siege warfare in the ‘Fourth Elegy’ with bored German troops (reconfigured as *landsknechte*³³) who ‘read mail, play scat, lie mute under greatcoats’ (57). Ezekiel was the prophet of the siege and sack of Jerusalem in 587 BC, sent by God to warn the Jews that the city would be overthrown. God commands Ezekiel to make a drawing of the siege of Jerusalem:

³² Eliot, “The Waste Land”, 61.

³³ German *landsknecht* lit. servant of the country, < *lands* (genitive) country + *knecht* servant. The German word was at an early date miswritten *lanzknecht*, as if < *lanz* lance. “Lansquenet, N.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed May 20, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/105652>.

son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and pourtray upon it the city, even Jerusalem: And lay siege against it, and build a fort against it, and cast a mount against it; set the camp also against it, and set battering rams against it round about.³⁴

Henderson does not cast himself quite in Ezekiel's role, but the 'Fourth Elegy' offers a (retrospectively) prophetic vision of Tobruk's war. Although the Allies rebuffed Rommel's siege and broke it in November 1941 with Operation Crusader, Tobruk would fall in mid 1942 in the Battle of Gazala, only to be recaptured by the Allies, led by General Montgomery, during the decisive Second Battle of Alamein later that year. Of these short-lived victories, Henderson writes, in a turn of phrase which echoes the end of Auden's 'Spain':

Tomorrow's victors
survey with grief too profound for mere lamentation
their own approaching defeat: while even the defeated
await dry-eyed their ineluctable triumph. (57)

Ezekiel was presented with a scroll inscribed with 'lamentations and mourning and woe' and commanded to eat it, finding that it tasted as sweet as honey. The message that Ezekiel carries brings grief to the Judeans, yet he relishes the task set for him by God: 'eat this roll, and go speak unto the house of Israel [...] So Ezekiel, condemn them!'³⁵ Henderson also takes Ezekiel's task upon himself, using these very words: 'shall I not speak and condemn?' he writes.³⁶ The 'Fourth Elegy' then, as Henderson's own scroll of lamentations and mourning, looks to Ezekiel and elegiac predecessors to find a language to express communal grief, but finds it 'too profound for mere lamentation', instead politicising the activity of elegy. The motivation behind Henderson's subversion of the pastoral elegy might well be found in the prophetic figure of Ezekiel.

As an exile, Ezekiel also prefigures the nomads of the 'Fourth Elegy'. Henderson writes: 'we're uneasy, knowing ourselves to be nomads/ impermanent guests on this bleak moon-surface' (57). Arcadian scenes of shepherd's mourning shepherds and finding consolation in

³⁴ Ezekiel 4:1-2 (King James Bible).

³⁵ Ezekiel 3:1;11:4.(King James Bible).

³⁶ Another possible source behind this is Rilke, who writes in the 'Ninth Elegy' to 'speak and proclaim'. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (London: The Hogarth Press, 1952), 85.

poetry have no place in Henderson's desert. The shepherd of the North African desert is nomadic, his transient existence in the inhospitable landscape makes precedent for the soldier. The shepherd is no longer the symbol of a simple existence, and thus his presence in elegy provides not a bereaved rustic figure for identification, but in Henderson's word, a 'rootless' and thus uncertain figure. It is a figure perhaps more suited to a time of upheaval. It is also a figure with which Henderson personally identifies, and which, by extension, he associates with the autobiographical collector who appears in the *Elegies*. In the 'Sixth Elegy' Henderson asks 'what byways must I follow' in order to do justice to the dead. The route he has established, through a technique of allusion which owes much to Eliot both directly and indirectly, opens up a palimpsestic and intertextual mode for representing war.

Conclusion: 'Bid farewell to the city'

In this, and the previous chapter, I have traced Henderson's allusions to masters such as Rilke, Eliot and Hölderlin, showing how they feature in a poem whose expressed purpose is to write against the destruction of war and the obliteration of memory. Henderson's scavenged fragments recast the desert as a palimpsestic memory-scape, combining personal loss with collective remembrance and cultural memory. Michael Rothberg writes that 'the frameworks of memory function something like a language – they provide a shared medium within which alone individuals can remember or articulate themselves.'³⁷ Also like a language is the way those frameworks evolve and are reinvented. Henderson's poem taps into existing frameworks to create a quite new and strange piece of work. It is perhaps not widely enough known to be an influential innovation of elegy in its own right, and it displays some of the excesses of modernism which would quickly drop out of fashion after the war. Indeed, Henderson himself largely abandoned this way of doing things, becoming instead a collector in the more literal sense, recording and documenting Scottish folk music. But if the poem seems like a relic now, it captures a specific moment in time and by so doing bears witness to the memory of those for whom it seeks to speak.

In this sense as well it is also a valedictory work, whose sense of grandeur perhaps obscures its value as an occasional poem. Like 'So Long', the goodbye ditty for the desert with which I began this chapter, *Elegies* serves to document a particular moment in order to capture its individual and collective significance. The 'Third Elegy' invokes the Alexandrian C. P. Cavafy's poem 'The God Leaves Antony' in order to suggest the personal and historical

³⁷ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 15.

significance of the North African campaign's key moments. The 'Third Elegy' describes troops moving out of Alexandria, almost literally recording this by reporting fragments of speech: '*Morning after. Get moving. Cheerio. Be seeing you when this party's over. Right, driver, get weaving*' (55, Henderson's italics). The prompt to 'get weaving' occurs as the fragments are woven into Henderson's poem. The poem follows the convoy past the Greek cafes (perhaps the site of the 'night before' of Henderson's 'morning after') and the civilisation of the city into the desert.

As this chapter has shown, Henderson's inter-woven borrowings are usually directly related to his time in Egypt, and his engagement with 'The God Leaves Antony' is no exception. The initial link is clear of course, Cavafy is Alexandria's poet laureate. The poem has appeared in E.M Forster's *Pharaos and Pharillon*, and Lawrence Durrell appends it to *The Alexandria Quartet*.³⁸ Henderson's notebooks specify his own engagement with it when it appeared in *Orientalism*, another Cairo-based magazine aimed at the temporary military community.³⁹ When the time came to finally piece the poem together, Henderson wrote to John Speirs to ask if any new versions of Cavafy were available.⁴⁰ Indeed, he seems to have been as popular among the Cairo literati as Rilke, unsurprisingly perhaps, as many had, like Bernard Spencer, moved from Greece at the beginning of the war. Moving from a documentary register to one of grander philosophical reflection, Henderson weaves quotations from Cavafy into the poem:

Do not regret
that we have still in history to suffer
or comrade that we are the agents
of a dialectic that can destroy us
but like a man prepared, like a brave man
bid farewell to the city: and quickly
move forward on the road leading west by the salt-lake.
Like a man for long prepared, like a brave man,
like to the man who was worthy of such a city
be glad that the case admits no other solution,
acknowledge with pride the clear imperative of action
and bid farewell to her, to Alexandria, whom you are losing. (56)

³⁸ C.P Cavafy, "The God Abandons Antony," trans. George Valassapoulo, in *Pharos and Pharillon*, by E.M. Forster, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1923), 56.

³⁹ On *Orientalism* see Roger Bowen, *Many Histories Deep: The Personal Landscape Poets in Egypt, 1940-45* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), 54.

⁴⁰ Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Library Special Collections, MS Coll-1438, Box 63, Notebook 11 (ca. 1945).

For Henderson, Cavafy's poem captures the mood of the convoy leaving Alexandria. 'The God Leaves Antony' muses on the moment Antony believed Alexandria to be lost to the armies of Octavius, as revellers leave the city and Antony realises Bacchus has abandoned him. In Cavafy's poem, this is figured by the exquisite song of an invisible choir passing Antony on its way out of the city. 'Listen to the notes', Cavafy writes, 'and bid farewell to her.'⁴¹ The valedictory song of the choir is Henderson's prompt to use the poem; he finds in it a parallel for his own military convoy, the revellers who leave 'the morning after' do so with a sense of trepidation and of the forthcoming struggle. Henderson's instinctive resistance to the destructive 'dialectic' of war, and the sense of posterity for those who 'suffer in history' renders this a mournful poem. The sense of loss is projected onto Alexandria itself: the night before this morning after, the cheery environment of Greek cafes, Alexandria's Bacchanalia, this vivacity is exactly what is lost in battle.

In this chapter, I have shown the intricate intertextuality of Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*. Cavafy joins Rilke, Hölderlin, and Eliot, and his Alexandria joins the Scottish Highlands and Biblical deserts as Henderson writes over and over-writes the palimpsestic African landscape. Henderson is a self-appointed 'remembrancer', carrying out work which he feels would otherwise be forgotten in the anonymous desert. If Henderson's poem elegises the dead of the desert by assigning meaning to places, in the next chapter I consider designated sites of memory as they appear in poetry, analysing poems which treat war memorials as ekphrastic objects.

⁴¹ Cavafy, "The God Abandons Antony", 56.

5. In Stone and in Ceremony

In ‘Sonnet XVI’, from the sequence ‘In Time of War’, W.H. Auden writes: ‘Here, war is simple, like a monument.’¹ Auden is writing from China as a poet-journalist reporting on the Second Sino-Japanese war which began in 1937, and the temporal marker of the sonnet is paramount: ‘here’, we take it, means ‘here’ and ‘now’, inside the war. It is a surprising statement, that even from the inside war appears as simple as a monument. The speaker draws attention to other signifiers, the theme here is the communication of meaning: ‘a telephone is speaking to a man;/ Flags on a map assert that troops were sent.’² Objects here are in command; the people passively receive the messages and function like cogs in this war machine. In Auden’s work, anything which communicates simply ought to be considered dangerous; the poetry of a tyrant, for example, is ‘easy to understand.’³ Monuments, then, are too simple to communicate the nuances and complexity of war in general, but manage, through their simplicity, to capture the binary of war from the inside.

In ‘September I, 1939’, Auden imagines a different kind of monument, the graves of the First World War, utilised for propaganda in the new war:

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The Enlightenment driven away,
The habit forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer all again.⁴

That dictators speak ‘elderly rubbish’ to ‘apathetic graves’ suggests the rift between those sent to die for an idea, and those whose old-fashioned ideas are to blame for another European war. Hamish Henderson would later write of the ‘laboured Augustan speeches’ in

¹ W. H. Auden, “In Time of War: A Sonnet Sequence with a Verse Commentary,” in *Journey to a War*, by Christopher Isherwood and W. H. Auden (New York: Random House, 1939), 274.

² Loc.cit.

³ W. H. Auden, “Epitaph on a Tyrant,” in *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940), 86.

⁴ Auden, “September I, 1939.”

a similar light.⁵ The Athenian historian Thucydides, exiled in the fourth century BCE, appears here as a predecessor for the modern historian: his evidence-based writings study the causes of the war between Athens and Sparta. Auden, writing from self-exile in New York, might identify with Thucydides as an exile, but also as a historical commentator; indeed it is from his position in exile that Thucydides was able to see both sides of the Athenian war with a degree of neutrality. The alignment of the poet with the historian is crucial here, because language might otherwise be manipulated for political ends; Auden rhymes ‘elderly rubbish they talk’ with ‘analysed all in his book’, drawing attention to two radically different war-time discourses, and sandwiched in-between are the ‘apathetic graves’. Auden’s ‘apathy’ works twice: first as a figure of the metonymically dissociated, disillusioned and dead soldier; and second, the graves are also ‘a-pathetic’, unable to generate an emotional response (especially pity, the locus of the poetic in Wilfred Owen’s wartime work), and devoid of rhetorical pathos.

For Auden then, monuments allow war to become simple. Apathetic graves and simple monuments elide the realities of the war which they are supposed to represent and commemorate. They are neither politic nor historic, but are at the mercy of such discourses, whose ability to talk to, or talk through the simplicity of graves leads to ever-renewing cycles of war and violence. ‘Mismanagement’ and ‘grief’ occur in the same breath: they suggest the failure of commemoration to encourage remembering. These brief moments are not the most obvious examples of ekphrasis in Auden’s oeuvre, but it is worth noting that war and conflict form the prominent subject matter of such canonical ekphrastic poems as ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ and the post-war ‘The Shield of Achilles’. The art object becomes a means by which to explore suffering and violence; as ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, which Auden wrote in the same moment as ‘In Time of War’, states: ‘About suffering they were never wrong/ the old Masters.’⁶ The monuments of war in ‘In Time of War’ and ‘September I, 1939’ are not works by the old masters, but rather products of collaboration between military and civic committees, and the architects employed by them: about suffering they were never explicit. We can treat some war memorials as serious works of sculpture or architecture, but there are political motivations behind such works as well as artistic, in addition to the social need for mourning, and these monuments do not express the horrors of war. Auden writes of the ‘old Masters’: ‘they never forget that *even dreadful martyrdom must run its course*’ (my emphasis).⁷ This counters the rhetoric of the commemoration of the First World War, which

⁵ Henderson, “Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica,” 2000, 52.

⁶ Auden, “Musée Des Beaux Arts”, 35.

⁷ Loc.cit.

urges us to never forget the martyrdom, whilst ensuring instead that the dreadful reality of their suffering is confined to oblivion.

War Memorial Ekphrasis

Auden's provocative assessment of monuments as 'simple' might be a little over simplistic itself. Between the wars there was a good deal of scrutiny and thought accompanying the massive project to build lasting memorials to the sacrifices of the First World War, some favourable and some less so. In this chapter, I consider thought on both sides of this equation, including the Imperial War Graves Commission's official mission to commemorate, and Siegfried Sassoon's personal grievance with their practices. In response to the events of 1914-18, memorials proliferated and were forced to change. Whereas traditional monuments to war celebrated great victories, and great leaders – one need only think of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square (1805), a towering classical pillar to a British Victory, with French defeat incorporated in its very construction through four bronze plaques made from captured guns – the First World War, with its long periods of futility and massive casualty, called for a different kind of commemoration. Arches, for example, are a familiar classical and neo-classical form employed in commemorative monuments, as in the Roman triumphal arches and the French imitation of these with the Arc de Triomphe. But in some major monuments of the First World War, such as the Thiepval monument and the Menin Gate, the symbolism changes; instead of towering monuments equating man's perfection of this crucial architectural form with military might, the negative spaces of the arch come into use instead, suggestive of the voids and losses of technological achievement.

In Kirk Savage's interpretation of the Thiepval monument to the missing of the Somme, the arches create an 'elegiac journey' through the ritualistic and collective space of the memorial:

While to varying degrees earlier war memorials had acknowledged loss, they were not intended to be sites of mourning but of celebration. Their recognition of individual loss, if it came at all, quickly gave way to a didactic lesson in the ultimate consolation of power. Thiepval succeeds in creating a much more genuine elegiac experience: individual loss is fully and openly acknowledged, but eventually reversed in the traditional elegy's gift of perpetual life.⁸

⁸ Kirk Savage, "The War Memorial as Elegy," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 650.

Monuments can and do offer something more than simplicity then, something even akin to poetry in the formal complexity and emotion. Jay Winter writes that the meaning of memorials was highly personal, that they ‘used collective expression, in stone and in ceremony, to help individual people [...] accept the brutal facts of death in war.’⁹ Another memorial to the missing of the First World War, The Menin Gate, also reconfigures the symbolism of the triumphal archway. Standing over one of the roads out of Ypres, Belgium, it marks the final journey of the many thousands of men whose names now line its interior. It also symbolises the transition from one life into the next, recalling both a violent historical and symbolically spiritual passage. The Menin Gate elongates the archway, forming a barrel-arch reminiscent of the crypt of a church, as well as the ‘elegiac journey’ from life to death, it is also a tomb-like resting place for the thousands whose bodies were never recovered.

Despite the innovation of the architecture, the memorials of the First World War were the subject of criticism from some quarters, including from veteran soldier poets. Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘On Passing the New Menin Gate’ (1928) derides the memorial’s ‘pile of peace-complacent stone’ as ‘pomp’:

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
 'Their name liveth for ever,' the Gateway claims.
 Was never an immolation so belied
 As these intolerably nameless names?
 Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
 Rise and deride this sepulcher of crime.¹⁰

Like Auden, Sassoon is sceptical of the motives behind the monument: this is an example of elderly rubbish spoken to an apathetic grave, and it is insulting to the memory of those who died in the indignity of the trenches. Sassoon’s poem is an example of what this chapter will argue is a peculiar species of ekphrasis: the war memorial poem. James A.W. Heffernan argues that ‘*ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation*’ (his italics).¹¹ The war memorial poem is a peculiar ekphrasis because the war memorial’s status as a work of high art is somewhat debateable. Whilst memorials such as Thiepval and the Menin Gate are clearly ambitious and conceptual works of architecture, many war memorials fall into the

⁹ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.

¹⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, “On Passing the New Menin Gate,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1947), 188.

¹¹ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.

utilitarian category, such as memorial parks, museums, benches, fountains or stadia.¹² A grave, for example, is not representative art, but a gravestone arguably is: it stands in for the life whose cessation it is designed to mark, and, if the war grave is in the shape of a cross, it denotes not only the religion of the dead man, but also the Christian ideal of sacrifice. This chapter studies works which engage with memorials of various sorts, either real, locatable memorials, such as the memorial stone for Edward Thomas upon which Alun Lewis's 'To Edward Thomas' is based, or representative examples of real memorials, such as the gravestones or temporary grave markers so regularly discussed by soldier poets.¹³

War memorial ekphrasis also deals with the loss that the memorial is designed to commemorate. As such, these poems resemble elegies or anti-elegies. Sassoon's poem, like many of his war poems, rejects the consolatory function of the Menin Gate, arguing that it elides both the names it is supposed to remember and the 'world's worst wound', and in so doing avoids the issue of responsibility for those deaths. Auden is more measured but equally sceptical about the figurative power of memorials to adequately represent war and its losses. By not saying much at all, monuments are vulnerable to hosting the manipulative rhetoric of war and the governing culture. Yet this perceived silence is an opportunity for the poet either to condemn the monument or to speak on its behalf, either to refute or enact the work of mourning which the monument was designed to fulfil. Heffernan's study of ekphrastic poetics, *Museum of Words*, describes this conflict between word and image: 'Ekphrasis [...] is a literary mode that turns on the antagonism [...] between verbal and visual representation.'¹⁴ This is true of both Sassoon and Auden's poems, which do not simply muse upon gravestones and memorials, but rather jostle for the primacy of the written mode over the sculptural, architectural or monumental, for the right to speak to, for and about the memorial, and, by extension, the dead. Some of the poems discussed in this chapter

¹² Bristol Rugby Club, this author's favourite team, played at the Memorial Stadium (formerly the Memorial Ground, and to fans just the 'Mem') from 1921 when it was built for a community which had lost so much to the war. The site has been sold to Sainsbury's and will be developed into a supermarket in 2015/16. The memorial gate, which is listed, will remain, but its inscription 'To them [the fallen] this ground will be a memorial' will lose its meaning somewhat when it becomes the entrance to a Sainsbury's car park.

¹³ It is also useful to consider the idea of 'notional' memorials (after John Hollander's 'notional ekphrasis') which refers to imagined monuments like those in Sidney Keyes's 'The Foreign Gate'. The eponymous gate of Keyes's poem is reminiscent of the Menin Gate. See John Hollander, "The Poetics of *Ekphrasis*," *Word & Image* 4, no. 1 (January 1988): 209–19. Keyes is discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

¹⁴ Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 7.

demonstrate what Heffernan considers the central preoccupation of ekphrasis: describing Shelley's 'Ozymandias', he writes 'this sonnet manifests what virtually all ekphrasis latently expresses: the poet's ambition to make his words outlast their ostensible subject, to displace visual representation with verbal representation.'¹⁵ This 'paragonal' relationship between the verbal and visual arts takes on a further dimension in the representation and memorialisation of war: the question, which is aesthetic, philosophical and ethical, of words becoming memory and sites of mourning.

Heffernan's model of 'paragonal' ekphrastic poetry has come under recent scrutiny from critics such as David Kennedy. In Kennedy's work, the ekphrastic poem does not represent a conflict between word and image, but rather an interpretive encounter, an 'attempt to bring art into the realm of our contingency.'¹⁶ Kennedy reconfigures Heffernan's working definition: '*ekphrasis is a verbal representation of an encounter with a work of art represented in the form and conventions of another medium*' (Kennedy's italics).¹⁷ Rather than the representational mode offered by Heffernan, this focus on the encounter describes ekphrasis as 're-presentational': a form of translation, translocation and transformation, as unexpected, momentary, and 'crucially, of two spheres of action coming into contact, with a consequent change of direction or velocity.' For Kennedy, this extends Heffernan's definition and allows us to ask 'whether such ekphrasis reads its object as text, an object or an event.'¹⁸

The nexus of reading one singular art work, and writing another based on the encounter, invites responsible deconstruction rather than the competitive model proposed by Heffernan. Kennedy reads Keats's 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' as an example:

We can also say that ekphrasis *reveals* the extent to which art disturbs the contemporary moment. Calling the object an 'urn' associates it with death and elegy and with the fact that the culture it embodies is long dead. This is one source of its disturbing power: how can something so dead still be so alive to us now? Simply put, how can art be death and vice versa? This is the force of the poem's numerous questions. The urn's disturbing power also derives from the fact that, like all art, it confronts us with the fact of transcendence; that is, it will last beyond the 'now',

¹⁵ Ibid. 118.

¹⁶ David Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, Limited, 2013), 6.

¹⁷ Ibid. 31.

¹⁸ Loc.cit.

beyond us. This is chastening, even terrifying and, we quickly tell ourselves, cannot be art's only meaning.¹⁹

War memorial ekphrasis offers both an affirmation of, and a challenge to, Kennedy's approach. The war memorial is 'alive' as long as it represents the dead, and it is built to be transcendent. The terror of the urn, for Kennedy, is that it has survived and will outlive us. The fear of the war memorial is similar but slightly different: that it will survive but cease to function, that the lives it was built to commemorate will be forgotten. It is for this reason that Heffernan's competitive model is still so useful to this analysis: the anxiety of the poet writing about the war memorial is that it is not a sufficient expression of the lives it represents. Sassoon's anger at the Menin Gate occurs precisely because it cannot and does not say that to which the soldier poets of the First World War testified. It survives not as a memorial but as a travesty.

Kennedy's notion of the ekphrastic encounter, however, helps us to understand the elegiac function of the war memorial as well. As a site of mourning, the memorial is not necessarily representative so much as it is ritualistic. The encounters described by the poets in this chapter are all elegiac, but the extent to which they can be said to express mourning or melancholia varies, and depends perhaps on the memorial itself and the poet. R. Clifton Spargo's study of the ethics of elegy describes melancholia as 'evocative of an ethical concern for the other elaborated by the mourner's objections to the cultural practices presiding over grief [... as] elegy's most persistent sign of a dissent from conventional meanings and as its similarly persistent sign of a dedication to the time and realm of the other.'²⁰ A poem's ambivalence towards the war memorial becomes an ethical instrument by which it is interpreted as an infidelity to the lives and deaths it represents.

One poem which exhibits these concerns is T.S. Eliot's occasional war-time text 'Defence of the Islands', and Shelley's 'Ozymandias', a key text for Heffernan's account of the ekphrastic encounter, provides a useful route into Eliot's work. During the early years of the Second World War, the safety of the First World War memorial sites of France and Belgium was a major concern for the Imperial War Graves Commission. The workers who had tended to the graves and monuments between the wars were forced to evacuate and the maintenance of hundreds of memorial sites was no longer guaranteed. This was a cause of some consternation across Britain, home of many of the 100,000 plus annual visitors to these sites.

¹⁹ Ibid. 5.

²⁰ R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 11.

In *The Times* in 1942, the director of the IWGC, Sir Fabian Ware, attempted to ease the concern:

Some, a few, of the cemeteries and memorials might have been obliterated; if so, the Commission had accurate surveys which would enable them to be reconstructed in detail; others had been damaged, the headstones battered by machine-gun fire, the great Cross of Sacrifice chipped and gashed but standing firm, carrying its scars of war; most of them were undamaged, but neglected and overgrown with weeds, the lawns unkept, the flower beds tangled and disordered.²¹

Despite Ware's determination to equate the damage to the monuments with the wounds and scars of soldiers, one cannot help but feel that the 'decay' of Shelley's 'Ozymandias' is playing out in the graveyards of France and Belgium: 'half sunk, this shattered visage lies.'²² Part of the power of Shelley's poem is the survival of the words on the plinth: 'Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!'²³ The poem's irony turns on the double meaning of 'despair', which is strong enough to constitute a joke. But equally important is the evocation of the power of words to survive and to mean, where stone cannot.

Heffernan's study of 'Ozymandias' ventriloquises Shelley by paraphrasing Horace: "Exegi monumentum petra perennius" – I have built a monument more lasting than stone.'²⁴ The Horatian comparison of words with minerals also resonates in T.S. Eliot's poem 'Defence of the Islands'. Written for the 1941 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Britain at War*, it begins:

Let these memorials of built stone – music's
enduring instrument, of many centuries of
patient cultivation of the earth, of English
verse

be joined with the memory of this defence of
the islands²⁵

²¹ "Damaged Memorials To The Dead," *The Times*, November 12, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

²² Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 550.

²³ Loc.cit.

²⁴ Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 118.

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), 201.

It is an occasional poem, for the exhibition and after Dunkirk, and as such seeks to crystallise, or petrify, the occasion by invoking the memorial. It appears in the very same moment that memorials of the First World War are being battered and conquered by the German advance. Eliot appeals to the architectural permanence of stone, as well as the other crafts – music, poetry and cultivation – as vessels for the preservation of memory and the designation of national spaces. But the suitability of any one of these practices is not taken for granted: instead it is a poem about the moment in which meaning is ascribed to an object or text, of its *becoming* memorial. Eliot recognises both the perceived endurance of stone memorials, and, given the extent to which his poem is required to participate in the ‘war effort’, their role in mourning the deceased and comforting the survivors. Nevertheless, the allusion to Horace reveals his ambivalence about both word and stone, and the disconnection between memory and memorial. The appeal – ‘Let these monuments of built stone [...] be joined with the memory’- is not directed at anyone in particular, indeed, whose responsibility is such a task? It is a line with the rhetoric of a dedicatory speech, even an opening ceremony.

The rhetoric continues as Eliot goes on to document those things that the memorial/poem must capture about Dunkirk – “battleship merchantman, trawler” – and extolling the virtues of those ‘undefeated in defeat, unaltered in victory’, before rounding on the purpose of the memorials:

to say, to the past and future generations
of our kin and of our speech, that we took up
our positions, in obedience to instructions.²⁶

In its final movement the poem both justifies and subverts the memorial. It preserves the memory of the event for future generations perhaps, but it looks backwards as much as forwards, existing to answer to the past, to enjoin the sacrifices of the present to those of past conflicts. And all this in obedience to orders rather than the civilised/civilising cause of ‘cultivation of the earth, of English/ verse’ suggested earlier in the poem. Eliot’s adoption of a statesman-like rhetoric is perhaps the most interesting part of this poem – it is for memorials to *say* above all else, and for this to happen, speech must be thrust upon them.

Eliot would later partially disinherit this piece, stating that it ‘cannot pretend to be verse’, but, as its republication in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (1969) also asserts: ‘its date – just after the evacuation of Dunkirk – and occasion have for me a significance which makes me

²⁶ Loc.cit.

wish to preserve it.’²⁷ Eliot dedicates the preserved poem to Edward McKnight Kauffer, the artist and designer who originally commissioned it for MoMA. Although the quality of the poem is below Eliot’s usual standards, he sees fit to ‘preserve’ this poem as a memorial to the time in which it was composed, in effect fulfilling the promise of enjoining text and memory which the poem itself describes. At the heart of Eliot’s poem is the suggestion that the memorial is in dialogue with the past as much as it is with the future: the notional war memorial of his poem is for “those who followed their forebears/ to Flanders and France”. The next part of this chapter will realise one of the implicit suggestions of the comparison between Auden and Sassoon: the revenant and resonance of the First World War memorial during the Second World War. Both poets write between the wars, amidst the ruins of the First World War and the portents of a new war.

The First World War Memorial in the Second World War

Upon passing a war memorial in Oxford in 1939, the young poet Keith Douglas remarked to his companions that his name would be on the next one.²⁸ Douglas had just enlisted in the cavalry, and although it would be several years before he saw active service, and half a decade before his death in Normandy at the age of 24, he was absolutely right. His name is now engraved under the Fitzjames Arch, between the Front Quad and Fellows’ Quad of Merton College, Oxford, just metres from the rooms which he occupied before his mobilisation (see Figure 3, overleaf). Douglas’s name appears with forty-two other associates of Merton College who fell in the Second World War, and more than double this number of First World War casualties.

Meanwhile, in November 1939, Edwin Lutyens, one of the principal architects of the Imperial War Graves Commission, wrote to the Commission’s founder Major General Sir Fabian Ware to argue for continuity between the First World War memorials and those of the new war: ‘keep the same headstones, the same monuments [...] In a hundred years time 1914 and 1939 will all be part of one war. It is certainly the same sacrifice for the same cause.’²⁹ In the aftermath of the Second World War, as the world began to understand the extent of Nazi atrocities, the perception of the cause would change, and as such, the sacrifice

²⁷ Loc.cit.

²⁸ Graham, *Keith Douglas, 1920-1944; a Biography*, 79.

²⁹ Christopher Hussey, *The Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens* (Antique Collectors’ Club, 1953), 566. Quoted in Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil* (Barnsley, S. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2010), 162-3.

would be viewed differently too. Even now, the largest commemorative event for the Second World War, the anniversary of the D-Day landings, is a celebration of victory over an enemy whose extremism had to be stopped, whereas the current First World War centenary celebrations revolve around the Armistice and cessation of hostilities. Nevertheless, in 1939, young men like Douglas were volunteering for military service looking to emulate the actions of the previous generation, and war memorials were the most visible reminder of their duty. Poets too, were looking to those revenants of the First World War that would help them make sense of the new war.



Figure 3. Ninian Comper, The Merton College War Memorial. 1922. Fitzjames Arch, Merton College, Oxford. (Photographed by the author).

Whilst First World War memorials had become a feature of poetry around the same time they had become a feature of the urban landscape in the early twenties, their proliferation in poetry had not abated by the mid-thirties as a new war loomed on the horizon. Siegfried Sassoon's ekphrastic war memorial poems appear at several intervals between 1919 and 1939. The most prominent texts in this mode are 'Memorial Tablet' (1919), 'On Passing the

New Menin Gate' (1928), and several works from *The Road to Ruin* (1933). These poems allow us to survey the development of the war memorial as a motif in Sassoon's work, beginning with the rawness of the death in 'Memorial Tablet', in which the posthumous voice of a soldier reacts to a memorial visitor: 'he gives my gilded name a thoughtful stare:/ For, though it is low down upon the list, I'm there;/ 'In proud and glorious memory'... that's my due.'³⁰ Sassoon's bitterness at the inadequacy of the war memorial is more visceral in 'On Passing the New Menin Gate' (discussed above) less than a decade later.

By the 1930s, when the futility of the sacrifice of the First World War was even more apparent as Germany began rearmament under Hitler, Sassoon's poetry concentrates on the failure of the monument to remind the public of the lessons of the First World War. As the title of the collection *The Road to Ruin* suggests, Sassoon sees this period as a descent into further barbarity and loss. In the first poem, 'At the Cenotaph', Sassoon writes:

I saw the Prince of Darkness, with his Staff,
 Standing bare-headed by the Cenotaph:
 Unostentatious and respectful, there
 He stood, and offered up the following prayer:
 'Make them forget, O Lord, what this Memorial
 Means; their discredited ideas revive;
 Breed new belief that war is purgatorial
 Proof of the pride and power of being alive;
 Men's biological urge to readjust
 The Map of Europe, Lord of Hosts, increase;
 Lift up their hearts in large destructive lust;
 And crown their heads with blind vindictive peace.'
 The Prince of Darkness to the Cenotaph
 Bowed. As he walked away I heard him laugh.³¹

The pun in the first line on 'staff' inculcates the military hierarchy in Sassoon's devilish caricature. The implication is that 'they' have already forgotten what the memorial means, and the rhyme 'memorial/war is purgatorial' further suggests the purging of memory. Whilst its meaning may be forgettable, the Cenotaph itself comes off far better than the Menin Gate in Sassoon's work. The clause 'unostentatious and respectful' might describe either the Prince of Darkness or the memorial itself, and whilst the syntactic pull seems to favour the devil, 'unostentatious' seems better suited to architecture. Nevertheless, the fact that the devil prays and bows to the Cenotaph does not bode well for its symbolic value.

³⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, "Memorial Tablet," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1947), 104.

³¹ Siegfried Sassoon, "At the Cenotaph," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1947), 201.

Poetry was intricately entwined with First World War memorials from their beginnings, with Rudyard Kipling's role as literary advisor to the Imperial War Graves Commission ensuring that memorials would bear a literary inscription. Many memorials carry the words 'Lest we Forget' from Kipling's poem 'Recessional'. *Lest we Forget* is also the title of a collection of poems by the Sheffield poet Constance Ada Renshaw, published in 1937. Renshaw's poems are largely in the jingoistic sentimental mode of Rupert Brooke, but tempered with a smattering of Owen and Sassoon's mud and protest, and as such reflect the dual nature of the First World War legacy through these two separate and contradictory traditions. Her poem 'The Dumb Men Speak' muses upon a war memorial: 'beneath a flagstone in the Abbey, lies/ The symbol of a mighty host'.³² Presumably the tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, this memorial provokes the spirit of Kipling's 'Lest we Forget' but refocuses it on the conciliatory politics that would enable the Munich Agreement in 1938: 'Our honour dies/ If we betray by shuffling compromise/ the legacy of peace.'

A poem by Margery Smith meditates upon this tomb by imagining the voice of the deceased. 'The Unknown Warrior Speaks' was published in the slim Cambridge volume *Poems of this War by Younger Poets*, edited by Patricia Ledward and Colin Strang, and has been collected in Catherine Reilly's important book *Chaos of the Night: Women's Poetry and Verse of the Second World War*.³³ Smith ventriloquises the Unknown Soldier, advising those who 'softly wane into a shadow' in the new war, that 'you sleep forgotten when you die.'³⁴ The Unknown Warrior in this poem celebrates life after death however, refusing to wane, his 'songs were bombs' and his death suffered in pursuit of a higher ideal: 'at that moment grew/ A loveliness in death.'³⁵ It is a generic vision of death at war, Brookean and patriotic, but it also highlights the symbolic reach of the war memorial. These poems respond to one of the most famous and evocative First World War memorials in the light of a new war, warning that the sacrifices of 1914-18 should not be forgotten. Both poems focus on speech; like Auden and Eliot, these poets realise that the silence of memorials renders them invisible, ineffective.

³² Constance Ada Renshaw, "The Dumb Men Speak," in *Lest We Forget* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1937), 30.

³³ Margery Smith, "The Unknown Warrior Speaks," in *Poems of This War by Younger Poets*, ed. Colin Strang and Patricia Ledward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942), 41. See also Catherine W. Reilly, ed., *Chaos of the Night: Women's Poetry and Verse of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 2008).

³⁴ Loc.cit.

³⁵ Smith, "The Unknown Warrior Speaks."

In the thirties then, the ekphrastic encounter with the war memorial allows the poet to look back to the First World War and to evaluate its aftermath, whilst simultaneously looking forward in uncertainty and anticipation. Geoff Dyer's *The Missing of the Somme* notes that one of the poems that has become a stalwart of commemoration, Laurence Binyon's 'For the Fallen', was written 'before the fallen actually fell', and as such is not a work of remembrance but of the 'anticipation of remembrance: a foreseeing that is also a determining' (Dyer's emphasis in both quotations).³⁶ Binyon's 'incantatory rhythms and mantra-like repetitions' emerge from a very different poetic landscape to the 1930s. The works of witness and protest by Sassoon et al. constitute just one of the factors contributing to far less naive and sentimental poetics in the face of the new war. All the works discussed so far are written pre-war, or very early in the war, before any really heavy losses were sustained and before the Blitz had begun in earnest. Elegising Dunkirk is not quite the same as elegising the Blitz or the Battle of Normandy. Loss is imagined in these works, understood in terms of the memorials and poetry of the First World War; certainly Keith Douglas views, or even valorises, himself in these terms. The projected or anticipated loss is articulated through the traces of the last war.

This prophetic poetry is characteristic of what Lyndsey Stonebridge has called 'the writing of anxiety' in mid-century Britain, as discussed in my Introduction. For Freud, 'anxiety describes a particular state of expecting the danger and preparing for it, even if it may be an unknown one.'³⁷ For Stonebridge, anxiety characterises the work of a number of wartime writers, for whom the uncertainty of the war and its effect on British society is indicative of a relationship between the individual and 'a history whose violence is felt as an extremely poignant type of discontinuity in the very depths of the psyche.'³⁸ For the poets who engage with the war memorial, the violence of history is not just felt deep within the self, but is commemorated very much on the surface. War memorials are historical violence writ large, and they offer a public mode of engaging with the rupture of the First World War, as well as a visible symbol made newly relevant in the Second World War. Auden, Sassoon and Eliot all register the impending violence – and thus, the impending loss – in political, rather than psychic terms, at least as far as these discourses can be separated. The anxiety which their

³⁶ Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London, etc: Penguin Books, 1995), 9.

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in Strachey and Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 12-13.

³⁸ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 6.

poems enact is of a social removal from history, a failure of the state and its memorial apparatus to adequately incorporate the war memorial into policy. The mantra ‘lest we forget’ is forgotten as a new generation of young men are mobilised for active service. In these poems, the war memorial ceases to be commemorative, but rather aids the cyclical, state-induced violence.

By the late thirties, monumentalism was coming under increased criticism from artists and social critics. Kirk Savage’s article ‘The War Memorial as Elegy’ notes that Herbert Read and Lewis Mumford were two of the commentators re-thinking the monumental. In 1938, Herbert Read takes a stab at the work of IWGC:

Art long ago ceased to be monumental. To be monumental, as the art of Michaelangelo or Rubens was monumental, the age must have a sense of glory. The artist must have some faith in his fellowmen, and some confidence in the civilisation to which he belongs. Such an attitude is not possible in the modern world – at least, not in our Western European world. We have lived through the greatest war in history, but we find it celebrated in thousands of mean, false and essentially unheroic monuments. Ten million killed, but no breath of inspiration from their dead bodies. Just a scramble for contracts and fees, and an unconnected desire to make the most utilitarian use of the fruits of heroism.³⁹

Read’s comments come in a review of Picasso’s *Guernica*. Picasso’s response to the modern catastrophe, Read argues, is a new form of monumental art: ‘The only logical monument would be some sort of negative monument. A monument to disillusion, to despair, to destruction. [...] a monument to the vast forces of evil which seek to control our lives: a monument of protestation.’⁴⁰ *Guernica*, Read suggests, is one contemporary piece which achieves this.

Read’s poem, ‘To a Conscript of 1940’, which is reminiscent of Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’, enacts something of this attitude. The poem’s speaker encounters a conscript of the Second World War who appears like a ghost from the previous war:

He turned towards me and I said:
‘I am one of those who went before you
Five-and-twenty years ago: one of the many who never
returned,

³⁹ Herbert Read, “Guernica: A Modern Calvary,” *London Bulletin* VI (October 1938): 6. Reprinted in Ellen C. Oppler, *Picasso’s Guernica*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 217-18.

⁴⁰ Oppler, *Picasso’s Guernica*, 217.

Of the many who returned and yet were dead.⁴¹

Both of the speakers in this poem are rendered dead, just as the figures in Owen's 'Strange Meeting' meet in the afterlife. The boundaries between death and life are blurred as new soldiers resemble the ghosts of old, and survivors and victims are indistinguishable. 'Our victory was our defeat', Read continues, 'we think we gave in vain, the world was not renewed.'⁴² The idea of the hero in Read's criticism and poetry is one who can fight knowing that there is no honour in victory or defeat: 'but you, my brother and my ghost, if you can go/ knowing that there is no reward [...] then honour is reprieved.' In the poem, it does not matter if Read's figures are alive or dead, commemorated, decorated or otherwise: they did not achieve the goals for which they laid down their lives.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the social critic Lewis Mumford was also sceptical of the value of memorials and monuments, and the social forces driving men to commemorate lives and victories. Mumford writes:

The human impulse to create everlasting monuments springs perhaps out of the desire of the living to perpetuate themselves: to overcome the flux and evanescence of all living forms. [...] Renewal through reproduction is the vulgar means of ensuring continuity: this and the transmission of the social heritage through memory, imitation, and the written record. But there is still another means, springing not out of life and its renewing impulses, but out of death: a desire to wall out life, to exclude the action of time, to remove the taint of biological processes, to exclude the active care of other generations by a process of mummification. The primitive burial mounds, the big stones of the Salisbury Plains or Brittany, the Pyramids and Sphinxes of Egypt, the grandiose gestures of a Sargon or an Ozymandias, of a Louis XIV or a Peter the Great: these represent that respect for death which is essentially a fear of life.⁴³

For Mumford then, 'the notion of a modern monument is a contradiction in terms: if it is a monument it is not modern, and if it is modern, it is not a monument.'⁴⁴ Mumford's notions of renewal are particularly pertinent alongside Read's 'To a Conscript'; the speaker of that poem is at once father, brother, likeness and superior officer to the new conscript. Renewal, for Read, is counter-monumental, based on comradeship, empathy and conversation. Kirk Savage cites both Read and Mumford in response to First World War memorials, but it is worth noting that both are writing very late in the inter-war period, indeed with a new war

⁴¹ Herbert Read, "To a Conscript of 1940," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 152.

⁴² Loc.cit.

⁴³ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), 433-434.

⁴⁴ Loc.cit.

already underway, when the failures to promote peace, art and civilisation after the catastrophe of 1914-18 are all too clear; Read is writing in the wake of a fascist massacre at Guernica, a portent of things to come.

‘Beneath this White Cross’: Henderson, Douglas and Jarman

The work of the Imperial War Graves Commission usually relied upon the military to mark sites where soldiers were buried. The speed of battle in the North African campaign, and the distances covered, presented a different challenge to the static trenches of the First World War. In other circumstances, graves were marked with bits of soap box or branches, but such materials were hard to come by in the desert. Instead graves would be marked with battle debris and the soldier’s own kit, and it was the work of the IWGC to pick up these pieces:

From Alamein to the Mareth line they scoured, trying to cover every map co-ordinate, puzzling out the often faulty map references provided by chaplains and burial officers, scanning the desert for some tell-tale bayonet or steel helmet which might betray the existence of a forgotten grave. They would often have to exhume bodies to discover their identities, then re-bury them, place a cross or wooden marker over each grave and plot their positions on the map so that a ‘graves concentration unit’ could bring them into a military cemetery later.⁴⁵

Marking anything in the capricious dunes of the desert was no easy task as Hamish Henderson reports in his notebook in 1942. Responsible for counting the number of vehicles lost in combat, Henderson describes the desert conditions: ‘because of the uncertain distances and directions I ticked them off with a piece of chalk, in order to make sure I was not counting the same ones twice.’⁴⁶ He reprises this role as a desert collector in his ‘Tenth Elegy’, this time imagining the burden of care for the graves: ‘So I turn aside in the benighted deadland/ to perform a duty, noting an outlying/ grave, or restoring a fallen cross-piece./ Remembrancer.’⁴⁷

Despite the practical difficulties encountered by the IWGC in North Africa, of finding and re-interring the dead, the architectural principles of the Commission were the same as in Europe. The architect responsible for building the cemeteries in the desert, Hubert Worthington, ‘was particularly anxious to preserve military associations. “Names like El

⁴⁵ Longworth, *The Unending Vigil*. 178

⁴⁶ Henderson, *Collected Poems and Songs*. 158n.

⁴⁷ Henderson, “Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica,” 2000. 72.

Alamein, Halfaya, Sollum, Tobruk, Acroma, and Mareth” he wrote,” had to be perpetuated.⁴⁸ As we saw in the previous chapter, Hamish Henderson’s *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* abides by this principle in its own way by setting his poems in these famous places, and inscribing the names in the titles. Henderson’s onomastic tributes to the dead operate in a similar manner to the work of the IWGC, documenting and perpetuating sites of mourning.

His ‘Sixth Elogy: Acroma’ is named after the site of the Knightsbridge Military Cemetery at Acroma, Tunisia. For Henderson, the memorial site occasions a resistance to the narratives of sacrifice that are so common in wartime:

...O, to right them

what requiem can I sing in the ears of the living

No blah about their sacrifice: rather tears or reviling
of the time that took them, than an insult so outrageous.
All barriers are down: in the criss-crossed enclosures
where most now lie assembled in their aching solitude
those others lie too – who were also the sacrificed
of history’s great rains, of the destructive transitions.
This one beach where high seas have disgorged them like flotsam
reveals in its nakedness their ultimate alliance.⁴⁹

Death is a leveller here, as it is throughout Henderson’s poem. But this posthumous equity is identifiable in the cemetery itself, the ‘criss-crossed enclosures’ of the dead. There are no barriers between the dead of this war and the sacrificed men of other eras, all of whom occupy this space like ‘flotsam’, washed up on the tides of history. The coastal imagery refers to this desert graveyard’s location just 5km from the sea, but extends to the desert more generally as a liminal space, its fluid sands neither fully sea nor land.

‘Fort Capuzzo’, the title of the ‘Ninth Elogy’, is a German war cemetery:

One evening, breaking a jeep journey at Capuzzo
I noticed a soldier as he entered the cemetery
and stood looking at the grave of a fallen enemy.
Then I understood the meaning of the hard word ‘pietas’
(a word unfamiliar to the newsreel commentator
as well as to the pimp, the informer and the traitor).

⁴⁸ Longworth, *The Unending Vigil*. 179

⁴⁹ Henderson, “Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica,” 2000. 63.

His thought was like this. -- Here's another 'Good Jerry'!
Poor mucker. Just eighteen. Must be hard-up for man-power.
Or else he volunteered, silly bastard. That's the fatal,
the-fatal-mistake. Never volunteer for nothing.
I wonder how he died? Just as well it was him, though,
and not one of our chaps... Yes, the only good Jerry,
as they say, is your sort, chum.
Cheerio, you poor bastard.⁵⁰

The tension between the verbal and the visual is stark here. Henderson displaces the ekphrastic gaze, looking at the soldier who is looking at the grave. Indeed, it is a poem which may have a secondary, undisclosed art object, in addition to the gravestone: Official War Photographer Lt. Ernest Brooks's iconic silhouette of a soldier looking at a grave at Passchendaele (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Ernest Brooks. 22nd August, 1917. Taken during the Third Battle of Ypres. Imperial War Museum, London.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 70

If this is the source, or at the very least, the archetype, then Henderson's colloquial ventriloquism subverts the gravity of the original composition.⁵¹ The poem responds to two art objects then, the grave which the soldier looks upon, and the photograph of a soldier looking at the grave. The crucial word here is 'pietas' as it signals the ambivalence about the visual and the primacy of the verbal. After seeing the picture of the soldier looking at the grave, the speaker understands 'the hard word 'pietas''. The image becomes a conduit to language: rather than words describing images, the image here describes the word. Furthermore, the image fails to describe 'pietas' adequately and the soldier's thoughts are put into words which elucidate the complex mix of emotions felt by the soldier: the sense of difference and of antagonism, but more clearly the empathy, the affectionate, comradely banter. Henderson asks us to rethink the soldierly response to both objects, the grave and the photograph.

Graves also feature in the works of Keith Douglas, and, like Henderson, photography might well be one of the important tropes behind some of these poems. In 'Landscape with Figures', the tomb of a soldier does not only become disordered through neglect but rather begins this way:

But you who like Thomas come
to poke fingers in the wounds
find monuments, and metal posies:
on each disordered tomb
the steel is torn into fronds
by the lunatic explosive.⁵²

Several years after passing the war memorial in Oxford, Douglas returns in his poetry, even more cynically now, to monuments. Sceptical that those at home could possibly believe what the soldiers in North Africa were experiencing, Douglas casts the public as the biblical figure of doubting Thomas. The monuments and graves are quite unlike the sanitised and uniform gravestones of France, or the smooth, regular surfaces of the Cross of Sacrifice. The dead of this poem have been laid to rest by the very 'lunatic explosive' that killed them, the flowers and monuments made from battlefield detritus. If the improvised gravestone cannot provide the closure it is supposed to, the poem itself is a lament, with variants on the dominant 'O' sound constituting all three stressed syllables in 'But *you* who like *Thomas*

⁵¹ It is used by Geoff Dyer, in *The Missing of the Somme*, with the caption 'The Anticipation of Memory', and is on the cover of the 2011 edition.

⁵² Keith Douglas, "Landscape with Figures I," in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 109.

come’, and two of the stresses in each of the following lines: ‘poke/wounds’; ‘monuments/posies’; ‘disordered tomb’; ‘torn/fronds’. The final stress falls on the expressively plosive ‘explosive’, an abrupt and disruptive word with which to finish the lament. The word ‘explosive’ is a beguiling combination of formal completion – the plosive heightens the vowel in a fitting culmination of the ‘O’ sounds and the stress lands in just the right place – the plosive sonic rupture which matches the word’s meaning so precisely. There are few cessations more abrupt than ‘explosives’, both phonetically and literally, and Douglas uses this onomatopoeic effect to emphasise the occasion of death behind the disordered tomb.

Burial is, of course, an important symbolic part of the mourning process, as Douglas’s poem ‘Simplify Me When I’m Dead’, written before he shipped to North Africa, considers in some detail. In the poem, burial is a process of stripping a body down to a skeleton, to a simplified version of that person: ‘the processes of earth/ strip off the colour and the skin [...] and leave me simpler than at birth.’⁵³ This, in time, allows the survivors to decide if the dead are ‘deserving [of] mention or charitable oblivion.’⁵⁴ Burial of the dead ensures their endurance in the memory of those who survive them, its rituals punctuate the death for those who live through it, laying the body to rest permanently in a specific place and at a specific time. One of Douglas’s best known poems from the front, ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’, is about precisely the opposite scenario, an unburied enemy soldier who is ‘abased’, ‘decayed’ and ‘sprawling in the sun.’⁵⁵ Nameless and without a grave, the soldier is ‘mocked by his own equipment.’ His lover, Steffi, whose photograph rests among the artefacts surrounding the body, ‘would weep to see him today/ how on his skin the swart flies move; the dust upon the paper eye/ and the burst stomach like a cave.’⁵⁶ It is a gory image, a body which almost unbearably marks its own death.

Douglas, like most soldiers at the front, would have to bury the dead in temporary graves ready for retrieval and exhumation by the Imperial War Graves Commission. Unlike most soldiers however, Douglas was equipped with a camera, one of the advantages of his additional duties as a camouflage officer, and he recorded a remarkable image of one of these burial sites (Figure 5, overleaf). The photograph, which is housed in the Special

⁵³ Douglas, “Simplify Me When I’m Dead.”

⁵⁴ Loc.cit.

⁵⁵ Keith Douglas, “*Vergissmeinnicht*,” in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 118.

⁵⁶ Loc.cit.

Collections of the Brotherton Library in Leeds, shows a partially buried skull, alongside a damaged helmet and a spade. It is not clear whether the skull is in the process of being buried or exhumed, but the mangled metal of the helmet and the damage to the side of the skull tells its own story.



Figure 5. Leeds, University of Leeds, Brotherton Library Special Collections, MS 20c Douglas/1/Box C/N.

The image shows us the ‘monuments’ and ‘steel torn into fronds’ of this particular disordered tomb and this archival artefact is a significant discovery, helping us to see the war through Douglas’s eyes. Douglas’s illustrations to his battle memoir *Alamein to Zem Zem* dwell on similarly gruesome scenes. The illustrations are framed very much like Douglas’s photograph, looking down on the bodies of the dead. The dead themselves always appear to be writhing and animated, locked in a ‘paroxysm, an orgasm of pain’ as Douglas describes it in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, or like mimes ‘enacting this prone and motionless struggle/ at a queer angle to the scenery’ in ‘Landscape with Figures II’.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, 51; Keith Douglas, “Landscape with Figures II,” in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 110.

The visceral reality captured by Douglas's photograph, and represented in his illustrations, reveals the horror that almost goes unsaid in Longworth's account of the work of the IWGC in the North African desert, that there were damaged and decaying bodies beneath every attempt to clean and fix a grave. Douglas's works return this reality to the sanitising project of the IWGC. In *Alamein to Zem Zem* he discusses the use of helmets and hats as grave markers in a passage which provides remarkable insight into the ways he was thinking about a soldier's death:

The side of the road was littered with derelict vehicles of all kinds, interspersed with neat graves bearing crosses inscribed with the names and rank of German officers and men, surmounted by their eagle-stamped steel helmets. More hastily dug and marked graves were those of Italians, on some of which was placed or hung the ugly green-lined Italian topee. There is something impressive in the hanging steel helmet that links those dead with knights buried under their shields and weapons. But how pathetically logical and human – one of those touches of unconscious comedy which makes it difficult to be angry with them – that the Italians should have supplemented the steel cap with a ridiculous battered cut-price topee. The steel helmet is an impressive tombstone, and is its own epitaph. But the cardboard topee seemed only to say there is some junk buried here, and we may as well leave a piece of rubbish to mark the spot. Perhaps this epitaph strikes nearer the heart of those who read it.⁵⁸

The two monuments here, the 'impressive tombstone' steel helmet and the 'cut-price topee', compete for a suitable commemorative discourse. The German helmets, eagle-stamped like its recent architecture, are suggestive of neo-classical monumental forms which are, even in this metonymic instance, grand and imposing. The Italians, on the other hand, are more shambolic, comedic and altogether more human, and their grave markers highlight the expendability of lives in war; certainly, for Douglas, a more fitting and truthful epitaph.

In the best works of the soldier poet John Jarman, 'El Alamein' (March 1943) and 'At a War Grave' (October 1942), the First World War provides the cultural artefacts which become the means of articulating death. The first of these is the better known work, but 'At a War Grave', a poem which refashions Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' whilst meditating upon the familiar white cross, is an ekphrastic protest poem of some technical merit and interest, which has an intimate bearing on this study. Jarman survived the North Africa campaign, fought in Sicily and was killed, like Keith Douglas, in Normandy, June 1944. Jarman was in the 51st Highland Division and so may have been familiar with Hamish Henderson's song 'The 51st Highland Division's Farewell to Sicily'. His most regularly

⁵⁸ Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, 84.

anthologised poem, 'El Alamein', which appeared in *Oasis*, also answers back to a famous First World War poem, in this case John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields'. McCrae's poem, which inaugurates the poppy as a symbol of First World War remembrance, begins: 'In Flanders fields the poppies blow/ between the crosses, row on row.'⁵⁹ Jarman writes:

There are flowers now, they say, at Alamein
Yes, flowers in the minefields now.
So those that come to view that vacant scene,
Where death remains and agony has been
Will find the lilies grow-
Flowers and nothing that we know.

So they rang the bells for us and Alamein,
Bells which we could not hear:
And to those that heard the bells what could it mean,
That name of loss and pride, El Alamein?
- Not the murk and harm of war,
But their hope, their own warm prayer.

It will become a staid historic name,
That crazy sea of sand!
Like Troy or Agincourt its single fame
Will be the garland for our brow, our claim,
On us a fleck of glory to the end:
And there our dead will keep their holy ground.

But this is not the place that we recall,
The crowded desert crossed with foaming tracks,
The one blotched building, lacking half a wall,
The grey-faced men, sand powdered over all;
The tanks, the guns, the trucks,
The black, dark-smoking wrecks.

So be it: none but us has known that land:
El Alamein will still be only ours
And those ten days of chaos in the sand.
Others will come who cannot understand,
Will halt beside the rusty minefield wires
And find there – flowers.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ John McCrae, "In Flanders Fields," in *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-1918*, ed. Brian Gardner (Reading: Methuen, 1964), 49.

⁶⁰ John Jarman, "El Alamein," in *Poems* (London: Collins, 1945), 21–22.

'El Alamein' is reminiscent of McCrae's rondeau verse form, but Jarman refuses to allow 'El Alamein' to become a refrain in the way 'In Flanders Fields' does for McCrae. Jarman's rhyme scheme instead forces the A1 rhyme 'El Alamein' to fall away in the poem as follows: A1BAABB, A1CAA1CC, ADAADD EFEEFF DGDDGG. The A1 rhyme loses its place at the beginning of the fourth stanza just as El Alamein, disfigured in the 'warm prayer' of those who did not witness the battle, loses its place in the collective consciousness of the soldiers: 'But this is not the place that we recall'. The tight declarative iambic pentameter of this line stands out in a poem which is metrically loose. The poem takes aim at the civilian non-witness, who in Keith Douglas's assessment is not fit to pass judgement on the distant war, as well as at the glorification and facile commemoration of battle sites such as Troy and Agincourt, now hollow signifiers which fail to communicate the experience of the witness.⁶¹

Just as 'El Alamein' channels 'In Flanders Fields', 'At a War Grave' is a direct response to Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier', and, like 'El Alamein', is a formally mutated revision. Where Brooke projects an imaginative and glorious account of his future death 'under an English heaven', Jarman's poem grounds itself at the site of an actual grave.⁶² In Brooke's 'corner of a foreign field that is forever England' the 'rich earth' conceals a 'richer dust', which is a 'body of England's', and is promised 'a pulse of eternal mind.'⁶³ Jarman writes:

No grave is rich: the dust that herein lies
 Beneath this white cross mixing with the sand
 Was vital once, with skill of eye and hand
 And speed of brain. These will not re-arise,
 These riches, nor will they be replaced;
 They are lost and nothing now, and here is left
 Only a worthless corpse of sense bereft,
 Symbol of death and sacrifice and waste.⁶⁴

Jarman's reply to Brooke's Petrarchan sonnet is an incomplete sonnet, an octave without a sestet. The dénouement of the sestet in 'The Soldier' charts the symbolic rise to heaven. Jarman, on the other hand, by rhyming 'herein lies' with 'will not re-arise', emphasises that

⁶¹ Douglas writes in 'Poets in this War' that 'English civilians have not endured any suffering comparable with that of other European civilians, and England has not been heavily bombed long enough for that alone to produce a body of 'war' poetry.' In Douglas, "Appendix B Poets in This War (May 1943)."

⁶² Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier," in *1914 & Other Poems*. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915), 15.

⁶³ Loc.cit.

⁶⁴ John Jarman, "At a War Grave," in *Poems* (London: Collins, 1945), 27.

death is something which takes place ‘*beneath* this white cross’, precluding any hope of ascent. Again the visual representation of death is inadequate; meditating upon the cross, the speaker notes the impossibility of this soldier fulfilling the promise of an afterlife implied by the crucifixion imagery. By breaking the sonnet after the octave, Jarmain refuses to allow his poem the transcendence of a sestet, keeping it firmly at the earthly, sandy, dusty graveside. Nevertheless, the octave, with its almost uninterrupted iambic pentameter (only the fifth line drops a beat and this is picked up by the sixth), and its ABBACDDC rhyme scheme, gives the poem a sense of formal containment, a function like that of the grave itself. ‘At a War Grave’ doubles as both a retort to Brooke and a rival for the ‘white cross’ which prompts the meditation. By cutting short the sonnet, Jarmain critiques the false transcendental promise of the gravestone and provides instead a burial and a memorial of his own.

Jarmain’s poems enact an ekphrastic encounter of some interpretative complexity. On the one hand, the poems look back to the most famous and enduring works of the First World War, certainly among those composed in a sentimental and populist mode. The grave stone which stands for those killed in North Africa thus engenders the thought of those killed in the previous war, and in both poems, the promise of transcendence offered by the predecessor (Brooke and McCrae), is, with hindsight, unfulfilled. But as well as looking back, this is also an anticipatory mode. The grave, in all its actuality, is a marker for the future. Its purpose is to dedicate the site which it occupies to the body and life interred beneath it. Jarmain’s meditations of the memorial are casually (consciously) prophetic, insisting that death should not be treated in the manner of Brooke and McCrae.

In the desert, war graves are important markers and sites of memory, but ones which are under constant threat from the hostile surroundings. Henderson, Douglas and Jarmain all consider the problematic nature of these sites in ekphrastic encounters which are ambivalent about the survival of memory and the rituals of remembrance on the North African front. They test poetics against other modes of remembrance, challenging memorial sites and the poems that find simple consolation in them.

Alun Lewis: ‘To Edward Thomas’

When the literary world cried ‘where are the war poets?’ in the early days of the Second World War, Alun Lewis’s publisher, Phillip Unwin, upon the publication of *Raiders’ Dawn*

in 1942, declared triumphantly that ‘The war poet has arrived at last!’⁶⁵ Cyril Connolly, editor of *Horizon*, noted that the Welsh poet would not satisfy anyone looking for a ‘Rupert Brooke character’, however.⁶⁶ The poems in *Raiders’ Dawn* certainly do not engage in any kind of militaristic or patriotic tubthumping, and Edward Thomas is a much clearer First World War predecessor than Brooke. Lewis’s most famous poem, ‘All day it has rained...’, is, amongst other things, an account of the dreariness of military training, and it mentions Thomas by name. His most successful poems date from the period he spent training in Hampshire, where he also acquainted himself with the work of Edward Thomas. Whilst he was here, Lewis visited the memorial stone dedicated to Thomas on the Shoulder of Mutton hill, near Steep, and wrote about the elegiac encounter with the memorial in ‘To Edward Thomas’.

This section looks at Lewis’s engagement with Thomas in this poem and in ‘All day it has rained...’, to argue that this period of creativity, shortly before shipping to India, marks a brief but intense elegiac engagement with Thomas’s work. Lewis’s identification with Thomas is so complete, that it is worth considering the notion that this period of mourning for a poetic predecessor is really a mode of self-elegising, aligning him with the anticipatory mourning for the self, which is familiar in the works of Sidney Keyes and Keith Douglas.⁶⁷ At the heart of these poems is the drive to preserve the work of Edward Thomas; by incorporating Thomas’s influence, Lewis both perpetuates the legacy of Thomas, and seeks to salvage something of his own by announcing himself among Thomas’s inheritors. Indeed, Thomas would become one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century, in the words of Ted Hughes, he is ‘the father of us all.’⁶⁸

A review of Thomas’s *The Trumpet and Other Poems* by Alun Lewis appeared in the same issue of *Horizon* as ‘All day it has rained...’. In what Paul Fussell calls ‘virtually a prose gloss of the poem’, Lewis writes:

⁶⁵ Michael Sheldon, *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of Horizon* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989).

⁶⁶ Loc.cit.

⁶⁷ Tim Kendall has discussed Douglas and Keyes’s ‘Self-Elegy’ in Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 167-196.

⁶⁸ Ted Hughes made this comment at the opening ceremony of the memorial to the Great War poets in Poets’ Corner, Westminster Abbey in 1985. See Jacek Wiśniewski, *Edward Thomas: A Mirror of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 243. Also quoted in Guy Cuthbertson and Lucy Newlyn, eds., “Introduction: Edward Thomas, Modern Writer,” in *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), 17–28.

I have been garrisoned for six months in Edward Thomas's country and walked his walks. I have sheltered from the rain in the beautiful house he built but did not inhabit. I have read his poems often and often in tent and hut. And now there is this little book to review.⁶⁹

As well as walking Thomas's walk, Lewis talks the talk here. The phrase 'often and often' is lifted from Thomas's 'Over the Hills', one of the poems he wrote at Steep in 1915:

Often and often it came back again
To mind, the day I passed the horizon ridge
To a new country, the path I had to find
By half-gaps that were stiles once in the hedge⁷⁰

In one of Thomas's walking poems, the speaker marches forward only to mournfully look back on these moments: 'I did not know my loss/ Till one day twelve months later suddenly'. Lewis's review also reprises the huts and rains of Thomas's poem 'Rain': 'Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain/ On this bleak hut'. It is compelling to think of Lewis's Edward Thomas in two modes: Thomas striding out across the downs, and Thomas kept inside by the rain, 'remembering again that I shall die', and both of these figures are present in 'All day it has rained...' The poem begins with the rain:

All day it has rained, and we on the edge of the moors
Have sprawled in our bell-tents, moody and dull as boors,
Groundsheets and blankets spread on the muddy ground
And from the first grey waking we have found
No refuge from the skirmishing fine rain
And the wind that made the canvas heave and flap
And the taut wet guy-ropes ravel out and snap.⁷¹

The two parts of this poem are initially somewhat irreconcilable, but the sharp contrast makes absolute sense when the first part is understood as a direct inheritance of Thomas's poetry. As John Pikoulis argues, Lewis responds not just to Thomas's countryside and

⁶⁹ Quoted in Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 214.

⁷⁰ Edward Thomas, "Over the Hills," in *The Collected Poems*, ed. R. George Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 77.

⁷¹ Alun Lewis, "All Day It Has Rained..." in *Selected Poems*, ed. Jeremy Hooker and Gweno Lewis (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981), 23–24.

poetics, but also relates to his temperament. The effect in ‘All day it has rained...’ is, for Pikoulis:

at once dreamy and appalled, the long spun lines moving with sombre deliberation, full of hovering echoes, to their appointed conclusion. How are we to account for this mood, so delicate in its fascination, so ominous in its tendency? Where else but in Edward Thomas, as the poem itself suggests? [...] In both there is a feeling of uselessness or sterility caused by their inability to use the powers they know to be within them, a sense of inner self unrealised. There are words to be written, things to be done, but a fateful listlessness prevents the conception from materialising, leaving the ideal to persist as in a dream, half-glimpsed at, out of reach. (Indeed, Lewis himself saw the war as a wider consequence of such failure.)⁷²

In 1949 Robert Graves suggests that ‘Lewis was the only poet of consequence who served and wrote in World War II.’⁷³ But when *Raiders’ Dawn* was published Lewis had not yet left England or seen action. Edward Thomas then, becomes many things for Lewis: a poetic influence, a similarly temperamental admirer of the Hampshire countryside, a Welsh outside Wales, and a soldier. Edward Thomas’s rain reminds him of death; for Lewis, it is the cessation of life in the bleak war that surrounds him: ‘Tomorrow maybe love; but now it is the rain/ Possesses us entirely, the twilight and the rain.’

It is out of this dreary twilight that Lewis conjures a nostalgic memory of the countryside, and it is here that Lewis identifies with his other version of Thomas-as-walker:

And I can remember nothing dearer or more to my heart
Than the children I watched in the woods on Saturday
Shaking down burning chestnuts for the schoolyard’s merry play,
Or the shaggy patient dog who followed me
By Sheet and Steep and up the wooded scree
To the Soulder O’ Mutton where Edward Thomas brooded long
On death and beauty – till a bullet stopped his song.⁷⁴

Again, Pikoulis is one of the Lewis’s most eloquent readers: ‘Perhaps the ‘shaggy dog’ carries with it overtones of a structural metaphor, the long-drawn-out tale that comes to a surprise ending whose effect depends on the flat stretches that precede it.’⁷⁵ The reading of

⁷² John Pikoulis, “Alun Lewis and Edward Thomas,” *Critical Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1981): 27-28.

⁷³ Graves, Addendum to ‘The poets of World War II,’ 1949, quoted in Michael Sheldon, *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of Horizon* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989) p. 67-9.

⁷⁴ Lewis, “All Day It Has Rained...”

⁷⁵ Pikoulis, “Alun Lewis and Edward Thomas”, 28.

the ‘shaggy dog’ is compelling, but the ‘flat stretches’ are perhaps rougher than he acknowledges: the image of children ‘shaking down burning chestnuts’ contains some menace, especially coupled with the dropping of bombs on Rome earlier in the poem. The dog, and Lewis’s autobiographical speaker, both follow the poet in his walks, and the village names, Sheet and Steep are coincidentally appropriate descriptors for Thomas’s activities, on the page and up the hills of Hampshire.

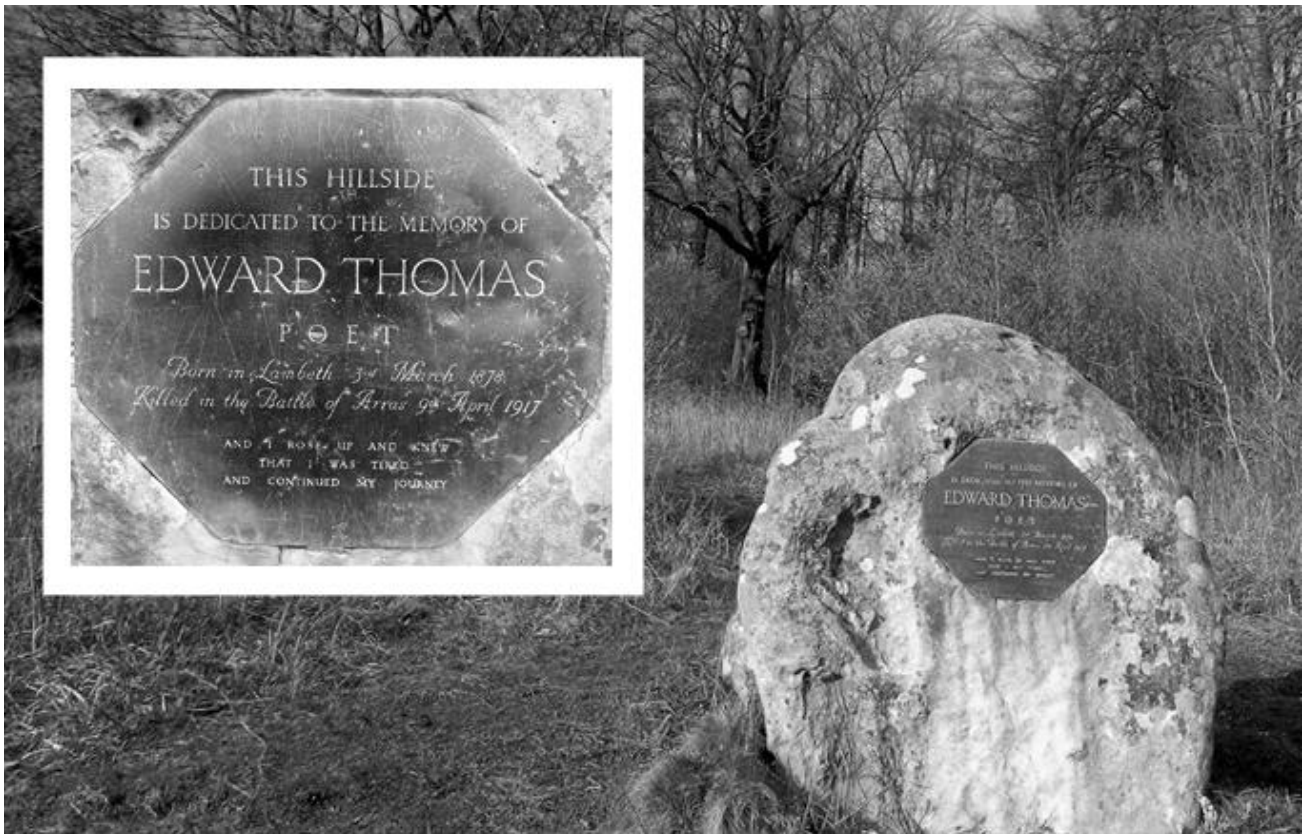


Figure 6. The Edward Thomas memorial stone near Steep, erected in 1935, with inset detail.

Lewis’s identification with Thomas is characteristic of the elegy as practiced more widely in the mid-century: the yearning for identification with the poet is tempered by the cutting short of his life and his work, in this case by the violence of war. Lewis, keen to follow in his footsteps, quite literally here, is also forced to acknowledge his violent death, and thus, the possibility of his own death in combat. Yet the most crucial factor in this engagement with Thomas is the ekphrastic encounter with the memorial stone erected by Walter de la Mare on the hillside near Steep Church, Hampshire, in 1937 (Figure 6). This memorial is unlike those of the Imperial War Graves Committee which have dominated this chapter. Instead it is a

roughly hewn piece of limestone, adorned with a simple, octagonal brass plaque which bears the inscription:

THIS HILLSIDE
IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
EDWARD THOMAS
POET

Born in Lambeth 3rd March 1878
Killed in the Battle of Arras 9th April 1917

AND I ROSE UP, AND KNEW
THAT I WAS TIRED,
AND CONTINUED MY JOURNEY

The quotation is from Thomas's 1911 short prose work 'The End of a Day'. Where 'All day it has rained...' follows Thomas's footsteps and some of the familiar staples of his poetry, 'To Edward Thomas' is addressed to the poet, and is both an elegy and one of the most sustained examples of war memorial ekphrasis. 'To Edward Thomas (On visiting the memorial stone above Steep in Hampshire)', as it is fully titled, is written in loose blank verse, punctuated with metrical variation and rhyme - most notably in the final rhymed couplet, whose hypermetric second line announces the death of Edward Thomas. It has four parts: the first two are octets (later building to the crescendo of a sonnet), as Lewis's autobiographical speaker climbs up from Sheet to Steep, and it is in the first of these that Lewis encounters the memorial stone for Edward Thomas:

On the way up from Sheet I met some children
Filling a pram with brushwood; higher still
Beside Steep church an old man pointed out
A rough white stone upon a flinty spur
Projecting from the high autumnal woods....
I doubt if much has changed since you came here
On your last leave; except the stone; it bears
Your name and trade: 'To Edward Thomas, Poet.'⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Alun Lewis, "To Edward Thomas," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Jeremy Hooker and Gweno Lewis (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981), 25.

The title of the poem functions both to address Edward Thomas, as the poem does, but also to quote, or rather misquote, the text from the memorial. This disrupts the position of the speaker, who is at once speaking about Thomas's memorial and to Thomas himself. It is only upon the encounter with the memorial that the speaker directly addresses Thomas as 'you', the ellipsis at the end of the fifth line appearing to shift the narrative perspective. The memorial stone thus conjures the presence of Thomas, rather than his memory, and Lewis quotes selectively from the memorial so as to dismiss the words which confirm Thomas's death.

The ekphrastic encounter occasions a kind of elegiac embodiment of Thomas, a refusal to acknowledge that the memorial stands for his death, but rather conjures him back into the realm of the living. The memorial itself appears to exist outside the natural space of the rest of the poem: its 'rough white' properties, characteristic of the chalk of the South Downs, mark it in contrast to the 'flinty spur' of the hill. It is at once *of* the surrounding countryside, and bestowed unnaturally *on* this spot. Like Thomas's nature poems, it is a human embellishment faithful to, and wrought from, the land, but nevertheless, irreconcilably its other. Its 'projection' makes it stand out, and seems also to bestow it with the gift of speech. Or, more compellingly, it occasions the pseudo-psychological (and conscious) projection of poet onto subject, poet onto poet, poet into nature, which characterises the rest of Lewis's elegy, stemming from the identification of I/my with you/your. Beyond poetics, which I return to momentarily, Lewis's identification with Thomas is characterised by a melancholy sense of affinity and separation; Lewis writes 'my cares weighed heavily as yours' and 'like you I felt somehow apart,/ lonely and exalted by the friendship of the wind', qualities of the memorial stone as well as of Thomas.⁷⁷

The memorial stone is thus central to the elegy which it occasions. It operates as the ekphrastic object of the poem, and the encounter with it provokes an outpouring of language in response to the memorial. In Kennedy's appreciation of ekphrases, the encounter consists 'of two spheres of action coming into contact, with a consequent change of direction or velocity.'⁷⁸ Certainly we can see this at work in Lewis's poem: whereas 'All day it has rained...' professed, not unambitiously, but perhaps derivatively, to follow in Thomas's footsteps, this poem signals a greater responsibility to the poet. Lewis's speaker walks at the end of 'All day it has rained...', and keeps walking at the beginning of 'To Edward Thomas', eventually finding the memorial stone. After this encounter he slows and sits, as the

⁷⁷ Loc.cit.

⁷⁸ Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere*, 31.

identification with Thomas is consummated in the poem's third part, a sonnet with a crescendo of natural beauty in the neo-romantic mode of Thomas. Lewis describes a view of yew trees and ridges wherein sunlight's:

...discerning fingers
Softly explore the distant wooded acres,
Touching the farmsteads one by one with lightness
Until it reached the Downs, whose soft green pastures
Went slanting sea- and skywards to the limits
Where sight surrenders and the mind alone
Can find the sheeps' tracks and the grazing.

And for that moment Life appeared
As gentle as the view I gazed upon.⁷⁹

Having learned from the best of Thomas, Lewis's portrait of the English countryside contains a subtext of contemporary anxiety. Having followed the view as far as the eye can see, Lewis encounters the moment when sensory perception fails, which, 'sea- and skywards', is also the edge of the nation. For Lewis, as for many young men in the early forties, sea and sky were terms that indicated shipping out, leaving the gentleness of the known, seen countryside for the ungentle, alien war. That sight 'surrenders' beyond this horizon both militarises the mechanics of the body, and is also suggestive of death in this liminal zone. Deprived of body, the mind reverts to the pastoral mode to make sense of death, seeking out sheep-tracks within the familiar internal world, rather than the unknowable external beyond. We might recall again 'Over the hills', where Thomas writes 'Often and often it came back again/ To mind, the day I passed the horizon ridge/ To a new country.'⁸⁰

The poem turns in its fourth movement. If the memorial had seemed to bring Thomas alive for Lewis's speaker, occasioning a climactic poetic hilltop fervour, distance from it, in space and time, returns the narrator to the world of the living and confines Thomas to history. The mode of address does not change, the speaker continues in the second person, but rather than the escapism of the landscape which he experienced with Thomas, he returns us to the impossibility of describing that landscape in verse and the inconvenience of reality:

Later, a whole day later, I remembered
This war and yours and your weary

⁷⁹ Lewis, "To Edward Thomas", 26.

⁸⁰ Thomas, "Over the Hills" 77.

Circle of failure and your striving
 To make articulate the groping voices
 Of snow and rain and dripping branches
 And your love that ailing in itself cried out
 About the straggling eaves and ringed candles
 With shadows slouching round your buried head...⁸¹

We can read the inscription on the Edward Thomas memorial, elided earlier in the poem, in these lines. The ‘weary circle’ describes Thomas’s ‘I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey’. Lewis goes on to describe the mundane and the banal details of Thomas’s life: his marriage: ‘there was no ease/ for you, or Helen’; ‘And wedding anniversaries as cold/ As dates in history’; and his children: ‘or those small perplexed/ Children of yours who only wished to please.’⁸² Thomas’s death at the end of the poem thus emerges ambivalently from the difficulties of life and art:

More urgent as all else dissolved away
 [...]

 the dream
 Emerging from the fact that folds a dream,
 The endless rides of stormy-branchèd dark
 Whose fibres are a thread within the hand –

Till suddenly, at Arras, you possessed that hinted land.⁸³

The ‘hinted land’ of this final line is capricious and complex. Perhaps it represents a sort of Biblical Promised Land, or afterlife, or a realisation of the dreamland finally free of the ‘fact’ of life. The landscape around Arras is chalky, like Hampshire, and there is a sense of a homecoming in death. It is perhaps the landscape which is hinted at in ‘Over the Hills’ (‘I passed the horizon ridge/ To a new country’⁸⁴). ‘Hinted land’ also echoes ‘hinterland’ and thus presents a sense of the near-interior of countries either side of the channel. In Lewis’s poems, the interior is a place of peace and beauty, and the exterior, beyond horizon and coast, is unknown. ‘Possessed’ also works hard here, doubling as the ownership of the land, and the haunting of it, just as Thomas’s revenant possesses Lewis’s poem.

The final line, which hints at closure, is anything but a reconciliation of Edward Thomas with the land he loved: the land might be dreamscape, or Lewis’s creation, and his sudden

⁸¹ Lewis, “To Edward Thomas”, 26.

⁸² Ibid. 26-27.

⁸³ Ibid. 27.

⁸⁴ Thomas, “Over the Hills” 77.

possession of it is more problematic than it is consolatory. It hints also at another detail from the memorial stone which Lewis elided from his poem, that it is the entire hillside that is dedicated to Thomas's memory, rather than just the stone.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed a number of ekphrastic poems which make war memorials their object. No single model of ekphrasis quite encapsulates all the different modes of speaking about war memorials demonstrated here, from Auden's suspicion of the representational quality of memorials to Sassoon's vitriolic rejection of their commemorative potential, or Jarman and Lewis's reconfiguration of First World War poetry and poets at memorial sites. However, all these poems do share a concern for mourning and memory, and the literary encounter with the war memorial is, fundamentally, a question of the role of poetry in the commemoration of war. In 'Snakeskin and Stone', which is not an ekphrastic poem but is very much concerned with the notion of commemoration, Keith Douglas writes of:

a whole city, inhabited by lovers
murderers, workmen and artists
not much recognized: all
who have no memorial
but are mere men. Even the lowest
never made himself a mask of words or figures.⁸⁵

The poem raises the question of the un-memorialised life, the value of the not-much-recognised. It suggests at once that memorials elevate the memorialised above the realm of 'mere men', yet at the same time constitute 'a mask' which the very lowest would not construct for themselves.

These issues are as much about language as they are about stone memorials. Douglas continues:

The words are dying in heaps
in the papers they lie in rows
awaiting burial. The speaker's mouth
like a cold sea that sucks and spews them out

⁸⁵ Keith Douglas, "Snakeskin and Stone," in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 105–6.

with insult to their bodies. Tangled they cruise
like mariners' bodies in the grave of ships.⁸⁶

Here, other forms of commemoration are scrutinised; the mass graves of war are grafted onto the image of newspaper columns, and the speaker, whose 'public speech/ I hate' fails precisely to offer the closure of mourning by burying the bodies at sea. Douglas would return to similar sucking imagery in 'Actors waiting on the wings of Europe', a late, unfinished poem which describes the 'sucking mouth of the day that swallowed us all/ into the stomach of war.'⁸⁷ Douglas focuses on the mouth as both an organ of rhetoric and a sucking, swallowing force. This recognition of the power of language over the fate of the dead treats memorials and poetry, ritual and rhetoric all as part of a discourse of remembrance.

⁸⁶ Loc.cit.

⁸⁷ Keith Douglas, "Actors Waiting in the Wings of Europe," in *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), 125.

6. Conclusion

Poetry's staging of voices, the memory of words and forms, casts a critical and artistic light on the precedents and predecessors that contribute to new works of literature. Second World War poetry is one specific moment in which the range of the inherited discourses was widely shared and identifiable, the precedent of the First World War and the impetus of modernism prompting a number of poets to turn towards the same voices in their representation of the new war. This thesis has identified and traced a number of key influences on the poets of the Second World War, and, as my research developed, it became increasingly clear that the important writers were not necessarily the most obvious candidates in the development of English war poetry. Whilst the influence of Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon might well be expected, the significant presence of Freud and the widespread impact of Rilke seem less immediately germane to the representation of war. With Eliot's modernist aesthetics and Yeats, modified in the guts of living poets, also shaping the scene of writing, the Second World War fell at a particularly rich moment for poetic style. Yet, as the First World War had shown, global conflicts bring into question the very nature of representation, and shock the sometimes parochial landscape of contemporary poetry. When war broke out in 1939, massive losses were expected and the public prepared to observe huge projects of remembrance. The task of the poet would be to search for new modes of representing death and mourning.

The First World War was unprecedented, but the Second World War had the First as its precedent. In 'To Edward Thomas', Alun Lewis writes that after his visit to the memorial stone: 'a whole day later, I remembered/ This war and yours.'¹ Writing about both wars as a single memory emphasises the multidirectional nature of memory as it exists in culture; two wars in one breath, not conflated, but in dialogue. Poetry gives access to the past, but does so in the present. Memory works the same way that poetry works, by recycling forms, recognising sounds and rhythms, apprehending echoes and puzzling over gaps. This thesis has shown that war poetry is a particularly stark case of this, the fractious and contingent nature of representation leaning more heavily on precedent when faced with limit experience. I have discussed the manifold ways that the catastrophe of the First World War was still being negotiated and revisited, the wound opened up long after the fact. That

¹ Lewis, "To Edward Thomas."

process has continued, and is, of course, a *condition* of history and memory rather than an isolated phenomenon. This thesis is confined to the years 1939-1945, with a little leeway either side, a choice made in order to elucidate the specific conditions of those years for the writing of war, and to attend to a small and relatively understudied canon of war poetry in the context of wider movements and trends in mid-century culture. The many submerged voices and late encounters discussed in these pages emerge and occur in the specific moment of the Second World War, a moment wherein the trauma of the First World War appears to poets to be happening again. It is an anxious framework which the work of Lyndsey Stonebridge on Freud and mid-century British culture has helped to understand.

In this thesis, I have engaged with current debates surrounding memory and mourning, and tapped into ongoing conversations regarding the Second World War poets. The new readings and research undertaken contribute to the existing scholarship on each individual poet. The archival material on Henderson and Douglas opens up new avenues of exploration for their work, particularly the identification of Rilke as a key influence on Douglas's most important war writing. I have shown how Douglas accessed his work through the translations of Ruth Speirs during his service in North Africa, and identifying the extent of Speirs's small but important role in Second World War literature is one of this thesis's most useful by-products, building on work by Roger Bowen in *Many Histories Deep* and Tim Neat's biography of Hamish Henderson. *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* has long been a staple of Second World War poetry anthologies, but critical engagement has hitherto been somewhat fragmentary for a poem of such length and complexity. Material from the Hamish Henderson archive has contributed to my dissection and interpretation of his poem, helping me make a case for the influence of Rilke and Ruth Speirs, as well to situate other key voices in *Elegies* such as Hölderlin, Eliot and Cavafy. I have shown how his poem is composed of powerful scraps scavenged from his experience of the North African Front, including literary and non-literary fragments related directly to the sites and memorials of the desert war.

As well as the existing canon of war poetry, I have brought some marginal voices into play as well, particularly John Jarmain, whose work has a formal merit worthy of discussion. This thesis also throws new light on a number of familiar writers, as well as highlighting the seminal influence of Freud and Rilke for poets of the Second World War. My approach to H.D. acknowledges her as an important voice on the war as well as on Freud, and brings these two preoccupations into dynamic interplay in her poetry and prose. The importance of the two wars in framing her poetry and her autobiographical writing cannot, I believe, be overstated. My approach to Auden is also unusual in treating him primarily as a war poet.

That Auden was concerned with contemporary politics and war is hardly a new discovery, but the frames of memory and mourning highlight key tropes in his wartime work which show him to be an important pioneer for the poets growing up with him as a role model. In many ways, this study takes its bearings from Auden's late modernist and post-Freudian reflections on poetry, mourning and commemoration in time of war. Auden figures in every chapter, apart from that on Hamish Henderson, as a point of departure or return. The Second World War was an important moment for Auden as a man and a poet, a moment of transition and rupture, new beginnings in America, stylistic changes, and ideological upheavals, and putting Freud to rest is a key symbolic gesture for a poet whose work was always a critique of 'the epoch'.

If the broad question of this thesis is 'how did British poets tackle the crisis of representation and commemoration occasioned by the Second World War', the progression of thought which I have pursued through multidirectional, palimpsestic and ekphrastic models of poetry begs the follow-up questions: 'how is the Second World War represented in poetry *now*? How does its poetry contribute to the discourses of memory and commemoration surrounding other conflicts?'

The Second World War's afterlife in poetry is complicated by the delayed articulation and understanding of the Holocaust and the extent to which these events can or should ever be distinct in memory and culture. To make a tendentious but illustrative distinction, the soldier's experience of the Second World War has become the stuff of Hollywood, while the Holocaust has largely been explored through novels and life-writing, the new genre of testimony, and the lens of post-structuralist theory. Between this and Theodor Adorno's famously prohibitive (but also over-used and often misunderstood) maxim 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', poetry in English has not had as clear a voice in apprehending the legacy of the Second World War in comparison to the regularly revisited poetry of the First World War.² Nevertheless, it is a subject which has been tackled by many important poets, from Phillip Larkin and Stevie Smith, through Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill and James Fenton, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, to Ciaran Carson, Tom Paulin, Andrew Motion and Carol Ann Duffy (to name but a handful of the most prominent British and Irish writers).

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, ed. Thomas McCarthy, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), 34.

The project of documenting the legacy of the Second World War in poetry and of its poetry's own afterlife has been given some attention. Antony Rowland's work on British Holocaust poetry, primarily Hughes, Plath, Hill and Harrison, considers the ways this catastrophe has been imagined at a historical and geographical remove. Rowland has also considered the work of the *Oasis* poets in light of recent studies of perpetrator testimony, showing how the field of Holocaust and Trauma Studies can contribute to wider interpretation of wartime culture.³ Roger Bowen's *Many Histories Deep* has pursued the impact of the Cairo literati forward into the postcolonial moment of the sixties, particularly through the work of Lawrence Durrell, but with meticulous attention to *Personal Landscape* as an originary site of anti-colonial resistance. Jahan Ramazani's work in *The Hybrid Muse* and *A Transnational Poetics* has further opened up the field of global poetics, and Bowen's thesis, now twenty years old, is ripe for revisiting.⁴ As well as the international perspectives and global reach of the work of Auden and H.D., a poet like polyglot Scottish-nationalist Hamish Henderson, who was documenting obscene soldier ballads whilst he was incorporating ancient and contemporary Egyptian sites and sounds into his work, is, in many ways, the most international of the poets studied here, and his work offers perhaps the best imaginative documentation I have come across of life and service in North Africa during the war. He is also a survivor of the war who would go on to become an important writer, scholar and collector of folk songs and a vocal (musical) anti-apartheid activist. The acquisition of his papers by the University of Edinburgh library from the Hamish Henderson Archive Trust in 2013 gives scholars a new opportunity to assess the value of his wartime work, as well as his post-war life as a scholar and collector of folk-songs. These two projects have often remained distinct in scholarship on his work, but this thesis begins to link them through the focus on Henderson as a scavenger or collector of fragments of local and literary significance in wartime as well as peacetime.

Gareth Reeves notes the dilemma of the non-combatant war poet: 'what right have non-participants to speak of agonies they have not experienced directly? Yet to maintain silence is an act of wilful ignorance, to be blind to the altered terrain one finds oneself inhabiting, is

³ See Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); A. Rowland, "The Oasis Poets: Perpetrators, Victims, and Soldier Testimony," *Comparative Literature* 63, no. 4 (2011): 366–82.

⁴ See Roger Bowen, *Many Histories Deep: The Personal Landscape Poets in Egypt, 1940-45* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995); Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

to be, however unknowingly, complicit.’⁵ This paradox is couched in terms familiar from Holocaust Studies, but as poems like James Fenton’s ‘A German Requiem’ and Seamus Heaney’s ‘A Sofa in the Forties’ show, the cultural representations of the Holocaust and of the war have become intimately linked in memory.⁶ Whilst non-combatant poets may not have witnessed the war directly, they nevertheless contribute to the way war is understood, sometimes by giving voice to those aspects of the war that are, wilfully or otherwise, forgotten or misremembered. Commemorative culture, as this thesis has shown through, say, the anger of Sassoon at war memorials, or Jarman’s careful dismantling of Brooke’s rhetoric, is rarely equipped to tell the whole story, or attend to the many conflicting perspectives of war.

Contemporary poets also write in the gaps left by official or popular narratives of the Second World War. Northern Irish poet Michael Longley’s war poems, particularly those about his father, a veteran of both World Wars, have drawn attention to commemoration as a point of conflict in Ireland due to the continuing resentment of the British military. In a line that mixes T.S. Eliot’s ‘forgetful snow’ with the contentiousness of the commemorative poppy, Longley writes that ‘no matter how heavily the snow may come down/ we have to allow the snow to wear a poppy.’⁷ Another Northern Irish poet, Ciaran Carson, weaves an intricate narrative in the poem ‘Dresden’, which links the destruction of Dresden by Allied bombers with the Northern Ireland conflict through the memory of the protagonist, Horse Boyle. Horse recalls flying over Dresden as a rear gunner: ‘As he remembered it, long afterwards, he could hear, or almost hear/ Between the rapid desultory thunderclaps, a thousand tinkling echoes.’⁸ This deep sonic memory echoes the tinkling cans of Horse’s caravan described in the first stanza: ‘You couldn’t go near the place without something falling over:/ A minor avalanche would ensue – more like a shop bell, really.’⁹ The tinkling

⁵ Gareth Reeves, “‘This Is Plenty. This Is More than Enough’: Poetry and the Memory of the Second World War,” in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 579.

⁶ See Seamus Heaney, “A Sofa in the Forties,” in *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), 11, and James Fenton, *A German Requiem: A Poem* (Edinburgh: Salamander Press, 1981).

⁷ Michael Longley, “Buchenwald Museum,” in *Collected Poems*, 2006, 227. I have discussed Longley’s commemorative poetry and the place of the poppy in his work elsewhere. See Sebastian Owen, “‘From One April to Another’: Remembering and Acknowledging the Holocaust in the Poetry of Michael Longley,” *Irish Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (July 2014): 358–73.

⁸ Ciaran Carson, “Dresden,” in *The Irish for No* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1988), 15.

⁹ *Ibid.* 11.

of bells is, like Proust's Madeleine, the trigger of a series of memories which recall events from the Troubles and lead back to the Second World War.

What is most striking about the poems of Longley and Carson is how quickly the distinctions between conflicts are broken down by the recourse to individual experience and collective memory. This is not a process of simplification and conflation but rather a careful negotiation and expression of the threads of memory which link these historical moments. This negotiation results in poetry of subtly juxtaposed and counterpoised representations, which places memories in a continuum of historic violence. These poems do not attempt to master the difficulty of representing and recalling conflict. Rather, they portray the relationship of the subject to time, what Lyndsey Stonebridge describes as the attempt to stay in history. Rilke's description of his experience of the First World War, discussed in Chapter 3 and appreciated by Auden, is, I think, a valuable account of the work of the non-combatant war poet: "always thinking it must come to an end, not understanding, not understanding. Not to understand: yes, that was my entire occupation in these years."¹⁰

The power of Rilke's statement, and its appeal to Auden, is that 'not understanding' is not passive. This is an entirely conscious act on Rilke's part, not a refusal to understand, but rather an open hospitality to the otherness of war, the violence and loss which is beyond expression and escapes representation. Contemporary non-combatant poets are increasingly drawn to the 'found poem' as a mode of expression which does not assume knowledge about war or prioritize the voice of the poet over the voice of the witness. Recent work by the American poet Jorie Graham and the former British Poet Laureate Andrew Motion has incorporated soldier testimony alongside other sources, literary and non-literary, published and unpublished, to create poetic collages of witnessing war, not unlike Hamish Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*. Charles's Reznikoff's *Holocaust* is perhaps the exemplary model here, a long 'found poem' which repeats in verse, almost verbatim, court room testimony. Sue Vice describes Reznikoff's project as the 'memory of the witness's memory' arguing that 'the very notion of versifying material from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials suggests both preservation and immolation, as if Holocaust testimony has become part of an epic set in the fixed past.'¹¹ This notion of the 'memory of the witness's memory' describes how Graham and Motion use 'found testimony' in their poetry, but rather than the 'fixed past' described by Vice, both poets use testimony in projects which reach across several wars, including the Second World War and recent conflicts in Iraq and

¹⁰ Quoted in Auden, "Poet in Wartime." 73-75

¹¹ Sue Vice, "Holocaust Poetry and Testimony," *Critical Survey* 20:2 (2008), 15-17.

Afghanistan. Theirs is a fluid past, illuminated by recent conflicts, and the experience of soldiers in the Second World War provides a precedent to express the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

These recent poets are also linked by the ways in which their poems inhabit the commemorative spaces of Normandy, the beaches where the D-Day landings took place, and the nearby cemeteries. Jorie Graham's collection *Overlord* (2005) incorporates material from accounts of the Normandy Campaign of 1944 from, among other sources, David Kenyon Webster's *Parachute Infantry: An American Paratrooper's Memoir of D-day and the Fall of the Third Reich* and the collection of eye-witness testimonies in Charles Masters's *Glidermen of Neptune: The American D-Day Glider Attack*.¹² Although some of Graham's quotations are verbatim, these works are not 'found poems' in any simple sense, but the testimony is there as a way to stage voices and to bear witness to the suffering endured by the veterans. Andrew Motion's *The Customs House* (2012) contains poems which are professedly 'found poems'. Motion versifies extracts from *Spoken from the Front* by Andy McNab, which contains accounts of the Afghanistan conflict, and uses these alongside anecdotes from his own father about the Normandy campaign of the Second World War. The layering of testimonial accounts in the landscapes of Normandy makes these collections feel like palimpsests, and both poets use Normandy as a way to discuss more recent conflicts, suggesting that these accounts of war operate like multidirectional screen memories, drawing links between soldiers' experiences across different conflicts.

The first third of Motion's *The Customs House* deals with war and the poems recall a trip the poet took to Normandy with his war-veteran father, retracing his movements during the Second World War and visiting the grave of Keith Douglas. Motion has spoken of his fondness for the war poets: 'there's a sense in which I'm in love with them, with Owen, Douglas and Thomas. I feel very close to them.'¹³ Motion's comments link Douglas with Wilfred Owen, the most widely read of the First World War poets, and Edward Thomas, one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century, recognizing Douglas among the most influential war poets. Douglas is a key voice in Graham's work as well, with extracts from 'How to Kill' incorporated into the poem "*Praying (Attempt of June 8 03)*," treated in much

¹² Webster, David Kenyon. *Parachute Infantry: An American Paratrooper's Memoir of D-day and the Fall of the Third Reich*. New York: Delta, 1994; Masters, Charles J. *Glidermen of Neptune: The American D-Day Glider Attack*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995.

¹³ David Whetstone, "Former Poet Laureate Sir Andrew Motion Heads for the Customs House," *The Journal*, accessed July 6, 2015, <http://www.thejournal.co.uk/culture/arts/former-poet-laureate-sir-andrew-6154391>.

the same way as the soldier testimony in *Overlord*. The focal point of Normandy, and Douglas's grave in particular, as a site of commemorative pilgrimage, demonstrates a very similar dynamic to that which this thesis has identified, the reaching back to a common predecessor and authoritative poetic voice on war in order to authorise and inspire modern war poetry. The final section of this thesis shows how the dynamic of turning to poetic precedent in order to represent memory and mourning continues post-1945 with recourse to the work of Keith Douglas.

After Keith Douglas

It is fair to say that the Second World War poets are an ill-defined group, or no grouping at all. There is little recognition of the work of Alun Lewis, Hamish Henderson and Sidney Keyes outside of poetry circles and university literature departments, and often, as I have found, within those departments as well. Even Keith Douglas, probably the Second World War's most famous soldier poet, has only a small place in the popular consciousness, and certainly not the widespread recognition among the general public commanded by the likes of Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. Edna Longley writes that the "tradition", as manufactured by academies and anthologies, still leaves Douglas on the margin.¹⁴ Douglas is recognised by other poets however; Geoffrey Hill describes his as an 'ambivalent status – at once "established" and overlooked.'¹⁵ In 1987, writing the introduction to Douglas's *Complete Poems*, Ted Hughes could refer to a poll of Poetry Society members three years earlier that placed Douglas in their top ten favourite poets.¹⁶ For Hughes, 'his evident solidity has been unveiled by a very gradual and quite well-observed lifting of the mists.'¹⁷ Hughes, along with Desmond Graham, was one of the chief contributors to the reversal of Douglas's fortunes, after his work had fallen into obscurity after the war. In recent years, Douglas has become the kind of touchstone for British poets that Rilke and Thomas were in the forties. Since 2001, the British and American return to combat in Afghanistan and the Middle East has prompted poets to return to war poetry to meet the challenges of articulating a new period of conflict.

¹⁴ Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1987), 94.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Hill, "'I in Another Place': Homage to Keith Douglas," *Stand* 6, no. 4 (1964): 6.

¹⁶ Ted Hughes, "Introduction (1987)," in *The Complete Poems*, by Keith Douglas (London: Faber & Faber, Limited, 2011), xviii.

¹⁷ *Loc.cit.*

The popularity of Douglas among poets owes a great deal to Desmond Graham's tireless and lifelong project to bring Douglas's work and archive into print.¹⁸ If Graham is Douglas's custodian, Ted Hughes is perhaps his most important advocate, and his introductions to Douglas's poems helped, and continue to help, find new audiences. Cornelia D. J. Pearsall's excellent article 'The War Remains of Keith Douglas and Ted Hughes' documents Hughes's and Sylvia Plath's discovery and promotion of Douglas; Plath, who was born twelve years after Douglas, said 'Both of us mourn this poet immensely and feel he would have been like a lovely big brother to us. His death is really a terrible blow and we are trying to resurrect his image and poems.'¹⁹ In 1987, Hughes returned to Douglas, comparing his poetic achievement to Wilfred Owen's: 'Like Owen's, though so different from his, it is an all-purpose style, stripped to the functional minimum, open to experience and exploratory, a kit for emergency use under adverse, extreme circumstance, yet capable of the intensity, grace and music of a high art.'²⁰ The notion of a 'kit for emergency use' hits the nail on the head when it comes to understanding Douglas's afterlife in poetry. Many writers have turned to his work as way to make sense of the fractious present in which they write, drawing upon his poetry to describe other conflicts. Here I want to pursue this briefly in the work of Geoffrey Hill, Michael Longley, Jorie Graham and Owen Sheers. Douglas's reach is extensive and he has also featured prominently in the criticism of Bernard Spencer, whose work is receiving renewed interest, George Macbeth in *A War Quartet*, David St. John's poem 'Six/Nine/Forty-Four', and Miriam Gamble's recent collection *Pirate Music*.²¹

¹⁸As well as editing the poems and *Alamein to Zem Zem*, Desmond Graham has written an authoritative biography of Douglas and brought out volumes of his letters and prose. See: Keith Douglas, *The Letters*, ed. Desmond Graham (Carcenet, 2000); Keith Douglas, *A Prose Miscellany*, ed. Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet, 1985); Desmond Graham, *Keith Douglas, 1920-1944: A Biography* (Faber & Faber, 2012).

¹⁹ Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Schober Plath, 7th June 1962, in Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber, 1992). Quoted in Cornelia D.J. Pearsall, "The War Remains of Keith Douglas and Ted Hughes," in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 525.

²⁰ Hughes, "Introduction (1987)", xxxiii.

²¹ Peter Robinson has recently collected Spencer's work into a new volume: Bernard Spencer, *Complete Poetry, Translations & Selected Prose*, ed. Peter Robinson (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2011); see George Macbeth, *A War Quartet* (London: Macmillan, 1969); David St John's poem 'Six/Nine/Forty-Four' is collected in David St John, *Study for the World's Body: New and Selected Poems* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1994), 8, it is also discussed briefly in Lorrie Goldensohn, *Dismantling Glory: Twentieth-Century Soldier Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 36. Miriam Gamble's poem 'After Keith Douglas' is based on Douglas's short essay 'On the Nature

Like Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill is a major English poet for whom Keith Douglas represents an important predecessor. He was, according to Hill in 1964 in a review of the edition of Douglas's *Selected Poems* introduced by Hughes, 'one of the finest poets of the last forty years' and his work has left an enduring mark on Hill's poetry.²² Indeed, Douglas's war poetry appears to have informed Hill's visceral explorations of the violence of war in poems like 'Funeral Music' in *King Log*, written shortly after Hill's review of *Selected Poems*. In an image adapted from Douglas, Hill describes fire 'ghosting upon a stone', collating lines from 'How to Kill': 'how easy it is to make a ghost// The weightless mosquito touches/ her tiny shadow on the stone.'²³ Also in 'Funeral Music', as Raphaël Ingelbien has argued, Hill rejects T.S. Eliot's pacification of England in *Four Quartets*, instead 'choos[ing] to question the authority that Eliot gained in wartime England by turning to the more marginal figure of Douglas.'²⁴ Ingelbien argues that 'Hill projects Douglas's visions of modern warfare onto the mediaeval landscape of England. By adapting Douglas's wartime idiom to his own exploration of English battlefields, Hill reinforces his critique of the visions of a pacified England.'²⁵ As Ingelbien points out, the 'strange-postured dead' of Hill's war sonnet sequence 'Funeral Music' recall the dead in Douglas's own war sonnets 'Landscape with Figures', who 'wriggle/ in their dowdy clothes' and enact 'this prone and motionless struggle at a queer angle to the scenery.'²⁶

Hill's review, 'Homage to Keith Douglas', concentrates on passages and extracts from Douglas's work in which the dead appear in strange postures and with extraneous, almost comic, personal effects, arguing that the similarities between Douglas's prose and poetic accounts of the desert war make his works appear 'like palimpsests.'²⁷ Hill notes a passage from *Alamein to Zem Zem* in which Douglas describes Italian soldiers lying 'surrounded by pitiable rubbish, picture postcards of Milan, Rome, Venice, snapshots of their families,

of Poetry.' See Miriam Gamble, "After Keith Douglas," in *Pirate Music* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2014), 47.

²² Hill, "'I in Another Place': Homage to Keith Douglas", 10.

²³ Geoffrey Hill, "Funeral Music," in *King Log* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968), 25; Douglas, "How to Kill."

²⁴ Raphaël Ingelbien, *Misreading England: Poetry and Nationhood Since the Second World War* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 38.

²⁵ Loc.cit.

²⁶ Hill, "Funeral Music", 26; Douglas, "Landscape with Figures II."

²⁷ Hill, "'I in Another Place': Homage to Keith Douglas", 10.

chocolate wrappings, and hundreds of cheap cardboard cigarette packets.²⁸ Hill points out the comparisons with the soldier in ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’, who lies accompanied by ‘the dishonoured picture of his girl’, or the ‘man with no head’ in ‘Cairo Jag’, who ‘has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.’²⁹ The black humour of Douglas’s witnessing is replicated in Hill’s *The Triumph of Love*, a poem that Tim Kendall has said ‘most nearly approaches a post-war poetry worthy of Douglas’s vision.’³⁰ Early in the poem Hill describes the destruction of Coventry in the Second World War and writes about a local martyred saint, Kenelm, who dies with ‘his mouth full of blood and toffee.’³¹ This Douglas-esque image of death, employed in close proximity to ‘Coventry ablaze’, shows that the unflinching gaze which Hill learned from Douglas in the sixties survives in his later works on war. Hill notes that Hughes credits Douglas with ‘invent[ing] a style that seems able to deal poetically with whatever it comes up against.’³² This is Hill testing out the ‘kit for emergency use’ that Douglas’s work makes available.

In 1991, a few short years after Douglas’s collected works were re-released with Hughes’s introduction, Seamus Heaney spoke about Douglas’s poetry in a lecture. Heaney discusses the temptation to set his reading of Douglas against the backdrop of the Gulf War due to:

this dread that [...] there would have been a desert war that would have commingled memories of North Africa campaigns and Flanders. There was a dread of the unknown and a sense of possible doom and Armageddon in the air, so that was one of the reasons why I thought I would talk about Keith Douglas.³³

Heaney argues that to view Douglas only in this light would be too topical and melodramatic for a lecture; nevertheless, it is telling that Douglas had become something of a sounding board for modern war. Perhaps it is his visual imagination, his interest in technology and his complex and what Heaney calls ‘morally questionable’ subject position that makes Douglas such a resonant voice for the writers of late twentieth and early twenty-first century wars.³⁴

²⁸ Douglas, *Alamein to Zem Zem*. Quoted in *Loc.cit.*

²⁹ Hill, “‘I in Another Place’: Homage to Keith Douglas.”

³⁰ Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 233.

³¹ Geoffrey Hill, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006), 178.

³² Hughes, quoted in Hill, “‘I in Another Place’: Homage to Keith Douglas”, 13.

³³ Seamus Heaney, “Passwords: Seamus Heaney on Keith Douglas” (Poets House, New York, 1991), <http://poetshouse.org/watch-listen-and-discuss/listen/1991-passwords-seamus-heaney-keith-douglas-full-audio>.

³⁴ *Loc.cit.*

Heaney's contemporary and friend, Michael Longley, has also invoked Keith Douglas numerous times in his work. Elsewhere, I have discussed one of these instances, arguing that the poem 'Bog Cotton' (*The Echo Gate*, 1979) demonstrates Longley's awareness of a problematic genealogy of war poetry.³⁵ In 'Bog Cotton' he echoes Douglas's address to Rosenberg in 'Desert Flowers' by writing 'Keith Douglas, I nearly repeat what you were saying [...] that was in Egypt./ Among the sandy soldiers of another war.'³⁶ Longley's purported repetition of Douglas is, like Douglas's purported repetition of Rosenberg, a red herring, but one which is carefully selected to draw attention to the perceived tautology of war. Like Douglas, Longley looks to the predecessor not for an easily replicated blueprint, but to show common ground and inheritance, and to understand the conflicts of the present in relation to those of the past.

The remark about 'another war' draws attention to Longley's *current* war in 1979, as he writes in the midst of the Northern Ireland Conflict. Longley's poem asks that we 'make room for bog cotton, another desert flower', a gesture which draws parallels with commemorative practice between the two World Wars and the present conflict, and thus the poetry (which 'apostrophised the poppies of Flanders') of those wars as well.³⁷ For Longley, Douglas is part of an existing field of war writing to which he owes allegiance, but from which he can borrow, distort and re-appropriate as the demands of the present dictate. The flowers of that poem, and of Douglas's and Rosenberg's, are problematic in Ireland where the poppy's commemorative symbolism is sullied by its association to the British military. For Longley, Douglas is part of a wider project to articulate the loss of the two World Wars and the violence of the Troubles without the conflation of the losses of these conflicts.

Longley's poem 'Death of a Horse' (*The Weather in Japan*, 2000) is professedly 'After Keith Douglas'. Based on Douglas's short story of the same name published in *Lilliput* in 1944, Longley's single-sentence, eight-line miniature is almost a found poem. Douglas's two-page story describes the demonstration of euthanizing a horse by a military vet through the eyes of the protagonist Simon, who faints at the spectacle, feeling as he does so that he 'had let the horse down.'³⁸ Longley does not quote from the original story exactly, but his poem reprises Douglas's words. Douglas writes of the horse that 'its expression was

³⁵ Owen, "From One April to Another", 363.

³⁶ Michael Longley, "Bog Cotton," in *Collected Poems*, 2006, 136–37.

³⁷ Loc.cit.

³⁸ Keith Douglas, "Appendix C: Death of a Horse," in *The Letters*, ed. Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 354–55.

resigned and humble [...] Simon was thinking all the time: “I wonder if it knows,” and after a time he thought: “It does know but it doesn’t seem to mind.”³⁹ In Longley’s poem this becomes the opening line: ‘Its expression resigned, humble even, as if it knows/ and doesn’t mind when a man draws the first diagonal/ In white across its forehead.’⁴⁰ As in ‘Bog Cotton’, Longley *nearly* repeats Douglas; by channelling his voice in this way he stages an almost unknown story by an under-read writer, creating a new and singular work as he does so.

Douglas’s ‘Death of Horse’, in characteristic style, watches death from a slight remove, and the notion of Simon ‘let[ting] the horse down’ by being unable to watch signals an ethical stance which sheds light on the poems ‘How to Kill’ and ‘*Vergissmeinnicht*’. The story is important in Douglas’s oeuvre because it suggests that Douglas’s gaze, which has sometimes been considered callous, is, in fact, an ethically-informed perspective which faces the truth and horror of war in order to acknowledge the suffering of its victims. Without the intermediary spectator role played by Simon in the poem, Longley’s speaker is more closely associated with an authorial ‘I’ and eye. Longley’s poem simultaneously channels the story and muses on Douglas’s death. The horse, resigned to die and ‘standing still, just staring ahead’ at the end of the poem suggests, paradoxically, a continuation of life, and one which is characterised by the all-important act of looking. There is a strong suggestion that Longley’s horse represents Douglas in some way: its resignation about its own death matches one of the most widely disseminated details about Douglas’s final years, his acceptance of his fate in the war. But more importantly perhaps is Longley’s homage to Douglas’s art: the horse-Douglas is a stalwart whose unflinching poetic gaze still has the ability to shock.

Longley is not the only poet whose work quotes or near-quotes Douglas. Jorie Graham’s collection *Overlord* focuses on the sites and memory of the Battle of Normandy (codenamed Operation Overlord) in June 1944, the campaign in which Douglas was killed. Graham’s poem ‘*Praying (Attempt of June 8 03)*’ quotes Douglas directly, and the date in its title refers to the anniversary of the day before his death. This confounding near-miss strikes me as a kind of awkward and challenging memorial, fixated on the last day Douglas was alive rather than the more conventional marker of the day on which he died.⁴¹ This is fitting perhaps,

³⁹ Michael Longley, “Death of a Horse” in *Collected Poems*, 2006, 260.

⁴⁰ Douglas, “Appendix C: Death of a Horse.”

⁴¹ Geoffrey Hill’s ‘September Song’ has a similar near-miss, the mourned child almost sharing a birthday with the poet. The child, who is killed in a concentration camp at the age of ten, becomes a

given that the poem itself voices Douglas in a way that preserves the life of his poetry in compelling ways:

the
passage through – [there it is, the word *mercy*][me shooting
the very sound up now
with faulty weapon][“Now in my glass appears/
the soldier who is going to die./ He smiles and moves about in ways/
his mother knows. I cry
NOW”].⁴²

Graham’s professedly autobiographical speaker announces her poetic voice as faulty weapon and her speech as a gunshot. She then quotes from the second stanza of Douglas’s ‘How to Kill’, or rather misquotes and re-lineates Douglas’s poem (this is the faultiness of the weapon perhaps). Interestingly, Graham mostly retains Douglas’s line breaks (or turns them into caesura), and the isolation of ‘NOW’ preserves the impact of that word from Douglas’s poem. I have argued elsewhere that ‘here’ and ‘now’ are key words in Graham’s *Overlord*, signalling the recurrence of history and memory in a present tense that is both broadly defined and refers specifically to the moment of the reading.⁴³

Like Heaney’s invocation of Douglas during the Gulf War in 1991, Graham alludes to his work against the backdrop of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the latter of which, in June 2003, was only very recently and controversially underway. Graham’s quotation of Douglas crucially retains the poetic effect of his original lineation, even as it incorporates it into her more expansive verse, and as such breathes life into his words. This life is, of course,

problematic figure of identification, demonstrated by the lines ‘(I have made/ an elegy for myself it/ is true)’. Jahan Ramazani notes that the similar dates of birth offer a ‘sickening reminder of their dissimilarity’ and Matthew Boswell adds ‘while the child’s reality existed alongside the writer’s world of comparative normality, it is now unreachable, separated by language, geography, and a small but critical lag in time.’ See Geoffrey Hill, “September Song,” in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006), 30; Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7; Mathhew Boswell, “Reading Holocaust Poetry: Genre, Authority and Identification,” in *The Future of Memory*, ed. Richard Crownshaw, Jane Kilby, and Antony Rowland (New York, London: Berghahn Books, 2011), 174.

⁴² Jorie Graham, “*Praying (Attempt of June 8 03)*,” in *Overlord: Poems* (New York: Ecco, 2006), 9–10.

⁴³ Sebastian Owen, “‘Here’ and ‘Now’: Re-Presenting the Battle of Normandy in Jorie Graham’s *Overlord*” (Contemporary Women’s Writing Network Conference, University of Hull, 2011).

contingent, and Graham quotes ‘How to Kill’ again to demonstrate the ephemerality of the poet’s voice: ‘how easy it is to make a ghost –/ as here, don’t you see, the minute I stop scribbling here/ I will be gone.’⁴⁴ Graham’s collection, which stages voices from various accounts of the war, including testimony from the ‘glidermen’ whose passage to Normandy was poorly protected, and from Stephen Ambrose’s book *Band of Brothers*, is fascinated by the experience of soldiers. Graham wrote the poems whilst living in Normandy, trying to express the scars of landscape beneath her feet and the cycles of historical violence: she has stated that she was ‘as any American is under the circumstances, someone who uncomprehendingly was faced with the first and second, primarily the second, war in Iraq.’⁴⁵

Keith Douglas has also inspired the work of Owen Sheers, a poet who has become a strong contemporary voice in war poetry. Sheers has recently taken responsibility for bringing Douglas to new audiences, writing a one-man play based on his life, *Unicorns, almost*, produced by the Old Vic with Joseph Fiennes playing Douglas, and presenting a documentary about his work for BBC4, *Battlefield Poet: Keith Douglas*. In the documentary, Sheers visits Douglas’s grave in Tilly-sur-Seulles War Cemetery in Normandy. Speaking from Douglas’s graveside, Sheers says ‘however much you know his story and you know how it ends, seeing it all there, written on the gravestone, it really just brings it back with incredible power.’⁴⁶ Sheers has since gone on to become an important war poet in his own right, with *The Independent* newspaper describing him as ‘the war poet of our generation.’⁴⁷ Written in the aftermath of his works on Douglas, the verse-drama *Pink Mist* (2013) draws from interviews conducted by Sheers with veterans of the Afghanistan War and their families, demonstrating, like Motion and Graham, and Hamish Henderson earlier, the inclination to dispense with the lyric ‘I’ in favour of mediated voices of first-person witnesses.

A review in *The Observer* argues that Sheers should be included on school curriculums along with Wilfred Owen: ‘The first Owen created a space in which the second Owen freely writes.’⁴⁸ As the third Owen in this equation I would move that Douglas is a more important predecessor for Sheers, indeed for many contemporary poets, his ‘kit for emergency use’

⁴⁴ Graham, “*Praying (Attempt of June 8 03)*”, 10.

⁴⁵ Jorie Graham, “Jorie Graham with Jennifer Reimer” (The Holloway Series in Poetry, UC Berkeley, April 20, 2007).

⁴⁶ Owen Sheers, “Battlefield Poet: Keith Douglas”, Julian Hendry (Dir.) (BBC4, November 11, 2010).

⁴⁷ Sophie Morris, “The 50 Best Winter Reads,” *The Independent*, October 25, 2013.

⁴⁸ Kate Kellaway, “Pink Mist by Owen Sheers,” *The Observer*, May 26, 2013.

regularly deployed in poetry about conflicts post-1945. Such varied and considered responses to Douglas's work attest to his importance in the development of English poetry. This thesis has focussed on the works and sites of memory to which poets turn in order to articulate something about the Second World War. Each new war is a new rupture in the collective consciousness and demands new modes of articulation. Meanwhile, each new war returns the commemorative rituals of previous wars to a place of prominence in public discourse. Poetry continues to reclaim and scrutinize that language.

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