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THE POETRY OF MORAL COMMITMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE LIFE AND WORK OF DOUGLAS LIVINGSTONE

_Under Asian and African suns_ *

Douglas Livingstone was born on 5 January 1932 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, where his father was serving in the Colonial Police. His parentes were "of sound middle-class Scottish stock – he, from a line of honorable colonial servants in the Far East... was some hero for a boy: escaping after ‘Singapore’, caught by the Jap navy and jailed in the oil slave-camp at Palembang, Sumatra... My mother was tougher on us, shooting me down whenever I hastened (I never needed a second invitation) to stand up and recite the latest opus I had composed, aged about 4, at Mrs Somebody’s kindergarten in Ipoh" 

He spent two years at a French convent in Malaya. His father being on long leave, he went with his parents to Scotland for a year. Back to Malaya in 1937, he lived there until March 1940 when, together with his sister Heather, he was sent to the Loreto Convent in Perth, Australia, for five months, his father again being on long leave.

With the advent of the Japanese invasion, he and his sister accompanied by their mother were evacuated to Colombo. He was only ten years old when his romantic and idyllic perception of life in Malaya had to suffer the shock of war:

* In the composition of this first section of the essay, I am indebted to Douglas Livingstone’s articles “Leaving School” (London Magazine, Vol. 6, No. 7, October 1966) and “The Other Job” (London Magazine, Vol. 29. Nos. 7/8, October/November 1989). A special acknowledgment must also be made to A.G. Ulyatt whose article “‘A Sucker for Experience’: a Brief Biography of Douglas Livingstone” (Pretoria, University of South Africa, 1979) has afforded several additional details. Thanks must also be accorded to the poet himself for the assistance he has given to me throughout this project.

It was a difficult time. This ten-year-old boy saw all the big white giants around him rapidly developing feet of clay, running away from, as the phrase had it at the time, 'the little yellow men'.

Speaking to Charles Leftwich in 1982, Livingstone observed that he had a marvellous early childhood full of innocence, mystery and imagination. The poem "A Flower for the Night", he says, was an attempt to capture that peaceful, magical childhood before the age of ten:

Where I lived for a childhood
the night grass was as magical as the moon;
coolly white and soft, like new snow beautiful,
and deeply piled by the monsoons.

There was a flower (I never learnt its name)
that bloomed one night a year,
following, with its delicate bluish face,
the arc that the full moon steered.

Against this idyllic picture of the Far East prior to his flight to South Africa, he recounts the actual horrors of war:

With the invasion of Malaya in the north, we moved down in fits, false starts, stopping at places on the way. Once in the confusion, the tenous battlefront of south-moving Allies left us twelve miles in their wakes. Like everyone else we were machine-gunned and bombed in transit. We moved in packed buses, trains and motor cars.

In Ceylon, Mrs. Livingstone and the children were eventually placed on a ship to South Africa by the British authorities. Livingstone arrived in Natal in 1942 for the first time. He attended the Margate Government School and, later, the Port Shepstone Secondary School where he recalls:

The Headmaster was caning me daily, until my backside became as hard as a hippo's. He would give me the maximum allowable by law at the time (six - I understand this has now been reduced to three) and I would remain bending.

2 "Shepherd of Dragons" (on video tape), by Charles Leftwich, University of Zululand, 1982.
yawning as provocatively as possible, patently inviting the illegal seventh which never came. My side of the 'fight' with him consisted of fairly funny anonymous poems pinned on the school board on the subject of his favourite pupil – a rather sadistic head-boy who terrorised the kids on the school buses.

After the war his sick and emaciated father, who had been a prisoner of war, arrived in South Africa and decided to send his son to Kearsney College, in the hilly land between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. When his father recovered his health, his family went back to Malaya leaving Livingstone at the boarding school. Here, at the age of 16, he first read Shelley, Byron, Keats; among his readings there was also a book on Georgian poetry and an early "tattered Penguin book of Someone's verse", both dishonestly acquired by breaking into empty holiday cottages or by stealing from second-hand stalls.

He completed his studies in December 1949 when he wrote his matriculation examination, in which he performed well in English though his science subjects were rather weak. Describing the period in which he was employed for the first time, he says:

When I left I went into a sugar-mill laboratory as a night-shift bench-chemist for a while so that I could spend the days on the beach toying with the idea of becoming a professional lifesaver. The lack of sleep nearly killed me however, and my desire to scribble verse, though muted, stood up and roared.

In 1951, Livingstone moved to Rhodesia where he studied to become a pathogenic bacteriologist at the Pasteur Institute, Salisbury. In 1956, he was awarded the Diploma in Medical Laboratory Technology from the Southern Rhodesia Medical Council, and in 1958 he obtained a Diploma in Bacteriology from the same institution:

While studying for my bacteriological ticket in Salisbury (Harare), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), I had taken leave to work on the Kariba Dam which now straddles the Zambesi River. The contractors were behind schedule with the north bank coffer-dam and they needed an extra diver. A small bunch of us, Cousteau-smitten amateurs, had been diving at the Sinoia Caves using home-made aqualungs fashioned from old RAF Spitfire fire-extinguishers and a demand-valve designed by a lanky wizard in the Post Office (Technical Branch). The dam-builders hired me, and it was there, in the Zambesi that I experienced early intimations of my own mortality, that I was just another life-form, expendable and quite unimportant.

* Ibid., p. 58.
* Ibid., p. 57.
* Ibid., p. 60.
"DOUGLAS LIVINGSTONE, "The Other Job", p. 74."
It was both the mystery of that strange period spent on the Zambesi River and the fear of death caused by his precarious health that intensified his observation of life and its meaning. At about this time, the poet started to suffer a series of illnesses: pericarditis, septicaemia, meningitis, encephalitis, spells of mental illness, and tuberculosis of the kidneys. He recalls that, even though he had always scribbled verse since about the age of 5, it was during this spell of about ten years – aged between 23 and 33 – that his talent sharpened up and he “started controlling interests in his existence” ¹⁰. Speaking to Michael Chapman, the poet seems to underline the importance of that period of unstable health for the development of his creative impulse:

I was doing some tuberculosis research at Broken Hill now called Kabwe and I contracted TB. It dragged on and dragged on. I took a chance with some fairly massive chemotherapy which I boosted with the aid of cortisone – all through scientific curiosity of course. With cortisone, one runs the risk of TB spreading like lightning through the body. Anyway, it cured me. But left me – chemically – insane.

When I was eventually taken off all treatments I recovered in about 48 hours or so, but the experience taught me a lot. I often wonder now if all mental aberrations aren’t really the product of some kind of chemical poison ¹¹.

After the poet was appointed officer-in-charge of the Broken Hill (now Kabwe) Pathological Laboratories, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), he started to send his poems to Europe for publication:

There was not much going on in this continent. There was a rather precious little poetry journal in Salisbury, now Harare. There was The Purple Renoster, of course, Lionel Abrahams’s journal, which I didn’t know how to break into, so I started sending the stuff overseas. I selected what I thought was the best literary journal in the world, The London Magazine, and I bombarded them with two or three poems a month for about a year before they accepted one ¹².

His first publication, The Skull in the Mud, containing a selection of 12 poems, was published in 1960 by Outposts Publications, London, a small publishing operation, directed by Howard Sergeant. In 1963 the poet was awarded the BBC-FBC Radio Prize for Drama for his verse-play The Sea My Winding Sheet and, in the same year, he won a poetry prize in a competition organised by Science Fiction News.

¹⁰ “Shepherd of Dragons”.
All his work up to 1964, including the poems he later collected in *Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa* (1964), reveals his attraction to the Western literary tradition displayed through a personal inward lens which transmutes into an ‘Africanness’ of the mind. Colin Style seems to suggest that the southern Africa (and the Rhodesias in particular) of the 1960s offered the poet such an intense experience that his creative leanings were shaped into a precise and attentive style:

Douglas Livingstone deserves, arguably, the same kind of recognition as Doris Lessing. Linking the two is not haphazard. Both passed formative years in Rhodesia; Lessing more so than Livingstone. Neither had more than a modest formal education, but both taught themselves to write in a tight, professional way as if they had lived all their lives in a cultural metropolis.¹⁴

Just before his return to South Africa in 1964, Livingstone’s second collection, *Sjambok and Other Poems from Africa*, appeared under the Oxford University Press imprint. He had accepted the post of microbiological technician at a scientific research institute in Durban, where he still works on marine pollution along the Natal Coast:

A team of biologists, chemists, oceanographers and engineers was being assembled locally to survey Natal coastal waters, and I joined them as a microbiologist. My job, broadly defined, was to establish bacterial criteria for ‘clean’ and polluted seawater, the city combining the roles of Africa’s busiest port in terms of tonnage, and Southern Africa’s premier holiday mecca.¹⁴

In 1965, he won the Guinness Prize for Poetry at the Cheltenham Festival for his poem “A Bamboo Day”. Three years later, in 1968, the volume *Poems* (with Thomas Kinsella and Anne Sexton) was published by Oxford University Press. It included 13 poems from *Sjambok* and 14 poems which were later included in his 1970 collection, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*. Considered by Stephen Gray, at the time, the widest selection of his mature work, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* won for Livingstone a half share in the 1970 Cholmondeley award for English poetry. The book represents a shift from the poetry of the vast African spaces to the description of people on the margins. Livingstone appears to oscillate in his view of

¹⁴ Douglas Livingstone, “The Other Job”, p. 78.
Durban between a city of some sort of “fabulous future where people, starting with Zulus and English-speaking whites, Afrikaners and Asians, would one day sink their essentially cultural differences into a common South African birthright”, and a city ready to collapse into another Calcutta or Mexico City. To the poet, Durban seems to blend the aura of innocence and harmony Livingstone perceived when he first arrived in Natal at the age of 10, and the visible transformation the African continent had suffered in the last decade:

Durban, in 1964, was a seaport slattern squatting astride and beginning to outgrow her tangle of drains; also, a holiday resort with a faded sun-bleached charm rather like an old film take of a Caribbean town in the 1930s, with more trees than dwellings 16.

The popularity he had gained overseas with his poems encouraged Oxford University Press to re-issue the Sjambok volume in paperback, while Jack Cope and Uys Krige included several of his poems in The Penguin Book of South African Verse published in 1968 17.

The year 1975 saw the publication of A Rosary of Bone, a collection of love poems which appeared as the seventh volume of the Mantis Editions of South African Poets for the David Philip publishing house. During the 1970s a massive production of political poetry commenced in South Africa aimed as protest and propaganda, and seeking a ‘black aesthetics’ against apartheid, and, more generally, against Eurocentric norms and values. Livingstone’s publishers were perhaps somewhat anxious about the reception in South African literary circles of a volume of love poetry 18. The book, however, was a success in South Africa; it was reprinted in 1983 and was enlarged with 15 new poems which included translations from Goethe, de Héredia and Gongóra.

Distancing himself from the style and technique of the Soweto poets who excluded from their writing such devices as rhyme, regular metrical structures and ornament 19, Livingstone clarified his position in the cultural environment of South Africa as he tried to justify the meaning of the publication of a collection of highly-crafted love poems:

16 Douglas Livingstone, “The Other Job”, p. 77.
I admire and respect them [the major Black Poets], and I understand what they are trying to do. But here and there – and very tentatively – I wish they could do it a bit better. I think poems are precarious things and I think they need at least one other justification than their content for survival. This is an age of immense production – the presses are running all the time. The sheer volume of words coming out – of not much merit, most of it – saddens me, a little. 20

Awarded the 1975 Olive Schreiner Prize for his radio play *A Rhino for the Boardroom*, Livingstone published the play in book form only in 1977 21. In 1978, some of the poems he included in *The Anvil’s Undertone* earned him the English Association of South Africa’s first prize for poetry. Then, his *Selected Poems* (1984) was awarded the 1984 CNA Literary Prize, one of South Africa’s premier literary awards. Livingstone himself admits to being taken aback:

I was completely stunned. It was a strange business. I appreciate the CNA is a pretty big South African Prize, but the last poet to get it was Guy Butler, 10 years ago 22.

His self-mockery towards his own work and, generally speaking, towards the function of the poet was discernible when, in 1982, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Literature from the University of Natal. On the day of the ceremony he declared:

My own more modest view of myself is that of a perfectly ordinary and harmless rhymester who attempts to inject poetry in the mundane stuff of living. Or should that be the other way round? Also: a part-time scientist who quite mildly does his own anti-pollution thing, vaguely pleased at having got into it – that is: anti-pollution – some years before it became really fashionable 23.

This desire to de-mythologize his role and achievement is recurrent in Livingstone’s interviews and articles; he likes to stress that he is an ‘ordinary’ man, not at all surviving on his source of poetical inspiration which gives him only sleepless nights. Nevertheless, it seems impossible for him to renounce his creative impulses, as he says in the final poem of *A Rosary of Bone*: “A harmless passion, surely, / an unobtrusive vice/this waiting game of making/small books of verse” 24.

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20 “Casanova in Modern Dress”, p. 11.
He has no university literary education, but his poems appear on the Transvaal and Natal matriculation syllabuses, on the Natal University syllabus and on the syllabuses of several other English departments in South Africa; they are regularly published in England, America, Zimbabwe and South Africa in magazines such as London Magazine, New Statesman, The Listener, Encounter, New Contrast.

The title of Ulyatt’s biographical article – “A Sucker for Experience” – summarizes the meaning of the poet’s life to Livingstone who brilliantly expresses it in the following statement:

A man must live, have lived as fully as possible to talk about life with any authenticity, or indeed gentleness, or vividness. I’m afraid I believe this. Life is beauty and terror, probably the same thing. Nature of course is sublimely indifferent ²⁵.

In a recent interview Livingstone told me: “I have failed at marriage twice (no children) although I adore women” ²⁶. Elsewhere the poet has declared: “Marriage is a talent like any other. I haven’t got it” ²⁷.

Livingstone has lived in Durban since 1964 and works for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research as a marine bacteriologist studying water pollution. In the early 1980s, he registered as an external part-time student with the University of Natal, attending the required Honours core courses after hours, and composed a thesis on the research he had been carrying out for 25 years on about thirty different sampling stations along the Natal Coast. This earned him a Doctorate in Biological Science, in 1989 ²⁸.

Most of the poems he has composed since the publication of his Selected Poems have been inspired by the beach sampling stations where he has worked over the years. A selection of these poems were awarded a SANLAM Award for unpublished manuscripts, while four of them won the 1990 AA Vita Award for the best poems published in journals ²⁹. His latest collection, published for the Cape Town based Carrefour Press in 1991, is called A Littoral Zone.

²⁵ “Shepherd of Dragons”.
The poet scientist in a jejune universe

Speaking to A.G. Ulyatt in 1976 Livingstone claims that individuality is more important than a group stance and explains: “Not that one’s own personality is more important than the group’s. It’s just that maybe there’s a slight chance of there being something more authentic [from one individual] rather than a group reaction” 50. And introducing the anthology A World of Their Own in 1976, André P. Brink says that ‘exploration’ is the major preoccupation of the 16 South African poets selected by Stephen Gray for this book. He then clarifies the meaning of this word: “exploration of the known or the unknown, exploration of the frontiers of the geographical world or of the innermost recesses of the self, exploration of love and loneliness, of communication, of destructiveness, exploration of language and form” 51.

Douglas Livingstone’s work exhibits all these themes. From The Skull in the Mud (1960) to the latest poems published in Stafforder and New Contrast, his poetry can be defined as an exploration of individual responses to everyday reality through a dramatic, and often ironic, inwardness. He explores his conflicting feelings for man’s social roles and, as a South African poet, shows his disenchantment with both a romantic return to the beauties of Nature and an exploitative consumerism. His is the kind of poetry which Stephen Gray saw emerging after the publication of Jack Cope and Uys Krige’s The Penguin Book of South African Verse (1968), a new poetry which has distanced itself from the writing of the ‘war generation’ (Guy Butler, Anthony Delius, R.N. Currey, F.T. Prince, Jack Cope, Charles Eglington, Ruth Miller, David Wright and Sydney Clouts) whose work “was to be seen across the same gulf of perspective that they in turn must have felt existed between them and their progenitors, Roy Campbell and William Plomer” 52.

Livingstone’s sense of his own incapacity to attain a reliable encounter with others – for example the feminine figures which hover over his imagery or the wilderness of the African continent itself – suggests the common uncertainty that much South African writing shows when it tries to enjoy the idea of an uncorrupted

beauty beyond the menace of scaring presences. This is not a “mystical shrugging-off of social responsibility” which Guy Butler isolates in some of the new poets; rather, Livingstone shows a capacity for digging into South African history and sentiment through a disciplined verbal mastery. His technique is painfully researched and reveals itself in his verse forms which encompass the influences of English and European tradition, the immediacies of southern African experience, and the modernist gesture of fracturing levels of literary and mythical discourse, in the search for reconciliations which deny neither difficulty, nor even the pervading threat of dislocation. “Douglas Livingstone”, Guy Butler observes, “has managed to make the great transition: his complexities are the misgivings, dilemmas and insecurities of us all” 

All his poems present a difficulty of a sort. Even his love poems are impeded by physical or psychological restraints which deny a full joy or playfulness. The poem “The Two of You” included in the collection A Rosary of Bone (1975), mixes love with art in a daring way. It expresses the conviction that a perfect aestheticism cannot be attained any longer in South Africa so that one has to sustain the odd beauty of the “nonsensical physical flaws of your [the woman’s] choice”. It is the subdued, vulnerable femininity of the solitary Magdalen, as opposed to the sensuous, powerful Helen who is seen by the poet as “redolent of sexual challenge, a maker of history” which detains the “suspect pulse” of the speaker’s emotions; and it is from Magdalen’s wrist, not Helen’s, that the new poem seems to emerge. Although the physical source [the woman] of the poet’s inspiration can generate this dubious achievement (the poem linguistically embodies the idea of a latent danger through the negation of the possible, positive term “sound” or “integral” and its replacement by the word “unflawed”), art seems nonetheless to be reconciled with reality and passion:

... but it is her: the shadowed
darling suspended so
diffidently in nonsensical

physical flaws of your choice
I love: who detains my
susceptible mind, my suspect pulse.

14 Note to the author.
Look: the delicate tendons
of her wrist constitute
a dangerously unflawed poem”.

There are further examples of Livingstone’s sense and vision into
the dissociation of the modern experience. Opening the long poem
“A Natural History of the Negatio Bacillus”, he says:

i Definition of Negatio
The distance between emotion and intellect, or heaven and earth, when such dis-
tance constitutes pathogenesis

He obviously perceives a fractured or dislocated universe in his
microcosmic personal cosmos. The speaker of the poem is disori-
ented by the world’s malady and by his contingent displacement.
“Tension, then”, Michael Chapman underlines, “is derived from a
clash of scientific and romantic attitudes. Paradoxically, in attempt-
ing to define his existence... this lonely individual succeeds only in
increasing his own sense of uncertainty” 17. In literary terms, these
two polarities reflect a disorientation on the part of the poet who
painfully feels the irreconcilable disassociation between Imagination
and Will, “trickily embedded in the twin halves of the brain”, even
though he recognises “the advisability of training and keeping the
pair of them (Will and Imagination) in perfect harmony like two
perfectly balanced horses, linked or bridled by the corpus cal-
losum” 18.

The dichotomy also recurs in “Reciprocal”, in which a new
synonymity introduces the problem about the encounter of Inspira-
tion (“electro-magnetic waves”) and the technical process of shaping
the work into a finished artifact (“matter”):

Since matter cannot cease in
some form or another, what
of thought, emotion? Perhaps

these, too, are forever: set
to fill the eternal space
between atoms, beneath the

15 *Douglas Livingstone, The Anvil’s Undertone*, Johannesburg, Donker, 1978,
p. 56.
151.
18 *Douglas Livingstone, “Graduation Address”,* p. 32.
universal architraves,
a merger of matter and
electro-magnetic waves”.

The conflicting prerogatives of the scientist and the poet exist in the tension of the romantic idea of the natural flux of inspiration and the curbing, chiselling work of the intellect. Even though he likes to match the two in an easy-mannered way – he says: “Science has helped me to be precise in poetry; and vice versa; and I have always maintained science is humanity’s search for the truth and art is humanity’s interpretation of the truth. I have no problems with the pair” 40 – his presentation of the composition process appears as an imposition of a restraining discipline over the romantic “spontaneous overflow of natural feelings”:

It is a double-strand of mutually antagonistic cords called ‘form’. One cord is extremely fragile, sensitive and delicate: it is almost undetectable. It is the form or shape the poem wants to make or take for itself... The other cord is really a barbed wire. It represents the ruthlessness, discipline and violence. – All your powers and training expertise that you have to exert to force the poem to retain that shape it is so delicately hinting at for itself 41.

This latent irreconcilability of creative and pragmatic impulses brings to many of his poems an uncertain element, sometimes represented as a mysterious or unknown force existing inside human consciousness. This constitutes something similar to what Patrick Cullinan, in his collection Today Is Not Different, calls “the first danger”. Because of the presence of this primordial flaw, man is transformed into a pilgrim travelling on history’s path where an unspecified aggressor is always in ambush. As Cullinan puts it:

We lay silent in the forest,
Not sure what we would surprise. It seemed, turning,
The path would ambush us. How could we kill
If we did not know the hunted? To disembowel
The unknown would be wrong. It could die wrongly, being

A thing not to be played with, touched: as
Above so below.
But when it did not rain we knew

40 Douglas Livingstone, The Antil’s Undertone, pp. 52-53.
That we were lost, and knew
We could not speak our own language.

Enver Docratt, in a poem which shows a different intent of tone but a similar sense of uncertainty, speaks about a treachery perpetrated in a bush “where demons drink the blood and pray”.

Livingstone arrives at the same sense of precariousness or disturbance when, mindful perhaps of the Africa which Plomer symbolized through the image of “a scorpion on a stone”, he describes the African world through the menacing presence of a viper:

A blunted Ace-of-Spades head
big as a terrier’s stills;
a sensory tongue flickers;
coils etched in fresh geometry,
faded harlequin’s hammock-skin-shed,
the fat viper crams the tense juncture
of a narrow ledge and its overhang;
hinged on skeletal levers, fangs
of slender wet porcelain wait
spring-loaded for puncture.

Like Cullinan’s “The First Danger”, Livingstone’s “Veld and Vlei Poem” dates back to 1978. It plays on the juxtaposition of two rhymed ten-line stanzas, each containing one side of the dichotomic legacy of two different historical periods of Africa. The words “veld”, “vlei”, “kopje” are linked to the Afrikaner heritage whereas “terrier”, “hammock”, “harlequin”, “porcelain”, and the reference to the cards (“A blunted Ace-of-Spades”) stand for the archetypal commodities of colonial leisure. But while the historical implications are condensed in the metonymic technique played through the elements of a South African landscape which has suffered the nomenclature of colonization, the snake cleaves the pastoral from within, conveying the idea that linguistic impositions can be easily overturned.

It is difficult to say if the sense of unease or discomfort which these poets feel in the African continent can be directly related to

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the dramatic historical events which occurred in South Africa in the 1970s, especially the killings in Soweto; but it is certain that Africa, especially for the white South Africans, is a continent which can send its people into exile, both real and psychological. In The Anvil's Undertone (1978), Livingstone's language and poetical techniques are more direct, acerbic and, as Michael Chapman observes, "the mood has darkened considerably. Human relations have failed, or been cut short by death, while the increasing urgency of the South African socio-political situation over the last decade has influenced the overall tone"

Lionel Abrahams, in one of his poems, sees that art, love and writing suffer from this sense of unbelonging which forbids the reappropriation of a lost balance between "act" and "language", history and literature. Similarly, Stephen Watson, in his poem "Coda", feels himself imprisoned in an "endemic vacancy", in "great dualities". In the poem "The Indirect Apprehension" Livingstone says:

I do not know what makes me fear the trees
That sentry down the path you move along;
Black scudding clouds; lost echoes of far seas;
The solitude within a night-bird's song.
I think this is the country of the dead;
Here, fear is joined to love in agony.

Elsewhere Livingstone, with a kind of Metaphysical extravagance and self-mockery, questions his ability to attain the ideal poet's or playwright's enthusiasms, and fears that he too will have to share the proper, mundane pursuits of the Gentleman:

The Poet's or Playwright's Function
Is to embark physically

Upon the Consciousness of his Generation;
Not merely as the Conscience

"See Stephen Watson, "Coda", In This City, Cape Town, David Philip, 1986, p. 34.
Of his Time; nor solely to reflect
Disintegration, if Disintegration

Is the Shaker of his Time's stormy Seas.
But to anchor a Present,

Nail to its Mast
One Vision, one Integrity

In a Manner so memorable
It fills Part of a Past.

A Poet's or Playwright's Enthusiasms,
These. The proper Pursuit

For a Gentleman remains to master
The Art of delaying his Orgasms".

Behind the bravura, the desire is the serious one of fixing the meaning of his generation's mistakes in a vision, an artistic integrity figured through the poet's imagination. This idea haunts Livingstone. But can the poet in South Africa shift like Donne from the 'Gentleman's pursuits' to the 'poet's function' without subjecting himself to ridicule? Possibly, however, political life has also been constricting in its Calvinistic dourness, and Livingstone's sexually daring poems are also socially necessary activities. His impelling physicality seems to embody what V.S. Dett, criticizing the choices of the editors of the first 14 numbers of the journal *New Coin*, found in very few of the poets hosted there:

there is so little of the note of passion, hardly a sound of the unsanctified voice that proclaims the agony, the terror, the anger, the mystery of being a human animal alive; too little questioning of accepted values, meanings, customs, forms; no more than the occasional pennyworth of wit, of satire, of social protest, of religious bewilderment or inspiration; hardly an instance of reference to the body's rudeness and delight; no cases of bold linguistic or formal experimentation; no more than the most perfunctory and conventional sense of our place and our time".

Only 4 out of the 103 poems Livingstone published in literary journals in the period 1960-1968 appeared in *New Coin* whereas the *London Magazine* accepted 39, *Contrast* 8 and *The Purple Renoster* 10. Both by avoiding the voice of historical characters or travellers and by refusing the common theme of exile which allowed many

"Ibidem, p. 3.
writers of the ‘war generation’ to retain an European style, Livingstone does not, as John F. Povey points out speaking about Anthony Delius and Guy Butler, have “the problem of a lingering African heritage in Europe, but Europe has somehow to be brought to Africa”.

As early as The Skull in the Mud (1960) and Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa (1964), Livingstone has used the African landscape and animal imagery in such a way that both his juvenile romantic leanings and his non-African readings revealed the uneasiness of a white African in search of a reconciliation between the tangible and the alien, the civilized and the primitive:

Within the flaccid gut of this flux land
   I write, a mucoid Jonah, with my sin
   behind me, standing sentry in the shade,
   while unrepentant, toasting in the sun,
   I sing to every blind unheeding maid
   a tilt at love I would not care to win
   and watch an ant run fretful on my hand.

It is only with the next collection, Eyes Closed Against the Sun (1970), that Livingstone discovers how human solitude and corruption are man’s common maladies, not at all caused by the particular environment of southern Africa. His ‘African persona’ is now portrayed as absorbed into the small-minded urban world of greed, which is slowly devouring the mysteries of a great but doomed continent. The poem “The Sleep of My Lions” opens with a summoning of the strength of the seas of many continents through the form of a Latin invocation, and appears to be a kind of intellectual inscription, or a prayer, for a redemption of man’s abuse:

Grant me a day of
moon-rites and rain-dances;
when rhinoceros
root in trained hibiscus borders;
when hippo flatten, with a smile,
deck-chairs at the beach resorts.

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Accord me a time
of stick-insect gods, and impala
no longer crushed by concrete;
when love poems like this
can again be written in beads 34.

It is, indeed, a painful loss which Livingstone describes in his poems. Here, the disappearance of an unspoiled world is partially redeemed by his linguistic mastery. In this sense, his poetry contains the very character of modernist art because, in T.S. Eliot's phrase about the co-existence of the modern fragmentation and the traditional unity in Ulysses, it 'can make the modern world possible for art' 35 and redeem the chaotic state of civilization through the powerful timelessness of aesthetic revelation, as Livingstone states:

By not writing poems about politics but by trying to use charged language one is definitely making a political statement even if one is only ‘civilising’ one’s rulers. It may be a more potent – or less potent – way of doing it than the protest poem. But I regard it as valid. I find that the range and resonance and sinewyness of language is a major civilising force 36.

Far from sharing its themes with the previous generation as suggested by Stephen Gray, and at a certain distance from the language of urgency of the Soweto poets, Livingstone’s poetry stands mid-way in the contest between, let us call it, aesthetics/politics or being/action: a dichotomy which has challenged more than one contemporary writer’s conscience. It is incorrect to see in the formalized, structuralized and refined language poets use, even in the traumatic crisis-ridden historical or social situations in South Africa, a sheer retreat from moral involvement.

Referring to the work of the great Polish poet Zbiguien Herbert, Stephen Watson perceives that the difficult dichotomy of art and politics, ‘being’ and ‘action’, can find a way of redemption because “aesthetics, that apparently flimsy, most frivolous of all categories, was in reality the ethical, and that the choices in the one at least implied if they did not necessarily enjoy in choices in the other” 37. In the poem “The Sower” (about the planting or sowing of poems),

34 Douglas Livingstone, “The Sleep of My Lions”, Eyes Closed Against the Sun, p. 17.
36 “Casanova in Modern Dress”, p. 11.
dated 1990, Livingstone questions the validity of “graffiti”, “slogans” and “socio-political missiles”, and hopes that the sower’s work can attain some moral results. He says:

Secret settlings of dust, rain on the breeze
may wake a seed to germinate,
to worm in roots while it gropes after
the sun, the moon, life and air
in that sleepy itinerary of bushes and trees.

Unshelling the nugget – the pristine part –
is, of course, hypothetical, especially
if the marrowed rock splits gently,
as tenderly as any lyrical poem
that quietly unshackles one human heart “.

Livingstone’s stance has not changed much over the last 30 years. As early as 1964 he said: “Why worry about an artist’s nationality? He can only put himself down as honestly as possible in the (at times, vain) hope of seeding hospitable souls; not with the intent to change the world or divert mainstream, though these may be by-products”  ).

Livingstone’s desire to preserve art’s redeeming possibilities and his trust in verbal mastery – a neo-symbolist recapitulation of the idea of the positive effects of literary magnificence – make his psychological tensions vibrate in the very structure and resonance of his language. His aspiration for a comprehensive consciousness which can absorb and reflect contemporary urgencies and relevant directions from the past is implied here; it is this recurrent hope for the artist’s ability to create something relevant for the understanding of our human condition which obsesses the poet’s mind. Elsewhere, referring to his poetical creations, Livingstone says:

Hey, my reckless dragons! You who kill me
and give me eternal birth – you are what you are,
as I am: of a restless ephemeral Now,
a peremptory earth ”

1, p. 24.
“ DOUGLAS LIVINGSTONE, “My Reckless Dragons”, Eyes Closed Against the Sun, p. 37.
In this long poem about the art of poetry, Livingstone speaks about the dragons’ “resonance of birth”, their “roaring” and “rutting thunderously behind the crackling dune”, their “forked fire” which reminds one of the pentecostal ‘tongues of fire’, a symbol for the poet’s attainment of a poetical production able to speak and make others understand his message in different languages. This universality characterizes the quality of Livingstone’s poems. The sense of profound irony shown by Livingstone in his observation of the particular idiosyncrasies of modern life and his often sceptical stand regarding human responses to life – love, joy, friendship, violence – characterize his best production. His attention to all these elements, as well as his own personal sense of discomfort, isolation and lack of confidence in human nature, shapes the forms and temperament of his language in such a way that his internationalism of themes compensates for the imperfection and the particularization of a fractured South Africa.