

Poetiche

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SON TO THE OCEAN

NEW ESSAYS ON DOUGLAS LIVINGSTONE'S POETRY

Edited and introduced by
Marco Fazzini

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Marco Fazzini

SON TO THE OCEAN

MARCO FAZZINI

Introduction:
Douglas Livingstone,
Poet/Scientist in a Jejune Universe

From his first book *The Skull in the Mud* (1960) to the latest haiku poems published in 1995 just before his death,¹ Douglas Livingstone's 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 neo-colonial capitalism. Livingstone's sense of man's difficulty to attain a reliable encounter with others – the feminine figures which hover over his multi-layered poetic narratives concerning meetings and amorous clashes, or the wilderness of the African continent itself – suggests the common uncertainty that much South African writing shows when it tries to entertain the idea of an uncorrupted beauty beyond the menace of scaring presences. Though his capacity for digging into South African history and sentiment is enacted through an oblique and often ambiguous verbal mastery, his technical gifts are carefully employed and reveal themselves in verse forms which encompass the influences of English (and European) tradition, the immediacies of southern African experience, and the neo-modernist gesture of fracturing levels of literary and mythical discourse to look for reconciliations, denying neither difficulty, nor even the pervading threat of dislocation. 'Douglas Livingstone', observed Guy Butler, 'has managed to make the great transition: his complexities are the misgivings, dilemmas and insecurities of us all'.²

This collection will achieve its goal if all the essays included here awaken an attraction for human emotive complexity and for that kind of dizziness caused by the slippage into the imaginative interpretation of the world's ruthlessness. This volume records vari-

ous attempts to read Douglas Livingstone's desire to explore the fracture zones of any individual's multi-faceted personality, introducing us to a series of dualisms to be found in a general human disposition towards the (African) world. As Tony Ullyatt has underlined in his contribution: 'Together, these dualities constitute parts of a much more complex yet cohesive and congruent pattern. Livingstone's is a world of boundaries and littoral zones, situated between the either/or territories of science and art, of compassion and disgust, of celebration and mourning'.³

Born in Kuala Lumpur, Douglas Livingstone arrives in Africa with his sister in 1942, after evacuation to Colombo with the advent of the Japanese invasion. He attends the Margate Government School and, later, the Port Shepstone Secondary School. When his father arrives in South Africa after the war, he is sent to Kearsney College, in the hilly land between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. 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 secondary stalls.⁴ His first paid employment is as a night-shift bench chemist in a sugar mill in Natal. At that time he spends his days on the beach 'toying with the idea of becoming a professional lifesaver'.⁵ In 1951 he moves to Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe) to work as an assayer in the government Metallurgical Laboratories. He spends some time as a labourer on a tobacco farm and, in 1952, the Pasteur Institute, in Salisbury, employs him as a technologist. After four years of study, he gains a Diploma in Medical Laboratory Technology. In 1957, he spends two months as a professional scuba diver during the construction of the Kariba Dam on the Zambesi River.

Both the mystery of that strange period spent on the Zambesi and the fear of death caused by his precarious health intensify his observation of life and its meaning. At about this time, the poet suffers a series of illnesses: pericarditis, septicaemia, meningitis, encephalitis, spells of mental illness, and tuberculosis of the kidneys. He recalls that, even though he had scribbled verse since about the age of 15, it is during this spell of about ten years – aged between 23 and 33 – that his talent sharpens up and he starts 'con-

trolling interests in his existence'.⁶ He then qualifies as a bacteriologist with the Southern Rhodesian Medical Council. The first of his approximately 100 scientific articles and reports to appear in international technical and specialist publications is published in the *Quarterly Review* of the Central African Association of Medical Laboratory Technologists. He is appointed Senior Technician in charge in the Bacteriological Department of the Lusaka General Hospital in Northern Rhodesia (the present Zambia) and, in 1959, he becomes Officer at the Pathological Diagnostic Laboratories at Broken Hill (now Kabwe, Zambia). Just before his return to South Africa in 1964, *Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa* appears under the Oxford University Press imprint. He then joins the National Institute for Water Research of the Durban CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research), working as a scientist on bacteriological aspects of marine pollution. From this time on, his literary articles, essays and reviews start appearing in literary journals; he gives talks and lectures on writing, taking part in public poetry readings and literary symposia. His poems begin to appear in anthologies all over the world. In 1992 he retires from the CSIR, but is retained as a consultant until the day of his death, in 1996.

All of Livingstone's poems present a difficulty of a sort. Even his love poems are impeded by social or psychological doubts which deny a full joy or playfulness, allowing the reader to share with him his insights into the dissociation of the modern experience. What probably attracts of Livingstone's poetry is not only the unavoidable feeling of unbalance provoked by his mixed reactions to reality and human condition, but mainly his provocative approach to life which, as Christopher Hope has underlined, 'broke all the rules about what a poet should do and be'.⁷ Opening the poem 'A Natural History of the Negatio Bacillus', Livingstone says:

i Definition of Negatio

The distance between emotion and intellect, or heaven
and earth, when such distance constitutes pathogenesis.⁸

Here the poet's perception of a fractured or dislocated universe in his microcosmic personal environment leads the reader to be disoriented by the world's malady and by his contingent displace-

ment. 'Tension then', Michael Chapman has noted, 'is derived from a clash of scientific and romantic attitudes. Paradoxically, in attempting to define his existence... this lonely individual succeeds only in increasing his own sense of uncertainty'.⁹ In literary terms, these two polarities reflect a disorientation on the part of the poet who painfully feels the irreconcilable dissociation 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 callosum'.¹⁰

Livingstone's preciseness, even in his first brief collection, risks becoming fastidious in its structural and phonosymbolic disposition of elements which, as Tony Voss has observed in his study dedicated to *The Skull in the Mud*, contain 'the bi-polar image of individual human desire, longing for the ideal effect against grim acceptance of the real'.¹¹ On the one hand, in 1960 Livingstone is already obsessed by the scientist's admiration for the amazing regularity of the table of elements and the general life rhythms of the earth, and on the other his mind is equally preoccupied by mythological and literary populations which he finds in the worlds of his Mediterranean 'companions', such as Ovid, Catullus, and Cavafy, or in Roy Campbell's South African modernist bravado, or in Alan Paton's liberal and moderate attitudes, or in e.e.cummings's formal experimentations, and in Fernando Pessoa's playful disorientation of masks. All this contributes to the rich overflow of attitudes and influences enmeshed in his poetic cauldron, determining that fascinating 'change from a youthful bravado about pain and suffering, to an older and wiser man's sense that compassion is more precious than boasting of your strength and immunity'.¹²

Behind the bravura, Livingstone's 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 from the 'Gentleman's pursuits' to the 'poet's function' without subjecting himself to ridicule? Possibly, however, political life has been constricting in its Calvinistic dourness, and Livingstone's sexually daring poems are socially necessary activities, as well as his attention

to 'green' preoccupations and to the decadence of Africa. As early as *Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa*, Livingstone has used the African landscape and animal imagery in such a way that both his juvenile romantic leanings and his non-African readings reveal the uneasiness of a white African in search of a reconciliation between the tangible and the alien, the civilized and the primitive. Yet, despite the fact that his 'African persona' is often portrayed as absorbed into the small-minded urban world of greediness, which is slowly devouring the mysteries of a great but doomed continent, Livingstone's bitter discovery is the one linked to his awareness of how human solitude and corruption are man's common maladies, of how the world's imperfection constantly reminds one of the lack of that plenitude that the poet's art partially restores: 'Essentially it is a vision of plenitude: of life forms, of whatever scale or condition, filled to their limits with dynamic energy. It is Livingstone's passionate apprehension of the plenitude of creation, however he finds it, that drives his poetic quest for expression'.¹³

Livingstone describes a painful loss in his poems and the disappearance of an unspoiled world is often partially cured by his linguistic mastery seeking, as Michael Chapman suggests, 'those fleeting moments of redemption, the enriching fragment, the mythic synthesis amid the transient character of personal, social, intellectual and artistic life'¹⁴ in order to redeem the chaotic state of civilization through the powerful timelessness of an aesthetic revelation. As the poet himself has stated:

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.¹⁵

Far from sharing its themes with the previous generation as suggested by Stephen Gray,¹⁶ and at a certain distance from the language of urgency of the Soweto poets of the 1970s, Livingstone's poetry stands mid-way in the contest between aesthetics/politics or being/action, dichotomies which have challenged more than one contemporary writer's conscience. Referring to the work of the

great Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, Stephen Watson has noted something which may aid an understanding of Livingstone's attitude. The difficult dichotomy of art and politics, 'being' and 'action' can find a way of redemption because 'aesthetic, that apparently flimsy, most frivolous of all categories, was in reality the ethical, and that choices in the one at least implied if they did not necessarily enjoin choices in the other'.¹⁷

This justifies the radical choice made by Livingstone in 1975 when his collection *A Rosary of Bone* counter-balances and, partly, annuls the political position of all those black poets who became the protagonists of a South Africa caught up in the turmoil generated by the student uprisings, even risking, as Duncan Brown underlines, converting his wariness of political rhetoric and the conformity of the group 'into a parodic and inaccurate portrayal of important aspects of black writing'.¹⁸ Livingstone's scepticism towards those black poets' aesthetic choice is expressed in various forms and in various places: at the University of Cape Town's Summer School in 1974, ('...modern literature has not changed the heart of even one politician – to my knowledge. Polit-Lit does have one important function, of course: to show the few readers interested that One's Heart Is In The Right Place...'),¹⁹ in a SABC Radio Documentary in 1979 ('Look, I find most politics and all racism just disgusting but I'm not a politician and I suppose politics being the art of survival – they must get on with it.').²⁰ and in a more recent interview released in 1990 ('...I am not a joiner; I do not belong to any cliques. But I have noticed, generally speaking, politics tend not to make for good art. How can they? Situations change, therefore the politics change: it's like attaching one's soul to a cabbage – the caggabe eventually gets either eaten or rots, taking your earnest little soul with it.').²¹

In his poem 'The Sower' (about the planting or sowing of poems), also released in 1990, Livingstone questions the validity of 'graffiti', 'slogans' and 'socio-political missiles', and he hopes that the sower's work can attain some kind of moral result, and writes:

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.²²

I remember hearing Livingstone say that his main desire as a poet was a small, yet unattainable one: to be remembered, after one hundred years from his death, for one single poem which could, as he says in the above mentioned lines, ‘quietly’ unshackle ‘one human heart’. He was probably thinking about the success of some of his favourite compositions, such as the few poems by Catullus he loved best, ‘To His Coy Mistress’ by Marvell, ‘Ithaka’ by Cavafy, or ‘The Zebras’ by Campbell, poems which he used to read in private meetings or include in the talks and lectures he released in his country. The over 300 poems, either in fair-copy holograph or typescript, which have been discovered after his death testify to a prolific production but also to a severe attitude towards his involvement with the art of ‘making’ poetry. The preciseness and emotional intensity he admired in the poems written by his ‘companions’ accompanied his whole career, and especially the two critical decades dominated by the South African historical events of the 1980s and early 1990s; those were the years in which, against the background of the State of Emergency, of the falling of Apartheid and of the many expectations of the new South Africa, he went on getting up early and going out of his small flat before dawn, frenetically loading his car with all his boxes, sampling bottles, a sampling stick, and a small exercise-book where he annotated every detail of a sound which was for him all his Africa, the breath of the earth pulsing even in the tiny tide of a sample to be analysed in the laboratory. One hundred years from his death have not elapsed yet, but his poetry now stands out as the work of a genius who, even in those few drops of the Durban sea he used to analyse, managed to study and discover the majesty of an oceanic wave whose secrets helped him unveil the meaning and power of the cosmos, and pass over the violence and corruption perpetrated by a collapsing humanity, still incapable to learn from its own mistakes.

NOTES

¹ *The Skull in the Mud*, Dulwich Village, Outposts Publications, 1960; *Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa*, London, Oxford University Press, 1964; *Poems*, with Thomas Kinsella and Anne Sexton, London, Oxford University Press, 1968; *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*, London, Oxford University Press, 1970; *A Rosary Of Bone*, Cape Town, David Philip, 1975 and 1983; *The Anvil's Undertone*, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1978; *Selected Poems*, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1984; *A Littoral Zone*, Cape Town, The Carrefour Press, 1991; *Giovanni Jacopo Meditates on the High-IQ Haiku*, Plumstead, Snail Press, 1995.

² Guy Butler, 'Livingstone, Douglas (James)', in Alan Lennox-Short ed., *English and South Africa*, Cape Town, Nasou, 1973, p. 31.

³ Tony Ullyatt, 'Two Different Sphincters: *A Rosary of Bone* (1975 and 1983)', p. 71 below.

⁴ See Douglas Livingstone, 'Leaving School', *London Magazine*, vol. 6, no. 7, October 1966, p. 57.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

⁶ See 'Shepherd of Dragons' (on video tape), by Charles Leftwich, University of Zululand, 1982.

⁷ Christopher Hope, 'Boxer on a Surfboard: *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* (1970)', p. 58 below.

⁸ Douglas Livingstone, *The Anvil's Undertone*, cit., p. 56.

⁹ Michael Chapman, *Douglas Livingstone: A Critical Study of his Poetry*, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1981, p. 151.

¹⁰ D.J. Livingstone, 'Graduation Address', University of Natal 1982 Graduation Citations and Address, Durban, University of Natal, 1982, p. 32.

¹¹ See Tony Voss, "'Limen et litus": *The Skull in the Mud* (1960)', p. 34 below.

¹² Don Maclennan, 'Preface: "Life Triumphs Even on No Longer Trusted Planets"', p. 15.

¹³ Tony Morphet, 'A Vision of Plenitude: *The Anvil's Undertone* (1978)', p. 104 below.

¹⁴ Michael Chapman, 'A Retrospect: *Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa* (1964)', p. 45 below.

¹⁵ Douglas Livingstone, 'Casanova in Modern Dress: An Interview with Douglas Livingstone by Michael Chapman', *Frontline Books*, no. 3, December 1983, p. 11.

¹⁶ See Stephen Gray, 'Introduction' to *Modern South African Poetry*,

Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1984, p. 12.

¹⁷ Stephen Watson, 'Poetry and Politicization', *Contrast* 61, vol. 16, no. 1, July 1986, p. 24.

¹⁸ Duncan Brown, 'Environment and Identity: *A Littoral Zone* (1991)', p. 128 below.

¹⁹ Douglas Livingstone, "Africa Within Us?"...', in Peter Wilhelm and James Polley eds., *Poetry South Africa: Selected Papers from Poetry '74*, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1976, p. 142.

²⁰ Douglas Livingstone, 'Douglas Livingstone – A Poet at Work. SABC Radio Documentary', produced by Don Ridgway, April 1979.

²¹ Douglas Livingstone, 'The Politics of Tolerance in South African Literature: D.L., poet, interviewed by Marco Fazzini', *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, vol. 30, nos. 1-2, 1991, p. 361.

²² Douglas Livingstone, *A Ruthless Fidelity: Collected Poems of Douglas Livingstone*, edited by Malcolm Hacksley and Don Maclennan, Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 2004, p. 396.

Contributors

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