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Abstract

Douglas Livingstone is rightly regarded by many critics as the leading poet now writing in South Africa. Yet, South Africa has been slow to recognize his poetic talent. (The first critical study of his work, *Douglas Livingstone: A Critical Study of his Poetry*, was published by Ad. Donker, Johannesburg, in 1981.) In spite of his being honoured with a D. Litt: from the University of Natal (Durban) in 1982, his poetry has been more favourably received in England and America than in his own country. He has won international awards from the British Society of Authors and at the Cheltenham Festival, yet in South Africa his only poetry prize has been in a competition which he entered anonymously. His latest collection, *The Anvil's Undertone* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1978), has been well received abroad: the *London Magazine*, commenting on Livingstone's 'powerful evocation of a doomed South African dreamland', concludes that there is 'no better poet writing on this continent in any language!' But this collection, which (to quote Richard Rive) 'must appeal to any serious student of South African literature',² was almost totally ignored by reviewers in South African literary magazines.

MICHAEL CHAPMAN

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It is argued that Livingstone is not a 'political' writer, and that in a politically turbulent society, the writer who matters must be overtly political. Certainly, it is both inevitable and justifiable that a good deal of writing from South Africa should protest in a vigorous and direct way.

But reductive theories can so easily simplify the relationship between art and historical pressures, while denying the individuality of the artist. Livingstone's poetry, though it rarely offers a one-to-one relationship between art and topical events, nevertheless embodies the rigorous stresses of cultural transition, particularly in southern Africa. His methods of indirection ensure that his work is refreshingly free of both genteel anguishings and the limited jargon of the public platform, those recurrent weaknesses of South African literature since Pringle. Livingstone captures individual experience and the temper of his times in boldly imaginative ways — by his unmistakable newness of tone, rhythm and imagery. *The Times Literary Supplement* has commented that he brings southern Africa 'dangerously and aptly alive'.⁵ This is true; yet it is also true that he transcends the region. As I shall show, his subject is not 'Africa' in a narrow sense, but contemporary man.

Douglas Livingstone was born of Scottish parents in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya, in 1932. At the age of ten he experienced at first hand the Japanese invasion. He recalls: 'We moved down the country in fits and starts machine-gunned and bombed in transit.'⁴ And, after his father had been taken prisoner-of-war, he left Malaya with his mother and elder sister for Ceylon, and then the South Coast of Natal in South Africa. After completing his schooling in 1951, he moved to what was then Rhodesia where he trained as a bacteriologist, worked for a time in Zambia, and then in 1964 returned to South Africa to take charge of marine bacteriological research for a water-research institute in Durban. Often asked about the apparent paradox that he is a scientist who is also a poet, Livingstone has replied: 'Science is man's search for truth; poetry combines a search and an interpretation.'⁵ He regards poetry as the minority art form, and sees it as constituting a greater challenge:

You have to get down to the truth, connect the truth in *oneself* with one's pen. It is very difficult to say exactly what you want to say, and you have to stay with it. It is a skill you have to keep on working at.⁶

Livingstone has so far published five books of poems and two award-winning radio plays. His first collection, *The Skull in the Mud* (London: Outposts Publications, 1960), is juvenilia; and Livingstone tells how, after realizing 'the appalling nature' of the twelve short poems that comprise the collection, he spent £25 buying up most of the available copies, which he destroyed.⁷ His next collection, *Sjambok, and other poems from Africa* (London: O.U.P., 1964), is significant in any discussion of a South African poetic tradition. Partly, it is significant because, for the first time since Roy Campbell in the 1920s, South

African English poetry hears the thrill of poetic utterance; the poems have that element of surprise so essential to poetry. Like Campbell, Livingstone is able to vivify language, to present the familiar in its unusual aspects. Here is his 'Vulture':

Slack neck with the pecked
skin thinly shaking, he
sidles aside, then stumps
his deliberate banker's
gait to the stinking meal.

Or, here is his 'She-Jackal':

Evilly panting and smiling, a jackal
stood near: razor ribs, warty shrivelled dugs,
hourglass loins and lean wire legs quivering;
the plump feeding ticks studding her bare flanks.

Livingstone's animals are a long way from the creatures to which we have grown accustomed. His animal poems, which comment obliquely on man in a tough, disillusioned landscape, have established him (together with Lawrence and Hughes) as a poet who has forcefully re-imagined animal life in ways relevant to a 20th-century world.

It is in fact Livingstone's ability to *re-imagine* motifs, situations, and particularly traditional segments of southern African experience, into original fictive forms that ultimately accounts for *Sjambok's* importance in South African poetry. While it is true that Campbell and Livingstone have in common an ability to activate language, the two poets have very different sensibilities. With Campbell we inhabit a heroic world which has not yet experienced the fragmentation of the Renaissance ideal; Livingstone, on the other hand, gives South African poetry a voice that is thoroughly and naturally modern.

This shift of sensibility is evident when we compare the two poets' respective responses to a particular motif in South African literature: that of Adamastor, the anthropomorphic spirit of the Cape of Storms, who first appears in Camoens's Portuguese Renaissance epic, *The Lusíads*. In Camoens's poem Vasco da Gama, the epic hero, outwits Adamastor, who is depicted as a gauche African cousin of the sophisticated Renaissance Europeans. Campbell, three hundred years later, resurrects Adamastor from the rocky escarpment of the Cape. Reacting against a late 19th-century South African 'tradition' of 'veld and vlei' verse (that is, sentimental hymns to the mystery of the veld), Campbell was attracted to Camoens's Renaissance flamboyance, and in Adamastor

he found a ready-made poetic symbol. Ignoring Adamastor's gaucherie, Campbell injects this ponderous giant with heroic vitality, depicting him as the Nemesis of the South African philistinism and stupidity which had refused to recognize Campbell's own robust poetic talents. 'Rounding the Cape' opens majestically:

The low sun whitens on the flying squalls,
Against the cliffs the long grey surge is rolled
Where Adamastor from his marble halls
Threatens the sons of Lusus as of old.

Livingstone — reacting specifically against Campbell — transforms Adamastor into a characteristically modern figure, terrifying in his very banality. In the poem 'Adamastor Resuscitated', Adamastor is a ludicrous figure of retribution who, preoccupied with an unsuccessful love affair, is allowed to sink ignominiously back into the scrub of the South African veld. Whereas Campbell's is a world in which Time's progression is marked by the tides that roll majestically to shore, Livingstone's Adamastor inhabits a universe in which Time is a '.38 repeater':

Memories of an atomic club dotting him one,
wrenched to be whirled from some pre-Nordic Yggdrasil —
if Time's a .38 repeater — he was done:
no rifling of his guts by knives impure,
self-consumption would be slower and more sure.

The old and the new are violently juxtaposed; chronological order seems to have gone awry. The celebrated question of Pinter's that summarizes the absurdist element in life is relevant: what's one thing got to do with another?

The motif of Adamastor is also used by both Campbell and Livingstone to depict their respective South African Adams, the white man's archetypal new world hero. As in American and Australian poetry, the South African Adam (as befits a frontier society) is a hunter. In Campbell's poetry he is an individual standing alone, self-reliant and ready to confront whatever awaits him; in Livingstone's work he has been transformed into an Adam-after-the-Fall.

Campbell, for example, sets his new world hero in a highly romantic hunter's paradise (as innocent in its way as the 19th-century pastoral idyll against which he had reacted). In 'To a Pet Cobra' the exceptional outdoor man (that is, Campbell himself) and nature share a magnificent and ruthless power:

Such venom give my hilted fangs the power,
Like drilling roots the dirty soil that spike,
To sting these rotted wastes into a flower.

Livingstone presents neither a pastoral idyll nor a hunter's paradise, but a disenchanting African landscape in which Campbell's 'solar colours' (his 'scarlet flowers' and 'golden rays') have faded to tawny yellows and greens. In 'The Killers' Livingstone's white hunter of the 1960s has been domesticated; a packed lunch and a supply of beer are now essential to the success of any outdoor venture:

You know how it is — fishing — your bare feet
in the warm mush of dead leaves near the edge
of the water, back against mossed tree bark
beer cooling in the river, and a wedge
of sandwich, wondering when to eat.

The colloquial idiom establishes the unheroic tone, while the high proportion of monosyllabic words captures the clipped South African manner of speaking. Like Campbell's Adam, Livingstone's Adam-after-the-Fall also confronts the primordial energies of the snake. But there is no synthesis. His actions are swift, barely rational; his limited sensibility (that curse of the South African situation) is revealed in a crisis:

I got the shotgun and blew her head clean
...I had to shoot; I mean
that now her limp grey life lies understood.

In *Sjambok*, then, Livingstone parodies what has been referred to as the South African justificatory myth of pastoralism and the virtue of innocence: that is, the tendency of successive generations of South African writers to romanticize pre-industrialism. His modern sensibility recognizes that pastoral themes need to be re-imagined, if they are to have relevance to a world in which it becomes increasingly difficult to return to nature.

Livingstone's modernity, of course, implies more than a chronological description; it is a matter of art and technique, a peculiar twist of vision — a vision which (as I have suggested) embodies a sharp awareness of the stresses of personal and cultural dissociation. The toughness and self-contradictoriness of human experience seem to defy traditional philosophical and moral systems; while science, instead of underpinning the poet's world-view with rationalistic assurances, has undergone a

modernist phase of its own, its once solid premises subverted by such concepts as relativity and indeterminacy. Livingstone's poetry exists in the tension of romantic and scientific attitudes. On the one hand, there is an element of bold experimentalism, indicating a desire to explore experience in daring ways; on the other, there is an equally strong appreciation of traditional form, implying the necessity of coping with a deeply felt, often distressing, subject.

The poetic techniques employed have certain affinities with American modernist techniques. Livingstone's rhythms are colloquial; the image is hard, exact, a description of spatial form; the impact of the poetry is instantaneous, not discursive; the syntax is the grammar of poetry, not of prose. Like T.S. Eliot and more recently Robert Lowell, Livingstone tends to translate his inner torment into a struggle with language. Eliot has spoken of fragments shored up against his ruin; Livingstone has said something similar about his own poetic practice:

Perhaps artistic responsibility is to get to know the nameless incubus within and deliver it with form and shape ... to rid oneself of a maybe dangerous violence by writing it out — to tame oneself as it were ... A poem is an artefact, a constructed thing.

Modernism makes its impact on Livingstone not superficially as an aesthetic theory (although he is obviously influenced by early 20th-century innovators); rather, his modernist strategies are dictated fundamentally by his own perceptions of psychological and historical discontinuity. In the poem 'Iscariot', for example, the Judas motif is wrenched into service of a sceptical 20th-century world. Much that is modern has entered Judas's feelings. His imagination has been dissected by 'splitting reason', and, unable to appreciate the nature of Christ's sacrifice, he is left alienated and alone. It is not Livingstone's purpose to show Judas's eventual suicide. Instead, the poem celebrates a terrible courage, which manifests itself in Judas's determination to exist in a universe that offers him no consolation:

I'll choose Earth as my rack.
Last; for prayer: my lips will spit a terse
goddam — those oddly flat and nailing vowels.

This idea of existential struggle recurs in Livingstone's poetry and constitutes a positive principle in a world in which human and spiritual values seem fractured.

Moreover, Livingstone's extraordinary artistic vitality — his creation

of striking fictions — in itself attests to an affirmation of life. In 'Storm-shelter', for instance, the poet evokes on the immediate level an African storm, but an initial reading already alerts one to descriptions of peculiar power. Images flash past the eye, while alliteratively awkward words elicit from the reader muscular participation. One is drawn both mentally and physically into a strange world, where the elements of the African bush emerge as symbols of violence and existential struggle:

Under the baobab tree, treaded
death, stroked in by the musty cats,
scratches silver on fleshy earth.
Threaded flame has unstitched and sundered
hollow thickets of bearded branches
blanched by a milk-wired ivy. Choleric
thunder staggers raging overhead.

'Choleric thunder' — this last psychologically-orientated image introduces the human drama. A lone figure attempts to find relief from the clash of elements that mirrors his torment. From the eye of the storm we hear a very human voice — a person like ourselves, who is painfully aware that the old sayings, the trusted systems, cannot account for his utter isolation:

'Never stand under trees in a storm.'
Old saws have an ancient rhythm
in them; but these dry, far from bold
norms and maxims are scalpel severed
by the sharp, needle-thin lightning,
frightening reason behind the eye,
slivered into lank abstract forms.

Here is the central paradox of Livingstone's vision: a striving for order, for 'reason', and the recognition that it may be inadequate to account for the instinctual side of man's psyche — the painful awareness that synthesis of man and Nature may be destined to remain illusory. It is the dilemma of imaginative man under the dispensation of science. For modern man, stripped of his 'old saws' and their 'ancient rhythms', there remains but the determination to survive. Although 'steel spears ... rattle their points ... maiming invisibly', and 'shafts reel/ through the streaked Impi from Nowhere',

There is only one thing to do —
wheel, stamping, into that brittle rain.

Such a commitment to bare survival could be extremely bleak; yet, 'Stormshelter' has considerable vibrancy. Finally, this poem insists unexpectedly on yet a further dimension of meaning: its linguistic dexterity is, in itself, a kind of celebration of the 'poetic' view of experience; even as we read of an inability to create, we participate in an act of imaginative enlargement. As Frank Kermode has said: 'Fictions are especially necessary in the modern world ... They enable man to confer organization and form on the temporal structure, and they grow very intricate because we know so desolately that *as* and *is* are not really one.'⁹

The character of Livingstone's poetry is in marked contrast to the character of black South African poetry of the last decade. Broadly speaking, Soweto poetry cultivates immediacy; Livingstone, on the other hand, attempts to cultivate more than immediacy, to embody language in a situation larger than the present. His variety of styles, his use of personae, and his critical re-imaginings of the past are means of overcoming the problem of a wider communication in a world that seems to have lost faith in traditional terms of reference.

Yet, Livingstone and a Soweto poet such as Oswald Mtshali are linked in interesting ways. 1970 saw the publication of Livingstone's next important collection, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* (O.U.P., London), and, soon afterwards, Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, both books containing predominantly urban poems. Although William Plomer, in the 1920s, had looked briefly at a tawdry Rand townscape, South African poets prior to 1970 had generally favoured the veld to the town as a source of imagery. Livingstone's and Mtshali's collections signal the beginning of an increasing urbanization of South African English poetry, and it is indicative of the South African racial situation that the two poets present not only very different visions of urban life, but also two 'cities' which are mutually exclusive.

Livingstone, who in the interim had settled in Durban, concentrates on the white inhabitants — the whores, hoboes and lonely flat-dwellers — of a big seaport; his black man is superficially drawn. Mtshali, for his part, presents unimaginative caricatures of whites, yet offers a memorable gallery of township types. Neither poet attempts to face the difficult challenge of a racially diverse environment. In his latest collection (*The Anvil's Undertone*), however, Livingstone does successfully evoke an urban landscape in which blacks, whites and Indians emerge as credible human beings, but in *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* he ignores urban racial tensions. In fact, he at times seems more interested in matters of technique than in the problems of his city inhabitants, and there are a number of sketches of urban observation which, while vivid

and celebratory of artistic individuation, are distinctly limited in their weight of experience.

But the more significant poems are acutely preoccupied with the human situation, and — as is the case with Soweto poetry too — life is pictured as a struggle. For Mtshali, life is a struggle in community, with survival related directly to subsistence living and oppressive laws. Livingstone, operating from within the parameters of white urban society, presents private modes of experience. In 'Did', for instance, the struggle to exist involves the anxieties of city loneliness:

Did, after overtopping the waiter,
leave his name, his phone-number
on a bar-chit, and straitly
under these, the single word *lonely*.
A girl called him selling service
before the street lamps could flower,
and he went round with ice,
a bottle and did drink, listening to her
icebreaking chatter, her teeth
meeting like tongs in small pairs;
did watch her acquisitive
nose with its sadly desperate quiver.

Isolation, the inability to find relationship, is the common experience of Livingstone's city dwellers. Yet, while ugliness is not shirked, the void in *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* is not as dark as it was in *Sjambok*. Perhaps during these years life in Durban seemed somewhat kinder to the poet than it had in Rhodesia. Whatever the reason, Livingstone extends his emotional range. Gentleness, compassion, humour (qualities which in the earlier collection were choked by the coarse growth of the African bush) largely account for the success of poems such as the much anthologized 'Gentling a Wildcat', 'To a Chinese Lady' and 'Steel Giraffes'. In the tender lyric, 'Steel Giraffes', the poet is in love, and the 'unromantic' South African industrial townscape seems transformed. The Durban skyline, perhaps even the African animal world beyond, tactfully acknowledges the wonder of human affection:

There are, probably, somewhere
arms as petal-slight as hers;
there are probably somewhere,
wrists as slim;
quite probably, someone has
hands as slender-leafed as hers;
the fingers, probably
bare of rings, as thin.

Certainly, there is nowhere
such a dolour
of funnels, mastings, yards,
filaments of dusk ringing shrouds
woven through the word goodbye,
riveted steel giraffes
tactfully looking elsewhere,
necks very still to the sky.

'Steel Giraffes' was reprinted in Livingstone's next collection, *A Rosary of Bone* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1975). This slim volume is unique in South African poetry for its intelligent, adult treatment of sexual love. The poet's stylistic versatility is evident in poems of celebration, loss, humour and ribaldry. His models are the 17th-century love poems of Donne and Marvell; but Livingstone exploits, to his own purpose, the Metaphysical tactics of scientific allusion, paradox, pun and hilarious comparison. Whereas Donne, in 'Love's Progress', wittily compares sexual conquest to a voyage of exploration through the waters of the northern hemisphere, Livingstone's early European navigator, Sir Tongue, charts southern zones:

I adjure thee, Sir Tongue: Be Firm. Be Indiscrete.
Cast off. Your journey start from her slightest Toes.
Set Sail upon the Creases of her Feet,

...

Down over Chin & Throat to Armpits you'll be sent,
& up those Sun-Tipped Capes from whence a Country-View
Spreads below. Coast down to her soft Belly's Dent.

Here, you may pause to ease your Rig and Sails.
Cruise in widening Circles until intervenes
That Continent's sweet Harbour from the South-West Gales.

Drop Anchor in this most redolent of Coves,
& taste for yourself Nectarines, Tangerines,
Pineapples, Grapes, Avocadoes, Paw-Paws, Cloves.

('Giovanni Jacopo Meditates: on an early European Navigator')

This is an amusing variation of the archetypal Cape journey, which has provided an organizing metaphor for successive South African writers. As the poet Robert Dederick said at the time: 'Livingstone has added a dash of colour to the prevailing grey earnestness of the contemporary poetical scene.'¹⁰

A Rosary of Bone does not so much examine the nature of human relations as new ways of expressing the emotion of love. The poems offer a dramatic expression of the outward, demonstrative aspects of feeling. There is scepticism, affirmation, raciness, and underlying seriousness that is never solemn. The poet discovers that love may offer man moments of synthesis, its failure leads to isolation and despair.

In Livingstone's latest collection, *The Anvil's Undertone*, 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. The poetry shows continuing stylistic evolution to accommodate the shift towards a greater intransigence. At times, the diction is austere; at other times, the search for new images — for new fictive worlds — takes one into areas of 20th-century scientific pursuit, witchcraft and nightmare. As in *Sjambok*, there is a turning outwards to the realized events, the symbolic images, of southern African society.

We journey to KwaZulu — underdeveloped, poverty-stricken — where

Umsinsi trees hold
up wasp-wasted ribcages bare but for
rags of bloodstained flowers...

('August Zulu')

to the undeserved luxury of white suburbia, where the Town Tembu

does the two cars, the garden,
the floors, the windows, the swimming pool.
There are many empty bottles and full
ashtrays...

('Town Tembu')

to a contrasting Durban townscape, where Peter Govender, busdriver and fisherman, discovers that contempt for death is *his* only freedom:

Sometime busdriver
of *Shiva's Pride*, *The Off-Course Tote*,
The Venus Trap and *The Khyber Pass Express*.

...
Old duels for fares:
The South Coast road — all we could get;
my left hand conning the wheel...

('Sonatina of Peter Govender, Beached')

to a village blacksmith shop, caught in the colours of the mind:

Horseshoes, blades, shares and lives: all shaped
to the hoarse roar and crack of flame,
by the clang of metallic chords,
hammer-song, the anvil's undertone;
nailed to one post of jackal's skull.

(‘Mpondo’s Smithy, Transkei’)

The Anvil’s Undertone represents a forceful distillation of individual and social pressures, upon which Livingstone has imposed his distinctive signature. In a world in which bush massacres and gruesome deaths in detention have almost become the common experience, he seems to say that absurdity, nightmare, is the present-day South African reality. Thus, the animal motif begins to assume hallucinatory shapes. In ‘Under Capricorn’ an African goat rises from a roadcutting, a frightening manifestation of man’s shadow world:

Fecund, fornicatory
hairy flanks tun-tight; yellow
mad intelligent eyes bright
under quick horns...

What is particularly interesting, though, is the way in which Livingstone has adapted the animal motif to reflect the haunted imagination of the urban man. In ‘The Zoo Affair’ the white hunter, who a decade earlier had taken his packed sandwiches to the bush, has now donned his city suit. Experiencing a new urban alienation, he is fascinated by a tiger in the city zoo, and one night enters its cage:

For perhaps one second he felt it, face buried in rank
cat’s fur: the sleepy response. Then the rasped purr
meshed with metallic springs. The barelling flanks
pumped an outraged blast from alien vaults of power.

They found him on the floor early next morning, his head
a split and viscid watermelon; loosely the wet tufts
of combed brains spilled, his smile quiet through the red;
beside him, for warmth, the cosy sprawl of his love.

The powerful, often gruesome, imagery evokes a scene of indiscriminate destruction. The urban man expresses his humanity, his desire for a passion, in a bizarre way, which only seems to suggest the full extent of his isolation.

Finally, Livingstone has accepted, in his own way, the recent challenge of Soweto poetry's 'open' or 'naked' forms. In 'Dust' he achieves an idiom which is hard, keenly-edged like metal, and perfectly equipped to express a vision of existence that has become implacable. The South African townscape is a battleground; a white man finds the corpse of a black labourer in the gutter:

The bundle in the gutter had its skull
cracked open by a kerie.
The blunt end of a sharpened bicycle
spoke grew a solitary
silver war-plume from the nape of his neck.
I turned him gently. He'd thinned to a wreck.

It was my friend Mketwa. He was dead.
Young Mac the Knife, I'd called him,
without much originality. Red
oozed where they'd overhauled him.
An illegal five-inch switchblade, his 'best'
possession, was stuck sideways in his chest.

This deeply-felt incident convinces the reader that Mketwa's life and death are tragic — a waste of human potential. Herein lies the real indictment of a restrictive social system.

Livingstone, then, creates the dramatic event which is set solidly in its background; there is economy and coherence in his projection of a variety of subject-matter. As is probably inevitable in a boldly adventurous poet, his experimental verve does at times overreach itself; at other times, a self-conscious aesthetic formalism militates against deeper insights into the human condition. In his best poetry, however, the relationship between human and aesthetic components is complex and dynamic. *The Anvil's Undertone* is deeply committed to southern Africa, yet it is successful at suggesting, too, that peculiarly regional anxieties have their echoes and counterparts elsewhere.

Refreshingly — particularly in the context of South African literature — Livingstone does not offer moral prescriptions. What he does is to write with compassion and originality about aspects of being alive in difficult times. In a world of total economics and politics — distrustful of the autonomous imagination — Livingstone has attempted to modify his reader's sensibility by affirming the value of the imaginative life.

NOTES

1. *London Magazine*, 18 (8), November 1978, 61.
2. Talking of Books, English Programme, S.A.B.C., 25 May 1978.
3. 19 November 1964.
4. 'Leaving School', *London Magazine*, 6 (7), October 1966, 55.
5. 'Douglas Livingstone, Poet', *The Daily News* (Durban), 7 January 1978.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Letter to the author, 21 March 1978.
8. 'Ten Comments on a Questionnaire', *London Magazine*, 4 (8), November 1964, 33.
9. *The Sense of an Ending*, New York, 1967, 40.
10. Talking of Books, 10 October 1975.



Douglas Livingstone. Photo: Monica Fairhull