

**"Symbiosis or Death":  
An Ecocritical Examination of  
Douglas Livingstone's poetry**

**THESIS**

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**Mariss Patricia Stevens**

Grahamstown

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## Abstract

As the quotation in the title of this thesis indicates, Douglas Livingstone states that unless humankind can learn to live in mutuality with the rest of the natural world, the human race faces extinction. Using the relatively new critical approach of ecological literary criticism (ecocriticism) this thesis explores Livingstone's preoccupation with "symbiosis or death" and shows that the predominant theme in his ecologically-orientated poetry is one of ecological despair. Countering this is a tentative thread of hope. Possible resolution lies in the human capacity to attain compassion and wisdom through the judicious use of science, creativity, the power of art and the power of love. Livingstone's ecological preoccupation is thus informed by the universal themes which have pervaded literature since its recorded beginnings.

The first chapter examines the concepts of ecology and literary ecocriticism, followed by a chapter on the life and work of Douglas Livingstone, and a review of the critical response to the five collections of poetry which predate *A Littoral Zone*, his final work. The remaining four chapters offer an analysis of his ecologically-orientated poetry, with the majority of the space given to an examination of *A Littoral Zone*. The following ecological themes are used in the analysis of the poems: evolutionary theory, humankind's relationship to nature, ecological equilibrium, and ecological destruction. The latter two themes are shown to represent Livingstone's view of the ideal and the real, or the opposites of hope and despair. The analysis interweaves an argument with the existing critical response to this collection.

This thesis demonstrates that Livingstone's crucial message – the need for humankind to attain ecological sensibility or “the knowledge of right living” (Ellen

Swallow) and so obviate its certain extinction – has largely been ignored in previous critical works.

Before the immense mystery of the universe our  
optimism tends to be abused. How can one explain  
a world which appears too beautiful to be an  
accident and too hideous to be a design?

– *William Plomer*

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### List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used, in order of appearance in the text:

<i>LZ</i>	<i>A Littoral Zone</i>
<i>BL</i>	<i>Biographia Literaria</i>
<i>AU</i>	<i>The Anvil's Undertone</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Sjambok and other poems from Africa</i>
<i>EC</i>	<i>Eyes Closed Against the Sun</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>A Rosary of Bone</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Selected Poems</i>

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Note:- Part of Chapter Five has been published as:

“Life pumping through as anyhow’: Douglas Livingstone’s use of Evolution in *A Littoral Zone*”

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We have evolved from the living world, and one of the gifts that Darwin gave us was to place us in that world, not as conquerors with spoils but as inheritors with responsibilities.

– *Brian Silver*

## Introduction

It was a Hogsback poet, Norman Morrissey, who first introduced me to Douglas Livingstone's poetry. He told me he thought Livingstone (1932-1996) is South Africa's greatest poet and lent me a copy of *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* (1970). I read it in our lush Hogsback garden, and was perplexed. The stark harshness of his poems contrasted strongly with Hogsback's summer luxuriance. But it was more than this. I could not pinpoint *why* the poetry was good. I am still struggling to understand Livingstone's poetry, yet I am convinced that he is South Africa's finest poet. His writings continue to perplex me, but after more than two years of intensive reading I am not bored by his verse.

Some years after my introduction to Livingstone's work I read his final collection, *A Littoral Zone* (1991) more or less simultaneously with Jonathan Bate's ecological book *The Song of the Earth* (2000). The one seemed to inform the other: Livingstone's wish "to hymn the earth" (39) and Bate's call to poets "to remind the next few generations that it is we who have the power to determine whether the earth will sing or be silent" (282). Hence my initial aim was to offer a new interpretation of the colonisation of land, from an ecological rather than a political perspective. This is precisely what Livingstone's poetry does.

This thesis does not explore the political in any depth. I am aware that this is contrary to the approach taken by many critics, particularly Michael Chapman. I claim strongly that Douglas Livingstone is *not* a political poet and that to try to read him as this is to seriously misread him. The political is concerned (broadly) with the manmade<sup>1</sup> ideologies and systems used to govern temporal affairs. The South African political situation under Apartheid was draconian and immoral. I do not deny this and neither, I think, did Livingstone. But it was temporary. Livingstone as poet has a vision which

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<sup>1</sup> I mostly use the terms humankind, humanity or, sometimes, the human race. But, there are times when the syntax or the historical context demand (for me) the use of the now generally unaccepted term man. When referring to the centuries-old man versus nature debate I have favoured the term "man" for historical reasons.

The world presented in Douglas Livingstone's poetry is that of man and woman, rather than that of humankind. This may seem anachronistic, but I believe it is also to do with the cadence and flow of language.

extends far beyond the politics of the day and into the future of the whole human race. In a published interview Chapman pointed out that poetry can be used as “a weapon of social change” (1985: 110). Livingstone openly said he lacked this conviction but added:

Except perhaps that they [poems] may kindle some kind of osmotic miraculous transformation of the human spirit towards kindness and brotherhood, and an acceptance of and wish to preserve beauty and ethics!

As regards *that* kind of politics, it's there in my work, implicitly... I *know* such intolerances as anti-semitism, racism, etc, to be inimical, incompatible with the spirit of being truly human, and, in the long term, biologically doomed. (*ibid.*)

In *A Littoral Zone* this message is clear: humankind faces certain extinction unless it can (miraculously) learn to co-exist with one another and the rest of the natural world. Humankind has a “choice”: it is “symbiosis or death” (*A Littoral Zone* 61; hereafter referred to as *LZ*). Livingstone's poetry continually reminds us of this ecological position and implicitly admonishes us for our anthropocentrism.

The term “ecology” is as complex as the man-versus-nature debate which has pervaded literature since its recorded beginnings. Ecology is a relatively new science. The term was coined by the zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 (Kroeber 22). Ecology encompasses the scientific account of what constitutes the biosphere (the Earth) and is explained in an hierarchical system, starting with subatomic particles which make up the atoms, then molecules, then cells, then tissues which together constitute organisms (plants and animals, including humans). These organisms form populations which live in communities within an ecosystem (the environment) which forms part of the greater biosphere (Irwin 6). This scientific account of the realm of ecology constitutes what James Lovelock calls theoretical ecology, “that branch of mathematical biology that is concerned with interactions among the species of an ecosystem” (1988: 47). A postgraduate science student told me that ecology is an ‘iffy’ science because it deals with too many variables simultaneously. But, paradoxically, the ‘strength’ of the science of ecology is precisely that it *does* look at all possible variables; it is concerned with the interactions and interconnections between and among organisms and their environment. When the human element is introduced into the ecological equation the concept of interaction becomes much more complex, for the ethical dimension of man's relationship to the environment is crucial.

Jonathan Bate claims Ellen Swallow was the first active ecologist. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century she campaigned for clean air and water and better urban living conditions in the

USA and was the first to apply the term ecology to man's relationship with the environment (1991: 36). She said:

For this knowledge of *right living* we have sought a new name ... as theology is the science of religious life, and biology the science of life ... so let Oekology be hence the worthiest of the applied sciences which teaches the principles on which to found healthy ... and happy life. (in Bate 1991: 36)

For Swallow, ecology as the knowledge of right living would lead to a healthy and happy life. I call this a state of "ecological equilibrium", a state which Livingstone intermittently explores and depicts as the idyllic in his poetry. The phrase "knowledge of right living" reverberates and pinpoints the core concern of ecology. Why is it that Swallow's words, uttered more than a century ago when the world was still relatively unspoilt, have by and large been ignored? The real problem seems to be the human refusal or inability to see beyond our noses and accept global responsibility. The eminent biologist Edward O. Wilson calls this inability the juggernaut theory of human nature. This theory "holds that people are programmed by their genetic heritage to be so selfish that a sense of global responsibility will come too late. Individuals place themselves first, family second, tribe third and the rest of the world a distant fourth" (Wilson 1986). Livingstone articulates this human predisposition in the poem "Christmas Chops at Station 1a" (LZ 12):

the perfectability of man,  
the conservation of beauty,  
the final attainment of truth  
are salients that ever evade us.

If humankind is genetically programmed to be deaf to Swallow's concept of the "knowledge of right living", is there any hope? This is explored in the final chapter where I argue that Livingstone prods our psychic awareness and appeals to the less tangible concepts of the imagination and the human capacity for love as possible antidotes to humankind's ecological ignorance and destructiveness.

This notwithstanding, does scientific ecology have a role to play? Is it, as Swallow claimed, the key to happy and healthy life? At one level, yes, but the import is more dire than this. The survival of the human race depends on ecological awareness or on what Julia Martin terms "environmental literacy". Ecology is not 'out there' as an applied science which has no bearing on the concerns of the man in the street. It is an ethical issue and our knowledge of the science of ecology should be seen as a tool for, without ecological awareness *and* action, humankind is doomed. Something about this

relatively new science has caught our imagination. This is, at least, a start. I believe it is the concept of interrelationship which has piqued human curiosity. An ecological awareness is based on the human ability to commune with the natural world. We need to foster this capacity for ‘communication’ because it leads us to ask where we belong in the greater scheme of things. These questings concerning have been expressed in human art since the beginnings of human civilization and the miraculous ecological web of life should be part of our ponderings. Ecology has, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, been annexed by literary theorists who have found that an ecologically informed approach can offer a more incisive interpretation of literary texts. This approach has been dubbed ecological literary criticism (ecocriticism) and it is the theoretical basis for this thesis.

While scientific ecology sees humankind as a biological organism, literary (or philosophical) ecology ponders the position of humanity as both part of and apart from nature. Consciousness has set us apart from the rest of the natural world in such a way that we do not instinctually co-exist with other organisms. Furthermore, humanity abuses the environment for its own gain. The conundrum of why humans are the only animal which fouls its own nest implicitly informs Livingstone’s poetry and causes him to call man the “clown of creation” (*LZ* 46), a foolish and uncouth ignoramus who does not know his place within the natural framework.

I argue that Livingstone, particularly in *A Littoral Zone*, seeks to remind his human readers that our survival as a species depends on our understanding that the Earth is our greater home and that we need to both find and know our place within it. The Greek roots of the word ecology (*oikos* as home or dwelling place and *logos* as relation) point to this relationship with one’s home or dwelling place.

The preceding seems to presuppose that Livingstone was a deep ecologist (see p 18 for a discussion of deep ecology). This is only partly accurate. His poetry is too gritty and ecologically pragmatic to be labelled deeply ecological. Yet, his reverence for nature (see the section “What is nature?” p 76) and the Earth is communicated (between the lines). I argue that he is a Romantic materialist who uses the best of the Romantic tradition – an appreciative awe of nature and a belief that the human imagination is crucial – and combines this with an acute scientific awareness (see also p 58). The material view pervades his poetry through the use of precise scientific words (for example: bacillus, isotopes, homeostasis, crystallogenesis, genetic blueprint, latency,

cilia, spirochaetes, mitochondria, geoid) and the underlying scientific theories of, for example, Darwinism, the biological function of cells, and geophysiology (the scientific name for Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (see footnote on p 36). His scientific understanding of the way nature works is perhaps most explicitly demonstrated in his use of evolutionary theory (see p 82). This is evident in his first volume, *A Skull in the Mud*, and in the poem of the same name, but is most explicitly explored in *A Littoral Zone*. In this work Livingstone puts humanity in the no-man's-land of the littoral zone and shows that humankind has lost a sense of belonging or place on the Earth. Evolution and ecology are inextricably linked (see p 131 for a fuller explanation). Douglas Livingstone as poet is both quixotic champion of the abused Earth and prophet of ecological doom. His poetry implies that he saw himself as a misguided ecological knight errant. But, as a microbiologist, he spent 30 years fighting water pollution off the Durban coastline. *A Littoral Zone* is the poetic account of his scientific work and is a bioregional narrative (see p 8).

Douglas Livingstone's poetry is difficult. Initially I thought it was too difficult, that its lyricism could be intuited but never adequately explained. I still believe this is true. But I no longer believe that it is inaccessible. Perhaps it is the difficulty of Livingstone's poetry which has resulted in both a narrow political interpretation of his work and a paucity of critical material on *A Littoral Zone*. In 2002, nearly a decade after this collection was published, Duncan Brown was the first to offer an environmental interpretation of *A Littoral Zone*. Apart from this, there has been no explicitly ecologically oriented interpretation of Livingstone's work. His most prolific critic, Michael Chapman, concedes (in the introduction to *The New Century of South African Poetry*) that Livingstone may be read ecologically. He does not say it as plainly as this and, curiously, puts his references to ecology in scare quotes:

The focus on Livingstone's last collection, *A Littoral Zone* (1991), lends emphasis to his concern with the 'ecologies' of our existence. Given the freer climate of the 1990s it may be possible to move beyond arguments as to whether Livingstone's derisive comments about polit-lit in the politically tense 1970s inevitably branded him a politically incorrect human being. While not ignoring the political past it is arguably more agreeable today to view a 'green' Livingstone. (2002: xxiii)

Livingstone's refusal to be drawn into the political arena and Chapman's insistence that he should be is documented both in Chapman's critical work and in interviews he conducted with Livingstone. This thesis attempts to show that Livingstone was never a

political poet (see chapter two for a discussion of the critical material) and that his alleged ‘political incorrectness’ pales into insignificance against the wider ecological issues (the future of the human race) which his poetry addresses.

I claim that the ecological message behind the poetry is of paramount importance, that Livingstone’s voice should join the small chorus of those who plead with humanity to stop the unthinking abuse of the Earth and try to avert a future of ecological doom. I am aware that my ecological presuppositions may, in places, be as overdetermined as previous political presuppositions (see also p 30). I try to substantiate my ecological interpretation by relying on what the poems say and on various articles by and interviews with Douglas Livingstone which point to his ecological view. For example, the phrase “ecological despair” which I will use repeatedly is Livingstone’s own (Robbins 1992: 52). Because Livingstone’s aim to help heal the planet is never expressed explicitly in his published poems, I have relied heavily on biographical information to support my argument that he was an (errant) ecological campaigner. Interestingly, an unpublished poem titled “In A Littoral Zone” contains this line: “a turning to an urge to heal the earth, its waters”. In another, four-line unpublished poem “Giovanni Jacopo Meditates (on the Myopia of Medicine)” he unequivocally criticises humankind for its ecological abuse of the Earth:<sup>2</sup>

Only one Lifeform is misbehaving  
 – Pity we cannot ban it:  
 Rife Humanity needs no saving,  
 Only the wretched Planet.

In this thesis I use only the latest versions of the published poems of Douglas Livingstone and have not considered the variants in the poems. The collections I have used are now all out of print. However, a new volume of collected poems has been edited by Malcolm Hacksley and Don MacLennan and is to be published during the course of 2004 (after the completion of this thesis).

Livingstone’s awareness of nature is strongly evident throughout all his poetry. There is a significant shift from predominant land imagery in his earlier works to sea imagery in his final collection. This can be biographically linked with Livingstone’s move from inland Africa (Zimbabwe and Zambia where he worked as a pathologist) to

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Mr Malcolm Hacksley, Director of NELM, for giving me copies of these poems.



Durban in 1964 to take up the post of marine microbiologist with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). His view of nature as a forming force is metaphorically represented by what he called the “Creative Principle” (Fazzini 1990: 139, Livingstone 1986: 106 and *LZ* 16) and I use this concept extensively in my interpretation of the poems. The titles of the collections are valuable metaphorical signposts. *A Skull in the Mud* is a trope for evolutionary ancestry while in *Sjambok and Other Poems from Africa* the sjambok signifies colonisation of the land (Africa) through the use of manmade tools. Human ignorance or blindness to the life-giving power of nature is metaphorically implicit in *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*, and *The Anvil’s Undertone* refers to the groaning of the abused Earth (the anvil). The remaining earlier collection, *A Rosary of Bone*, is a collection of love poems (which contains a few poems of ecological import).

The thesis concentrates on *A Littoral Zone* because it is a largely unexplored work and because of its strong ecological theme, evident in most of the poems in the collection. I give a less detailed examination of Livingstone’s earlier work (his first five collections of poetry) and examine only the poems which have a definite ecological basis.

In *A Littoral Zone* the Creative Principle is conflated with evolutionary theory, particularly the hypothesis that life-forms originated in the sea (the aquatic theory). The sea is portrayed as an indifferent maternal figure in the final poem of the collection (61). In the opening poem Livingstone says “Perhaps the sea indeed did suckle you” (7) and later in the sequence he “recall[s] a time I once breathed in its sea” (18). A less obvious, but pertinent, aspect of the Creative Principle in *A Littoral Zone* is Livingstone’s use of the concept of life. In all but one reference (“seeking life, seeking love” (26)), life is connected with the inexorable biological process: “confronting life” (7), “life pumping through us anyhow” (35), “life / triumphs even on no longer trusted planets” (47) and “the trophy: life?” (61). The final quotation is also the final line in *A Littoral Zone*. It not only refers to the miraculous biological process of life, but also asks a tantalising question: is life a ‘floating’ trophy or prize which is not humankind’s to keep in perpetuity?

This thesis does not explore two large areas of Livingstone’s work which both offer enough material for separate theses. The first area is his ‘Giovanni Jacopo’ poems. The Jacopo poems have a distinctly different style and here Livingstone uses a different

voice and persona, much as the Portuguese and for a time Durban-based poet, Fernando Pessoa, does. The latter's translator, Jonathan Griffin, claims that Pessoa's other poets were written under heteronyms, not pseudonyms. He makes this distinction because "they are imaginary poets with real poems in them. Fernando Pessoa was four poets in one" (9). Likewise, Douglas Livingstone was (at least) two poets: himself and Giovanni Jacopo. Why he took recourse in another voice and personality with a 17<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy offers rich material for a fascinating study.

The second area is the theme of religion or what Livingstone called "my running battle with the Almighty" (Robbins 1992: 52). The religious theme in the poetry of Douglas Livingstone is recurrent and striking. (This religious imagery can doubtless be linked to Livingstone's early education in a Catholic convent in Malaysia.) Michael Chapman particularly has done some critical work on the religious theme. I have largely ignored this theme, except where it has a direct ecological bearing. The religious is more camouflaged in *A Littoral Zone* than it is in Livingstone's earlier work and a study of his shifting perspective on the nature of religion would make for a fascinating study.

In this thesis I make little reference to the physical maps on the frontispiece and the final page (63) of the book. They frame the poetry of *A Littoral Zone* and place the poems in a defined geographical context. The 'mapping' of his journey and scientific work along the Natal coastline contributes to my claim that the collection is a bioregional narrative for it "presents a human being in an ethical, sustainable relationship to a place that is defined by its human and nonhuman aspects" (Armbruster in Tallmadge 12).

Livingstone described it more poetically in an interview with David Robbins:

I think Natal is a microcosm of South Africa, South Africa of the world. Socially we've got it all: the divisions between the haves and the have-nots, the racial problems ... If South Africa doesn't make it neither will the world. Here I am referring to the humans.

On another level, a deeper level perhaps, I see Natal as a microcosm of Africa. Natal is a compressed version of the continent. It has everything. Terror, beauty, and an immense sense of power emanating from the earth and the waters. (1987: 51)

I never met Douglas Livingstone, but two of his friends and fellow poets, Marco Fazzini and Don Maclellan, have told me that Livingstone considered *A Littoral Zone* to be his finest work, that it was here that he managed to articulate his concerns most clearly. This thesis does not use the term landscape but refers to the natural environment

as the Earth. The poetry demands this use of terminology because it does not lend itself to the idea of pictorial natural scenery, as implied by the term landscape. Livingstone's poetry reflects the divide between manmade environments (the urban) and natural environments (the rural or, even, pastoral). When referring to the human habitat or our ecological position on the Earth I have favoured the terms 'place' and 'home' in my analyses. Julia Martin points out that

In some recent critical discourse, instead of "landscape" or "nature", terms such as "place", or "home" and the concept of situatedness have been developing connotations which suggest an embodied locatedness in particular environments, an experience primarily of land rather than landscape. (1999: 53)

The thesis consists of six chapters. The first two chapters are more theoretical and the remaining four concentrate on the poetry of Douglas Livingstone.

Chapter one deals with the theoretical framework of the thesis and examines ecology and ecological literary criticism. The second chapter offers a brief biography of Livingstone and an overview of the existing critical material on his poetry.

The third chapter examines Livingstone's earlier work (the first five poetry collections) and argues that his ecological preoccupation is evident in these collections. This chapter offers four broad themes within the ecological framework and examines key poems in detail to support this 'categorisation'. The themes are: evolutionary theory, humankind's ambivalent relationship with nature, ecological equilibrium and ecological destruction.

Following an introductory chapter on *A Littoral Zone*, the last two chapters concentrate on this, Livingstone's final collection. Chapter four examines what Livingstone called "humanity's physical element" and what I dub the material view – the biological and scientific explanations of life and the physical world. This chapter offers analyses of poems which deal with Darwinism and humankind's abuse of nature. It concludes that (despite scientific knowledge that humankind is part of the evolutionary process and therefore part of nature) humanity has engineered itself into a position of ecological destruction.

The final chapter examines an ideal state which I have termed ecological equilibrium. It analyses poems in *A Littoral Zone* which explore the power of art and the power of love and argues that these fall into Livingstone's category of "humanity's psychic element", or what I see as Livingstone's Romantic aspect. The poetry implies

that it is the human capacities for compassion and imaginative identification which, paradoxically, could offer a solution. If humankind's alienation from nature and consequent ecological destructiveness can be stemmed, the first step would be an altered perspective of humankind's position on the Earth. This new perspective or way of seeing requires a psychic shift of consciousness because a physical or biological understanding of our position is not enough.

Perhaps in moments of – shall we say – low spiritual ebb, when I cannot handle people too well, or what they do to each other or the planet, I look to the sea (among other powerful manifestations of the earth's life) and conspire with it mentally, and probably subversively, and certainly ineffectually.

There's a deep slow river of love in me for the land, its denizens, its waters, its skies. But it's a heck of a mess ...

– *Douglas Livingstone*

## Chapter One

### Ecology, Literary Ecocriticism and Douglas Livingstone

The literature on ecology is a strange mixture of highly technical, dense language on the one hand and emotionally laden implorations to ‘save the Earth’ on the other. How does one reconcile the cold theoretical classification (organisms, populations, communities, ecosystems, biodiversity and biosphere) with the fire-and-brimstone zealotry which also forms part of ecological discourse? In short, *what is ecology?* Is it a science or a new ‘religion’? I believe that it is a bit of both, that ecology has both a scientific and a spiritual strand. Douglas Livingstone, as scientist and poet, uses both these strands. He calls them the “physical and psychic elements” (LZ 62). This categorisation mirrors the differentiation made by ecological theorists between the biological and the cultural and, more broadly, the perceived distinction between science and poetry.

As I write I am aware of the irony in the above lines. Ecology’s aim is a nondualistic view of the world. Why then am I writing – and thinking – dualistically? Because I am a product of my age, because this is the way I have learnt to view the world. This view is symptomatic of humanity’s modern malaise and perhaps explains why ecology is a theory and not a practice. Is it possible to mesh ecological theory and ecological practice?<sup>3</sup> This is arguably the great challenge of our age. The aim of this thesis is to show that much of Livingstone’s poetry is concerned with humankind’s refusal or (worse) inability to practise ecology.

Ecology as a science, very broadly, examines how the world fits together. The subject of this thesis is the poetry of Douglas Livingstone. The immediate question is, what does the one have to do with the other? Or, what is the connection between the apparently disparate disciplines of science and poetry? Science offers explanations of the physical workings of the world, poetry explores the psychic responses to that world. Or, in Livingstone’s words, “Science is humanity’s *search* for truth and art is humanity’s *interpretation* of the truth” (Fazzini 1990: 142). Can science and poetry (as part of art) be

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<sup>3</sup> See Julia Martin’s PhD dissertation “The Jewelled Net: Towards a Southern African Theory/Practice of Environmental Literacy” for a pragmatic *and* provocative exploration of the theory versus practice dichotomy.

married? This chapter will explore this possibility. One avenue is the recent extension of ecology into ecological literary criticism (literary ecocriticism), whereby texts are read against the backdrop of a holistic or ecological worldview.

### **Ecology, towards a definition and an understanding of the concept**

Interconnection or interaction is the key word in the various definitions of ecology.

*Blackwell's Concise Encyclopedia of Ecology* explains the difficulty of pinpointing a precise definition of ecology:

It began as a subject concerned predominantly with the ENVIRONMENT (Haeckel's 'house'), i.e. the study of the way that organisms are influenced by physiochemical conditions. However, as it has developed, it has become increasingly concerned with interactions between individuals, so that it is now probably best defined as that area of biology concerned with the study of collective groups of organisms. (Callow 36)

Other dictionary definitions of ecology (with my italics) are:

- The branch of biology that deals with organisms' *relations to one another* and to the physical environment in which they live (OED)
- The study of the *interrelationships between* living organisms and their environment (Lincoln 94)
- The scientific study of the *interrelationships among* organisms, and between them and all aspects, living and non-living, of their environment (Allaby 136)
- The study of the *interactions among* organisms and between organisms, and between them and all aspects of their environment, living (*biotic*) and non-living (*abiotic*). (Irwin 4)

The term ecology was coined by the zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866. He defined it as:

The body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature – the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment; including above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact – in a word, ecology is the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle for existence. (in Kroeber 22-3)

Karl Kroeber claims that Haeckel's definition has since needed to be refined or expanded but adds: "its two key features remain undisturbed: ecology treats of total interrelationships of organisms and their environments, and ecology depends upon

Darwinian evolutionary thinking” (23). Haeckel as zoologist placed ecology firmly in the area of biology. Shortly afterwards the social campaigner Ellen Swallow extended ecology into the cultural and was, according to Jonathan Bate, the first to apply ecology to man’s relationship with the environment, referring to it as “this knowledge of right living” (1991: 36). (See p 3 for a fuller discussion.) The double strand of the biological and the cultural or, as I claim, the scientific and the spiritual within ecology was thus evident from its beginnings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Haeckel’s correlation between interrelationship and Darwin’s theory of evolution remains the vital cornerstone in ecology (see p 131).

Pat Irwin’s definition of ecology (given above) offers important detail. In *Ecology: An introduction to principles* he explains that an ecosystem is a natural system on land or water, or both, in which the living community interacts with its abiotic environment (5). His inclusion of the non-living (rock, sand, solar energy) is important. In the broader ecological framework the non-living may be extended to include manmade inanimate things, from cities to works of art. The OED makes a distinction between ecology and *human ecology*: “the branch of knowledge that deals with the interaction of humans with the environment”. The role of art in describing and clarifying human interactions with the environment falls into this more opaque (dare I say?) spiritual strand of ecology.

Scientific ecology’s theory of interdependence is used as a model in philosophical ecology (ecophilosophy):

If the ‘dominant [dualistic] worldview’ emphasizes separation, alternative, ecological worldviews rest on a principle of interconnectedness. ‘Ecology’ is not intended here in its literal sense, as denoting merely a branch of biological science. The science of ecology, with its representation of the living world as a system of relationships, is in itself neutral with respect to its deeper metaphysical implications. In ecophilosophy, however, this science serves as a *model* – an appropriate theoretical image for a set of irreducible ontological interdependencies. (Mathews in Craig 3:198)

Scientific ecology as a model and “appropriate theoretical image” is a useful (and pertinent) explanation of the dynamics of both literary ecocriticism and ecopoetics. And Livingstone uses both metaphysics and metaphor to explain humankind’s position in the world.

The connections or interactions between organisms are multi-dimensional and, for the most part, beyond our ken. A true ecological understanding of the world is instinctual.



This is an idealistic position because humankind cannot return to a primitive or instinctual way of life. Livingstone points to the instinctual when he calls the San “symbiotic man about / the business of getting on with the earth” (LZ 44). By instinctual I mean an innate and unconscious natural response to the physical world (the Earth). In ecological terms this may be described as at-oneness or atonement, a sense of at-homeness or belonging within the natural framework. This (idealistic) view presupposes a nondualistic being-in-the-world (Heidegger’s *dasein*) and is best explained by phenomenology which valorises the subjective and innate perception of the phenomena which make up the world. The work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) is often used by literary and philosophical ecologists. David Abrams argues that Merleau-Ponty’s thesis points to the apprehension that humankind is *of* the Earth (Livingstone 1986: 105) and not just *on* it:

His thesis of the primacy of perception suggests that *all* of our thoughts and our theories are secretly sustained by the structure of the perceptual world. It is precisely in this sense that philosophies reliant upon the *concept* of “horizon” have long been under the influence of the actual visible horizon that lies beyond the walls of our office or lecture hall, that structural enigma which we commonly take for granted, but which ceaselessly reminds us of our embodied situation on the surface of this huge and spherical body we call the Earth.

Yet we should not even say “on” the Earth for we now know that we live *within* the Earth. (in Macauley 86-7)

Modern humanity is in danger of losing this instinctual understanding of our place within nature. Or, to put it another way, we no longer have an innate ecological sensibility. The intellectual advocates of ecological literary criticism all stress the importance of the imagination. Perhaps imagination can, if not replace, at least offer a corrective to humanity’s severance from instinctual understanding and so lead us to what David Macauley calls “a new ecological sensibility” (3).

I will use David Suzuki’s explanation of ecology as “a new way of thinking about the world – as sets of relationships rather than separated objects” (198) as my basic definition of the term. Suzuki’s definition includes the idea of ecology as the study of the interconnections or symbiotic sets of relationship of all things in the world *and* the human race as active agents endowed with consciousness. Following Livingstone, I include the concept of symbiosis (Greek *sym* (together) and *bios* (livelihood)) which points to a mutually beneficial partnership between organisms of different kinds. In *The Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* Lynn Margulis states: “Symbiosis, the term coined by

the German botanist Anton duBury in 1873, is the living together of very different kinds of organisms” (43). She (controversially) argues that most evolutionary novelty arises directly from symbiosis. In her view, all life-forms “emanate from the microcosm” (14), share a common source and owe their evolved existence to the process of symbiogenesis. Margulis concludes that the human race is an insignificant part of this symbiotic pattern:

Our symbiogenetic composite core is far older than the recent innovation we call the individual human. Our strong sense of difference from any other life-form, our sense of species superiority, is a delusion of grandeur. (124)

Ecology is of no use to humanity unless it helps us to learn to see ourselves as organisms which are part of a greater whole and prepares us to enter into a partnership with these other organisms. But it is we who need to do the work. There is no relationship *between* man and nature, as is commonly claimed in ecological discourse (see for example, Bate 1991: 45 and 57, Macauley 2 and 4, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment’s (ASLE’s) mission statement in Glotfelty xviii, Noel Perrin in Halpern 23). The physical world is neutral or biologically indifferent towards humankind. It is man’s relation *to* nature which is, ecologically speaking, at stake. If humanity did not have consciousness and rationality, our relationship to nature would not be an issue for we would simply or instinctually co-exist with the rest of the biological world. In other words, symbiosis would be a given. We need to see ourselves as symbiotically dependent on the Earth and not as controllers of it. Margulis cuts to the chase:

To me, the human move to take responsibility for the living Earth is laughable – the rhetoric of the powerless. The planet takes care of us, not we of it. Our self-inflated moral imperative to guide a wayward Earth or heal a sick planet is evidence of our immense capacity for self-delusion.

Rather, we need to protect us from ourselves. (143)

To use the scientific terms, the biosphere is the matrix or life-support system and, within this system, symbiosis occurs between organisms and their ecosystems.

Livingstone makes this distinction in his poem “Road Back” (LZ 61):

The planet counterattacks.  
Its choice is plain: kill or be killed.  
Ours too: symbiosis or death  
at the hands of a bright blue cell[.]

Here, the “planet” and “a bright blue cell” represent the biosphere within which the choice is between survival (through a symbiotic relationship with the ecosystems of the Earth) and extinction if we do not learn to live ecologically.

This thesis concentrates more heavily on the cultural aspect of Livingstone’s view of humankind’s position within the ecological framework, for this is where a possible resolution may be found. Livingstone intimates that the human capacity to imagine can act as a catalyst in this resolution process. If there is any hope, it lies buried in humanity’s “psychic element” (*LZ 62*). (See chapter 5.)

Livingstone as scientist does also explore the biological. For him, the littoral zone is the metaphoric meeting place “between humanity’s physical and psychic elements” (*LZ 62*). Joseph Grange’s concept of foundational ecology goes some way in explaining this metaphoric meeting place. For him, foundational ecology “seeks the ground of our relation with nature as well as its corresponding depths in the human psyche” (in Evernden 68). This echoes the view of the deep ecologists. Grange argues:

[I]n our human being we want nearness to that which distances itself from us. We seek to be the neighbor of that which withdraws from the light of openness. Yet that neighbor, the earth, and even our body, gives itself without cost and without price, freely of itself to us – if we but respect it and let it be what it is. Ecology is therefore learning anew *to-be-at-home* in the region of our concern. This means that human homecoming is a matter of learning how to dwell intimately with that which resists our attempts to control, shape, manipulate and exploit it. (in Evernden 69)

The concept of *to-be-at-home* is embedded in both the *oikos* and *logos* contained in the term ecology, where *logos* can either refer to a branch of study or the slippery area of reason, language and relation. In the human dimension, ecology points to our relationship with the Earth as our dwelling place.

The planet Earth may be seen as a giant ecosystem (biosphere), but it is more complicated than this because, through technology, humankind has created a second, artificial or non-living world. This returns us to the two strands of biology and culture within the ecological. I will use the term Earth when referring to the biological aspect of ecology, and world when referring to its cultural aspect. The *logos* is embedded in the cultural strand of ecology through both reasoning and language. Science, in using both reason and language, has a strong cultural dimension. Yet the aim of the sciences is to explain the physical world. Science can thus be seen as a bridge between the physical and

the cultural. Poetry also seeks to explain the world but uses metaphor rather than provable physical fact as its building blocks. Jonathan Bate also claims a double function for the poetic. He says poetry may be seen as ecological in two senses: “it is either (both?) a language (*logos*) that restores us to our home (*oikos*) or (and?) a melancholy recognizing that our only home (*oikos*) is language (*logos*)” (2000: 281). In short, poetry (from the Greek, *poesis*, making) offers humans an understanding of both the Earth and the world through a particular use of language. Bate is pointing to both our intuitive awareness of a biological belonging with the Earth and to our cultural estrangement in the artificial world we have created. This is the underlying tension in ecology, itself an artificial paradigm created by humans to emphasize the interconnectedness of all things. The sticking point is humankind itself. Are we a part of, or apart from, nature? The answer to this question is both yes and no. Bate points out that deep ecology is an impossibility, that the true deep ecologist is a utopian (2000:37). Macauley, on the other hand, argues that: “The best utopian thought follows strong insights and tendencies to their logical conclusions; provides imaginative possibilities for association, through communication, and organization; and is implicitly critical of existing conditions. In this sense, it is real insofar as it is a *realizable ideal*” (6, my underlining).

There is no short definition of deep ecology. It can best be described as a call for wisdom and “right living”, as Ellen Swallow put it. Arne Naess, the original proponent of deep ecology, makes circular statements like: “The essence of deep ecology ... is to ask deeper questions” (in Sessions 37). Naess’s further statement that “Ecosophy, or deep ecology then, involves a shift from science to wisdom” is both idealistic and based on the premise that science lacks wisdom. I am not sure that this is true and believe that Livingstone would *not* support this view. His paper “Science and Truth” is evidence of this. Perhaps the flaw in Naess’s well-intentioned argument is that it does not escape dualism. Gary Snyder offers a more holistic (and realistic?) view:

We have it within our deepest powers not only to change ourselves, but also to change our culture. If man is to remain on earth he must transform the five-millennia-long urbanizing civilization tradition into a new ecologically-sensitive, harmony-oriented wild-minded scientific-spiritual culture. (in Sessions 147)

The literary equivalent of deep ecology is the pastoral. Deep ecology can best be seen as an ideal philosophy which expresses human longing but which does not offer a practical solution. But, because this utopian concept feeds the human imagination, it does have

value. Julia Martin repeatedly stresses the need for “compassion and wisdom” (1999: 162, 172, 177, 208) and deep ecology offers a path towards the attainment of this.

### **A brief history of ecology**

A historical perspective is essential to an understanding of both the principles behind ecology and why it is a necessary discipline. I rely heavily on William Howarth’s article “Some Principles of Ecocriticism” in the following summary.

Ernest Haeckel is today seen as a founder of biogenetics and is the author of the theorem “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” (one organism’s life repeats a species’ history) (in Glotfelty 73). From this Howarth concludes: “Ecology thus absorbed Linnaean taxonomy, quantified Darwinian evolution, and revolutionized Mendelian genetics, creating what amounts to a vernacular and democratic science” (73).

The first scientific ecological research was done between 1887 and 1899 in America when scientists examined the lost biodiversity of prairie grasslands by studying the recovering zones of glacial lakes and dunes. Ecology was then widely adopted as a vernacular science by many disciplines through which to read, interpret and narrate land history. Howarth writes: “Several ecologists wrote histories of regional land-use, linking biogeography to agronomy and sociology to examine natural and cultural interaction... This work enlarged the research community, leading to the founding of the Ecological Society of America in 1920” (74); and adds:

Not all scientists greeted the new trend warmly. Marston Bates objected to ‘ecology’ replacing natural history because ecologists were too literary, using rhetoric and symbols instead of precise data. Behind these complaints lay a century of lexical growth, as the early languages of biology generated the broader discourse of [the] ecological story. (*ibid.*)

This shows an early awareness of the double-strand of the biological and the cultural within ecology. The years of The Depression and World War II turned ecology even more toward the cultural, or what Howarth calls “public narrative” (74). Ecology was invoked by wilderness preservationists and protestors against military-industrial research and so came to be seen, by some, as subversive:

To radical ecofeminists, science became an oppressive, male-authored enemy that insisted on the biological necessity of sexual reproduction... These voices reflected how much ecology had become a medicine sung by modern shamans to heal a sick world. (in Glotfelty 74)

Howarth cites Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) as an example of how ecology came to define ethical principles: her work aroused a sense of conscience about pesticides that poison ground water and destroy biodiversity. Yaakov Garb argues that Murray Bookchin's *Our Synthetic Environment* (published half a year before Carson's *Silent Spring*) is a "much more comprehensive, multidimensional, and above all politically far-reaching work" (in Macauley 246).

Howarth writes that deep ecology came into being in the 1980s as a counterattack against commerce profiting from "green" policies. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century "ecology remained a popular model for understanding nature, and for relating places through biogeography and land history" (in Glotfelty 74). Howarth implies that the genesis of ecology has changed the way in which humanity, or Americans, see the Earth:

Ecology advanced from description to advocacy after 1960, as its stories presented ethical choices that affect land and people. Just as telescopes and satellite photographs provided new maps of the earth (Kepes, Hall), so did ecological study shape a new ethics in landscape history. This altered vision of land-use also revised histories of American culture... Once described as the conquest or 'winning' of a continent (Goetzmann) the American experience is now increasingly seen as a series of questionable readings, their rhetoric of relentless progress emulating the investigative methods of early natural history (Regis). (75)

In introducing the role of ecocriticism within the ecological framework, Howarth opaquely claims: "Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning" (77). Very simply, literary ecocriticism is about the lost art of reading the land.

### **Ecological literary criticism**

When talking about ecological literary criticism, the embedded concept of the *logos* in ecology points to both the use of language and to the idea of a relation, through language, between humankind and the Earth. Jonathan Bate posits the use of language (or *logos*) as a way of overcoming a dualistic view of the world:

Central to the dilemma of environmentalism is the fact that the act of identifying the presumption of human apartness from nature as the problem is itself a symptom of that very apartness. The identification is the product of an instrumental way of thinking and of using language. It may therefore be that a necessary step in overcoming the apartness is to think and to use language in a different way. (2000: 37)

The puzzle of ecology, then, is that in order to attain it we would have to lose our humanity, or at least the position into which it has led us. We are and we are not part of nature. Our consciousness separates us from nature, while our instinct unites us with the Earth. Is it possible for modern humankind to become reconscientised? Bate is, I think, calling for a synthesis between consciousness, expressed through language, and instinct. Towards the end of *The Song of the Earth* he returns to the premise of using language as a bridge between humankind and the Earth.

Locked in the prison-house of language, dwelling in the *logos* not the *oikos*, we know only the text not the land. Unless, that is, we could come to understand that every piece of land is itself a text, with its own syntax and signifying potential. Or one should say: come to understand once again, as our ancestors did. For the idea that the earth itself is a text is a very old one. And there used to be an agreed answer about who the author is. (237)

Bate is here talking about *logos* as relation. He posits it as a possibility or an ideal shown through the repeated phrase “come to understand”.

While Bate does not make it clear what he means by “author”, I read this as the maker. The *logos* is sometimes interpreted by scholars as the Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1.1). Perhaps Bate, in using the word “author”, assumes a source or organising principle of life on Earth. This is akin to Livingstone’s Creative Principle. For example, in “Science and Truth” Livingstone says:

Truth seems to reserve for itself a quality of subtlety or elusiveness, which would infer that the pursuit of a definitive proof of the truth, as opposed to truth itself, is reminiscent of trying to ‘prove’ the existence of God (or a Creative Principle) whereas, by all accounts, ‘awareness’ of God is essentially ‘experiential’. (1986: 106)

Language and the way in which it is used constitutes the basic ingredient of literature. Literary ecocriticism offers an ecological interpretation of texts. Cheryl Glotfelty says: “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty & Fromm xviii). She lists a number of the questions which could be asked by literary ecocritics ranging from the focussed “How is nature represented in this sonnet?” to the much broader “What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history and ethics?” (xix). She also points to the central concern of culture in ecocriticism:

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (xix)

This returns, broadly, to my statement that poetry (as a specific part of literature) acts as a bridge or a relational tool. Jonathan Bate expresses the same idea as Glotfelty more succinctly:

A central question in environmental ethics is whether to regard humankind as part of nature or apart from nature. It is the task of literary ecocriticism to address a local version of that question: what is the place of *creative imagining* and writing in the complex set of relationships between humankind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being and dwelling? (2000: 72-3, my italics)

Bate claims the “truly ecological literary genre is comedy” because comedy is about survival (2000: 180). He offers recognition rather than transcendence (associated with the genre of tragedy) as a survival tool or a way of finding our place (*oikos*) in the world. Recognition (*anagnorisis*) is an ancient poetic device used to bring about a change in fortune (destruction in tragedy and success in comic plots) which depends on a discovery made by the protagonist (Abrams 131). If humankind is the protagonist in a hypothetical play about the future of the Earth, then it must be hoped that the human race recognises that its role is a small but continuing one (as part of nature’s chorus) and not that of the flawed tragic hero who is doomed to fall through hubris. Livingstone’s poetry seeks to remind humankind of our proper place in the world as creatures who are dependent on the Earth for succour. Bate argues that “‘literary ecology’ must consider the question of our animal being” (181).

The term ecocriticism (Greek *oikos* and *kritis*) is interpreted to mean ‘house judge’ by William Howarth. He says: “the *oikos* is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls ‘our widest home,’ and the *kritos* is an arbiter of taste” (in Glotfelty 69). For him, criticism judges the quality and integrity of works and promotes their dissemination (71). He claims the four disciplines of ecology, ethics, language and criticism are essential for the reading of nature writing:

To me they offer combinations of theory and method that explore environmental literature. As an interdisciplinary science, ecology describes the relations between nature and culture. The applied philosophy of ethics offers ways to mediate



historic social conflicts. Language theory examines how words represent human and nonhuman life. Criticism judges the quality and integrity of works and promotes their dissemination. Each discipline stresses the relations of nature and literature as shifting, moving shapes – a house in progress, perhaps, unfinished and standing in a field. (*ibid.*)

For Howarth the aim of ecocriticism should be “to redirect humanistic ideology, not spurning the natural sciences but using their ideas to sustain viable readings” (78).

My working definition of literary ecocriticism is the analysis of literature’s expression of humanity’s place on Earth, our *oikos* or home. This implicitly includes the cultural (through literature) and the biological (through the Earth as our ecosystem). Karl Kroeber points to the importance of this intersection between the cultural and the biological:

An ecologically oriented criticism directs itself to understanding persistent romantic struggles to articulate meaningful human relations within the conditions of a natural world in which transcendence is not an issue. Such criticism does not dismiss the copious evidence of romantic claims that imaginative consciousness fulfils, rather than contravenes, the dynamic tendencies of natural life. Ecologically oriented criticism thus recognizes a foreshadowing of its own understanding of humanity’s relation to nature in the romantic view that it is natural for human beings to be self-conscious, and natural, therefore, to construct their cultures out of complexly interassimilative engagements with their physical and biological environment. Foreshadowings of this kind are valuable, because they enable literary scholars to define with precision how their critical presuppositions have differentially emerged from the cultural discourse of their predecessors. (38-9)

The term *ecocriticism* is a contraction of *ecological literary criticism*. The tendency to drop the reference to literature fudges the full ecological implication of the discipline. Bate refers to *literary ecocriticism* (2000: 73) and I adopt this term. Kroeber does not use the contraction, arguing that *ecological literary criticism* concentrates on linkages between natural and cultural processes (1). He, like Howarth, points to the linking function of literary ecocriticism between humanism and science and calls the Romantic poets “proto-ecological” because they accepted “a natural environment existent outside of one’s personal psyche” (19). They did this without a developed knowledge of science because in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century there was “no biochemistry, let alone molecular genetics” (19):

The romantic poets are of special interest to those of us concerned to develop an ecologically oriented criticism exactly because they anticipate – sometimes shrewdly, sometimes absurdly – attitudes and conceptions that only in our century

have been given either a solid scientific basis, or whose psychic grounding has only recently been persuasively analyzed. Because the romantics in these respects are in the position of forerunners, they at times seem to us inconsistent, errant and mistaken, very often too speculative... Yet uninhibited by the enormous mountains of fact piled up by later chemists and biologists, these ecologically oriented poets sometimes direct our attention to essential principles and save us from losing our way among masses of bewildering detail, thereby clarifying why we need an ecological criticism. (Kroeber 19)

Kroeber concedes that scientific procedures help us to understand the natural environment because science orders external reality. But, he adds, this external reality can only be fully appreciated through “imaginative acts of mind” (19). I will return to the role of the imagination.

### **Ecopoetics**

Jonathan Bate coins this term and states: “Ecopoetry is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it. By ‘poetry’ here I mean *poiesis, making*” (2000: 42, my underlining). He quotes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Dialogues* to explain what he calls “‘ecopoetic’ consciousness” (*ibid.*).

‘The more sensitive the soul of the observer, the greater the ecstasy aroused in him by this harmony [of the great pageant of nature]. At such times his senses are possessed by a deep and delightful reverie, and in a state of blissful self-abandonment he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful order, with which he feels himself at one. All individual objects escape him; he sees and feels nothing but the unity of all things.’ (in Bate 41)

This is a description of what the Romantics called the sublime, the experiencing of “the one life within us and abroad” (Coleridge “The Eolian Harp” line 26). The ecological intersections are shown in the phrases “this harmony”, “this beautiful order, with which he feels himself at one” and “the unity of all things”. The imaginative process is indicated in the repetition of “he feels”. Is this state of reverie or ecopoetic consciousness sustainable? It raises the old problem of the gap between dream and reality. Bate is aware of the difficulty of attaining this sublime state but claims that it is a necessary dream. He also points out that language is a problem, for “Once the poem is written down, once the feeling is reconstituted in language, the vision of ecological integration is perforce disrupted” (149). Despite this, language – particularly poetry – remains humankind’s best chance of communicating or communing with the Earth:

‘There remains,’ wrote Heidegger in his *Holzwege*, or *Forest Paths*, ‘the song that names the earth.’ Postmodernity proclaims that all marks are textmarks; ecopoetics proposes that we must hold fast to the possibility that certain textmarks called poems can bring back to our memory humankind’s ancient knowledge that without landmarks we are lost. (Bate 2000: 175)

Livingstone, too, appeals to ancient earthly knowledge which rests in the keep of poets: “Under Africa’s moon there dreams a strand / older than old the ancient poets keep”; and yearns to express this “with poems we have not yet begun” (*LZ* 39).

I am aware that I repeatedly refer to the Romantic sublime and fail to define it. It evades definition. The following passage from Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope* eloquently expresses both the emotional aspect of the sublime and the difficulty of quantifying it:

... and the *piet-my-vrou* would cry from the kloof, which was like a hand suddenly plucking on the strings of the heart, so that your whole being shook and trembled; and why and why, why no one knew, it was the nature of man and of creation, that some sound, long remembered from the days of innocence before the world’s corruption, could open the door of the soul, flooding it with a sudden knowledge of the sadness and terror and beauty of man’s home and the earth. But you could not keep such knowledge, you could not hold it in your hand like a flower or a book, for it came and went like the wind; and the door of the soul would not stay open, for maybe it was too great joy and sorrow for a man, and meant only for angels. (48-9)

According to Percy Bysshe Shelley, poets serve the double function of “legislators” who elucidate the present order of things and “prophets” who foresee how the present situation will affect the future.<sup>4</sup> Bate echoes this idea in a chapter called “What are Poets For?”:

What are poets for in our brave new millennium? Could it be to remind the next few generations that it is we who have the power to determine whether the earth will sing or be silent? As earth’s own poetry, symbolized for Keats in the grasshopper and the cricket, is drowned ever deeper – not merely by bulldozers in the forest, but more insidiously by the ubiquitous susurrus of cyberspace – so there will be an ever greater need to retain a place in culture, in the work of human imagining, for the song that names the earth. (2000: 282)

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<sup>4</sup> The full quotation is: “Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word...” (in Reiman and Powers 482-3)

Why poetry and not literature in general? Why the term ecopoetics? The term poetics originates with Aristotle's treatise on poetry and deals with the theory and techniques (or making) of poetry. Poetry itself is said to occupy the highest place in literature. Admittedly, this claim has been made by poets themselves in various defences of poetry. Sir Philip Sydney (1554-1586) describes poetry as a "speaking picture" (222) and says its function is "to teach and delight" (217).<sup>5</sup> He claims that "poetry is of all human learning the most ancient ... and so universal that no learned nation doth despise it" (232). Shelley claims that the language of poets "is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension" (in Reiman 482). On the effects of poetry on society he says: "it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness; and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union" (486). The word "unapprehended" must be noted, for it marks Shelley's struggle to pinpoint the power of poetry. He intimates that this power lies in the metaphorical.

Metaphor is inordinately difficult to define. Like humour and irony we recognise it when we encounter it, but find it difficult to explain how it works. The old teaching device of explaining metaphor as an indirect comparison is apposite but inadequate. Metaphor rests in a combination of imagery and association – the metaphor in the text evokes a set of mental images in the mind of the reader who then associates them with the idea behind the words and then (miraculously) the text communicates itself to one's gut. A.S. Byatt describes this process with eloquence in *Angels and Insects*:

Names, you know, are a way of weaving the world together, by relating creatures to other creatures and a kind of *metamorphosis*, you might say, out of a *metaphor* which is a figure of speech for carrying one idea into another. (131-2)

Gillian Beer in *Darwin's Plots* admirably demonstrates the importance of metaphor in Charles Darwin's work. She argues convincingly that metaphor is part of both the imaginative process and the process of discovery: "Metaphor, both in its residuum of the known and in its heuristic powers, offers a means to recognisable discovery" (89); and "If we read metaphor, as Cassirer (1925) does, neither as ornament nor as privileged

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<sup>5</sup> Livingstone expresses this function of poetry in another way. He replaces the phrase "to teach and delight" with to entertain and repeatedly states that this is his aim, see 1974: 7, Fazzini 1990: 137 and 141.

discourse, but as a fundamental means of initiating discovery, we shall better understand its value as a part of theory for Darwin” (*ibid.*). At the start of a chapter titled “Analogy, metaphor and narrative in *The Origin*”, Beer reminds us that Aristotle in the *Poetics* wrote that metaphor is a sign of genius (73), and ends the chapter with a statement about the power of metaphor to communicate the otherwise inexplicable:

The quagmire of the metaphoric troubles Darwin, yet he needs it – he needs its tendency to suggest more or other than you meant to say, to make the latent actual, to waken sleeping dogs, and equally, he needs its powers of persuasion through lassitude, through our *inattention*. (95)

Livingstone’s poetry is similarly a startling mixture of hard-nosed scientific fact and rich metaphor. A full understanding of his poetry requires rigour and scientific research on the part of the reader. But this difficulty is not insurmountable and the advantage is that Livingstone’s use of science in his poetry gives it a greater depth and pertinence. The poetry presents a fuller picture of *how* the world works.

Sidney and Shelley both laud poetry over prose. While literature in general has an obvious role within ecocriticism (the expression of ecological awareness through literature) Bate’s argument that poetry is “an especially efficient system for recycling the richest thoughts and feelings of a community” (247) is compelling. Shelley compares poetry and prose:

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. (in Reiman 485)

He is here assuming a common humanity perhaps akin to C.G. Jung’s collective unconscious and becomes more vague when talking about the ‘ingredients’ of a poem. But, how does one define what makes up “eternal truth”? Livingstone partly resolves this conundrum by positing a Creative Principle. Later Shelley says: “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world” (487). In the end, I think that only poetry can explain poetry.

Just as the nature of poetry is, essentially, indefinable so, too, is humankind’s place on Earth. We don’t really know *why* we are here and this is why we struggle to know *how* to be on the Earth. If this were not so, would Heidegger, for example, have

devised the concept of *dasein* (being in the world)? Eco-poetics is, in effect, another form of *dasein*, for it is about finding a sense of belonging (or home), within both the Earth and the world. Bate argues that humankind has to move to an imaginative sense of home or belonging and it is through poetry, particularly eco-poetry, that this may be possible. “The point is rather to reflect on the relationship with earthly things that is turned into language by the poetry of dwelling” (2000: 280).

David Suzuki also explores the power of language. His thesis differs from Bate’s in that he explicitly includes the metaphysical or what he calls “spirit”. Where Bate argues that poetry can be used as a healing tool, Suzuki stresses the importance of stories and myth: “Like air and water, like the love and companionship of our kind, we need spiritual connection; *we need to understand where we belong*. Our stories tell us where we come from and why we are here” (184, my italics). The italicised section can be read as an eco-poetic statement. He traces our alienation or what he calls “fall from grace” (191) as far back as Plato and Aristotle who “began a powerful process of separating the world-as-abstract-principle from the world-as-experience” (191), and discusses Cartesian dualism which has shaped the modern view of the world where things are seen as divided into subject and object, mind and body:

Descartes’s famous definition of existence (‘I think therefore I am’) completes a new myth about our relationship to the world: human beings are the things that think (the *only* things, and that is *all* they are), and the rest of the world is made up of things that can be measured (or ‘thought about’). Subject or object, mind or body, matter or spirit: this is the dual world we have inhabited ever since – where the brain’s ability to distinguish and classify has ruled the roost. From this duality come the ideas we live by, what William Blake called ‘mind forg’d manacles,’ the mental abstractions that seem too obvious to question, that construct and confine our vision of reality. (Suzuki 192)

Suzuki claims (along with Bate, Harrison, Evernden, Martin and others) that this dualistic view of the world is the cause of our malaise and that we have “sent ourselves into exile to *abstract* the meaning and the value of the world” (194-5). He posits spiritual reconciliation as a way out of this “exile” and within this broad area, he speaks of the power of poetry:

Since poetry began, poets and songwriters have been fighting the mind/body dichotomy, singing their sense of the world, of the body and spirit moving together through the world eternally. Poetry takes the fractured, mortal, longing human creature and reshapes it into be-longing. Crafted words attempt to resolve

the contradictions of consciousness, catching speech (as insubstantial as air, as transitory as breath) as it comes and goes, tying it into the eternal. (202)

His tone is more impassioned and sentimental than Bate's, but the idea is the same. He stresses the eco-poetical longing for home (or dwelling on the Earth) through language by hyphenating and therefore stressing the components of belonging: where be-longing indicates being in a state of longing and echoes Heidegger's concept of *dasein*.

Robert Pogue Harrison also writes about the loss and longing that result from human severance from the natural world (the Earth): "What nature cannot provide is an image for the longing that pervades human finitude. It is this longing that seeks an abode on the earth, but the only thing that can house it are the words in which it confesses its longing for closure" (228). He uses metaphor to explain this longing for a sense of place:

A house is a place to set an image in. This image is made of mud, of the earth, but it is the image of something which the earth cannot contain. It is the image of ... a word. Not a linguistic word but the *logos* of human transcendence. It is not for nothing that *logos* in Greek means relation, gathering, binding, before it means language. (229)

In Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone* the eco-poetical is most pointed and poignant because the poems are about the human search for place (*oikos*). His diction reflects a human longing to find a place through symbiosis or synthesis between the physical and the psychic. Even in the poems which deal with the biological (for example, "Cells") Livingstone indicates that, in the end, language is humankind's expression of its relationship with the Earth.

This thesis will use literary ecocriticism as a hermeneutic tool to show how Livingstone explores and expresses humanity's search for a sense of place on Earth. I use the word hermeneutic to acknowledge the interpretative nature of this thesis.<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur's working definition of hermeneutics is "the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts" (43). Ricoeur points out that "hermeneutics itself puts us on guard against the illusion or pretension of neutrality" (*ibid.*). He refers to "the reciprocity between interpretation of the text and self-interpretation" and calls it "the hermeneutical circle" (165). Hermeneutics is a two-step,

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the word hermeneutics is from the Greek god, Hermes, who was the god of science and commerce, the patron of travellers and also of rogues, vagabonds and thieves (Brewer 703) as well as of the arts and eloquence. A truly quixotic figure!

circular or dialectical process. What I am really talking about is *my* reading of Livingstone's poems and *my* writing about them. The analysis of the poems (chapters three, five and six) will demonstrate that an eco-poetical approach (rather than, for example, a political approach) is essential for a deeper understanding of much of Livingstone's poetry. This does not mean it is the *only* approach, but it is the best one I could find given that "the truth is very difficult to get at", as Livingstone himself said (1990: 59). A.S. Byatt has this to say on reading, writing and the hermeneutic tangle:

[T]he truth ... is that we don't know what we are not biologically fitted to know, it may be full of all sorts of shining and tearing things, geometries, chemistries, physics we have no access to and never can have. Reading and writing extend – not infinitely, but violently, but giddily – the variations we can perceive on the truths we thus discover. (2000: 237)

### **The role of the imagination**

At the start of this chapter I said imagination can act as a healer of humanity's severance from an instinctual understanding of the Earth and so help restore our ecological equilibrium. But what is the imagination? The OED defines it as: "The mental faculty which forms images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses..." and "The creative faculty of the mind; the ability to form new and striking concepts". Simply, through the imagination we are able to see the world in a new way. Poetry, through language, communicates these new or altered perceptions. Shakespeare describes this process with eloquence and depth:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1, 11-17)

Like science and art, the imagination and reason are often seen as sparring partners. But is this so? The imagination can best be seen as a catalyst. The Romantic poets were aware of this and did not discount the faculty of reason. Livingstone's poetry reflects this view. He sees the imagination as part of the pursuit of truth and uses a gritty version of the Romantic valorisation of the imagination and the sublime in his poetry.

The Romantic poets introduced a concept of the imagination which pervades and informs the modern view of this faculty. In "A Defence of Poetry", Percy Bysshe



Shelley refers to imagination and reason as “those two classes of mental action” (in Reiman 480) and explains:

Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance. (*ibid.*)

John Keats, in a letter dated 3 November 1817, refers to “the authenticity of the Imagination” and then writes: “I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth” (in Cook 365). This statement does not necessarily discount the validity of truth derived from reason. He is merely stating that he is more certain of imaginative truth.

William Blake claimed that imagination is eternal, but reason is “Annihilable”:

The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself.  
Affection or Love becomes a State when divided from Imagination.  
The Memory is a State always, & the Reason is a State  
Created to be Annihilated & a new Ratio Created.

(*Milton 2: 32: 32-35, in Keynes 522*)

For Blake, imagination is an “eternal form”, part of the human essence, whereas reason is a “spectre” and a “state”, a faculty which limits vision and which must continually be re-evaluated. In *A Vision of the Last Judgment* he says: “Vision or Imagination is a Representation of What Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably” (in Keynes 604). The limiting nature of reason is explored in:

The Negation is the Spectre, the Reasoning Power in Man:  
This is a false Body, an Incrustation over my Immortal  
Spirit, a Selfhood which must be put off & annihilated alway

(*Milton 2: 40: 34-6, in Keynes 533*)

Reason is the negation not because it is an evil as a faculty but because, in isolation from the imagination, it limits vision.<sup>7</sup> For Blake (and Livingstone) the imagination is an essential catalyst which can temper a rational view of the world. Julia Martin’s felicitous phrase “imaginative identification” summarises this process:

Blake’s focus on Imagination seems, at least in part, to be a way of making the point that human consciousness is that which confers value in the world, and has the capacity for the acts of imaginative identification that are involved in sympathy or love or compassion. (Martin 1999: 146)

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<sup>7</sup> This insight comes from Veli Mitova.

The Romantic poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge explores the power of the imagination in depth and detail in *Biographia Literaria*. He divides it into the primary and the secondary imagination. Coleridge called the primary imagination the “infinite I am” (*BL* 159) and said it represents the life force, that it is the prime agent which perceives. It is through the primary imagination that we know the world. The secondary imagination is the creative side of the imagination for it “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or when this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify” (*BL* 159-60). The primary and secondary realms of the imagination are its passive and active aspects respectively. He calls the imagination an “esemplastic power” by which he meant a unifying force. Coleridge claims that the imagination has a “synthetic and magical power” and that this power is “first put into action by the will and understanding” (*BL* 166). Coleridge’s philosophy resonates in the following lines from Livingstone (*LZ* 53):

A modern will, sundered from its twin  
– imagination – has had God killed.

In *Fancy and Imagination* R.L. Brett points out that Coleridge calls the imagination “the agent of the reason” and that it operates under the direction of the will:

It would be a mistake to regard terms such as reason and understanding, fancy and imagination, as entities; they are not so much faculties as processes. Coleridge was emphatic in his insistence that the human mind is like an organism and not a machine. (59).

The human mind as an organism can be linked to evolutionary theory. Humans are biological *and* thinking creatures. Despite the fact that we have and use both imagination and reason (consciousness), we are still part of the evolutionary process that governs all life. Brett argues that Coleridge followed Kant in describing the imagination as operating under the reason: “It is true that Coleridge went beyond Kant in believing that the reason could give us more than a knowledge of the world of perception. But it would be wrong to think that Coleridge regarded the imagination as giving us an access to truth beyond the scope of reason” (62). Following Brett’s analysis it can be said that Coleridge had a symbiotic view of the interplay between reason and the imagination.

Jonathan Bate calls the human mind “the environment of the imagination” (2000: 281) and alludes to the power of the imagination (and has a dig at reason):

The freedom of birds – Keats’ nightingale, Shelley’s skylark – is a *necessary imagining*. I stand in the field behind my house, watching and listening as the skylark rises. My heart leaps up. But my mind has fallen into knowledge: a biologist will be able to explain to me why the lark rises. Freedom has nothing to do with it. The freedom of the lark is only in my imagination, just as the state of nature – Arcadia, Ariel’s island – is but a *necessary dream*. Maybe the true poets are those who hold fast to the dream even as they recognize it as a dream. (93, my italics)

He appears to be saying that in order to appreciate nature, we have to romanticise it, for ‘real’ nature is too blatant, too “red in tooth and claw” in Tennyson’s phrase. The biological facts do not feed our psyches. Perhaps this is why we do not like to see ourselves as part of nature and have taken the route of alienation. Yet – and here the conundrum resurfaces – humankind seems to need to feed off nature psychically, needs to be part of nature. This is perhaps what lies at the root of the emergence of the ecological. We have created a science, ecology, to try to redress the balance, to obviate our alienation from nature. This science has taken on a psychic life of its own and has mutated to encompass literature through what Bate calls *ecopoetics* with its grounding concept of “necessary imagining”. In referring to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Bate cryptically states: “Ecopoetics asks us to imagine that Ariel can be set free” (93).

And Livingstone? He is, in Bate’s words, a true poet because he “hold[s] fast” to the pastoral dream of nature. And yet he does not shy away from the blatant facts of predatory nature. Livingstone shares with the Romantics a sense of wonder for nature and its workings and a belief in the power of the imagination. I call him a Romantic materialist<sup>8</sup> because his awe of nature is paradoxically tempered by scientific explanation of the corporeal world. His poetry reflects the ‘best’ of the Romantic tradition, but replaces the Romantic idea of nurturing nature with the Darwinian view of cruel nature (the contingency of the evolutionary process). A.S. Byatt weaves this tantalising passage into her novel *The Biographer’s Tale*:

Sir Philip Sydney thought that poets made better flowers than Nature.

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<sup>8</sup> I borrow this categorisation from Gillian Beer who describes Charles Darwin in the same way: “Darwin’s romantic materialism which resulted in a desire to substantiate metaphor, to convert analogy into real affinity, should be understood as part of a profound imaginative longing shared by a great number of his contemporaries. Materialism was not simply an abstraction. Its emphasis upon natural forms and upon organisms could comfort as well as disturb” (37).

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers as poets have done – neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.

Not so. As long as we don't destroy and diminish it irrevocably, the too-much-loved earth will always exceed our power to describe, or imagine, or understand it. (259)

I think Livingstone would have agreed with this.

### **Science and poetry**

Given that Livingstone was both poet and scientist and given his distinction between humanity's physical and psychic elements (*LZ* 62), an examination of these apparently disparate realms is required. William Howarth claims that it is difficult to connect science and literature "for their cultures have grown widely apart" (in Glotfelty 76). But are science and literature polar opposites? The most obvious difficulty is that science and literature use different concepts and different 'languages'.

I.A. Richards points out in *Science and Poetry* (first published in 1926) that science "can only tell us *how* such and such behave" (58). His following statement on the merits of science is interestingly ecological:

Science can tell us about man's place in the universe and his chances; that the place is precarious, and the chances problematical. It can enormously increase our chances if we can make wise use of it. (58)

Richards believes that poetry is also capable of this wisdom, of "saving us" or "preserving us or rescuing us from confusion and frustration" (90). Richards' thesis, in summary, is that science deals with the *how*, while poetry ponders the *what* and *why* of existence (see Richards 58-9). To put it another way, science rests in the physical and poetry in the psychic or metaphysical. Northrop Frye claims that the "polarizing of creative power between vision and sense is the basis of the distinction between the arts and the sciences" (153).

Brian Silver in the preface to *The Ascent of Science* admits that the human race has used science to manipulate the future, but also argues that "science is also a triumph of reason, luck, and above all imagination" (xiv). David Bohm in *On Creativity* asks: "But is it true that science *necessarily* implies a completely meaningless and mechanical character to the universe?"; and answers with the claim that scientists do *not* see "the

universe as mere mechanism” but “feel very strongly that the laws of the universe ... have a very striking and significant kind of *beauty*” (31). He then carefully discusses the concept of truth and concludes: “It seems to me that in the quality of truth and beauty one finds what is really the deepest root of the relationship between science and art” (33).

Livingstone’s rigorously philosophical paper “Science and Truth” examines how thinkers and scientists have viewed truth and, in concluding, asks “Is the ‘truth’ attainable?” (105). He gives this answer:

It is possible we have to reconcile our pursuit of scientific truth – verifying every step of the way, *imagining it, longing for it, even dreaming of it*, spurring ourselves on with the current theory or available ratiocinative device, alert always for the dissolution of rigidities whose components re-form into new realities which will dissolve in their turn – with never actually attaining it. Einstein’s observation: ‘The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of all true art and science’, affords not only comfort but enjoyment while the day to day proper business of science ensues, i.e.: seeking after truth, however evasive the truth happens to be. (106, my italics)

In quoting Einstein, Livingstone also points to beauty and truth as the source of both science and art. His much-quoted belief that “Science is humanity’s *search* for truth and art is humanity’s *interpretation* of the truth” (Fazzini 1990: 142) is a further indication of his belief that science and art are not mutually exclusive.

### **Douglas Livingstone as ecologist**

There is no doubt that Douglas Livingstone was both ecologically aware and ecologically proactive. As scientist, he devoted some 30 years of his life to cleaning up the sea around Durban. As poet, he communicated his ecological awareness and despair through his poetry and through talks and articles.

His friend and colleague, Allan Connell, explains how Livingstone’s scientific work in microbial analysis of water quality led to clean bathing water at Durban’s beaches.<sup>9</sup> He pays tribute to Livingstone’s work as a whole: “Douglas’ dedication to the

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<sup>9</sup> In an article “In Memoriam: Dr Douglas Livingstone – the Scientist”, Connell explains: “In Durban Douglas joined a team of scientists studying the health of the marine environment in the vicinity of Durban. This research preceded the construction of the two major submarine outfalls constructed in 1978 and 1969 to convey sewage and some industrial effluents several kilometres offshore, and proved to be an invaluable yardstick with which to measure the effectiveness of the outfalls in improving the nearshore and surfzone water quality. In this the microbial studies of the small team headed by Douglas played a key role as it was the microbial parameters that had been seriously compromised by the previous disposal practice of discharging effluent at the mouth of Durban Harbour on the outgoing tide. Even after the pipelines were

sea and the planet is obvious in his poems and in his science. He was almost obsessed with the need to leave the world a better place, and his staying on as a consultant to the CSIR after his retirement in 1992, even though he was itching to write, was part of that” (17). In the introduction to his PhD dissertation, Livingstone points to his pragmatic approach: “This comparatively recent disseminative perception of responsibility towards matters ecological and environmental can only be welcomed. Yet a perspective has to be maintained: *something practical has to be done* about the waste” (1989a: 1, my italics).

In a biographical article “The Other Job – III” Livingstone recounts his decision to leave Zambia in the early 1960s and cites one of the reasons: “Best to devote my small energies to healing the planet, I thought” (1989b: 74). He says this had its genesis during his work as a contract underwater diver on the Kariba Dam project:

... it was there, in the Zambezi that I experienced early intimations of my own mortality, that I was just another life-form, expendable and unimportant. Such intelligence casually conveyed to any young man in peacetime is probably astonishing. There were bones in the river bed, and I thought of the slightly amused and sardonic manner in which some scientists referred to the dinosaurs. Yet the dinosaurs were around for 50 to 150 million years; we’ve been around for only 3 to 5 million... As the empty tin cans and beer bottles rained down on me and the bones in the Zambezi’s mud ... it seemed to me that it was not the planet but humanity itself that was being cursed and harried and driven along the path down which the quagga and the dodo were propelled, the only difference being that humanity was doing it to itself. (74-5)

Later in the article, Livingstone pokes fun at his own naivety and then alludes to the maturing of his ecological position as it came to be informed by James Lovelock’s Gaia principle<sup>10</sup>:

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commissioned the microbial studies on Durban’s bathing beaches identified polluted stormwater drains that had been masked by the more widespread pollution of the harbour mouth discharge. Systematic detection and correction led to Durban’s bathing beaches attaining water quality that met stringent international standards. This very valuable programme continues to provide a watchdog function over bathing water quality of Durban’s beaches” (15).

<sup>10</sup> Lovelock says Gaia is the modern expression of Hutton’s superorganism and is a self-regulating system. The Earth is seen as a living system. “Gaia became visible through the new knowledge about the Earth gained from space and from extensive investigations of the Earth’s surface, oceans, and atmosphere during the past few decades. While this view lends itself to poetic metaphor, it is also a hard science theory of our planet that came from a top-down view from space. The top-down view of the Earth as a single system, one that I call Gaia, is essentially physiological. It is concerned with the working of the whole system, not with separated parts of a planet divided arbitrarily into the biosphere, the atmosphere, the lithosphere, and the hydrosphere. These are not real divisions of the Earth, they are spheres of influence inhabited by academic scientists.” (1991: 11) The scientific name for Gaia is geophysiology. Lovelock says: “geophysiology is concerned with how the living Earth works. Geophysiology ignores the traditional division between the

My 1963 comically chivalrous resolve to contribute my pennyworth to the planet's health has been somewhat modified. I still fear the Earth's fate less than humanity's. If the globe is a living cell – and all the evidence so far points to this – it will survive no matter what, no matter who or what has to go. If you threaten a cell, even a non-sentient one, it will retreat if it can, or fight back. It seems to me the planet is starting to fight back with weapons ranging from the biological to the geomorphological, from viruses to vulcanism. Messing with the air and waters and issuing intractable wastes will not kill this particular blue cell hanging in space with the only life so far detected in the known universe: *somebody* is going to get stonked, and the Earth will survive in modified form, with modified life-forms. The only personal contribution is perhaps to live as simply as possible, despite being trapped in the urban flypaper. (81)

He then calls himself an “environmental scientist” and compares his job to that of a garbage man “with a few extra skills ... a sort of human dung-beetle grunting mumbled expostulations now and then” (81). These expostulations are his poems. Livingstone later repeats and expands upon the sentiments expressed in this biographical article.

In an interview with Michael Chapman, Livingstone compares First World technology with the less rapacious lifestyle of Third World countries and says Africa is “more cooperative, less competitive, more alive yet less frenetic, less materialistic, closer to the earth and its blessings and cursings” (1985: 110). He also makes overt environmental statements about Africa: “there is a cliché – ‘Africa is dying’. It is, of course: about 10 to 15 ha of rainforest is being destroyed every 60 seconds, with all that *that* implies” (*Ibid*). In answer to Chapman's question on science and poetry and whether Livingstone has an inner conflict over these, he said:

I have always had quite a strong impulse to heal my fellow man, medically and, sort of quasi-medically, to heal the earth, this wonderful planet we live on...

I work in marine bacteriology against the pollution of water; and I have all kinds of psychic and mystic connections with water, as I do with the sun. I don't think anything – not one thing that I have mentioned here is incompatible with poetry. I think they are all interconnected with all aspects of literature and aspects of science. They are aspects of man on this earth. No conflict here! (112)

Livingstone told David Robbins that he looked on the earth as a living cell, but that nature inherently contains the “implacable antagonisms” of the force of life versus the power of death (1987: 53). “I think that life is infinitely vulnerable and precious. This

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Earth and life sciences, which view the evolution of the rocks and the evolution of life as two separate sciences. Instead geophysiology treats the two processes as a single evolutionary science.” (1991: 26)

is why I became involved with pollution back in 1964. It's my impulse to heal, to nurture life" (*ibid.*).

A few years later, in an interview with Marco Fazzini, Livingstone expressed his ecological concerns more explicitly:

... we [humans] are polluting our own nest, threatening our living planet towards destruction.

I am not a paid-up member of the Greens, but about 30 years ago I decided to devote my few skills to our Mother, the earth, and to making a few poems to entertain, tease, challenge my readers into have some care, some concern, some identification with this beautiful planet. (1990: 140)

He returns to this theme later in the interview: "I think I am optimistic about the planet and its inherent life force but pessimistic about man – the ultimate polluter through his greed and numbers" (142). The interview ends with Livingstone's answer to a question on the contribution he can make to a post-apartheid South Africa. He makes a universal prediction:

South Africa is the world's laboratory: it represents the globe's nations and preoccupations in microcosm. If it fails ... there is no future for humanity at large except the ugly spread of racial and religious wars, the final triumph of evil in pursuit of the devils of materialism, power and mindless destructivity.

In which case we deserve to go, allowing the planet to recover from our hubris, gather its resources to prepare for a more symbiotic and less quarrelsome species. (145)

In another interview with David Robbins after the launch of *A Littoral Zone*, Livingstone refers to "a sense of ecological despair":

Yes. Despair. I look at the pictures coming back from space. Our universe has great beauty, but I can never forget that – so far as we know – we are alone in it. Ours is the only planet which supports life. There are no 3 ft green men or 9 ft silver women on their way to save us from our folly.

We are destroying the human-life-supporting facility that this earth has. But the earth is a living cell; like all cells under threat it will retreat or fight back. I believe our earth will fight back. I believe life will continue here, but perhaps in a very different form. Perhaps in a non-human form ... (1992: 52-3)

### **Overview of the literature**

The combination of Douglas Livingstone's poetry and ecocritical literary theory has taken me to most corners of the library: from philosophy to psychology to sociology to Darwinian theory to popular science to geophysiology to mythology to mysticism to music to environmental theory and, of course, to the English literature shelves. My



research has followed two main paths: that of ecological literary criticism, and that of critical and biographical material on Douglas Livingstone. The literature review for this thesis is thus (of necessity) rather odd.

- Literary ecocriticism

This is a new, but growing, area of discourse. According to Jonathan Bate the first explicit ecological literary criticism appeared in the 1980s (2000: 72). The preceding sections of this chapter offer a review of the ecocritical texts which I have consulted. In summary, Jonathan Bate and Neil Evernden offer an examination of both the biological and cultural strands within the ecological, while Karl Kroeber and Robert Pogue Harrison concentrate on the cultural. David Suzuki's *The Sacred Balance* gives a valuable spiritual insight into the field. My core secondary text is Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* which does much more than posit the theory of ecopoetics. Both Bate and Karl Kroeber (*Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*) examine the founding role of the Romantic poets in forming a basis for an ecological worldview. Both authors offer extensive ecocritical analyses of the poetry of the Romantics and so demonstrate a "rethinking" (Kroeber 8) of the way in which the poetry can be read. Kroeber argues against the "increasing self-isolation of criticism within narrow ideological/metaphysical concerns" (20) and for a more holistic or ecological approach. His style is convoluted when compared with Bate's clear prose and wider scope in *The Song of the Earth*, which shows a marked progression in his ecopoetic vision when compared with his earlier book *Romantic Ecology*. The latter does, however, offer a valuable interpretation of the role of the pastoral in attaining ecological sensibility. Harrison offers a broader review, through a sweep of literature, of the ecological implications of humankind's relationship with forests: *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* "tells the more elusive story of the role forests have played in the cultural imagination of the West" (ix). I have used three collections of essays on literary ecocriticism: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, Kim Taplin's *Tongues in Trees: Studies in Literature and Ecology*, and *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*, edited by John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington. These, along with the ASLE (The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) journal, ISLE (*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*), have contributed

greatly to my understanding of literary ecocriticism. At the same time, these collections have shown that the discipline is still fluid. Definitions of what ecocriticism is and explanations of its function vary, but the basic premise – interrelatedness – is the common factor in this new and exciting area of literary research.

- Ecology

Neil Evernden's *The Natural Alien: Humankind and the Environment* does not venture into the area of literature but does give a clear account of the human impact upon the environment and examines the consequent ecological implications. Pat Irwin's introductory reader titled *Ecology: An Introduction to Principles* is a useful guide to the basic definitions and principles of scientific ecology. Barbara Kingsolver's *Small Wonder* is an exquisite example of ecological sensibility which combines her biological knowledge and her spiritual insight in prose which persuades rather than pontificates. Implicit in the ecological framework is a reworking of the Art-versus-Nature debate. Useful texts in this area are *Minding Nature: the Philosophers of Ecology*, edited by David Macauley, and *Encompassing Nature: A Sourcebook*, edited by Robert M. Torrance. Likewise, *The Picador Nature Reader*, edited by Daniel Halpern and Dan Frank, has provided valuable insights through its varied collection of poems, stories and articles on natural history. Through Douglas Livingstone's poetry I have learnt that evolutionary theory and geophysics (the Gaia hypothesis) are essential components of the ecological matrix. Works by Gillian Beer (*Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*), Richard Dawkins (*The Blind Watchmaker* and *River out of Eden*), Daniel Dennett (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea*) and Stephen Gould (*The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* and *Life's Grandeur*) have provided valuable background information on evolutionary theory. James Lovelock's three books which explain his Gaia hypothesis have been consulted.

- South African ecocriticism

Most of the ecocritical texts are British and American and very little has been written in the field in South Africa. However, Julia Martin's dissertation "The Jewelled Net"

is definitive, not only for its exegesis of literary ecocriticism as a discipline but also for its analysis of environmental literature and practice in South Africa. Apart from this the main volume on South African ecocriticism is *Literature, Nature and the Land: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Environment* (collected AUETSA papers 1992) edited by Nigel Bell and Meg Cowper Lewis. However, not all the articles in this volume are within the scope of the volume's title. Useful articles include Julia Martin's "New, with Added Ecology?: Hippos, Forests and Environmental Literacy", Stanley Frielick's "Deep Ecology, the Environment, and African Literature" and Geoff Hutchings' "Accommodating the Language to the Land".

Other South African scholars have published occasional ecocritical papers. These include Godfrey Meintjes' "Environmental Communication: Notes on the relationship(s) between ecology and literature" and Dan Wylie's various contributions to the field: an article on Roy Campbell ("Pioneer and Vulture: Roy Campbell and the Natural World"), on John Eppel, ("Close to Epiphanies: The Poetry of John Eppel and the Natural World") and various poetry reviews for *English Academy Review*. Duncan Brown's "Environment and Identity: Douglas Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone*" views the poetry from an ecological perspective. In short, South African literary ecocriticism is still in its fledgling stage.

The next chapter gives a detailed review of the critical material on Douglas Livingstone's earlier work and the final four chapters include critical responses to *A Littoral Zone*.

Both science and poetry constitute very hard work towards the truth. The truth is very difficult to get at, but everybody carries it with him. It is not that people are walking around foxing themselves, it's just that there's a lot of imprecision attached to expressing the truth. Language civilises. One is writing poetry because one has to; it is a terrible obsession, one would rather not do it; but there's always the faint hope that you are sending the signal out that a fellow soul will say 'OK, that spoke to me'.

– *Douglas Livingstone*

## Chapter Two

### Douglas Livingstone: His Life, Work and the Critical Response to His Earlier Work

The aim of this chapter is to explore the depth and diversity of Douglas Livingstone's thought and work. It contains a brief biography, an outline of his published work and awards in both the literary and scientific fields, and an attempt to contextualise his work within the traditions of South African poetry. The chapter closes with a review of the critical response to Livingstone's first five poetry collections (which I have called his earlier work). This review unabashedly uses an ecologically informed approach. The critical response to *A Littoral Zone* is examined in chapter four.

After his death Livingstone was hailed as South Africa's first 21<sup>st</sup> Century poet by Michael Chapman at an evening of tributes to the poet. This phrase was repeated in newspaper obituaries.<sup>11</sup> Chapman's tribute was later published in *The English Academy Review* along with tributes by Lionel Abrahams and Don Maclennan. He writes:

I spoke of his exploration – in his last collection, *A Littoral Zone* – of the uneasy divide between humanity's physical and psychic selves. The poems pose key questions, after apartheid, about ecologies of destruction and creation, and I concluded that Livingstone could well come to be regarded as this country's first twenty-first century poet. (1995: 6)

Chapman's phrase "ecologies of destruction and creation" appositely sums up the tension in Livingstone's poetry and points to what he calls "a universalising approach" (*ibid.*). In the published joint article "Remembering Douglas Livingstone" Abrahams, too, pays tribute to Livingstone's ecological awareness and "his dedication to embattled causes like poetry and the health of the earth" (5). In his tribute titled "The Princely Poet", Abrahams beautifully summarises the "great themes" of Livingstone's work as "the celebration of life, of passion, courage and creativity, of nature and beauty". He says that the poet's grief over the results of cruelty and stupidity is the negative side of these great themes and the source of some of his most powerful poems (*ibid.*). Maclennan notes that Livingstone's writing "deconstructs the world of appearances to show that we have a

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<sup>11</sup> Three press clippings – two obituaries and one review of *A Littoral Zone* – were kindly given to me by Don Maclennan. Two are undated and without reference to the newspaper in which they appeared. I therefore include photocopies of the articles for reference purposes (as Appendix B).

closer affinity with nature and animals (and microbes?) than we suppose” and that “he affirms a Darwinian view of things” (9). MacLennan, too, implicitly points to the ecological undertow in the poet’s work but later asks where this would take humanity, quoting from Livingstone’s poem “Scourings at Station 19” (LZ 47):

Yet if the world is a Darwinian place, what could possibly be the basis for continued hope? ... The heroic is romantic, as well as comic. The final image of the poet is that of the battered bantam rooster on the beach, defying the world:

This teapot, whose rage is writ too large to be cooped  
within one pygmy chanticleer, surveyed amazed  
by gulls and gannets, trumpets his fractious challenge.  
Tempting to dub the din thanksgiving; or more: life  
triumphs even on no longer trusted plants. (10)

MacLennan uses “life / triumphs even on no longer trusted planets” as the title for his tribute. The line summarises Livingstone’s hope for the Earth and his unlikely teapot-shaped rooster’s “fractious challenge” to the people who live carelessly on it.

Maureen Isaacson’s press obituary, “Courtly Gent and Sensual Poet, Douglas Livingstone Remembered”, canvasses the opinions of South African literary figures. Lionel Abrahams notes Livingstone’s “drivingly unselfish sense of duty and responsibility to his art and his science”. His partner, Monica Fairall, calls him a renaissance man and says he sought truth in science and that his poetry was an interpretation of this. Tony Morphet recounts a conversation with Livingstone: “I said to him: ‘I understand you’re a poet.’ He said: ‘No, I’m a scientist’”. But he was both, and the journalist Nico Zaverdinos recalls Livingstone telling him that his poetry was his real work: “My [scientific] doctorate is the soft core, *A Littoral Zone* is the hard core”.

Isaacson’s obituary also explores Livingstone’s refusal to write overtly ‘political’ poetry. Jeremy Cronin, a contemporary South African poet, said: “He was a marvellously sensual lyrical poet in the tradition of Roy Campbell, unfortunately with the same politics as Roy Campbell”. Cronin does not expand on this inaccuracy. (Campbell wrote a great deal more politically-orientated satirical verse and lived a more politically active life than Livingstone did.) Andries Oliphant, editor of *Staffrider*, conversely notes that Livingstone’s decision to distance himself from political partisanship did not prevent him from satirising certain political postures.

In another press obituary, “A Gap in our Horizon”, Stephen Gray quotes fellow critic Christopher Hope who, in 1985, claimed that Livingstone was the “most widely

admired by poets of all poetical persuasions as the creator of a body of authentic African poetry unrivalled since Roy Campbell”. In this article Guy Butler remarks on Livingstone’s craftsmanship: “that powerful, clear voice ... with such versatility and range of tone and attitude. I loved his insistence on practice and craft”.

I summarise these tributes and obituaries because the way in which he was seen and remembered by his contemporaries is indicative of the mark Livingstone made and of the man he was. In short, his contemporaries acknowledge (sometimes obliquely) his ecological awareness, his blending of the scientific and the poetic, his lyricism and his craftsmanship. There is both praise and criticism for his refusal to be bludgeoned into writing about the politics of the day. In his press report, Gray quotes Chapman’s apposite summary of the man and his work:

He is still the poet no future discussion of South African work can avoid. In his bigger ecological themes, about nature’s creative and destructive forces, he really anticipated this country’s post-apartheid concerns. He disdained narrow tolerances. He was our first 21st-century poet.

### **His life**

Born on 5 January 1932 of Scottish parents in Kuala Lumpur, Douglas Livingstone spent the first ten years of his life in Malaysia, apart from extended visits to Scotland and Perth, Australia. His father was an officer in the colonial police. At the age of five he was sent to a convent boarding school with his sister, Heather. He witnessed the Japanese invasion and capture of Malaysia (December 1941 to February 1942) as a ten-year old boy. During the invasion, the family moved south and settled in Colombo, in what was then Ceylon, for a short time. While his father was in a prisoner of war camp in Sumatra, the remainder of the Livingstone family arrived in Durban in March 1942. Douglas Livingstone’s father rejoined the family in Durban after the war and sent his son to boarding school at Kearsney College because he was spending more time on the beach than at the two day-schools at which he had been enrolled. The family then returned to Malaysia, but left Livingstone behind at the boarding school, which he later remembered for its “wonderful library” (1968: 59). During his school holidays he learnt to hunt (for the first and last time), joined a criminal gang, and decided: “I was to become a poet, a ‘true’ poet, whatever that means – I remember the phrase is all, often muttered under my breath as a sort of talisman or battle-cry in my tenses moments” (*ibid.*).

Livingstone matriculated from Kearsney College in 1949. His first, brief, job was as a night-shift bench chemist at a sugar mill. At the beginning of 1951 he went to what was then Rhodesia and took up a post as an assayer in Southern Rhodesia's government metallurgical laboratories. In December 1952 he changed jobs and worked as a technologist at the Pasteur Institute in Salisbury, until September 1956 when he was awarded a diploma in medical laboratory technology. During an annual leave he worked as an industrial contract diver at the Kariba dam project. He continued to study and obtained a diploma in bacteriology. He then moved to the public health laboratories in Lusaka, Zambia, where he was senior technician in charge of the bacteriological department. In 1959 he became the officer in charge of the Broken Hill pathological laboratories and held this position until December 1963. During this time he suffered from a series of illnesses including pericarditis, septicaemia, meningitis, encephalitis, spells of mental illness and tuberculosis of the kidneys.

In January 1964 Livingstone returned to South Africa to work for The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) as a microbiologist. His job over the next 30 years was to establish bacterial criteria for 'clean' and polluted seawater. He was the CSIR's head of marine bacteriological research. He died of stomach cancer on 19 February 1996 at the age of 64. Livingstone held a PhD in water conservation from the University of Natal (1989) and was awarded two honorary doctorates for literature from Natal and Rhodes Universities. He was married twice, for seven and five years respectively, and had no children.

### **His work**

Livingstone first published in the English poetry magazine *Outposts* in the 1950s. His debut volume of poetry, *The Skull in the Mud*, was published in 1960 when he was 28 years old. In the following two years further poems appeared in *Contrast*, *Outposts*, *The Central African Examiner* and *London Magazine*. In 1963 he won the BBC-FBC radio prize for drama for his verse-play *The Sea My Winding Sheet*, followed in 1975 by the Olive Schreiner prize for another play, *A Rhino in the Boardroom*. A later prose play, *The Semblance of the Real*, was published in 1984.

He also won a poetry prize in 1963 in a competition organised by *Science Fiction News*. Oxford University Press then asked him for a selection of poems and this resulted



in the publication of *Sjambok and Other Poems from Africa* (1964). This was reprinted by the South African imprint, Ad Donker, in 1988. Between 1965 and 1970 he published extensively in magazines in South Africa, the then Rhodesia, Australia, America and England. He won the 1965 Guinness Prize for Poetry at the Cheltenham Festival for the poem “A Bamboo Day”. Livingstone’s work was published jointly by Oxford University Press in a collection entitled *Poems by Thomas Kinsella, Douglas Livingstone, and Anne Sexton* (1968). His second volume of poems, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*, was published by Oxford in 1970 (reprinted, 1975), the year in which he won the British Cholmondeley Award for Poetry.

A collection of love poetry, *A Rosary of Bone*, was published locally by David Philip in 1975. This was enlarged and reprinted in 1983. In 1978 Livingstone won the English Association of South Africa prize for a group of poems in *The Anvil’s Undertone*, published by Ad Donker. In 1984 Ad Donker published Livingstone’s *Selected Poems* which received that year’s CNA Literary Prize. His final collection of poetry, *A Littoral Zone*, was published in 1991 by Carrefour Press and won the Sanlam Literary Award for Poetry.

Finally, Livingstone dubs himself as the “translator” of *Giovanni Jacopo Meditates (on the High-IQ Haiku)*, published by Firfield in 1995.<sup>12</sup>

### **D.J. Livingstone’s scientific work**

As a scientist Livingstone used the initialised version of his name and published at least 14 scientific papers in South Africa and England and, over a 20-year period, produced about 18 contract reports on the microbiological quality of the sea off Durban for the Durban Corporation. His published scientific papers are listed in Appendix A.

Livingstone’s PhD thesis from the University of Natal is titled “A Microbial Study of Water Quality in the Marine Environment off Durban: 1964-1988”. It was published as a CSIR Research Report (No. 704) in 1990 under the amended title “Microbial Studies in Seawater Quality off Durban”. It carries this tantalising epigraph from James Joyce’s

*Ulysses*:

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<sup>12</sup> The above information is taken from A.G. Ulyatt’s article, “‘A Sucker for Experience’: A Brief Biography of Douglas Livingstone” (1985), Livingstone’s article “Leaving School – XII” (1968), various press obituaries on Douglas Livingstone, and an article by Geoffrey Haresnape in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: South African Writers*.

The Roman, like the Englishman who follows in his footsteps, brought to every new shore on which he set his foot (on our shore he never set it) only his cloacal obsession. He gazed about him in his toga and he said: It is meet to be here. Let us construct a water closet.

This human “cloacal obsession” to pollute the environment and our habitat is a symptom of our ecological destructiveness and is one of Livingstone’s main preoccupations. The introduction to his dissertation alludes to the role scientific research can play in redressing the human cloacal penchant to use the sea as a sewer or dumping ground for waste. The opening paragraphs hammer home the point that humankind is not only polluting the Earth but is also fouling its own nest and thus destroying its own environment and life-support system:

In an ideal world where perfect paradigms prevailed there would be no waste, and therefore no pollution. In the absence of such a paradise, on a planet whose main pollutant is, arguably, humanity itself, it is surely the responsibility of every civilized society to confront the problems inherent in the disposal of the waste it generates with all the affordable care, practical concern and available skills it can muster to preserve its environment, not only for its own well-being and survival, but for those of future generations.

One fact is paramount: this is a provenly tough and resilient planet, the only one in the known universe upon which diverse and abundant life exists. The earth’s environmental circumstances have changed in the past due to sketchily perceived events probably involving climate, vulcanism, polar shifts, cosmological catastrophes, etc. to the detriment of its then prevailing life-forms. Today, the planet’s presently dominant life-form is in the strange position of possibly effecting unwanted changes in the biosphere from its own waste-products – *fouling its own nest*, as it were – to its own injury. Fearful of propagating its own destruction, an awareness – occasionally compounded by ignorance and hysteria fed by, at times, an alarmist media – has surfaced in humanity’s consciousness of the price invariably attached to modern comforts, the enjoyment of technological facilities and uncontrolled population growth. This comparatively recent disseminative perception of responsibility towards matters ecological and environmental can only be welcomed. Yet a perspective has to be maintained: something practical has to be done about the waste. (1, my italics)

The views expressed here (Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis that the Earth is a self-regulating superorganism which sustains the various life-forms on the planet, the effect of changing environments on organisms, that humans are just another life-form, and humankind’s destructiveness and blind indifference to sustainable living) are adumbrated in much of Livingstone’s poetry. In short, his science informs his poetry. In an interview with Michael Chapman, Livingstone said he did not see science and poetry as being in

conflict: “I don’t think anything ... is incompatible with poetry. I think they are all interconnected with all aspects of literature and aspects of science. They are aspects of man on this earth” (1985: 112). His ecological sensibility is obvious in not only this quotation but in much of the published biographical and autobiographical material on Douglas Livingstone. He dubbed himself as “The Black Knight” (*The Anvil’s Undertone* 26; hereafter referred to as *AU*) who is “apocalyptic for the Earth”, but he might better be called a green knight who fights, in vain, to communicate his ecological sensibility. This awareness is based on material scientific fact and he communicates this through his poetry. He (grudgingly) admits this in the Chapman interview: “Maybe I am trying, rather egotistically, to bridge a gap, unobtrusively to bring in science in my work, to make science more ‘accessible’” (1985:114).

Another of Livingstone’s preoccupations was the pursuit of truth. He said his aim in writing poetry was to entertain, but, without losing sight of the ‘truth’: “I would rather say a poet tends to interpret the truth ... But Plato is also correct: a poet ... certainly uses fictions to convey the truth. Poets should, I maintain, try to remain entertaining” (Fazzini 1990: 141). He was aware of the elusiveness of truth: “Both science and poetry constitute hard work towards the truth. The truth is very difficult to get at, but everybody carries it with him” (Livingstone 1990: 59). The published paper “Science and Truth”<sup>13</sup>, demonstrates D.J. Livingstone’s search for an ontological and physical explanation of life on Earth. The paper is a careful analysis of views on truth by various intellectuals. He questions the existence of “objective” truth and says: “There appears to be a growing school of thinking which maintains that (my oversimplification follows here): imaginatively expanded cognitive modes *can* transcend the purely subjective” (1986: 101). He says that the contemporary ontologist M. Whiteman, along with “such daring originals” as J.E. Lovelock, Lewis Thomas and Nicholas Humphrey, “afford us glimmerings of the whole as one... The corpus appears to be not so much the life *on*, but the life *of* the Earth; and the singularities of such a vision must consequently ‘provide the

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<sup>13</sup> The Livingstone papers housed at NELM (National English Literary Museum) indicate that “Science and Truth” was not written lightly or easily. Its original draft is titled “Mundane Introspections on Science and Truth” (dated February 1986). The papers include annotated and edited drafts and are interleaved with articles by the thinkers he quotes in the article. There are also notes on ontology.

basis for a truly unified philosophy of science and nature,' to borrow John Poynton's (1985) felicitous phrase" (105).

In an epigraph to section III of this paper, Livingstone quotes Andrew Greeley: "Man is inextricably enmeshed in the universe. It is the beginning of wisdom to understand this fact; it is the beginning of mysticism to enjoy it" (104). The final paragraph contains the well-known Einstein quotation: "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of all true art and science" (106). Livingstone was a scientist before he was a mystic, but his belief in a Creative Principle and in humanity's "psychic element" (*LZ* 62) shows that he did not discount the mystical knowledge which is inaccessible to the intellect.

Livingstone concludes "Science and Truth" with the statement that the pursuit of truth is necessary even though it is unattainable and likens the pursuit of "definitive proof of the truth" to trying to 'prove' the existence of God (or a Creative Principle) (1986: 106). In his final paragraph he allows the poet as well as the scientist to speak: "Einstein's observation... affords not only comfort but enjoyment while the day to day proper business of science ensues" (*ibid.*)

### **Douglas Livingstone's poetry and the South African tradition**

This section has been difficult to write because there is no definitive English South African literary tradition. Firstly, it is not old enough (200 years does not make a tradition particularly when compared with the six-century old English canon) and, secondly, the disparate voices and cultures within South African English literature preclude a single tradition. Further, with regard to poetry written in English, it took a century for South African poets to find a voice and a path (Butler xxiv and xxvi). The difficulty is compounded because Livingstone's voice is unique and does not fit into either of the two broad themes found in South African English poetry – a romanticisation of the African landscape and protest or resistance poetry which is overtly political. Only white writing (to borrow J.M. Coetzee's phrase) informs the first theme whereas protest or resistance poetry has been written by both black and white poets. Both themes have as their basis the effects of European colonisation of Africa. Livingstone sidesteps the preoccupation with ownership of the land and instead writes from a broader perspective where Africa is a trope for nature as a life-support system. His concern is more the abused Earth and the

long-term implications of this than the more temporal political concerns of 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa.

Michael Chapman's view of Livingstone as "this country's first twenty-first century poet" (1995: 6) is astute because Livingstone anticipated a new and global age – the ecological – which reaches beyond the localised concerns of colonisation and postcolonialism in South Africa. He does share with South African poets who precede him a preoccupation with what they generally saw as the African landscape and what he sees as the Earth or the power of nature. However, he treats the land in a new way, not as a continent to be tamed but as a force to be revered and conserved, for the land is what supports life itself. While I would not label Livingstone a deep ecologist, his view of the land as his (and humanity's) greater home and the yearning for a symbiotic relationship and sense of place speaks of a deeper apprehension of nature. Chapman touches on this preoccupation:

It would seem clear that Livingstone's poetry embodies thematic and stylistic ambivalences of a kind not often encountered in South African literary practice prior to the 1960s. In its involvement with both breakdown and fresh possibilities, his work relates new poetic structures to modes of perception, so that language itself is in important respects seen to be imbuing reality with a form and a history. This principle of re-creation operated in Plomer's poetry and has, since the advent of modernism (c. 1880), remained crucial to the romantic-symbolist aesthetic. (1984: 96)

I would argue that Livingstone moves beyond modernism – and even postmodernism – and into the ecological. While he called himself a "white African" (see Brown 2002: 105), Livingstone's poetry has stronger resonance with the English literature canon than it does with the (in comparison very short) South African tradition. The influence of the Romantic poets, of John Donne and the other metaphysical poets, of Shakespeare, of T.S. Eliot, and of W.B. Yeats are all to be found in Livingstone's poetry.

Dirk Klopper notes that many critics (justifiably) claim that Francis Carey Slater was the first English poet to have spoken in a truly South African voice (1990: 275). Klopper quotes this telling comment by Slater on the derivative nature of South African poetry:

The main fault in our poetry, according to English critics, is that it is too derivative in form. Apparently they look to new countries for a new technique – a new way of writing. This seems hardly fair... If, then, the poets of the younger countries introduce new themes and fresh and arresting imagery while handling

old forms in a characteristic manner, is that not all that may be reasonably expected of them? (*ibid.*)

Colonial English South African poetry reflects a fascinating tension where the earlier poets, particularly Thomas Pringle (1789-1834), struggled to reconcile their European roots with the harsher realities of Africa through what can be called African Romanticism. Sidney Clouts, a poet who is often coupled with Livingstone, calls this “the violent arcadia” (also the title of his master’s thesis on the nature poetry of Thomas Pringle, Francis Carey Slater and Roy Campbell). His “violent arcadia” is a paradox which reflects an attempt to portray the beauty and savagery of Africa through the idyll of the ancient pastoral tradition (2).

In *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature* Malvern van Wyk Smith claims the first notable English South African poet is Thomas Pringle who, with his fellow 1820 settler-poets, tried to develop “an apt discourse to take imaginative possession ... [of] both people and place” (19). The consensus is that he failed to find this discourse. Sidney Clouts argues “how inadequate Pringle’s style generally is for the depiction of scenes which cannot be comprehended within the framework of a gentler response” (66). In the introduction to *A Book of South African Verse* (1963), Guy Butler similarly claims that Pringle used “stock responses” and did not find a fitting vocabulary (xxiv). White South African poetry only “found its poetic apotheosis” (xxvi) a century later in the writings of Roy Campbell (1901-57) and William Plomer (1903-73). It was their treatment of the African landscape which set them apart from the “high-sounding waffle” (Butler xxiv) of the South African poets who preceded them. Smith argues that Campbell and Plomer “transformed the debate about domicile and appropriation” (47), and Butler writes that they

put paid to this old maid’s view of Africa which made the Karoo and the Bushveld extensions of the Lake District. The landscape is not seen as the face of a Nature which is magnificent, capricious, impersonal. Plomer offers for our contemplation not ‘a primrose by a river’s brim’ but ‘a scorpion on a stone’ [The Scorpion]. (xxvii)

This uneasy view of the African landscape continues into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and is compounded by the effects of the Second World War and the rise to power of the National Party in South Africa in 1948. Butler argues that the pioneering spirit of the white settler poets is subsumed by the effects of industry and commerce and resultant

urbanisation. He adds that in the verse of the 1940s to 1960s Europe is seen as bringer of disease, not of light (xxviii):

Africa can offer no help or encouragement: 'there is nothing but the forms and colours' [Roy Fuller's 'The Green Hills of Africa']. It has no history, no gods, no sages, no art capable of winning our consent or allegiance. It rejects us. (xxix)

Butler writes that Campbell captures this feeling of rejection in "Rounding the Cape" and reveals an ambivalent attitude towards Africa which is both "hated and adored" (*ibid.*)

It seems to me that the white South African poets' ambivalence towards the African landscape reflects a struggle to find a sense of place in Africa. Whether romanticised or starkly portrayed, Africa is not truly home. Smith refers to the "crises of arbitration between the Africa and Europe within" (81) where the post-Second-World War, white English poets – Guy Butler, Roy Macnab, Anthony Delius, Charles Eglinton, F.D. Sinclair, F.T. Prince and R.N. Currey – explored Campbell's Adamastor motif in ways which reflected this ambivalence.

Smith names Sidney Clouts and Douglas Livingstone as the two most prominent and outstanding white poets since the 1960s. He claims that both Clouts and Livingstone concentrate on "the larger text of Africa" (87) and eschew an overt political discourse (88), while their white contemporaries also seek what Smith calls "a spirit of place" (90). This apprehension of "a spirit of place" points to a possible reconciliation, a feeling of at-homeness or belonging on the African continent.

Black writers have not had to quest for this sense of belonging but instead have had to battle to defend their home ground. The late 1800s saw the emergence of the first black writers to use English. They were the mission school trained writers Sol Plaatje, J.T. Jabavu, the Dhlomo brothers and A.K. Soga (Smith 39-40). Smith also cites the rise to power of the National Party in 1948 as a powerful new chapter in South African English writing where "the major discourse would continue to be the increasingly complex dialectic of appropriation and resistance" (66). This resistance has led to the protest poetry of the Soweto poets. This poetry resulted from personal suppression and imprisonment. In the early 1970s several of these poets (Mongane Wally Serote, James Matthews, Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali, Arthur Nortje, Mafika Gwala, Sipho Sepamla, Robert Royston and Barry Feinberg) published collections. A new wave of poetry followed the Soweto rising of 1976 (Smith 108-112).

Smith, writing in the 1980s, states that “white ... writing has increasingly become a literature of dread, in contrast to the black discourse of endurance and challenge” (67). Has South African poetry moved beyond this black-white split and found its own ‘voice’? I submit that Douglas Livingstone’s poetry marks the start of a new tradition of ecologically orientated poetry in South Africa.

While Livingstone’s poetry is not concerned with colonial appropriation and postcolonial obsessions with ownership of the land, it is concerned with finding a sense of place in Africa. For this reason Livingstone was influenced by other South African poetry and is often linked with Roy Campbell (Chapman 1984: 74, Smith 89). Klopper notes:

Livingstone does appear to draw on the work of Campbell. One way of describing Livingstone is to say that he is a contemporary South African modernist who combines the symbolic resonance of Campbell with the ironic sensibility of William Plomer. (1990: 286)

Roy Campbell’s “symbolic resonance” is most obvious in his revival of the myth of Adamastor, a myth which Livingstone uses in his verse play *The Sea My Winding Sheet* and in “Adamastor Resuscitated” (*Sjambok and other poems from Africa* 12; hereafter referred to as *S*). Sidney Clouts argues that Campbell believed in poetry as “‘a pastoral art’, flowering best under conditions where the relation between man and nature was fundamental both to life and to art” (149). This philosophy could as well be used to describe Livingstone’s view. Campbell – like Livingstone – valorised the imagination. In *Broken Record* Campbell describes himself as a Quixotic figure: “I live three-quarters of the time in my imagination, which is the highest and purest form of the intelligence, the discarding of which for materialistic and scientific values has caused the misery of the modern world” (in Clouts 149). Livingstone, on the other hand, does not hold this narrow view of the value of science and instead seeks synthesis between the imagination and science.

In summarising Campbell’s position in English South African poetry, Clouts says:

Campbell was the first South African poet to write with a mastery of form. To a poetry heavily dependent on conventional responses he brought the authority of an intense and fresh lyrical control of language. The store of prosodic energies in his work makes the English and European traditions creatively available to us, under the pressure of a highly individual talent.

... He was applying a forceful sophistication of style to the expression of a harsh and challenging reality. The way in which subject matter contrasts with idiom can



be seen as a stylistic pastoralism, declaring from the start opposing qualities which he employs to celebrate not only joy, contentment and hope but the conflict involved in their attainment. To see Campbell's South African poems too emphatically as statements of protest in a limiting environment is therefore to misread in them the intense impulse of a poet whose protest is one aspect only of a serious attempt to extend consciousness. They are certainly poems containing his protest, but this is in accordance with his larger purpose to locate himself imaginatively in an ironic pastoralism of the imagination, where fulfilment is the fruit of struggle and 'the black world is fuel / To hearts that burn and battle for delight'. (161)

Clouts' term "an ironic pastoralism of the imagination" can as well be applied to Livingstone's poetry. He also displays a mastery of form and a control of language. Livingstone's 'pastoralism' however is portrayed as an ideal in the form of what I call ecological equilibrium. For Livingstone, the way to be in Africa is through symbiosis, not appropriation.

Campbell shows traces of ecological awareness in, for example, "The timeless, surly patience of the serf / That moves the nearest to the naked earth" ("The Serf" lines 12-13) and "Across his back, unheeded, we have broken / Whole forests, heedless of the blood we've spilled" ("Rounding the Cape" lines 9-10). But his view is not as comprehensive or as scientifically informed as Livingstone's.

Livingstone was also undoubtedly influenced by the Romantic poets, particularly Byron and Shelley. The Romantic vision proved to be inadequate for previous South African poets. This is Stephen Watson's argument. He says that the tradition of literary romanticism (with a small r) has disintegrated in 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa (57). He claims that the romantic tradition in South Africa lost its original purpose of criticism of society and became divorced from everything except its "tenuous literary heritage" (60). I argue that criticism of society is only part of the Romantic tradition and that, for Livingstone and for literary ecologists, the Romantic communion with Nature and the role of the imagination are vital. Watson argues from a Marxist point of view that romanticism has become a refuge (64):

It established its hold on the minds of any number of writers not as a response to anything like a new mode of production, but to a peculiarly colonial experience of alienation. Characteristically, it strove to overcome this by means of a 'projection of consciousness into the alien: into the African himself, into the African fauna or landscape'. All its various efforts to establish a subjective intensity and wholeness, to attain that internal paradise in which the distinction between internal and external, subject and object, mind and world is momentarily elided,

may be read as the efforts of aliens to overcome the other that rendered them alien. (60-1)

Watson quotes Sidney Clouts who said his ambition was “to create a South African poetry and a new language for it – an aboriginal language which fulfils not present but future aspirations” (69) and concludes that Clouts failed because of his “essentially romantic inclination”:

He remains a coloniser poet, one neither of England nor wholly of Africa, occupying a ground so indeterminate that it frequently appears to be groundless. And that was his tragedy. (80)

Livingstone’s Romanticism also seeks synthesis between the dualities given by Watson above, but his Romanticism is not localised. His search is for a global language, if language is the correct term for his poetic articulation of the interpretation of the ‘truth’. He was acutely aware of the slippery nature of ‘truth’, the search for which, he believed, lies partly in scientific endeavour. Livingstone’s poetry breaks free from the coloniser’s struggle to find a narrow definition of belonging within the African landscape. He uses Africa in all its beauty and terror as a universal trope for the power of the Earth as humankind’s *oikos* or dwelling place, and so escapes the concerns of colonialism and, even, postcolonialism. His search is not so much for an internal paradise as for an ecological sensibility which, if realised, would return humankind to a form of ecological equilibrium where, following biological rhythms, we could live in harmony with the Earth. In short, Livingstone was a Romantic materialist. The problem lies not with Livingstone’s vision but with humankind itself.

In *White Writing* J.M. Coetzee examines the problems of what he calls a universal language (a means of communication which everyone can understand) and a sense of belonging within South African poetry: “The questions that trouble white South African poets above all are, as we might expect, whether the land speaks a universal language, whether the African landscape can be articulated in a European language, whether the European can be at home in Africa” (1988: 167). Coetzee does not discuss Livingstone in *White Writing*, but does examine the work of his fellow poet Sidney Clouts and argues that “Clouts provides the most radical response as yet to the burden assumed by the South African poet of European culture: the burden of finding a home in Africa for a consciousness formed in and by a language whose history lies on another continent”

(173). Livingstone, too, speaks this “universal” and ecological language where Africa, for him, is not a colonised continent, but a representative piece of the Earth.

### **Catching a curved ball: the misinterpretation of Douglas Livingstone’s concerns**

Douglas Livingstone was a Darwinian and a Romantic materialist. His critics of the 1970s and 80s mostly did not see this and so offered inadequate interpretations of his work and concerns. Take, for example, the reaction to Livingstone’s catchword “Polit-Lit” (1976: 142). Chapman refers to it as disparaging (1984: 94), scornful (1996: 341) and derisive (2002: xxiii) and Dirk Klopper as scathing (1990: 289). While not wishing to focus on the fray, I must protest that ““Africa Within Us’ .....?””, in which the word Polit-Lit appears, is not disparaging. There is certainly a tone of playful parody: “Polit-Lit does have one important function of course: to show the few readers interested that One’s Heart Is In The Right Place” (1976: 142). However, the main focus of Livingstone’s article is a carefully argued plea for ecological sensibility and brotherhood. He opens by stating that (as Brecht had it) modern literature has not changed the heart of even one politician and that his own political poems “were complete disasters – bad poetry” and hence not publishable (1976: 142). Livingstone then describes the functioning of the cell and the biological process and uses this as an ecological metaphor:

Each of us is a walking universe of completely disparate worlds, continents and seas, with immense and differing populations, all organized together into some sort of functioning coherence with the single inherent determination (if we are sane) to preserve life and what is left of our planet. (143)

He ends the paper with poetic descriptions of the richness of South African life, followed by allusions to a shared humanity, the South African apartheid system of the time, and the miracle of the evolution of the human race. His final words are:

I feel in all humility we can but find this and much more to confess or celebrate within ourselves; discovering in the process the miracle against which no wall nor law or barbed-wire can ever prevail: our *uncommon* humanity. (144)

The phrase “*uncommon* humanity” refers to the singular miracle of the evolution of the human species. Livingstone argues, then, that politics pales into insignificance when measured against the miracle of life. Dirk Klopper reads the article quite differently. He argues convolutedly that:

In his article ““Africa within us’ .....?” (1976), Livingstone uses science to counter political conceptions of literature. His parodic style is clever, subversive

even, in its deployment of scientific jargon to undercut political jargon. But science turns out, finally, to be simply a metaphor, and a politically loaded one at that:

A living body is of course subject to certain immutable laws. A body divided against itself, as someone I'm sure said, dies – as in various types of cancer for instance, where some cells, not content with their orderly dissimilarities yet underlying unity of purpose with the blokes over the road, differ yet again from their associates, and in trying to impose their ways on the others, destroy the whole world they occupy. Dying too in the process, of course: the inexorable final goal of which they are no doubt mindlessly unaware while the heady process of Antigone-like insurrection ensues. (143)

Livingstone's allegory of insurrection reaches back to Elizabethan notions of the body politic. The immutable law is both biological and socio-political. The implication is that social insurrection, like bodily insurrection, is a cancer. (1990: 289)

I would argue that this is not at all an allegory of socio-political insurrection, but a Darwinian view of survival and extinction which has only a weak metaphorical link with "Elizabethan notions of the body politic". It is to do with ecological destruction and the need for symbiotic relationship.

Livingstone's ecological preoccupation and the philosophical thinking which informs this view are more pertinent to an interpretation of his poetry than his so-called political incorrectness (Chapman 2002: xxiii). In an interview with Michael Chapman, published in *Leadership* in 1985, Livingstone said: "I have noticed that mixing art and politics usually decomposes, vitiates both." And: "I'm in a kind of limbo, a limbo of political unimportance. Yet if everything is indeed political, does it matter if 'politics' are found in my work or not?" (110). This statement points to a vision which goes beyond the turbulence of South Africa's Apartheid years. Tony Morphet said: "He loathed politics. He thought politics was power thinly disguised as virtue" (see Isaacson's press obituary, Appendix B).

What, then, is Livingstone's *Weltanschauung*? There is no short answer to this question. It is clear that he is a truth-seeker who believes in the efficacy of both science and poetry. My claim that Livingstone can be called a Romantic materialist is made with due reservation but is I think more accurate than Michael Chapman's claim that he is a romantic symbolist (1984: 81 and 96). Chapman does allude to the materialism in Livingstone's poetry: "But if, at the one extreme, there is Livingstone's anti-poetic need

to find a closer identification between the word and the thing, we have at the other his romantic-symbolist attempts to reconstruct new ways of seeing and feeling” (1984: 81). By his use of “romantic-symbolist” I take Chapman to mean a subjective view of modern unity, but this ‘classification’ makes no room for the scientific – or material – aspect of Livingstone’s thought. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines materialism as:

the general theory that the ultimate constituents of reality are material or physical bodies, elements or process. It is a form of monism in that it holds that everything in existence is reducible to what is material or physical in nature... Many philosophers have been attracted to materialism both because of its reductive simplicity and its association with scientific knowledge. (Craig 6: 171)

Materialism thus points to Livingstone’s physical or scientific view of the world, while his psychic apprehensions are included in the Romantic view. By Romantic materialism I mean the view that the physical world is made up of matter and energy and is subject to immutable laws of nature, but that this fact does not preclude a reverence for the myriad interconnections and miraculous existence of life. Gillian Beer succinctly describes Romantic materialism as “a sense of the clustering mystery of a material universe” (142).

### **An ecological overview of the critical response to Livingstone’s earlier work**

Apart from Michael Chapman’s extensive research on the earlier work of Douglas Livingstone, there is not a large body of critical writing in this area. Dirk Klopper’s contribution to Livingstone criticism includes a number of pages in his chapter “Ideology and the Study of White South African English Poetry” in *Rendering Things Visible* (1990), edited by Martin Trump, and a later article “A Libidinal Zone: The Poetic Legacy of Douglas Livingstone” (1997) (which includes some references to *A Littoral Zone*). Geoffrey Haresnape’s article on Douglas Livingstone in the *Dictionary of Literary Biographies* (2000) offers a brief biography and a critical summary of all of his work.

I have traced three master’s theses on Douglas Livingstone and another with a substantial chapter on his poetry. Written in the 1980s and early ’90s, none of the theses give an explicitly ecological reading of Livingstone’s poetry.

Pieter Daniel de Wet examines ten South African poets in “The Widening Eye: Images of, Attitudes to, and Consciousness of the African Landscape, as Reflected in the Work of Selected Poets” (1984). The chapter on Livingstone is titled “Africa Within”. De

Wet claims Livingstone is “a poet acutely aware of both past and contemporary social, political and aesthetic problems” (183) and notes that “He has ironically declared that he understands ‘the Africa within us’ to be not only the differentiated cells that compose our bodies, but also the symbiotic organisms that help to preserve life” (183). I argue that Livingstone is here being scientific and ecological, rather than ironic. De Wet does allude to Livingstone’s ecological preoccupation when he claims that the poet attempts to synthesise a seemingly chaotic and meaningless universe from the vantage points of the scientific, the literary, the intuitive and the historical (184).

Gayatri Priyadarshini (Priya) Narismulu’s thesis, “Poetry as an Expression of the Understanding of One’s Reality: A Study of the Work of the South African Writer Douglas Livingstone” (1985), predates the discourse of literary ecocriticism but her conclusion that a “monistic conceptual framework” (139) informs Livingstone’s poetry points to an ecological reading. She explains monism as a non-dualistic way of seeing the world “which implies a paradigm shift to a conceptual system that transcends the mechanistic framework” (141); this “new conceptual system removes the distance between the poet and his context, summarily resolving the dislocation and alienation that some of his poems demonstrate” (153).

Claudio Perinot’s thesis from the University of Venice, “Douglas Livingstone’s Poetry: Imagery and Technique” (1989), examines the semantic construction of the poetry in detail. The introduction relies heavily on Chapman’s narrow interpretation that Livingstone’s poetry reflects “man’s fundamental sense of isolation” (41). This thesis does not grapple with the broader import or meaning of Livingstone’s work.

Marco Fazzini’s thesis, “The Poetry of Douglas Livingstone: Towards an Italian Translation” (1991), mainly consists of translations of some of Livingstone’s poems into Italian. The abstract and introduction offer astute insights into what Fazzini calls “the meaning of his poetry”. He claims Livingstone’s poetry is “an exploration of individual responses to everyday reality through a dramatic, and often ironic, inwardness” and that “Livingstone shows a capacity for sifting South African history and sentiment through a disciplined verbal mastery” (1991: 21). According to Fazzini, Livingstone “perceives a fractured or dislocated universe” (23), but he also correctly notes a search for “a reconciliation between the tangible and the alien, the civilized and the primitive” (29) in the animal poems. Fazzini states that Livingstone believed in language, not politics, and

notes the “universality” of his poetry (32). He playfully but astutely calls Livingstone “a Casanova in modern dress” (11).

The principal critical text on Douglas Livingstone’s earlier work is Michael Chapman’s *Douglas Livingstone: A Critical Study of his Poetry* (1981). It covers Livingstone’s first five collections of poetry in chronological order, devoting a separate chapter to each work. Chapman has written prolifically on Livingstone: his other critical texts include a substantial chapter on the poet in *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (1984)<sup>14</sup> as well as a section in *Southern African Literatures* (1996).

In the introduction to his book on Douglas Livingstone, Chapman writes: “Critics both in South Africa and in other countries have responded favourably to his talent” (1981: 9) and summarises comments from the 1960s and 70s which by and large refer to Livingstone’s treatment of the African landscape. The book as a whole explores this treatment of the landscape and its fauna and flora, and Livingstone’s craftsmanship as a poet. Chapman also notes:

The *Times Literary Supplement* (1964) adds that Livingstone makes the African fauna and flora come ‘dangerously and aptly alive’. This is true; yet his subject is not ‘Africa’ in any narrow sense

and suggests rather that “Livingstone’s subject is contemporary man” (10). This is only partly correct. Livingstone’s poetry examines the place of contemporary man within the world and on (of) the Earth. His treatment of the non-human world and the human relationship with both the natural and artificial environment are, I suggest, also predominant themes. (This is most fully developed in *A Littoral Zone*.) For example, while Chapman’s analysis of the imagery and “echo rhymes” (78) of “Stormshelter” (S 11) is accomplished, I think he misreads the message of the poem when he claims “from the eye of the storm we hear a person like ourselves, who is acutely conscious that the ‘Old Saws’, the once trusted systems, cannot account for his utter isolation” (78). The poem is more about fear than isolation. Nature’s power, signified by the storm, induces the fear in the central stanza:

‘Never stand under trees in a storm.’  
Old saws have an ancient rhythm  
in them; but these dry, far from bold

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<sup>14</sup> I am aware that this book has been updated and reprinted. The new edition became available when this thesis was in its final stages and therefore has not been consulted here.

norms and maxims are scalpel-severed  
by the sharp, needle-thin lightning,  
frightening reason behind the eye,  
slivered into land and abstract forms.

At the end of the poem the speaker uses reason when he decides to heed the “Old saws” and leave the deceptive shelter of the tree: “There is only one thing to do – / wheel, stamping, into that brittle rain” and so avoid the danger of being struck by lightning. The old wisdom or folklore is not isolating, merely practical. Once the speaker of the poem manages to contain his terror of the storm and regain his reason, the “Old saws” do their work and save him. Chapman claims this poem contains

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. (79)<sup>15</sup>

If there is a paradox to be found in this poem, it is that reason reunites the speaker with his instinctual knowledge. The elusiveness of synthesis between man and nature is certainly a recurring and predominant Livingstone theme, but it is not to be found, as Chapman claims, in “Stormshelter”.

While Chapman correctly pinpoints the tension in Livingstone’s work between human psychic awareness and the physical world, Dirk Klopper gives a more sophisticated interpretation of this “paradox”:

The apparent contradiction of engaging ‘physically’ with something as seemingly incorporeal as ‘consciousness’ serves to convey the paradox of Livingstone’s poetry as a whole, in as much as this poetry is at once cerebral and sensual, restrained and intense, serious and ironic. The idea of a consciousness experienced in the realm of the physical shows that Livingstone’s concerns, whatever their intellectual content may be, are never far from evincing an awareness of the body and its non-intellectual modes of perception and experience. (1997: 44)

Klopper’s observation points to the difficulty of labelling Livingstone’s philosophy and aptly describes the recurring motif of the tension between the physical and the psychic.

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<sup>15</sup> Chapman does modify this statement in *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (1984) where he shifts the focus of the paradox he finds in “Stormshelter” from the (non)relationship between “man and nature” to that between humankind and science:

Here we have the central paradox of Livingstone’s insight: there is simultaneously a striving for the ‘ordered’ response and a recognition of analysable instincts as well as primordial visions; it is yet another variation of man’s dilemma under the dispensation of science. (1984: 108)



The first chapter of Chapman's critical study is devoted to *The Skull in the Mud*. He refers to these poems as juvenilia but states that they nevertheless contain the themes which will continue in Livingstone's work: confrontation between man and his racial memory; the desire to establish meaningful relationship between past and present and between man and nature; and man's acute awareness of isolation and his need to find relationship in an uncertain world (19-20). I would include these themes under a broad heading of 'treatment of evolutionary theory' because they all point to the fact that the human race evolved – along with other life-forms – from a common ancestor or, as Margulis argues, all life-forms are symbiogenetically connected to ancient bacteria (14, 43, 101). Livingstone's poetry implies that apprehension of our biological basis is humankind's starting point for understanding our position in the world and our relationship to nature. In short, a knowledge of evolutionary theory leads to an ecological understanding of humanity's reliance on interdependence. Chapman identifies another important theme in *The Skull in the Mud*: Africa as the ancient continent impervious to man's hopes and fears (24). This points to what I call nature's indifference towards humankind, a realisation of which is essential for ecological sensibility or for man knowing his place on Earth.

Chapman concludes the chapter:

Yet, although Livingstone in *The Skull in the Mud* has still to find an authentic voice, his central concerns have been indicated. He will continue to reflect man's lonely struggle in a precarious world – the subsequent poetry being characterized by its distinctive response to the problem of isolation and relationship, and originality being dependent on the poet's meticulous craftsmanship. (26)

If Chapman is saying that Livingstone's craftsmanship improves in his later collections, I agree with him. But I would argue that even in this early collection Livingstone's voice is authentic and that the poems reflect his view that humankind is "just another life-form" (Livingstone 1989b: 74).

In the second chapter Chapman contextualises Livingstone's poetry within the South African tradition and discusses *Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa*. He argues that "Livingstone's poetry embodies characteristically modernist ambivalences. Existing in a tension of scientific and romantic attitudes, his work shows a sharp awareness of the constant involvement of breakdown with new possibilities" (40). The final obfuscatory phrase is clarified in the following sentence, which refers to Livingstone's use of both

experimentation and of traditional form. He also claims that Livingstone (along with Sidney Clouts, Ruth Miller and Arthur Nortje) has a modernist view of language and that their poetry allows for “the possibility that words are man-made and thus have dominance over the general ‘truths’ of our social being” (44). It seems that, in trying to demonstrate that Livingstone is a modernist, Chapman has got himself into a tangle of meaninglessness. He claims, for example, that: “Their poetry may commonly be termed ‘synthetic in its very indeterminacy’, its modernism showing itself in a realized sensibility of style more than in subject-matter” (45). Is Chapman saying that Livingstone (along with his contemporaries) has a difficult style? Or is he arguing that the poems have nothing to say, are lacking in subject matter?! I think that Chapman is making a political point, for he goes on to compare Livingstone’s style with that of the Soweto poetry of the 1970s: “Livingstone’s is a fictive art, of metaphor, mask and devious involvement” while, he claims, the Soweto poets “directly relate” to “immediate social and political realities” (45). In short, Chapman argues that Livingstone’s style is too sophisticated. In trying to score political points, he is both maligning and misreading Livingstone’s poetry. Two pages later he appears to contradict himself:

Livingstone’s conception of the relationship between human and animal existence is a fundamental one ... if – as in Livingstone’s case – language is seen as man-made, it may by the same token be seen as deriving in the first instance from the simple solid entities of the natural world. Such ‘truth’ of observation is often a strength in Livingstone’s work, but does at times militate against a poem achieving indefinite layers of suggestion. (47)

Chapman does note that Livingstone treats the African landscape in a new (Darwinian) way: “As Thomas Lark (1965) has remarked, his [Livingstone’s] Africa is neither the ‘pastoral retreat’ of earlier South African veld singers nor a ‘hunter’s paradise’, in the tradition of Campbell, but ‘a stark animal-infested land: threatening, ominous, unlovely’” (51). Klopper, too, notes that Livingstone “regards Africa as a place of violence, a place in which is enacted the ancient and bloody struggle for survival” (1997: 44). Chapman reads the animal poems in *Sjambok* as “a metaphor of existential struggle, destructiveness, the primitive instincts” (54) rather than as an exploration of humankind’s relationship towards nature.

Chapman claims the next collection, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*, is still primarily concerned with man’s isolation and his need to find relationship, but that it displays a change in tone which is warm, gentle and playful (81):

It should be mentioned, however, that despite the signs of play, wistfulness and wonder, he does not deny knowledge of life's ugliness and destruction. Isolation and struggle remain features of the poetic world presented in this collection; synthesis of man and nature when it occurs is at best precarious. (84)

This synthesis is precarious because it is a pastoral ideal and Livingstone, as a scientist, knew this.

Chapman interprets "The Sleep of My Lions", a central poem in this collection, as "a delightful light-hearted criticism of modern civilization" (83). The poem is much more than this: it is a longing for ecological equilibrium (a return to an Edenic or innocent state) and suggests more than "a certain wistfulness for a less complex pastoral past" (82). The poem opens with an invocation to the oceans of the world, in Latin, and asks that the sea or Creative Principle:

save me  
                  from civilization,  
my pastory  
                  from further violation.

This poem is an impassioned plea for ecological grace and it is worth quoting the remaining lines in full:

Leave me my magics  
and tribes;  
to the quagga, the dodo,  
the sleep of my lions.

Rust me barbed fences.  
Patrol what remains.  
Accept bricks, hunting rifles  
and realists, telephones  
and diesels  
to your antiseptic main.

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.

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.

This is a love poem to the Earth and the allusion to the San people in the final stanza is a call for a return to the time when humanity knew how to live symbiotically with the earth. It is not so much a criticism of modern civilization (Chapman 83), as it is an incantation (shown in “save me”, “grant me”, “accord me”) to the Creative Principle for grace to live in harmony with the Earth, despite the violations of civilization. Marco Fazzini rightly says this poem “appears to be a kind of intellectual inscription, or a prayer, for a redemption of man’s abuse” (1991: 29). Priya Narismulu, also rightly, says it is an “incantatory poem” which is “expressive of one’s particular response to the sense of being inseparably part of one’s world” (156).

“The Sleep of My Lions” and “Drinking Wine” (*Eyes Closed Against the Sun* 17 and 43; hereafter referred to as *EC*) can be read as a pair for both poems are about the yearning for ecological atunement or symbiotic existence on Earth. It is significant that both poems are 31 lines long (a prime number divisible only by itself); they perhaps echo the Japanese tanka, a poem of 31 syllables which gives a complete picture of an event or mood.

Chapman also misses the ecological points in “Drinking Wine”. Here, Livingstone as speaker slips into reverie of a mythic past which, according to Chapman, “illustrates the dangers attendant on poetry which attempts to create a dream-world” (91). He adds this poem does not include the element of confrontation which characterises most of Livingstone’s best work and says it “is ‘poetical’ in the sense that it does not communicate anything distinctively its own” (92). I am not sure what this sentence means, but would strongly argue that the poem distinctly communicates a vision of atonement with both the world and the Earth. This belies Chapman’s repeated assertion that a strong preoccupation in Livingstone’s poetry is man’s alienation and isolation. The poem both confronts history and life on Earth and communicates a sweeping vision of interconnection, from the roots of the vine deep in the earth to the oceans and the essence of drowned sailors, apprehended in and through the wine the poet is drinking: “The glass cups blood / wood, iron and bread” (lines 18-19). The poem ends with the speaker identifying imaginatively with all things – real and mythical – in the world:

Drinking, I drink  
old mythologies –  
men, gods, strange beasts;

the stones, slaked battles, seas;  
the oil and olives from lost argosies.

Chapman incorrectly claims these lines display a Keatsian desire to “drink and leave the world unseen” (92). I argue the opposite; the speaker is absorbed into the world, imagines himself as part of the mysterious sweep of life on Earth, both biological and cultural.

Chapman’s well-considered analysis of “Gentling a Wildcat” shows that he is aware of Livingstone’s ecological sensibility. For example:

In ‘Gentling a Wildcat’, then, Livingstone, through the motif of the wildcat, dramatically renders his humanist concern for creation and destruction in the pattern of life. Taking full cognizance of the scientific attitude, he admits to his identification with nature’s cruelty; yet he recognizes too that he is implicated not simply in a fundamental law of survival, but in *the rich inclusiveness of life*. By investing the brute facts of death with emotional significance, he suggests that it is important for modern ‘scientific’ man to retain his capacity for wonder, and above all for sympathy. This poem is ultimately a tribute to the imaginative view of experience. (86-7, my italics)

In her analysis of “Gentling a Wildcat” Narismulu points to the resolving of dislocation: “the persona reacts instinctively, and humanely (as well as irrationally) in an integrative spirit of co-operation, offering comfort, sympathy, and synthesis in response to a situation of conflict, isolation, suffering and destruction” (154). Narisumulu’s comment contains too many anthropomorphic abstract nouns; it would have been enough to say ‘offering synthesis in response to a situation of suffering and destruction’. (See p 89 for an ecocritical analysis of this poem which explores the speaker’s anthropomorphism.)

The other poems with an animal motif in this collection include “A Bamboo Day”, “One Elephant”, and ‘Conversation with a Giraffe at Dusk in the Zoo’. Chapman claims these “do not present such an unremittingly harsh a view of existence” as do the animal poems in *Sjambok* (88). This is true of “One Elephant” (an ironic parody of human nature) and “Conversation with a Giraffe”. But I would argue that “A Bamboo Day”, through the image of drought and the predator-prey relationship, strikingly depicts nature as uncaring and so does hark back to the “harsh view of existence” depicted in *Sjambok*. This ambivalent view of nature is maintained by Livingstone in all his work.

In chapter four of his critical study Chapman claims the love poems in *A Rosary of Bone* are modelled on 17<sup>th</sup> Century English Metaphysical poetry (116), but astutely adds:

some include what might conveniently be called traditionally romantic characteristics. Alan Ross has remarked on Livingstone's 'agreeable brand of romantic cynicism'; he could as well have mentioned that the poet is at times prepared to view love without a trace of cynicism. (117)

I argue in chapter six of this thesis that Livingstone sees love as a key towards attaining ecological equilibrium. Chapman hints at this possibility when he claims that love is firmly defined by the forces of nature in "Loving" and that the sea evokes a sense of both tranquillity and mystery. "Love is thus given significant form in relation to the majestic rhythms of the natural world" (119). Another poem which Chapman links to external nature is "A Morning". He explores it in detail and concludes: "The poet's own sense of the wonder of creation is embodied in the image sequences, so that the notion of harmony between physical and spiritual nature emerges as an emotional experience" (121). He observes with insight that:

Livingstone, then, views love as both a creative and a destructive passion; it can synthesize disparate experience, but its failure leads to alienation and despair... much of his most vital poetry may well arise from feelings of harmony or disintegration, which are initially experienced on the very private level of intimate human relationships. (128)

Unlikely as it may seem, love is essential to ecological health and Chapman is aware of love's important synthesising power in Livingstone's poetry. Klopper refers to "the idea of relationship, its prospect and failure" as an important aspect of Livingstone's nature poetry and says it is elevated to a central concern in his love poetry (1997: 46).

In the final chapter of his critical study Chapman claims *The Anvil's Undertone* marks a "turning outwards ... away from the intimate relations to the realized events, the symbolic images of civilization" (135). He argues:

it is as if both the experience of failed personal relationships and the uneasiness of the socio-political situation in Southern Africa have, so to speak, forced the poet towards a physical and emotional landscape which has affinities with the flinty terrain evoked so powerfully in *Sjambok*. (143)

Chapman's use of the qualifiers "it is as if" and "so to speak" weaken his already thin argument. It is more reasonable to say that Livingstone's "uneasiness" comes from a global (rather than personal or local) awareness of the ecological and environmental crisis of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. My claim is evidenced by autobiographical and biographical information (see the section: "Douglas Livingstone as ecologist" p 35). Chapman claims the undertones of this collection are mostly of existential struggle, desolation and death,

while I claim the undertone is a metaphor for the reverberations of the abused Earth (or nature) which is being damaged by humankind's wanton misuse of its resources.

Chapman says *The Anvil's Undertone* is also about "man's knowledge of isolation and his need for relationship in an uncertain world" (143).

The poem "A Piece of Earth" in which the poet comes across a duiker trapped in a snare depicts, for Chapman, the desperate struggle to exist:

In these lines Livingstone achieves a symbolism which is in a sense direct speech. Animal existence and landscape are both so austere that a plain statement ('The earth remains unmoving') is somehow informed with sympathy for the wretched creature. (145)

Is Chapman claiming that the landscape (or the earth) feels sympathy for the duiker? His syntax is not clear, but if this is what he means, it is incorrect. It is we, as readers, who feel sympathy for the duiker. Livingstone indicates in this poem that although nature is indifferent to the suffering of animal life (including man) through the phrase "the earth remains unmoving", humankind, in the form of the careless poacher, is the pariah. In fairness, Chapman does correctly add: "'A Piece of Earth' is a powerful nature study which evokes the naked extremity of the primary struggles" (145). (See p 89 for a fuller discussion of this poem.)

Chapman rightly notes there are several poems which, in their attempt to define and analyse experience, introduce a ratiocinative voice (146) and gives "A Natural History of the Negatio Bacillus" as an example. (This 'ratiocinative voice' is carried strongly into *A Littoral Zone*.) According to Chapman, *The Anvil's Undertone* displays three aspects of Livingstone's poetic development: his response to the scientific attitude; his exploitation of surrealistic effects; and his presentation of peculiarly South African social realities (146). Haresnape also pinpoints three main themes: concern with the natural world; the differing outlooks of colonizer and colonized; and religion (252). Both Chapman's and Haresnape's explanations are correct, but limited. I claim the predominant theme of this collection is ecological destruction and argue this more fully in the next chapter.

Chapman argues that the ratiocinative poems "Homeostasis", "Isotopes" and "Reciprocals" draw their imagery from both scientific and romantic sources and "are all concerned with the relationship of 'thought' and 'emotion', of 'reason' and 'mystery', in human life" (147) while Haresnape argues that the underlying concern of "A Natural

History of the Negatio Bacillus” and “Isotopes” is “Livingstone’s concern with religion” (253). Chapman curiously claims that a lonely protagonist gathers facts in an attempt to define his existence in “Negatio Bacillus” and that the poem is a powerful statement of alienation. While the latter statement is true, I understand the negatio bacillus to be the human race, portrayed as a destructive virus, which is alienated from nature and therefore is ecologically destructive. The poem is a satire, couched in scientific terminology, of humankind’s anthropocentricism and arrogance and is not, as Chapman claims, a poem about “this lonely individual [who] succeeds in increasing his own sense of uncertainty” (151). In *South African English Poetry*, Chapman does modify his interpretation. He alludes to the ecological import of the poem when he correctly claims:

In diagnosing his state of ‘negatio’, the protagonist comes to realise that man’s slender hopes of rediscovering an integrated approach to life lie not in reason, materialism or even in scientific and social progress, so long as these courses continue to be pursued at the expense of the ‘older remedies’ of imaginative responsiveness, myth and mysticism. (1984: 106)

Chapman notes that several poems in *The Anvil’s Undertone* “evoke a bizarre, sometimes macabre world” (153) and claims that “an element of the hallucinatory” is to be found in the early poem “The Skull in the Mud” where primordial images are used to express man’s instinctual life (153). Geoffrey Hutchings, on the other hand, describes the underlying theme of this poem as “a confrontation between Western technology and an ancient Africa” (65). I would argue that “The Skull” is more Darwinian than surreal and that Hutchings’ interpretation is more accurate. Chapman correctly sees the surreal in “The Voice of the Experiment”, “The Midnight Lama” and “Elegy in a City Crematorium” (which also has a satiric element) as well as “The Ossuary” and “Armistice Day, Natal”. African wild life as a source of “images of destruction and ugliness” is, according to Chapman, pushed further in this collection where Livingstone “also searches the animal world for his symbols of nightmare” (158). He compares “Veld and Vlei Poem” and “Under Capricorn” which both offer social commentary. “Veld and Vlei” parodies “South African nature poetasters, with their idyllic and mystical conceptions of ‘the veld’” (159) while the latter poem “pierces through the bedrock where the primary struggles are fought, its super-real images of animal and human life



conjuring up a bizarre psychological and social landscape” (*ibid.*). “The Zoo Affair” is also cited as an example of the bizarre:

Several poems in this collection, then, express acute states of crisis. The greater the poet’s feelings of alienation the less familiar ... his mode of expression is likely to be ... Of course, poetry which attempts to express the bizarre may easily become merely perverse. Livingstone’s sense of classical form, however, usually provides a necessary measure of restraint... he nevertheless daringly reveals the darker, obscurer areas of man’s experience where the instinctual responses are to horror, passion, isolation and death. (162)

This bizarre element will become more predominant in *A Littoral Zone* where it is used to convey an ecological message. (See particularly the later discussions on “The Wall Beyond Station X”, p 201, and “Descent from the Tower”, p 207.)

Chapman points to the wider significance of *The Anvil’s Undertone* and suggests “peculiarly regional anxieties have their echoes and counterparts elsewhere”. He notes that “Livingstone has attempted to modify his reader’s sensibility by affirming the value of the imaginative life” (171). A page earlier Chapman talks of the individual expression in Livingstone’s work and gives an apt interpretation of Livingstone’s craft, but elides the messages behind the craft:

The brilliant episode, then, is Livingstone’s forte. His imagination 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. He does not so much offer a depth of insight into the full complexity of the human condition as a superbly individual expression of the outward, demonstrative aspects of feeling. His poetry reveals a sensibility characterized by a profound discomfort: the curse of being vulnerably human. (170)

This concentration on Livingstone’s craft (“economy and coherence”, “superbly individual expression”) and certain emotional absolutes (“the human condition”, “the curse of being vulnerably human”) is a general tendency throughout Chapman’s book. This detracts from the ecological core or wider issues which are explored and elucidated in the poetry.

Literary ecocriticism was in its fledgling stages in the 1980s when Chapman’s book was published. Throughout this review of his criticism I have thought that his effort to explain and categorise Livingstone’s difficult poetry would have been aided by an ecologically informed approach. In short, Chapman’s meticulous criticism is limited or skewed in certain crucial ways. He concentrates on the poet’s craftsmanship at the

expense of the meaning of the poetry; imposes political readings when they are not appropriate; and isolates emotional responses (alienation, isolation, horror, passion) without examining the causes of these states. I argue that an ecological perspective brings greater scope to an interpretation of the poems and explore this in the next chapter.

Yet the overriding relationship we have with nature – and the one that television repeatedly ignores – is through our emotions. It is through feelings and imagination that we experience kinship and connectedness, the pain of separation and extinction, not through the detachment of scientific accounts. And it is through myth, story-telling, art, metaphor and play that we make overall sense of our place in the world.

– Richard Mabey

## Chapter Three

### An Ecocritical Examination of Douglas Livingstone's Earlier Work

Much of Douglas Livingstone's poetry puts one in one's place. My use of the phrase "put in one's place" is deliberately ambiguous. I use it in the idiomatic sense, "to remind a person of his or her failings or lowly status" (OED); in the general sense, to elucidate humankind's position in relation to the rest of the world; and in the sense of to find belonging through a dwelling place or home. I believe Livingstone's aim is to make us see our true position, or place, in the physical world, for to know one's place is to act appropriately given one's situation and "social status" (OED) or, in ecological terms, biological status. In chapter one I defined literary ecocriticism as (in part) the analysis of literature's expression of humanity's place on Earth (our *oikos* or home). This chapter will show that a number of the poems in Livingstone's earlier work (the five volumes of poetry that predate *A Littoral Zone*) explore this idea of knowing one's place. His ontological ideal as expressed in his paper "Science and Truth" is for humankind to comprehend that we are part of "the life of the Earth" (1986: 105). His realistic conclusion is that humankind has divorced itself from the natural world and has therefore become ecologically destructive. He vacillates between ecological hope and ecological despair, between the ideal and the real, in his examination of humanity as, on the one hand, part of nature and, on the other, as apart from nature. Both strands are evident from *The Skull in the Mud* through to *The Anvil's Undertone*, but his ecological despair is more dominant in *Sjambok and other poems from Africa* and *The Anvil's Undertone*.

#### A brief overview of the ecological in Livingstone's earlier work

Douglas Livingstone did his best to buy and destroy all the published copies of his debut collection, *The Skull in the Mud* (1960), because he was embarrassed by it (Chapman 1981:12; Haresnape 248). *Selected Poems* (1984) contains eight poems from this collection, five of which examine modern humanity's uneasy position on the Earth. Livingstone's ecological awareness is thus evident even in his earliest published work.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I have used *Selected Poems* rather than the original collection because I assume that Livingstone sanctioned the republication of this sample of poems from *The Skull*.

The next collection, *Sjambok and Other Poems from Africa* (1988 rpt) explores humankind's uneasy ecological position in more depth. Of the collection's 41 poems, I judge 23 to be explicitly ecological. Humankind is repeatedly shown to be alienated from, and destructive of, nature. However, the tension between humankind as part of and as apart from nature is also explored. In the next slimmer volume, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* (1975 rpt), there are fewer poems with a definite ecological theme (9 out of 30), but this collection broaches new themes which will be carried into *A Littoral Zone*. Firstly, a yearning for ecological equilibrium emerges, particularly in "The Sleep of My Lions" and "Drinking Wine". Secondly, the religious, introduced in "Iscaiot" in the previous volume, becomes a stronger theme and some of these poems may also be interpreted ecologically. Thirdly, the urban setting and its influence on human life may be seen as an emerging theme if juxtaposed with *Sjambok's* rural setting of inland Africa.

The sea or oceanic influence is intermittently present in *Eyes Closed* and becomes more prevalent in *A Rosary of Bone* (1983 rpt) where it is used, in conjunction with love, to explore Livingstone's idea of a Creative Principle. This principle refers to a conception of the Earth's origin and essential nature, to what Charles Darwin called a First Cause (1958: 93). Although few of the poems in this volume of love poetry are ecological (5 out of 46), these few poems display a sharper and more scientific ecological awareness than those in the previous volumes. This scientifically informed view of man and nature is both striking and terrifying in the final clutch of six poems in *The Anvil's Undertone* (1978). The relentless examination of ecological destruction and the tension between imagination and reason in these ratiocinative poems<sup>17</sup> have a distinctively different tone: they mark Livingstone's ecological coming of age. These poems are important precursors to *A Littoral Zone*. In *The Anvil's Undertone* as a whole, Livingstone paints a broader, and bleaker, picture of ecological despair where the Earth, or anvil, reverberates under human hammer blows. In the 20 poems (out of 36) with an ecological theme the undertone (or ecological fallout) is explored from all angles, from an examination of evolution, to a plea for reciprocity between humankind and nature, to outright negation or destruction.

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<sup>17</sup> This is Michael Chapman's term. He explains the complicated nature of these poems in the following way: "Livingstone's ratiocinative poems, which were written in the late 1960s and very early 1970s draw their imagery from 'scientific' and 'romantic' sources, and are all concerned with the relationship of 'thought' and 'emotion', of 'reason' and 'mystery' in human life" (1981: 147).

The images from the titles of Livingstone's first five collections are valuable metaphorical signposts for his view of nature and man. The skull in the mud is a trope for evolution and the concept of natural selection. Humanity owes its existence to the Darwinian mechanisms of overproduction of offspring, variation and heritability (Gould 2002: 13), thus to contingency and biological processes. This scientifically-informed view negates the human race's penchant to see itself as superior to the rest of the natural world. Livingstone's image of the sjambok alludes to this superiority. It is a trope for man as coloniser through the use of tools. The sjambok, made of leather, reflects a manipulation of natural materials and exemplifies human power and domination over the Earth. Livingstone shows that human cultural processes can be antithetical to the biological process, and some poems reflect Max Oelschlaeger's claim that "The socially dominant elite confines ecology to environmentalism... this elite is embedded in the discourse of power, in a conceptualized hierarchy that places MAN the rational animal in control of the ecomachine" (in Rothenberg 53). Through the image of eyes which are closed against the sun (where the sun is read as a trope for the life force), Livingstone conveys the idea of humankind as blind to natural forces. This composite image alludes to humankind's self-imposed alienation from nature. The linking of the rosary (used in Catholic religious practice to contemplate the fifteen mysteries) and the bones of the human skull is a complex image which symbolises the spiritual in the physical structure of the human body (see "Wheels" *A Rosary of Bone* 26; hereafter referred to as *RB*). Finally, the anvil is a trope for "stalwart ... nature" which endures the hammer blows of human history (see "The Paladin in Conglomerate" *RB* 67). The anvil's undertone refers to the reverberations of human abuse of nature through destructive cultural processes. In an interview with Elizabeth Thompson, Livingstone explains the lines "the stalwart anvil / of nature / and the blows of history's hammer":

This is where I see humanity – trapped between the two, especially here, on this continent. So, the bottom half – the anvil – is in the title of the book... a hint of how human life gets shaped by its environment (in this case Africa shaping us all here) was lurking in some corner of my neocortex when the poem was being made. (10-11)

### **What is nature?**

How does Livingstone see nature? This is a crucial and difficult question. Raymond Williams says nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language and that it

reflects the major variations of human thought (1976: 184 and 189). In “Ideas of Nature” he postulates that the word’s earliest meaning was “the inherent and essential quality of any particular thing”, from the Latin *natura rerum*. Later *natura* on its own came to mean “the essential, inherent and indeed immutable laws of the world” or essential principle (1980: 68). Livingstone refers to the “Creative Principle” in *A Littoral Zone* (16), in “Science and Truth” (1986: 106) and in an interview with Fazzini (1990: 139 and 140), and alludes to it through the trope of the sea in his earlier work. He therefore does at times see nature as “this singular, abstracted and often personified principle” (Williams 1980: 69).

But this is not Livingstone’s only interpretation of nature. Williams shows that nature may be seen as any of the following: “Red in tooth and claw; a ruthlessly competitive struggle for existence; an extraordinary interlocking system of mutual advantage; a paradigm of interdependence and cooperation” (70). Livingstone as scientist and proponent of evolutionary theory intermittently reflects the first two views of nature as a predatory struggle. It is, however, the idea of synthesis (indicated in Williams’ final two propositions) which creates the tension in his poetry. Some poems reflect man’s struggle to find a place in nature and the suggestion is that interdependence is a mirage, given humanity’s inability to live in mutuality with the Earth.

Williams argues that “once we begin to speak of men mixing their labour with the earth, we are in a whole world of new relations between man and nature, and to separate natural history from social history becomes extremely problematic” (76). He concludes that man and nature had to be seen as separate after the advent of agricultural improvement and the industrial revolution where nature was seen “as a set of objects, on which men could operate” (77). He states that by the 18<sup>th</sup> Century nature had become “a philosophical principle, a principle of order and right reason” (78). Nature *per se* was marginalised: “But now nature, increasingly, was ‘out there’, and it was natural to reshape it to a dominant need, without having to consider very deeply what this reshaping might do to men” (79). Williams’ use of “nature” and “natural” to signify the thing itself and the human propensity or process, respectively, points to the complexity of meanings inherent in the word.

Certain aspects of human nature and of nature itself have been on a collision course since the advent of civilization. Partly, it was nature’s old antagonist, reason,

which led to this position. Renaissance humanism insisted on the primacy of reason and put man in a central position in the universe (Abrams 79). Reason was “considered the distinctively human faculty ... as opposed to the instinctual appetites and the ‘animal passions’ in ordered human life” (*ibid.*). Jonathan Bate describes nature’s decentralised position in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment thought. “The Enlightenment had a discourse of *rights*, taken up in moral and political science, and a discourse of *nature*, taken up in the natural sciences. But... only on its margins did it have a discourse of the rights *of* nature. Romanticism frequently proclaims those rights” (2000: 244). Nature, as a human abstraction, does not (strictly speaking) have or qualify for rights. Semantic quibbles aside, Bate is pointing to the call by the Romantics for human reverence towards nature and a resultant conservation of the environment. Williams describes this environmental awareness not as Romantic, but as “green” (1980: 80), and adds “in Wordsworth and beyond him, there came the sense of nature as a refuge, a refuge from man; a place of healing, a solace, a retreat” (80). Livingstone as a Romantic materialist does not see nature as a refuge but rather as a life-support system. He repeatedly refers in articles and in his poetry to James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis and to Darwinism.

Williams accurately notes that Darwin’s notion of natural selection passed into popular imagery through the idea of the fittest “meaning those best adapted to a given and variable environment became ‘strongest’, ‘most ruthless’.<sup>18</sup> The social jungle, the rat race, the territory-guarders, the naked apes: this, bitterly, was how an idea of man re-entered the idea of nature” (82). Livingstone discards the more comforting Wordsworthian notion of nature as a nurturing mother, but he does view nature as a teacher or guide (albeit a harsh one) and expands the Romantic sublime, through an informed scientific approach, to present a new worldview which has not yet been labelled. The best I can offer is Romantic materialism. Julian Huxley<sup>19</sup> makes a plea for Evolutionary Humanism (where humanism refers to humankind as responsible and progressive intellectual beings):

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<sup>18</sup> It was Herbert Spenser and not Charles Darwin who coined the phrase “the survival of the fittest” (Silver 289) and “strongest” is not necessarily accurate. A more correct term would be “most suited to conditions”.

<sup>19</sup> Julian Huxley (grandson of Charles Darwin’s ‘campaigner’ T.H. Huxley) is better known for his postulation of a new evolutionary synthesis, introduced in his book *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* (1942). John Gribbin and Michael White argue that the publication of this book, 60 years after the death of Darwin, marked the moment when Darwinism finally became established as the best explanation of how evolution works (294).



This new idea-system... I shall simply call *Humanism*, because it can only be based on our understanding of man and his relations with the rest of the environment. It must be focused on man as an organism, though one with unique properties. It must be organized round the facts and ideas of evolution, taking account of the discovery that man is part of a comprehensive evolutionary process, and cannot avoid playing a decisive role in it.

Such an Evolutionary Humanism is necessarily unitary instead of dualistic, affirming the unity of mind and body; universal instead of particularist, affirming the continuity of man with the rest of life, and of life with the rest of the universe; naturalistic instead of supernaturalist, affirming the unity of the spiritual and material; and global instead of divisive, affirming the unity of all mankind. (73)

Livingstone demonstrates through his poetry that anthropocentrism is not sustainable in ecological terms. He articulates a reverence for nature, but portrays Darwinism not as the survival of the fittest with man at the top of the food chain, but from the perspective of a common ancestor. He prods his readers into contemplating the fact that humanity originated, along with other organisms, as a microbe in the primeval soup, and so puts us in our place.

Williams claims that “nothing much can be done until we are able to see the causes of this alienation of nature” (1990: 82). This is also Livingstone’s preoccupation. It is, perhaps, an irresolvable problem and it frequently leads Livingstone into a position of ecological despair. He repeatedly examines the problem of humankind’s alienation from and of nature. Williams points out that there is no going back. While “many writers have created an idea of a rural past” (82), this use of pastoralism seriously underestimates the problem. Livingstone uses the pastoral mode in only a few poems and then often ironically. In the poems which do portray man and nature as united the tone is almost always one of yearning. This yearning for a lost synthesis or state of innocence paradoxically both serves to compound the despair and to offer hope. This is an example of the tension between reason and imagination where a reasoned view of the present state of the world points to a position of despair while an imagined view of a pastoral ideal reawakens hope in the human heart. Livingstone uses both reason and imagination. His reason is philosophically and scientifically informed, but he often urges his readers to imagine the microbial activities which support our physical world, thereby taking science (which contributed, especially during the Enlightenment, to humanity’s separation from nature) and using it as an imaginative tool for a synthesis between man and nature. Both evolution and microbial activity inform his poetry. Livingstone thus uses what Williams

calls “the living processes of which we are part” (84) in an effort to re-educate humankind. In short, he tries to place humankind alongside other organisms as part of nature and not as anthropocentrically apart from nature. This calls for a radical change in humanity’s current view of itself and the world. As Jonathan Bate has it: “ecology has to be an attitude of mind before it can be an effective set of environmental policies” (1991: 83).

Yaakov Garb (in discussing Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*) points out that nature is a human concept and that we do not really know what we are talking about when we refer to it:

Terms like ‘nature,’ the ‘natural,’ and the ‘balance of nature’ have great discursive force not in spite of but because of their fuzziness. Their multiple connotations and self-evident (thus unexamined) definition within the community that shares them, enable protean versatility. We add great force to any argument by adducing the ‘natural’ to it, so long as no one asks too carefully what we mean by the term. If they do, it will often turn out that nature (and its cognates) are not preexisting, ontologically firm objects or conditions in the natural world, but a reification of human criteria and definitions. (in Macauley 238)

In a provocative article titled “Against Nature”, Joyce Carol Oates uses the phrase “not *Nature-in-itself* but *Nature-as-experience*” to elucidate the human propensity to own nature as “something of *ours*” (in Halpern 229). Oates points out that Nature “eludes us even as it prepares to swallow us up” (226) and that it is unconscious of human concerns:

Nature has no instructions for mankind except that our poor beleaguered humanist-democratic way of life, our fantasies of the individual’s high worth, our sense that the weak, no less than the strong, have a right to survive, are absurd. (229)

That humankind believes nature cares is another indication of our anthropocentrism. John Fowles eloquently expresses this view:

There is a kind of coldness, I would rather say a stillness, an empty space, at the heart of our forced co-existence with all the other species of the planet. Richard Jefferies coined a word for it: the ultra-humanity of all that is not man ... not with us or against us, but outside and beyond us, truly alien. It may sound paradoxical, but we shall not cease to be alienated – by our knowledge, by our greed, by our vanity – from nature until we grant it its unconscious alienation from us. (in Halpern 133)

Livingstone reaches this same realisation and communicates it most forcibly in *A Littoral Zone*. In an interview he said:

... we are the architects of our own salvation or destruction – which (terrible thought!) means we are, finally, just another life-form despite these lofty choices available to us. If we do not make it morally, or should I say spiritually, the earth, the Creative Principle will replace us... If the globe is a living cell – and all the evidence so far points to this – it will survive no matter what, no matter who or what has to go. (Fazzini 1990:139).

### **Livingstone's themes within the broader ecological framework**

To explore his position which shifts between ecological hope and ecological despair, Douglas Livingstone portrays humankind as both divided from and united with the physical world or nature. Humanity united with nature is an idealistic position, imagined as a possibility; while humanity divided from nature is a more realistic portrayal. The two extremes may be termed deep ecology and ecological destruction. Livingstone implicitly acknowledges that his search for a middle ground, where humankind would attain a state of ecological equilibrium, is quixotic. His work reflects the following aspects or dimensions, which are not clear-cut categories in his poetry but rather are portrayed as tensioned links. I offer the following categorisation of themes as a means of analysis rather than as distinct categories as few of the poems fit cleanly into any one category.

**1. Evolutionary theory** presupposes a common ancestor for all life-forms on Earth and leads to a deep ecological awareness of humanity's tenuous position on Earth.

Livingstone uses the evolutionary process as an ontological metaphor and in support of his belief in a Creative Principle. I am aware of the contradiction between ontology (as a branch of metaphysics) and evolution which is based in the mechanisms of the physical or biological. Evolution and the idea of a creator or a teleological purpose are mutually exclusive (see Mayr 49; 66-7). Livingstone, too, was aware of this contradiction, which he referred to as "my running war with the Almighty" (Robbins 1992: 52). The religious is a recurrent theme in his work: in *A Littoral Zone*, for example, he gives "An Evolutionary Nod to God". The sea is often used a trope for the Creative Principle in Livingstone's poetry. Following Livingstone's capitalisation of the Creative Principle, this position requires that we view Nature with a capital N. I have instead favoured the use of a capitalisation of Earth and have not written nature with a capital N because of the term's complexity.

2. **Humankind's ambivalent position as both a part of nature and apart from nature** reflects the tension between humanity striving to live in harmony with nature, and humankind as self-alienated from nature with no relationship with the Earth. Given our biological origins, humankind is a part of nature. But our cultural and technological endeavours have severed this link and set us apart from the rest of the natural world. Livingstone's poetry repeatedly examines this tension and questions how humankind can fit into the physical world.
  
3. **Ecological equilibrium** as an ideal state. Livingstone's quest for this is often expressed as a yearning. This may also be called the search for ecological symbiosis. Stephen J. Gould (controversially) posits that "punctuated equilibrium" is part of the evolutionary process: "As a central proposition, punctuated equilibrium holds that the great majority of species, as evidenced by their anatomical and geographical histories in the fossil record, originate in geological moments (punctuations) and then persist in stasis throughout their long durations" (2002: 766). Contention surrounds this view. Gillian Beer argues: "Darwin rejected the idea of a stable or static world, and would not accept equilibrium as a sufficient description of the relationship between the forces of change and continuance" (50). Nevertheless, the world we perceive appears to be in stasis and part of human desire is to thwart the inevitability of change (an old theme in literature). The theme of ecological equilibrium in Livingstone's work can be seen as a metaphoric portrayal of the wish for stasis.
  
4. **Ecological destruction** and consequent despair on the part of the poet.

I will examine key poems which relate to these themes more or less chronologically in the five earlier works.

### 1. Evolutionary theory

In using evolution in his work, Livingstone reminds his readers that humankind is part of a contingent biological process of natural selection and so puts humanity's assumed position of superiority on the Earth into perspective. If we view ourselves both against the backdrop of prehistoric time and as part of the web of life on Earth, we have to forego

our anthropocentrism. This deeper, organic view of ourselves and the world is inordinately difficult to achieve, but may be the only way in which imagination and science (or reason) can be synthesised. This is what the deep ecologists would term “rejection of the man-in-environment image [in] favour of *the relational, total-field image*” and “an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life” (Naess in Sessions 151-2).

In “**The Skull in the Mud**” (*Selected Poems* 14; hereafter referred to as *SP*) the speaker confronts his evolutionary origins, signified by the skull he finds on the bed of the newly constructed Kariba Dam. Although Livingstone himself is the diver,<sup>20</sup> he refers to himself in the third person and adopts a universal position which subtly refers to humanity’s evolutionary commonality, the Darwinian concept that all life-forms are descended from a common ancestor (Mayr 1, Beer 144). The poem also explores the inevitability of death as another fate shared by all living organisms. In recounting his Kariba diving experience, Livingstone said “it was there, in the Zambezi that I experienced early intimations of my own mortality, that I was just another life-form, expendable and quite unimportant” (1989b: 74).

The poem’s first three stanzas describe in great technical detail (harness, spiked steel, sheet-piling, stiff pipes, web of metal, etc.) the speaker’s descent into the water in a cage (or lift shaft in the dam wall). Each stanza refers to death through the images of “his harness like some cloth garrotte”, “the rusty box of death” and the “coffin-shaped room” (lines 4, 6 and 12). These references both emphasise the theme of mortality and foreshadow the meeting with the traditional symbol of death, the skull, at the bottom of the dive. The poem could be read as a paradox of life in death (the final stanza emphasises this idea), but from a biological perspective, life and death are merely part of an evolutionary process. The speaker repeatedly grapples for understanding of this across the enjambment of stanzas six and seven:

*tried* to plumb through the river’s blood  
their alienness, *groped* for the rare

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<sup>20</sup> I rely here on biographical information. While studying to become a bacteriologist in then Salisbury, Rhodesia, in the 1950s, Livingstone worked as a contract diver at the Kariba dam project. (1989b: 74)

meaning in this contact of race,  
*striving* to bridge...  
 (lines 23-6, my italics)

The death image in the first three stanzas is accompanied by literal entrapment: the diver is enclosed in a cage or box. This entrapment metaphorically alludes to a fear of death which he confronts, face to face, when he finds the “gently dead” (line 19) skull at the bottom of the dam. His ‘communication’ with the skull makes him understand his ancient ancestry, described as “this contact of race” (line 25). The shift from “each” to “they” in the following quotation signifies the speaker’s progression from an individual or separate identity to a common identification with the skull, which is to say with his evolutionary heritage:

Each now at one with this the last  
 levelling constituency –  
 thalamic, wordless fluency –  
 they formed, de-formed and drowned their past.  
 (lines 29-32)

The thalamus is the part of the brain which relays sensory information and acts as a centre for pain perception. Livingstone uses the adjective “thalamic” to denote modern humanity’s pre-lingual or “wordless” connection with the ancient primate. Their shared heritage is further emphasised through the word “constituency”.

The continuation of life and, by implication, the continuing evolutionary process are examined in the final stanza. The skull winks at the speaker and, for a moment, the reader imagines along with Livingstone that the jawless skull has “drowned their past” and communicated with him. But, in fact, it is a minnow swimming through the skull which makes it appear as if the relic is winking at him. The minnow is more than an explanation for the “skull’s wink”. It signifies life and points to the interconnection of all life-forms through the concept of a common ancestor.

In a later short poem also about diving in the Kariba Dam, “**Spinal Column**” (*AU* 37), Livingstone puts a cosmic spin on evolutionary theory and postulates humankind’s cosmic ancestry. The theory Livingstone draws on is that the Earth was formed some 4.6 billion years ago when a supernova exploded somewhere close to the cloud of gas from which the Sun and Earth were formed (Lovelock 1991: 74). The fallout of the supernova contained elements which were essential for the formation of life on Earth. These elements included carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, sulphur, phosphorus and iron (76):

The first sputnik blipped above me  
 where I worked twelve metres down  
 at the jaws of dam construction  
 in an outraged Zambezi;  
 hearing the broadcast about it  
 that evening, recalled a light  
 chord tied at my back which strung  
 the man groping in mud  
 to sometime starmen, knotted  
 under my ancient aqualung.

The news of the first sputnik in outer space causes Livingstone as speaker to examine his origins. He cryptically alludes to three broad evolutionary stages: the vital role of cosmic elements in the planet's environment which are personified as "sometime starmen"; the consequent evolution of life-forms on Earth from this 'stardust'<sup>21</sup> and his own connection with this process indicated by "a light / chord tied at my back"; and the nurturing medium of the sea where "my ancient aqualung" is both a reference to his antiquated diving equipment and the enveloping originatory sea. Lovelock claims that the birth of Earth as a life-supporting system (Gaia) "came when evolution of those simple bacteria according to Darwinian natural selection and the evolution of the planetary surface environment and atmosphere ceased to be two separate processes" (1991: 84). Livingstone's use of "chord" (punning on cord) points both to a connecting link and to a harmonising factor between himself (and by implication mankind) and the cosmos. It also literally refers to the tube which connects the oxygen tanks on his back to the mouthpiece which allows him to breath while scuba diving in the dam. His "ancient aqualung" becomes a trope for gills or humankind's primordial breathing apparatus.

The poem, therefore, alludes to the ecological web of life through a combination of the epigenesis of the Earth and Darwinian natural selection: in short, a cosmic view of evolutionary theory. This telescopic perspective reduces the poet to "the man groping in the mud", an image which conveys his confusion and insignificance. In contrast the

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<sup>21</sup> I borrow the word stardust from the lyrics of Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock":

We are stardust, we are golden,  
 And we got to get ourselves back to the garden.  
 We are stardust, we are billion year old carbon, we are golden  
 We just got caught up in some devil's bargain  
 And we got to get ourselves back to the garden.  
 To some semblance of a garden.

personified “outraged Zambezi”, or nature itself, is angry at the technological interference brought about by the dam construction.

The sea is generally accepted as the place of origin of life on Earth. Gillian Beer explains this poetically: “Evolutionary theory implied a new myth of the past: instead of the garden at the beginning, there was the sea and the swamp” (118); and James Lovelock cautiously says it is “reasonably certain” that life on the planet began in the sea (1987: 87). The quirky poem “**One Time**” (S 44) describes an attempt to have sex while scuba diving in the sea and examines the impossibility of returning to this oceanic evolutionary past. It also examines human hubris and pokes fun at people who ‘go against’ nature and court danger when they attempt to copulate in deep water. The third section of the poem reflects a yearning to return to the primeval waters of humankind’s evolutionary origins when the speaker delights in “emulations of the passions / of dolphins” (lines 18-19). But then his partner loses consciousness and nearly drowns. This poem’s broad implication is that we can only imagine our evolutionary past, not relive it. Because there is no return to the aquatic stage of human evolution, too ‘deep’ a view of our place in nature leads to practical problems.

Livingstone often uses the sea as trope for the Creative Principle: “I believe the Creative Principle of the universe has more female characteristics than male! The earth, sea, moon, stars, virtue, science and poetry all strike me as female; only the sun and philosophy appear to be male” (in Fazzini 1990: 140). The interview includes a poem, “Giovanni Jacopo Meditates (*on the Creator’s Gender*)”, which contains the phrase “In Nature, guised as Mother-Earth” where the Earth, which includes the oceans, is shown to be the nurturing matrix. For Livingstone the sea is also a source of inspiration. In *A Rosary of Bone* the sea is a dominant setting and is directly linked with love in “To Make You” (1), “A Morning” (2), “Compass” (28), “Giovanni Jacopo Meditates (*on Drifting*)” (9) and “A Consequence of the Violation”(27). In the poem “Loving” (analysed in the section on ecological equilibrium, see p 105), the sea is powerfully portrayed as analogous to male-female human love.

Only a few of the poems in the earlier work deal directly with evolutionary theory, but it will become a dominant theme in *A Littoral Zone*. Both “The Skull in the Mud” and “Spinal Column” demonstrate that recognition of our biological beginnings offers one



way of finding our sense of place on the Earth and a consequent attainment of ecological health. We need to *see* that we are part of nature (and the greater cosmos) and are “just another life-form”, in Livingstone’s words (1989b: 74, Fazzini 1990: 139). This requires an act of imagination. He uses evolutionary theory to establish a common ground between humanity and nature and from this base explores humankind’s separation from nature in many other poems. Livingstone’s idea of a Creative Principle, while arguably antithetical to Darwinism, is for him crucial to our knowing our place within the natural scheme of things because it demands that we revere the Earth. The human capacity for love offers another path towards an ecologically informed view and this is explored in the love poems in *A Rosary of Bone*, particularly in “Loving” (see also chapter six).

## **2. Humankind’s ambivalent relationship with nature**

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, Livingstone’s view of man and nature is as complex as the concepts themselves. In analysing key poems which broadly fall into (1) humankind as part of nature; (2) as apart from nature; and (3) with one foot in each camp, I hope to demonstrate Livingstone’s preoccupation with humanity’s ambiguous position both on and of the Earth. There are a clutch of poems from *Sjambok* which reflect humankind as both part of and apart from nature. This ambivalence is best portrayed in “The Killers” (46), examined more closely on page 101. The other poems which examine man’s ambivalent relationship to nature are: “To a Dead Elephant” (18), “She-Jackal” (27) and “Wattle Leaves” (34).

The following close analysis of chosen poems from the first two categories shows that they do not fit neatly into these boxes; but the framework embodies the thesis and antithesis of humankind’s relationship to nature. This tension, if resolved, would lead to synthesis through humanity’s symbiotic relationship with other Earthly life-forms. I call this “ecological equilibrium” and explore Livingstone’s treatment of it in the next section.

- **Humankind as part of nature**

There are relatively few poems which can be included under this theme. Livingstone shows that humankind struggles to see itself as part of nature and that it is only through imaginative identification that this relationship is established. He uses the intermediaries

of anthropomorphisation, the religious, and art to explore ways of gaining atunement with nature.

The power of music to unite humankind with nature is explored in “**Sax and Marimbas**” (S 16). But this union is not an easy one. Nature is personified as angry and is portrayed as harsh, unyielding and primordial in the final stanza:

And over all that crouching motionless  
watchful land webs an incandescence  
of wailed skeins, stitching skulls, threading diaphragms:  
new blues for a harsh and ancient innocence.

The message of the poem is that humans venture into the maw of nature at their peril; it is a force much greater than themselves. This poem explores human creativity through music (it is immaterial whether the music is cosmopolitan or distinctly African, signified by the sax and the marimbas respectively), and suggests that this creativity is a powerful human force which, while uniting man and nature, creates an inexplicable tension.

The jazz musicians play under the African sky and around a fire. Images of anger are connected with the fire in the first stanza: “Coals frowning” and “an angry orange sheen from the glared teeth”. This natural background prefigures the final stanza where their music evokes a response from the personified “motionless / watchful land”. Nature, therefore, accommodates the music and weaves a connection between itself and the musicians, so that the skulls and the diaphragms (line 15) of the musicians become part of the Earth. But it is “an incandescence / of wailed skeins”, indicating that a state of mourning is woven into the connection. The adverb “wailed” signifies both the sadness and the anger of loss. The poem enacts a return, through human creativity, to primordial being where the men, their music and the land, or Earth, are interlinked: “new blues for harsh and ancient innocence” (line 16). The reference to “blues” music reiterates the idea of sadness and loss. The idyllic but “harsh” primordial state of “ancient innocence” has been glimpsed, but cannot be re-attained, and this compounds the loss.

The presentation of personified nature can best be read as a Dionysian aspect of Livingstone’s Creative Principle. The implication is that humankind can through its own creative powers venture too close to the power of primordial nature. Camille Paglia calls this power the chthonian and describes it as “nature’s daemonic ugliness” (5), which, she claims, is “what the west represses in its view of nature” (*ibid.*). Livingstone, through this

poem, indicates that overcoming this repression of the primordial or chthonian element is not without its pitfalls. Raw Dionysian passion is too much to bear.

In ecological terms, this poem displays a coming together of the biological and the cultural. The biological is signified through the anatomy of the players, and the cultural through their music, which becomes “new blues” or songs different from the ancient tunes which were used to hymn the earth. This power of art resurfaces as a theme in *A Littoral Zone*.

In “**Gentling a Wildcat**” (*EC* 18)<sup>22</sup> and “**A Piece of Earth**” (*AU* 47) Livingstone imagines and anthropomorphises the plight of mauled animals. In both poems Livingstone communicates an unsentimental compassion for the suffering animals, but shows himself to be powerless against nature’s apparently cruel tide. The wildcat is savaged by a predator while the blue duiker in “A Piece of Earth” is caught in a human trap set by a “footloose poacher” (line 14). Nature’s cruelty is juxtaposed with human cruelty in the latter poem. While Livingstone as speaker is active in “Gentling a Wildcat”, he is notably absent in the second poem where the Earth, too, “remains unmoving” (line 24). Yet both poems powerfully convey the poet’s communion with the doomed animals and, by extrapolation, with nature itself. “A Piece of Earth” evokes an antipathy towards human callousness, for the poacher does not bother to check his trap, is “long gone” and “will not be returning” (lines 13 and 16). This poem is not so much an indictment on poaching as on the poacher’s lack of moral sensibility. Livingstone’s anthropomorphic communion with a part of nature is juxtaposed with the trapper’s blatant indifference.

“Gentling a Wildcat” is obversely ecological in that to tame or gentle a frenzied wildcat in its death throes shows Livingstone’s remarkable, almost unbelievable, atunement with nature. But his act is an exception and makes no difference to the broader ecological picture. Or does it? This particular wildcat and her cub are long gone, but the poem and its message live on. The message is difficult to pinpoint. We, as readers, are not called to gentle dying wildcats, but we are called to appreciate and revere nature’s cycles. The ecological nub of the poem lies in stanza eight. What is the “something” that “felt wrong” (line 36)? It is that birth and death should not occur simultaneously because this goes against nature’s grain. Nature’s “lifetimes of claws, kaleidoscopes: / moon-

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<sup>22</sup> No other poems in *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* appear to deal with the theme of humankind as part of nature.

claws, sun-claws, teeth after death” (lines 38-9), should retreat at the time of “mating and birth” (line 40). So, the poet offers what solace he can and gentles the animal until “she let me ease her claws” (line 47). There is an allusion here to Tennyson’s “nature red in tooth and claw”. Livingstone, I think, struggles with the tension between the Romantic view of nature as the nurturing mother and a scientifically informed view of nature as contingent and uncaring.

There is no doubt that Livingstone anthropomorphises the wildcat. His empathy for the creature’s suffering is patent. But he does not follow the human custom of burying its dead. Instead he finds a compromise by placing the corpses of the wildcat and her cub in a tree, out of reach of ground scavengers. He imagines an alternative to the natural cycle of death and decay but does not say – or cannot say – exactly what this is. The starting point is a more gentle, composting process where small creatures (beetles, then maggots, then ants) will feed off the corpses. He imagines that “a cycle of maybe something more pastoral” will follow. Through the pastoral he alludes to a utopian or ideal destination for the dead wildcat and her cub. This may be interpreted as a kind of prayer for the dead animals. In this poem Livingstone is mesmerised by nature. It reflects a moment, or interlude, where he feels himself to be part of nature and so, idealistically, he tries to temper its cruelty through human gentleness, extended to the wildcat both in its painful end to life and in its death.

In another, related poem, “Wheels” (*RB* 26), an unborn foetus is seen as the centre around which the world revolves with its “horizon, sun, / the earth and moon” (lines 5-6). The cub and the foetus both represent future cycles of life and in “Wheels” the foetus is figured as holy when its skull is said to be “a rosary of bone” (line 20).

“**Homoeostasis**”<sup>23</sup> (*AU* 64) is a more complex poem which, through its imagery, interweaves the themes of religion, inimical or warring Nature, Darwinism, medical science as humankind’s prop, and humankind’s alienation from the physical or natural world. These are all explored as antithetical to homoeostasis and demonstrate the tenuousness of humankind’s natural position. Lovelock points out that homoeostasis in living systems is not a permanent, fixed state of constancy, but a “dynamic state of

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<sup>23</sup> The OED defines homoeostasis as: Maintenance of a dynamically stable state within a system by means of internal regulatory processes that counteract external disturbance of the equilibrium; the state so maintained; specifically in Physiology, maintenance of relatively constant conditions of the body.

constancy” where living things can move to a new state of constancy.<sup>24</sup> He claims that Gaia’s history is characterised by homeorhesis, meaning that periods of constancy are punctuated by shifts to new, different states of constancy (1991: 141). Stephen J. Gould calls this “punctuated equilibrium” (2002: 766).

Livingstone (as second-person speaker observing himself in the poem) uses the concept of homeostasis to reflect a surreal communion or at-oneness with nature when, through his imagination, he experiences the world through the eyes of an ant and of a seagull. But, as the final stanza indicates, this position is not sustainable:

A moment you were a matrix, now: ant  
and seagull have gone, leaving you to your  
humanity, disconnected.

Homeostasis is thus used as an image for his fleeting interconnection with the web of life. Through the eye of the ant and the seagull, Livingstone sees the world from an ecological perspective, experiences homeostasis or a dynamic state of constancy. The first stanza introduces the gull, described as “a grey crucifix” (line 2). This religious image is reiterated in the sixth stanza when the gull’s eyes are, curiously, described as “papal diamonds” (line 18). Suffering, associated with the image of the cross, is more strongly conveyed in “the skewers of her [the gull’s] cries” (line 17). The gull also symbolises the unattainable. The poet appears to momentarily enter her consciousness and fly with her, but can only see what is below, not what is above. Livingstone twice addresses her directly with the refrain “*Where do you sleep, far-flyer?*”.

The first four stanzas describe the natural setting of the beach. A mood of stasis is created through the words: “motionless”, “hung”, “suspend”, “hunch” and “prone” (lines 2, 3, 4, 7 and 10). Yet, this state of stasis is ominous: the trees and bushes are personified soldiers who await orders or “marshallings” from the sea. The atmosphere is of impending war or flood, of cataclysmic natural warfare or destruction. The poet is “prone on a plumbeous world”, but through imagination escapes gravity and heaviness and enters a deep ecological state:

you connect

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<sup>24</sup> Lovelock uses the analogy of a ship’s autopilot device to explain the homeostatic process: “the ship may need to deviate to a different course. When this is set, the autopilot rapidly changes the ship’s direction of motion to a new, stable motion, and homeostasis [sic] then proceeds. This process of sudden moves from one stable state to a new stable state is known as *homeorhesis*” (1991: 141).

across the precise line of continents:  
 the encounter of beach and earth...  
 (lines 10-12)

His reverie takes him into a pondering of the consciousness of the seagull and the ant. He cannot fully enter the consciousness of the gull, cannot imagine where she sleeps (line 13), and so he turns “to link with the preoccupied ant” (line 19). He first analyses the ant’s position as “an apex” of the “invisible pyramid” of evolution (lines 22 and 23). The lion, traditionally seen as the king of the beasts, is relegated to a lesser position: “the lions are going, perhaps gone” (line 25). The implication is that the insects will inherit the Earth.<sup>25</sup> Livingstone then turns to his own position as a man, physically “propped by antibiotics” (line 26) on one hand and psychically nurtured on the other by the mystery or elixir of nature, its “nutrients from the arcana” (line 27). The reference to the arcana and the Medieval alchemists’ quest for the deep secrets of nature contrasts sharply with modern medicine’s quick-fix use of antibiotics. Livingstone as ant then contemplates a ‘useful’ death where his remains become compost to feed the earth or, even, that his organs could give life to another: “good cells even / in the cortices of strange kidneys” (lines 29-30). He momentarily enters the consciousness of the gull in stanza 11: “Your gull bullets through you, wake intact one / instant”. These two radically opposed perspectives give a grand view but no overview, for the perspective-as-ant and the perspective-as-gull cannot be experienced simultaneously. While these do give a ‘deeper’ view than that of “humanity, disconnected”, they are still both limited because, the poem implies, there is no overall view or truth, only different perspectives.

He then again becomes the ant (stanza 12-15) and, in imaginatively adopting its consciousness, he is able to “Descend” (line 37) and see the world as an ant might. He describes this perspective as “a landscape empty as a man sees / on a dead moon, its cities razed” (lines 38-9). This image of desolation and death may be connected to a lack of imagination, for he then mysteriously or imaginatively ascends (stanza 14) and so has a bird’s eye view of the ocean. This figurative overview affords him a glimpse of “a marine purpose” (line 45). This refers back to the “marshallings of the all-night sea” (line 9), but may also be an allusion to the aquatic stage of evolution. His reverie then ends: “The ant

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<sup>25</sup> In an interview with Fazzini, Livingstone said: “... wetlands are being drained for housing estates; where are the birds going to reproduce? (If enough birds die, insects will inherit the earth!)” (1990: 142).

dissolves” (line 46). He is left with “An image, accountably desolate” (line 49) and repeats his earlier question: “*Where do you sleep, far-flyer*” (line 50). The poem ends with him disconnected from the ecological matrix.

This poem has slippery implications. Livingstone is, I think, communicating an impossible prerequisite: that humankind should forego the perception that we are at the apex of the living world; that we need to acknowledge that the ants are ecologically wiser than we are. This shift in view would require imaginative gymnastics of the kind he demonstrates, fleetingly, in the poem. In short, our anthropocentrism has disconnected us from nature and it is only through imagination that we may reintegrate ourselves, become part of nature and so obviate or stem “the marshallings of the all-night sea” and avoid a cataclysm. The title of the poem gives some hope, for homoeostasis implies that, if the Earth’s internal regulatory processes (the natural law) are followed, it is possible to change course, as it were, to move into a new, different state of constancy. Homoeostasis counteracts external disturbance and is thus one way of counteracting ecological destruction or abuse.

Other poems (not analysed here) which show humankind to be part of Nature are “Stormshelter” and “Isariot” (*S* 11 and 22) which use ancient lore and religious doubt respectively to examine human ways of finding unity with nature. “Giovanni Jacopo Meditates (on his *Regio* absens)” (*AU* 70) examines the pastoral ideal.

In summary, through the relatively few poems which examine the dimension of humankind as part of nature, Livingstone implies that man is incapable of existing as a purely natural being. Further, there is no direct route to our living harmoniously with nature. The above poems suggest that imagination is the gateway through which a closer union with the natural world can take place. In “Sax and Marimbas” the music forms the link. In “Gentling a Wildcat” and “A Piece of Earth” the poet imaginatively identifies with the animals in the poems, and in “Homoeostasis” he extends this identification into entering the consciousness of the insect and the bird. Livingstone begins to use religion and art as possible routes towards a deeper understanding of humankind’s position (or non-position) within the natural world. These, too, require imagination as a catalyst.

- **Humankind as apart from nature**

In contrast to the few poems which reflect humankind as united with nature (and, even then, tensions exist) there are many poems in the five earlier collections which explore the theme of humankind as decidedly apart from nature.

In the final stanza of “**Africa**” (*The Skull in the Mud*, also in *SP 13*) Livingstone uses the anvil as a metaphor for the African land which suffers the ‘hammer blows’ of modern technology. The image of a foundry, suggested in the “night’s black mouth” (line 4), is initially used as a metaphor for the geomorphological formation of the Earth and, particularly, of Africa. In geological time the “hammer suns” (line 1) work with the earth’s molten lava (“ruby freshness furnaced” (line 2)). In the “dawn” (lines 1 and 6) of the birth of Africa the land is formed through geomorphological processes, “the avalanching anvil rush” (line 7). The first two stanzas describe this process and the third stanza personifies the birds and amphibians (herons and newts) as they go about the business of earning a living. This serves as an introduction to the “linear mistakes” (line 13) or technological abuse of the Earth, which are explored in the final stanza.

The smothering, unecological effect on the Earth of modern science and technology is shown in:

A sanguine Earth bowls languid through the lakes  
of Einstein’s field of linear mistakes,  
and Africa spreads sideways to the crush.  
(lines 13-15)

The Earth is “sanguine” and “languid” and this inherent contradiction of full-bloodedness and torpor indicates that the Earth is both brave or optimistic and patient or uncaring. The lines imply that the Earth is unconcerned about the appropriating actions of humankind. The inclusiveness of the Earth, or nature, is juxtaposed with the exclusiveness of human action, the “linear mistakes” or misuse of scientific knowledge. The land’s initial and formative “hammer suns” have been replaced by human hammer blows. (The anvil as an image for “stalwart nature” resurfaces in the later collection *The Anvil’s Undertone*. See analysis of “The Paladin”, p 120.)

The ravaging effects of our modern lifestyle, brought about by the misuse of science and technology, are indicated through “the crush” which impacts on Africa so that it has to “spread sideways”. In the previous stanza humans (signified as personified herons) start this technological process through agriculture and mining when “they stalk



/ their daily crust on farm and mine” (lines 10-11). In portraying humans as birds Livingstone subtly points to humanity’s (ignored) connection with the animal kingdom. Livingstone’s early ecological awareness is thus evident in this poem which criticises a “linear” scientific view which does not acknowledge the multi-dimensional ecological web which supports life on Earth. In “**Adamastor Resuscitated**” (S 12) the tenacious power of the Earth is also explored through the image of Adamastor, Camoens’s defeated Titan or giant who became the continent of Africa. This poem, too, juxtaposes Africa’s robustness (through the trope of Adamastor who refuses to die) with human flippancy and disregard for the regenerative power of the Earth.

*Sjambok and Other Poems from Africa* repeatedly explores humankind’s alienation from nature, but I want to concentrate on “Falconer on a Skyscraper” and part of “Elements”.

In “**Falconer on a Skyscraper**” (S 23), the falcon is read as a trope for natural and rapturous instinct. The speaker is a falconer, a breeder and trainer of the female of these birds of prey. This implies control over the female bird. At the end of the poem the falconer imagines himself as the falcon who is able to mate with, or love, the female bird. Instinct and reason are both present in the speaker who weighs up the choice between a foregoing of his desire and a rapacious, instinctual appetite, where love would lead to death: “should I now pitch her or love her to a sticky death?” (line 23). In pitching the falcon he would allow her to fly away and be free to hunt, or follow her natural instinct.

The speaker’s dilemma is between his desire, which he knows to be rapacious, and a more benevolent or protective form of fatherly love, hinted at in the monastic connotations of “archimandrites”:

how intolerable to be viewed at once by two loves—  
 one cannot decide which side is to be presented,  
 so here we perch like archimandrites or turtledoves...  
 (lines 5-8)

His “two loves” could be seen as the religious and the instinctual. However, this surreal description of the instinctual takes place against the setting of the city, “a sad wet nurse” (line 9) whose nurture, while useful, is not satisfactory. The poem therefore explores the tension between the urban and the natural, and between the religious and the instinctual. The unnatural situation of a falcon trained to hunt in the city points to an unecological position and it is this which engenders the dilemma between instinct and reason. Love is

offered as a possible panacea in the second stanza. Yet this itself presents an “intolerable” situation where the speaker feels he must choose between the kinder Christian love of the monastic priest and his rapacious instinctual passion to “love her to a sticky death” (line 23). By the end of the poem, the tension is between freedom and instinct: whether to “pitch” the bird (who is, metaphorically, “a beautiful woman” (line 14)) or to ravish her (line 23). In both cases reason is the catalyst: in line seven a decision cannot be made but in the final line the speaker states that he has “the choice... that choice”. The import is that reason, one crucial faculty which separates humankind from the rest of nature, is the sticking point which precludes ecological balance.

A later poem “**Bataleur**” (AU 45) also juxtaposes humanity’s ‘threadbare’ reason (line 23) with the majesty and instinctual knowledge of a bird of prey. The bataleur eagle is shown to be victorious (line 31) and superior to humanity’s threadbare reason which “gets by, just” (line 23). But, ironically, reason has given humankind the upper hand.

The final poem in *Sjambok*, “**Elements**” (60), comprises four sections. This uses Empedocles’ ancient idea that the world or Earth is made up of the four elements of earth, water, air and fire. The poem, as a whole, demonstrates a lack of ecological synthesis because each element is treated separately, each being linked to a different Bible story. Synthesis through love is explored in the final section “*Water*” through the figure of Jesus Christ, who represents a commingling of divine and human love. Mary Magdalene, as the speaker in this section, alludes to the paucity of human love:

... I know a salt  
and selfless love no man has brought  
and never another can earn...  
(lines 33-35).

Michael Chapman correctly says: “Christ is depicted as the image of the perfect man whose commanding presence had inspired his age” (1981: 36). Livingstone explores the key role of humane love in attaining ecological symbiosis in *A Rosary of Bone*, but here hints at the human inability to plumb the healing power of love.

There is a strong ecological element in “*Air*” in which the fig tree speaks of its struggle with the elements and its resultant inability to bear fruit: “I had no figs” (line 7). A search for synthesis is portrayed through the poet’s imagining of the tree’s awareness of all the elements: there are allusions to water and earth, “I sucked on roots” (line 6); to air, “I cannot feel the healing wind” (line 11); and to fire, “sparked in you to wreak the

lightning” (line 14). The fig tree’s failure to bear fruit results in it being chopped down by human hand and thus points to humankind’s callousness and alienation from nature. The tree’s struggle is evident in “strived”, “straining, I tried” and “I sucked” (lines 2, 3 and 6). The tree is anthropomorphised by Livingstone and, in giving it a voice, he urges the reader to imagine what it would feel like to be an executed tree. The tree bears no malice towards the woodcutter “who came to pluck my fate” (line 8), and exonerates its executioner: “not petulance nor angry whim / sparked in you” (lines 13-14). But the tree does state that human destructiveness *has* taken place and implies in the final line that this was done thoughtlessly, “you chose mine, perhaps for planks”. Its pain is evident in the final stanza where “lightning” is wreaked on it as it is felled.

Livingstone, in making his readers imagine the struggle and the pain of the tree, broadens the human ecological perspective and makes us aware, if not guilty, of destructive acts against nature. The image of the fig is, probably, grounded in a Biblical allusion to Habbakkuk, who waits in faith for God’s judgement upon the Chaldeans who were guilty of unsatiableness, covetousness, cruelty, drunkenness and idolatry. God destroys the natural resources which feed the people: “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut from the fold and there shall be no herd in the stalls” (Hab 3:17). Livingstone allows the tree to comment on how insatiable human covetousness might lead to reprisal or destruction of the sustaining Earth and asks us to imagine the tree’s position.

*Eyes Closed Against the Sun* does not explore the theme of man apart from nature in great depth. A single poem from *A Rosary of Bone* “**The Genetic Blueprint in Roses, Etc**” (29), concentrates on humankind’s alienation from nature through scientific meddling. The hybridised rose is an image for this scientific interference. The rose has “no future” (line 1) and is “flawed” (line 9) for it cannot reproduce itself naturally. The rose symbolises artificial selection rather than Darwin’s theory of natural selection, which proposes that all living things are dependent on the genetic matrix for the continuation of life on Earth. The rose is, further, a symbol for art. Through hybridisation this rose’s natural beauty has been aesthetically heightened. The following lines indicate that the rose performs the same function as a work of art:

who mark life’s joys and sorrows  
lifting indelible

brief stillnesses out from time...

(lines 2-4)

So, the rose – traditionally a symbol for love – comes to represent aspects of nature, science and art in this complex poem about humankind’s attempt to manipulate evolution through the science of genetics. It explores the effects of man’s interference with the given natural order. Stanzas four and five list the results of this interference in a series of ‘not, buts’ where the natural function is juxtaposed with the ‘artificial’ use humankind makes of the basic components of the universe:

not law but its consequence,  
not organ but impulse,  
not synapse but memory,

not cells but their function,  
not atoms but their temper,  
not extent but intent...

Humanity’s “intent” is criticised and the consequences of this intent or interference are contained in the “flawed rose” which, although as beautiful as a work of art, harbours in its compromised genetic blueprint humankind’s folly, which is described as “willed perfection” (line 18).

*The Anvil’s Undertone* contains many poems which examine humankind in its alienation from nature. “**August Zulu**” (10), a dense poem which examines Zulu culture on the cusp of change, reflects the speaker’s shifting perspective of nature as he travels into the hills and finds a polluted river. The interrelationship of these themes, particularly the debilitating effects of technological progress which result in water pollution, can best be interpreted ecologically. The poem, broadly, explores how change may or may not be reshaped into a new form. The potter, as an image of the remoulder, is introduced in the first section, “throwing his best” (line 14), and reappears at the poem’s closing:

The potter has not revoked,  
But paused to rethink a handful of cups:  
A potential lives longer than a truth.

*Sanibona*, greetings, peace and good luck!

There is a possible allusion to Isaiah, where God or the designer moulds humankind: “we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we are all the work of thy hand” (64:8). But Livingstone’s potter is, I think, the Creative Principle which forms and regulates Earth’s

life-forms. The poem ends on an ambivalent note of hope. The potter, the designer, has not withdrawn, but neither is he (or she?) active. He is, instead, considering possibilities or the potential of the future of the Earth and, more narrowly, Zulu culture. This is indicated in the final Zulu greeting of peace and good luck.

While the poem is bracketed by an argument from design through the opening and closing references to the potter,<sup>26</sup> its central concern is the human perspective on nature as well as the abuse of natural resources. This forms the ecological heart of the poem. Livingstone's journey by Landrover (note the poem's many references to different types of motor cars) provides a vehicle for his reappréhension of nature. Viewed from afar the hills are "bland" (line 32), indicating a shallow ecological perspective. But, later, "the hills, close to, are far / from bland (lines 64-7). In the final section, Livingstone, as scientist, collects a water sample from a drinking hole used by both animals and humans and describes it as "fouled-up soups" (line 138) which must be boiled if the people (the "nation" (line 136)) who have drunk the water for centuries are to survive. Technology and the consequent destruction of natural resources can, Livingstone implies, result in the destruction of a human culture. The river, too, is polluted for it contains "adverse bacteriological facts" (line 146). So, the natural landscape (which is described in great detail in the poem) is juxtaposed with the debilitating effects of technological progress: "My science / has caught up with ... the Manzibomvu / River" (lines 139-142). The poem implies that this technological interference which brings pollution is irreversible, unlike the rehabilitating effect of the seasons where rain will bring relief and the land will be "glazed by rains to greens" (line 91).

This complex and, at times, jerky poem has as an undertone of ecological despair. This despair is juxtaposed with romantic or, even, religious hope which is vested in a higher power: "the potter has not revoked" (line 158). The problem lies with humanity and its power to damage both the natural environment and social systems. In section two Livingstone, as speaker, says:

Reshaping old designs is seldom easy:  
how to reconcile enthusiasms  
of the younger missionaries looking  
forward, bitterness of the dried elders

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<sup>26</sup> I am referring here to William Paley's argument from design in which he compared God to a watchmaker.

looking back across the same charred distance...  
(lines 54-58)

The poem explores the link between the destruction of cultures and the destruction of natural resources and embodies the tension between good science and technological destructiveness. Science contains implicit hope, for the measuring of pollution levels (the noting of “adverse bacteriological facts”) is the first step to ensuring potable water.

There is no question that humankind’s alienation from nature is a strong preoccupation in Livingstone’s poetry. Other poems which can be included under this theme are: the sonnets “Drought” and “To Our Tomorrows” from *The Skull in the Mud* (reprinted in *Selected Poems* 17 and 18); two poems from *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*, “One Elephant” (20) and “The Heritage” (42); a number of poems from *Sjambok and Other Poems of Africa*, “Adamastor Resuscitated” (12), “Transactions” (15), “Zebra” (33), “Fishport, Cape” (41), “The King” (42) and “The Lost Mine” (52). *The Anvil’s Undertone*, too, contains mainly poems which depict humankind as apart from nature: “Rock Art” (16), “The Zoo Affair” (41), “Bataleur” (45), “Veld and Vlei Poem” (49), “Isotopes” (60) and “The Paladin in Conglomerate” (67), which is examined at the end of this chapter.

Is this alienation a result of the human ability to reason? Livingstone implicitly grapples with this question in the above poems. For example, “Africa” and “August Zulu” both examine how technological advances can lead to human abuse of the Earth, while “Falconer on a Skyscraper” explores the effect on the human psyche of urbanisation and the loss of instinctual knowledge. “The Genetic Blueprint of Roses, Etc” examines the consequences of artificial as opposed to natural selection, and in “Elements” Livingstone uses the voice of a tree to give a (concealed) sermon on human wanton destruction of the natural environment. Livingstone therefore paints a bleak picture and offers no redemptive solutions in these poems. The next section examines those poems which do see some redemptive hope.

### 3. Ecological equilibrium

In “Road Back” (LZ 60) Livingstone gives humankind two options, “symbiosis or death”, and refers to the Earth as “Gaia”. Symbiosis here means human symbiosis with the rest of

nature. As demonstrated in the analysis of Livingstone's 'nature' poems so far, he shows this to be, at best, a precarious hope. Even in the relatively few poems which show man to be in tune with nature, there is always a qualification in the form of a nature personified as overpowering or disinterested, or a lurking predator, or of humankind's antipathy to wild nature. The central ecological question, then, is whether it is in fact possible for man to live symbiotically with nature. What is evident is that it is humankind which must, somehow, establish this symbiotic position, because nature is indifferent to man. The deep ecologists valorise a return to wild nature, but Livingstone regards this as both idealistic and impossible. However, in keeping with the philosophy of the deep ecologists, he implicitly calls on humans to revere nature and so to respect the diverse and intricate life-support system of the Earth. Paradoxically, the road he offers is through art, not nature. Creativity and language are specific to man and these, it can be argued, are the key characteristics, along with reason, which have separated us from nature. A reconnection with what Livingstone calls the Creative Principle – the forming force of Nature – offers one way of redressing the ecological destruction we have wrought on the Earth. This is, of course, an ideal situation. This section examines Livingstone's portrayal of a symbiotic state or ecological equilibrium, which, too, is an ideal state.

Humankind in a state of ecological equilibrium would, for example, have a deeper understanding of the life of the snake in **"The Killers"** (S 46), a poem which examines the tension of humankind being both a part of and apart from nature. Here Livingstone shows that man cannot face cruel or wild nature and if there is a resolution (a state of symbiosis) it can only be fleeting and be formulated from a position of safety. Both the man and the snake are the killers in the poem. Its tight construction mirrors the "catapulting lurch" (line 19) of the cobra through its repeated rhyme format of abcba, with each stanza's central line finding its rhyming match in the following stanza. This matching of the snake's coiling movement and the detailed description of the creature create a picture so vivid that, by the end of the poem, we share Livingstone's relief at her death. (The snake is referred to as "her" and not "it" throughout the poem.)

The poem is about the relationship between Livingstone as speaker and as a human and the snake as representative of both the creative and destructive forces of nature. Destruction through the threat of death predominates, but once the snake is killed Livingstone intimates that he is also aware of the creature's symbolic creativity (see the

analysis on p 170 of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Black Snake” in *A Littoral Zone*, for a fuller explanation of the symbolism of the snake). The theme is deeper than mere predatorship. In the penultimate stanza the poet communicates with the snake and her fury appears to abate: “Her eyes dulled from blood-red” (line 34). Yet he still shoots the cobra because he is in fear of her “waiting stalk” (line 35). He then justifies or rationalises his action in the final lines: “I had to shoot; I mean / that now her limp grey life lies understood”. This understanding only comes by way of killing and is therefore somehow empty – it is not clear if the speaker does (or *can*) understand the life of the snake. The poem points to the question of whether it is possible for the human race to know its place on Earth and is an important precursor to “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake”.

How to find or know one’s place (i.e. to attain ecological equilibrium) is a crucial problem. There are two possible ways: through knowledge and through the imagination. Whether either are sufficient is debateable, for what is sought is an ideal position. Livingstone intermittently grapples with the yearning for this pastoral or utopian ideal of man united with nature in his earlier work. The themes of evolutionary theory and ecological equilibrium are closely connected, for an understanding of where we come from would, arguably, lead to our knowing how to be or live on Earth. Evolutionary knowledge leads to a physical understanding of humankind’s position within the natural framework while what I call ecological equilibrium points to a psychic understanding of man’s place on Earth. In an essay “The Sense of Place”, Seamus Heaney writes about the importance of the imagination in identifying with this “sense of place”:

... our imaginations assent to the stimulus of the names, our sense of the place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented. It is this feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind, whether that country of the mind takes its tone unconsciously from a shared oral inherited culture, or from a consciously savoured literary culture, or from both, it is this marriage that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation. (132)

This points to the importance of art (rather than a biological understanding of humankind’s position in the living world) in attaining ecological sensibility.

Two early poems which use the pastoral to explore a state of ecological equilibrium are “**The Time of Sowing**” and “**Bamboo**” (S 29 and 38). Both are about



planting and regeneration. In “The Time of Sowing” the sower is moved to ecstasy through his contemplation of the act of planting. He displays a symbiotic atunement with the earth and its cycles, signified here by the personified moon. In the final stanza, where we learn that the moon is the sower’s friend, it becomes a symbol of love. In personifying the moon, Livingstone emphasises the sower’s atunement with nature and asks that his readers, too, imaginatively enter into this engagement with nature. The moon tells the sower that the time is nearly ripe for sowing and he knows she will offer nurturance to the new seeds (stanza one). The speaker is a simple man who understands and responds to the rhythms of nature which evoke in him an “eagerness” which is so intense that it is “almost terror” (line 9). His desire or need to plant is likened to the “fever” and “pleasurable tremor” of sexual sensation (lines 11 and 12). He is so moved to ecstasy that he must bed his woman before he sows the seeds. In this way the poem links human procreation and plant regeneration. It portrays an instinctual and, therefore, uncomplicated ecological relationship with the Earth. This poem, in valorising the peasant and his agricultural endeavours, romanticises the harsh realities of peasant life and so points to the idyllic contained in the pastoral. But there is a small twist: Livingstone intimates that the moon, as representative of regenerative nature, is indifferent to the sower. She is “bland” (line 3) and “smiles yellowly” (line 14) into his heart. Both the adjective and adverb literally describe the moon, but the descriptions are ambiguous, and intimate that the speaker is aware of the moon’s bland dispassion. These are transferred epithets for the speaker’s unarticulated realisation that his friend, the moon, in fact has no relationship with him. This is, perhaps, the cause of the “almost terror” he experiences at the thought of planting. Agriculture can be seen as meddling with pure or wild nature. So, despite the idyllic tone of the poem, there is an undercurrent of uneasiness which intimates that even the most rural of people are not completely in tune with nature.

Like “The Time of Sowing”, “Bamboo” displays the speaker’s pleasure at making plants grow. The act of planting in “Bamboo” is less premeditated than in “The Time of Sowing”. Livingstone, as speaker, ‘saves’ the flooded bamboo by replanting it in a more conducive place. Once it has taken root, he returns to enjoy its shade and experiences a “dry / and satisfactory” sense of peace. What gives him satisfaction is the realisation that nature has responded to his ministrations, but this can also be seen as his interference. He

has, in effect, performed an act of conservation. His ecological attunement, shown through his action of regenerating the bamboo, is qualified by his awareness of nature's greater – and destructive – power. This is described through the storm and flood in the first part and through the drought in the latter part of the poem.

In *Sjambok and Other Poems from Africa* as a whole, the setting is rural inland Africa where ecological equilibrium is more likely to be present. In the later collection, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*, Livingstone explores the possibility of attaining this state in the city. The latter collection opens with a clutch of poems depicting lustreless city life. Then “**a.m.**” (11) offers some relief when the city and the distanced second-person speaker (who is presumably Livingstone himself) are refreshed after an early morning rain shower. The speaker moves from a mood of despair in the opening stanza to one of momentary euphoria in the final stanza. The real relief lies in that “eccentric point” (line 23) where the city-bound poet momentarily communes with nature. A fleeting ecological balance is reached when the birds of the city join the “ancient fraternity” (line 25) of nature, and the speaker imagines that he is “spreadeagled and wheeling / among them” (lines 30-1). This change of consciousness is explored more fully in “Homoeostasis” when the speaker ‘becomes’ an ant and a gull (see p 90). In “a.m.” the speaker also takes on a more active role as a metaphorical laundryman or city cleaner who assists nature or finishes off the laundering job started by nature. In the second stanza the rain has turned the city into a “bundle of a rinsed / city” and the speaker imaginatively ministers to the city by “hang[ing] up tenderly to dry / your sparkling towers” (lines 35-6), figuratively becoming part of the natural cleansing process.

The city is personified as female in line 21, perhaps to signify that, despite the “tangle of drains” and urban squalor, she provides a home and therefore some form of nurture for the many city dwellers. Also, the city is ‘contained’ by indefinite nature in “beyond this, a sea, / and beyond, a sun” (lines 23-4), alluding to Livingstone’s Creative Principle. The lightened mood of the “city run / no longer to seed” (lines 18-19) infects “her” inhabitants or “invented persons” (line 40) who become as angels, “a great / singing host” (lines 41-2), as they go about their early morning activities. The city dwellers are imaginatively transformed into “invented persons – / splendid persons!” who are able to “lighten” the cleansed city’s metaphorical “straightened sheets” (line 39). The speaker is imagining order and harmony and extends the laundry trope to include the city

inhabitants, also cleansed and refreshed, and projected as images on the “straightened sheets” of an imagined movie screen. In short, he offers an idealistic portrayal or film where reality is subsumed in art and daily chores become a heavenly activity, indicated in the lines:

... a great  
singing host  
at stoves, shaving-mirrors, apples  
in satchels ...  
(lines 41-43)

The poem returns to reality in its closing lines when we are reminded that this “eccentric point” or moment of harmony with nature cannot be sustained, for it can only “last you, yet: this round / of daylight, almost”. This poem shows a yearning for ecological balance between the city and nature and humanity which can only be momentarily achieved and then only in the poet’s imagination.

This imaginative identification with nature is also used to attain ecological equilibrium in “**Loving**” (*RB* 32). This poem can be read on (at least) two levels. It can be interpreted simply as a love poem to a woman expressed in natural metaphors. She is compared to the earth, the sea and the sun. Or it can be read ecologically, where human love becomes a metaphor for a symbiotic state. The latter interpretation better explains the power of the poem. In loving the woman, the speaker finds atonement, since the woman leads him, through love, to an “unsullied earth” (line 3): he perceives her as an organic being through “the elements and compounds” of which she is constituted. In the second stanza she comes to represent the sea, and therefore the Creative Principle, through the “ineluctable tides” within her which he is powerless to resist. This leads him to a state of “knowing” (line 7) that the woman is part of the Earth for her hair becomes as grass, her skin as sun (line 12). Through her he “knows ... the latency” or underlying condition of existence (in biological terms, latency indicates a disposition which remains concealed until the necessary conditions for its development are supplied (OED)):

Knowing you I know  
– O, grass as hair, skin as sun –  
the latency to which there is a key:  
behind your tranquil breasts  
subtends a sea.  
(lines 11-15)

So, for Livingstone, love is the necessary condition for understanding his psychic connection with the natural world and thus for attaining ecological equilibrium. In “knowing” or making love to the woman he “knows” or understands – through the physical act of love – his psychic being. The ambiguity contained in the word “know” points to the importance of both the physical and the cognitive within the human condition. To attain a glimmer of understanding of the human disposition, “the latency” of that disposition must be uncovered. For Livingstone “there is a key” – love. His use of the indefinite article, coupled with the inherent difficulty of defining or pinpointing the nature of love, points to our tenuous grasp of what it means to be human. Our position or place within the ecological framework is part of the equation. Livingstone perceives, through his loving, that the Creative Principle (represented by the trope of the sea) is subtended beneath, or supports, his lover.

The only poem which explores a state of ecological equilibrium in *The Anvil's Undertone*, the next (and final) collection in Livingstone's earlier work, is “**Reciprocals**” (52). This poem indicates that Livingstone's earlier ecological hope is waning and that ecological despair is gaining the upper hand. In “Reciprocals” Livingstone attempts to comprehend the creative force behind the multi-dimensional web of life on Earth. The poem moves between the cosmic and the organic and focuses on the psychic human connection with the creative force which he describes in both scientific and spiritual terms. The poem is, essentially, about a search for symbiosis or ecological equilibrium. The title points to the implied give-and-take of a reciprocal relationship grounded in exchange or mutuality. Reciprocal is also a scientific term for an inverse relationship, and this poem postulates that the opposites of science and spirituality, or reason and imagination, are connected through just such a relationship. An inverse relationship, by contrast, points to an inverted state or condition where a thing is in reverse order to something else.

The poem is centred around the rhythmic rise and fall in the patterns of life. The Earth is compared to a “great heart” (line 1) which rhythmically contracts and dilates and ‘pumps’ the sea. The human psyche is also connected to this earthly rhythm through the reciprocals of faith and doubt, which are compared to inhalation and exhalation. Human spirituality is thus linked to the Earth's rhythmic pattern (the sea's tides) through the trope of physiology: the heart and lungs as part of an integrated life-sustaining system.

The poem is divided into four parts of three stanzas each. The first two parts explore the workings of the planet Earth and the final two parts the workings of human emotion. In both cases, science is used as an explanatory tool. The first part alludes to nature's sustaining power through the sea's cyclical regulatory function. But it also explores nature's cataclysmic or disruptive force in "torn by a /lava-phlegmed volcanic sneeze" (lines 8-9) where the physiology trope (introduced in the "great heart of the world") is extended. In the second part the sun, as the provider of energy or life, is shown to be subservient to the moon which brought order through its control of the sea's tides. The moon is personified and directly addressed: "Pale moon, you have changed the earth / with your look" (lines 10-11). She is lauded and indirectly praised for her beauty and grace. The speaker refers to the Earth's geomorphogenic formation and the process of continental drift in the third stanza of this section: "Millennia come and pass / the continents kiss and part" (lines 16-17). The section then ends abruptly. There is a change of tone and focus in the address to the moon. "And now? Bootprints on your face" (line 18) conveys the speaker's outrage at the moon landing's technological trampling and trampling of the moon's beauty.

In the third part Livingstone ponders the position of human thought and emotion in the physical universe. He bases his ponderings on the connection between matter and energy in the laws of physics. He uses the First Law of Thermodynamics, which states that energy cannot be created or destroyed, to explore or question the workings of human thought and emotion. He refers, too, to Einstein's equation  $E = mc^2$  which shows that even a tiny mass ( $m$ ) can be converted into an enormous amount of energy when the mass is multiplied by the speed of light ( $c$ ) and squared:<sup>27</sup>

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

universal architaves,  
a merger of matter and  
electro-magnetic waves.

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<sup>27</sup> I am grateful to Gregor Leigh for the physics lesson.

Livingstone postulates that human consciousness exists, and continues to exist, eternally in another dimension “between atoms” (line 24).

The final part explores human faith and doubt as part of the cosmic pattern or Creative Principle, the “felt but unseen spirit” (line 30). Human consciousness and the Creative Principle are, he says, reciprocally linked in “each governing the other, / balancing life” (lines 31-2). The poem then ends with a return to the heart metaphor through the “bivalve shell”, a minute sea organism which “may” contain “the focus / of the universe” (lines 32-3). Livingstone uses the bivalve shell as a metaphor for faith and as a reference to Charles Darwin’s contention that the universe was not designed by an intelligent being. Darwin wrote:

The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a *bivalve shell* must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows. (1958: 87, my italics)

“Reciprocals” implies rather that there *is* a design or Creative Principle at work in nature.

The poem moves from the macrocosm to the microcosm, from the “great heart” of the Earth to the “minute bivalve” of this unidentified organism. In doing so the poem shows a containment of the organic within the cosmic. There is an echo of William Blake’s “minute particulars” here. The world is contained in “a grain of sand” (“Auguries of Innocence” line 1, in Keynes 431); in ecological terms, the forces which govern the cosmic and the organic are the same. But it requires an act of imagination to see this. Livingstone implies that to comprehend the give-and-take of life’s patterns is to understand the workings of both the Earth and our consciousness.

In conclusion, the state which I have termed ecological equilibrium is, in Livingstone’s poetry, not portrayed as sustainable. But, for him, it does ‘exist’ and requires spiritual acuity or an at-oneness with the rhythmic pattern of nature. This is a romanticised view of nature which does inform some of Livingstone’s poems and goes some way towards explaining his postulation of a Creative Principle. He is not alone amongst scientists in holding such a view. Edward O. Wilson’s concept of biophilia also serves to explain this

position. Wilson defines biophilia as “the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (165) and argues that it is essential:

The significance of biophilia in human biology is potentially profound, even if it exists solely as weak learning rules. It is relevant to our thinking about nature, about the landscape, the arts and mythopoeia, and it invites us to take a new look at environmental ethics. (166)

Wilson’s admission of the weakness of these “learning rules” points to the idealistic nature of this position. He is also the proponent of sociobiology which argues that culture is created and shaped by biological processes while the biological processes are simultaneously altered in response to cultural change (11). Sociobiology has since largely been discredited, but Livingstone’s conclusion to his academic paper titled “Sociobiology and Fitness Maximisation” is still pertinent: “For too many decades the reductionist mode has prevailed: we have been scientifically concentrating almost exclusively upon the cell at the expense of ecologies. It is to be hoped that sociobiology can offer some contribution to the redress of this balance” (1983: 5).

The above poems which depict ecological equilibrium use the pastoral in *Sjambok*; an eccentric or new way of looking at the city in *Eyes Closed*; the power of love in *A Rosary of Bone*; and the science-religion tension in *The Anvil’s Undertone*. Livingstone’s view becomes more sophisticated over time, moving from the conventional use of the pastoral to reflect the ideal of humankind in harmony with nature in his second collection, to a more realistic grappling with the creative force behind the universe in his fifth collection. I have offered detailed analyses of most of the poems which portray ecological equilibrium. The few others which explore this theme are: “The Hungry Heart” (from *Sjambok* 40) which depicts the speaker’s pure appreciation of nature for its own sake and his yearning for the spiritual sustenance which an instinctual relationship with nature would bring; and the following poems from *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*: “A Flower for the Night” (14), “The Sleep of My Lions” (17) and “Drinking Wine” (43). (See p 65 and p 66 for a fuller discussion of the latter two poems.) “Crystallogenesis” (from *A Rosary of Bone* 14) also depicts ecological equilibrium. Narismulu concludes her thesis with a review of what constitutes ‘truth’ amongst contemporary thinkers and physicists and makes repeated reference to Livingstone’s article “Science and Truth”. She then states that ““Crystallogenesis’ ... may well constitute the poet’s manifesto” (163) and quotes the following lines from the poem:

Life I know as  
 a boundless search for  
     things greater than  
 life to add to life.

The mud stained hunt  
 in me, looking for  
     a few crystal lines,  
 is quite cheerful,  
     unavailing  
 yet, but prospective:  
     still expectant.

This expectancy and implied hope become, on the whole, more muted and are replaced by despair at humankind's abusive attitude in Livingstone's next (and fifth) collection, *The Anvil's Undertone*, and are carried into *A Littoral Zone*.

#### 4. Ecological destruction

Those of Livingstone's poems which explore ecological destruction show that "the balance" referred to by Livingstone (see above) has not been redressed. Edward O. Wilson refers to "the juggernaut theory of human nature, which holds that people are programmed by their genetic heritage to be so selfish that a sense of global responsibility will come too late" (186). He claims that humans are genetically programmed to plan ahead for no more than two generations and tend to underestimate the impact of natural cataclysms. This leads directly to human-induced destruction of the ecology. Is this "myopic fog" (186) inescapable? Livingstone often seems to think it is.

Ecological destruction is a predominant theme in *Sjambok and Other Poems from Africa* and *The Anvil's Undertone* and is not as obviously or repeatedly explored in the other collections. "**Discovery**" (S 48) reflects Livingstone's despair. His "discovery" is an ecological one: humankind is shown to be an intruder on the Earth and a mad self-killer. The speaker is distanced by the use of the second-person pronoun "you". He acts both as speaker and as representative of humankind in general. The man walking and hunting in the night is shown to be a blundering, noisy fool whose prowling is deafening to the small creatures. In the fourth stanza he is compared to a rat, or the vermin of the animal world. But, it is implied, unlike the rodent whose scavenging has an ecological purpose, humankind cannot even claim this: "But you, ratlike in certain respects / certainly, have got an appointment next / door to nowhere" (lines 10-12). In short,



humanity has no future place on Earth, is facing extinction because of his self-centred blundering and unecological lifestyle.

The final two stanzas explore humankind's self-preoccupation through the trope of the man looking at his reflection in the pool. The penultimate stanza first warns that he may not like what he sees through the suggestion that he spit into the pool to disturb the reflection. The evident self-parody is that, in doing this, he will spit at himself and so express self-disgust. Further, "you and your quarry" (line 27) are the same thing, given that he is looking at his own reflection in the pool. He is, therefore, hunting or preying upon himself as well as inadvertently searching for himself. The man's blinkeredness is further emphasised through the allusion to Narcissus, who unknowingly fell in love with his own reflection (Brewer 745). In the final stanza the man is told he will find "it" (his quarry) in the reflection of himself, which has "wavering mad eyes". This is a strong indictment of humankind's shiftiness and lack of reason. Nature is given the final word through the leaf which lies at the bottom of the pool. This leaf "never speaks first", implying that nature will not commune with man; it has to be the other way round. This is in line with my argument that what is critical is humankind's relationship *to* nature and not – as is sometimes claimed in ecological discourse – the relationship *between* man and nature (see p 16). "Discovery" is the most explicitly ecological poem in *Sjambok*.

**"Midnight Touches"** (13) is the only poem in *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* which deals with the theme of ecological destruction. It is a chilling doomsday poem, written in four stanzas. The terror lies not so much in the gangsterism and domestic violence of the central stanzas, but in the encroachment of modern, urban evil on the countryside. The "midnight touches" of the title are not sentimental, pretty pictures but rather a warning that the end of a cycle (midnight) approaches (touches) humankind. The sheep, symbol for the stupid animal, is the harbinger of this message. This image is deliberately subversive, implying that the "unconscious" humans (depicted through the transferred epithet as farmhouse windows) are more stupid than the sheep which are traditionally regarded as unthinking. The sheep are skittish and "alarmed" (line 14) while the farmers sleep on in blissful ignorance, "unconscious" of the gathering apocalypse, "the stockpiling storm" (lines 15 and 16). In the face of this, the ministrations of the hospital staff in the first stanza are futile. While the main focus of the poem is the human-on-human violence portrayed in the two central stanzas, the subtle ecological import of

the final stanza is that humankind fails to see its impending and self-inflicted doom, brought about by its deafness to the signs and rhythms of nature.

Midnight also serves as a trope for an ecological climacteric in **“The Midnight Lamia”** (AU 21). This poem explores psychic malevolence towards nature through the incapacitated old woman who takes the form of a mythical monster or lamia. In the opening line she is an “old invalid”, but she metaphorically wreaks ecological havoc and, by the end of the poem, becomes an earthslayer who, as her “scythes” (line 29) destroy the growing crops, becomes a more frightening form of the grim reaper. Chapman claims that “the old hag effectively emerges as a personification of nightmare” (1981: 155). I would argue rather that she personifies ecological destruction. The nightmare is that this destruction is mindless and cold-blooded. The poem is firmly founded in myth through the reference to the Lamia and to the surreal world of the astral travelling of the old woman as vampire, the demon or monster who sucks the blood of children in the Greek myth (Brewer 620). The poem is about the psychic power of the incapacitated to feed, vampire-like, off the life force of the Earth and so destroy it. If read in this way, the poem’s ecological implications are chilling. The old woman as the lamia figure metaphorically represents a destructive force which will suck dry the lifeblood of the Earth. But, beyond the metaphor, there are real implications. It is the ecologically damaging psychic malignancy she represents which is terrifying.

In the first stanza, time (symbolised by the moonlit sundial) is sabotaged. The old woman’s psyche is compared to a fuse which connects to a keg of gunpowder placed on the sundial or keeper of time. She ignites the fuse (line 1) and the implication is that time will explode. The second stanza finds her travelling and preying on the “hapless mice” (line 14). She metamorphoses into the form of a predator, a cat which “purrs rage” (line 14). The natural landscape is portrayed as idyllic in “the mastfilled evenings, cloudlit skies, / warm night of drifting leaves” (lines 11-12). After stanza three’s surreal picture of the psychic world, the poem returns momentarily to the invalided woman in her bed and then to her predatory, psychic state. She is “cat-eared, unblinking, treed; hear-seeing all, / not comprehending all” (lines 27-8). Here she metamorphoses into a tree, becomes as nature for she sees and hears “all” with her cat ears. She becomes a conscious part of the web of life on Earth. But – and this is the crunch – she does not comprehend “all”. Such

omnipotent power is disastrous without omnipotent knowledge or awareness. And so she proceeds to ravish the growing plants, “the wretched harvest” (line 30).

The dire message of this poem – humankind’s psychic malevolence against the Earth – can, perhaps, only be expressed through the world of ghoulish nightmare. Would we believe it, or even take notice of it, otherwise?

The preceding analysis of humankind as apart from nature demonstrates how Livingstone’s poems reflect humanity’s antipathy and violence towards nature, especially when man finds himself in the position of nature’s prey. This predator-prey relationship arguably lies at the heart of humankind’s destructive stance. When coupled with anthropocentrism and the consequent disregard for the natural functioning of the Earth, this antipathy leads to ecological destruction. As previously stated, nature is inimical to man. It is when man acts both inimically and violently towards nature that ecological erosion occurs. This leads to a severance of the tenuous man-nature relationship and hence the failure of any hope of a symbiotic relationship with nature. This argument is complicated if nature’s cataclysmic destructive power (in the form of what are termed natural disasters) is taken into account.

Other poems from *Sjambok* which explore this theme are “The Visionary” (9), “On Clouds” (10), and “Sjambok” (19). *The Anvil’s Undertone* has a number of other poems of ecological destruction and despair: “First Seed: First Blood (for two voices)” (29), “Journeyman” (36), “Lensman” (54) and “A Natural History of the Negatio Bacillus” (56). (See below for a discussion of “Negatio Bacillus”.)

## **Conclusion**

An ecocritical examination of key poems from Livingstone’s earlier work shows his persistent preoccupation with man’s position within nature and the consequent ecological implications of this relationship. What, for example, is one to make of Livingstone’s persistent personification of nature, given that nature is inimical to man? Is he merely falling into the pathetic fallacy trap? Both Jonathan Bate (1991) and Gillian Beer argue that John Ruskin’s formulation of the pathetic fallacy (1856) has value. M.H. Abrams explains it as “a phrase invented ... to signify the attribution to natural objects of human capabilities and feelings” (129) while Beer points to its deeper significance:

This famous phrase is often stripped of the force with which it describes as a *'fallacy'* the attempt to centre the natural world upon man's sensibility. (45)

A phenomenological reading would suggest that in personifying nature, Livingstone is conveying his perception of what he calls the Creative Principle. Nature, or the Earth, as the embodiment of the Creative Principle is given the power of a biological designer, hence an ontological force which can create and, by implication, destroy life.

Livingstone's thesis is that we ignore the Creative Principle at our peril. If we do not revere nature it will retaliate and destroy the human race. A perception that humanity is mostly unaware of this force and is actively destroying the Earth's biodiversity and natural habitats leads Livingstone into a position of ecological despair.

The ecological themes identified in this chapter are all evident in **"A Natural History of the Negatio Bacillus"** (one of the ratiocinative poems from *The Anvil's Undertone* 56), which portrays humankind as a destructive bacterium. I offer the following analysis as a summary of Livingstone's ecological preoccupation. In the poem Ecological destruction is wrought by humankind, which is portrayed as the "negatio bacillus" or destructive, disease-causing organism. There is "no known cure" (verse iv). The only balancing hope for this destructive force is that a select few, people who are "wholly of the earth" (verse iv), are immune to it. The implication of the poem, then, is that ecological awareness and therefore a symbiotic relationship between humans and their home, the Earth, would resist the spread of destruction. This, it is implied, would demand a return to innocence or an Eden-like state: "In the beginning was a world quite naturally in contact with the principle of its creation" (verse ii). Like the seven days of creation in Genesis, this poem contains seven verses and the final verse may be interpreted as: on the seventh day of destruction, the poet rested.

The poem uses scientific classification to explore the metaphysical. The tension is between heaven and earth (representative of emotion and intellect; of idealism and realism; of the imagined and the material; or the metaphysical and the physical). The poem ends with an appeal to both: "O father in heaven and my mother earth" (verse vii). It is only through a synthesis of intellect and emotion that the disease may be arrested. The disease of negatio bacillus is defined in the first verse. Its "pathogenesis" (verse i) or development occurs when emotion and intellect are separated. Emotion is regarded as metaphysical, from "heaven", and intellect as physical, from "earth".

Because he suffers from, or is, this disease, man's mind cannot develop: "it [negatio bacillus] is known to arrest psychogenesis" (verse i).

In the second verse, the myth of Eden and the theory of evolution are used to trace humankind's separation from the Creative Principle. In the early stages of our evolution, when "one man stood up", we still "enjoyed some unification" between emotion and intellect. But then a stronger or more intelligent man "held the [creative] principle off from the world" and "His stance caused unnatural disturbances". Human evolution resulted in a separation from the Earth. In the third verse this separation process continues. It is signified by man's use of stilts, a trope for his self-elevation or egotistical and, therefore, unecological endeavours. Heaven and earth "had to" withdraw into quarantine, presumably to protect 'themselves' from negatio bacillus or diseased humanity.

The fourth verse examines those who have "natural immunity" to the disease. These are the innocent or saintly: animals, small children, certain women, primitive (or uncontaminated) people and "some saints and prophets". While there is no known cure for the disease, it can be alleviated through close contact with the earth. This is a trope for ecological atunement with the Earth.

The fifth verse connects humanity with aggression. Aggression is a symptom of the disease and is used to diagnose it. Negatio bacillus brings emotional severance from the Creative Principle ("when heaven is gone forever") and intellectual antipathy toward the Earth ("earth gathers itself to / flinch from the patient's foot"). Livingstone bases this poem on the premise that humanity has consciousness and has misused its intellect. Instead of thinking of himself as part of the Earth, man has intellectualised himself into alienation from the Earth. The poem implies that the saving grace is emotion, the more instinctual aspect of human consciousness. Through emotion, "heaven", or more specifically the idea of heaven on earth (Eden), can be apprehended.

The sixth verse gives a case history of a sufferer of the disease. The man in the case history dies in the spirit and enters a bizarre world of meaninglessness. He loses linkage with "whatever piece of earth he was on" because "his mind questioned the task of linkage". The rational human faculty on its own is inadequate to sustain a meaningful existence. The man thus enters a state of death in life as a "corpse" or automaton in the bureaucratic or business world of "corporations". At the beginning of the verse the man

has a soul. His mind then interferes and he loses all “linkage” with the emotional aspect of himself.

The seventh and final verse, “*Prophylaxis: ‘Contra-Negatio’ mantra*” is offered as a mantra to the Creative Principle and the speaker seeks preventative measures through a synthesis between heaven and earth. The Creative Principle is addressed as both the father and the mother, God and Nature. Man is portrayed as the child. He asks that God and Nature “love each other”. What he is seeking, I think, is a merging of theology and paganism or, in mythological terms, a coming together of Apollo and Dionysius. Portrayed as a child, humankind is stripped of its attempt at power. The prayerful tone of the final lines, “Divorce not over me, condemn me not to the void between, and let me not be by nothingness beguiled”, emphasises the powerless position of the man. The import of the poem is that it will require a synthesis of reason and passion (here called intellect and emotion) if ecological equilibrium is to be found. When the two are separated, ecological destruction results. This need for a synthesis of reason and imagination is the underlying message in Livingstone’s work which gives equal importance to science and poetry. The ‘equation’ for synthesis may also be described as the necessity of both the physical and the psychic if man is to re-establish a healthy and harmonious relationship with nature. Is this tension between the physical and the psychic resolvable? This question is explored in *A Littoral Zone*, where Livingstone calls this zone “the mysterious border that shifts restlessly between land and sea [which] has, to me, always reflected that blurred and uneasy divide between humanity’s physical and psychic elements” (*LZ* 62). The figure of Don Quixote, the misguided and eccentric chivalric champion who fights for an imagined (or lost) cause, provides an eccentric meeting point. Quixote is intermittently alluded to in Livingstone’s earlier work and informs *A Littoral Zone* through more direct references.

There is compelling evidence of Livingstone’s ecological preoccupation in his earlier work. The ecological poems do not dominate the body of work as distinctly as in *A Littoral Zone*, but the theme is still strongly evident. These works, broadly, reflect Livingstone’s move from a position of tentative ecological hope to one of predominant despair in *The Anvil’s Undertone*.

We are an animal that needs to use its intelligence  
to mitigate the effects of its intelligence on the other  
creatures. And the air, and the earth, and the water.

– A.S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*

## Chapter Four

### An Introduction to *A Littoral Zone*

If Douglas Livingstone's earlier work explores humanity's struggle for a sense of place in the natural world, then his penultimate collection puts the human race in the no-man's-land of the littoral zone. The overriding theme of *A Littoral Zone* (1991) is that humankind has lost a sense of belonging or place on Earth. Anthropocentrism has, ironically, marginalized humanity. Because we believe that we are outside of the ecological framework or, worse, that we have dominion over the Earth and can therefore control nature, we no longer act on the instinctual knowledge that we are *of* the Earth.

Does this situation make a mockery of Livingstone's insistence on a search for ecological equilibrium? The final chapter will attempt to answer this through an examination of the psychic or Romantic element in the poetry of *A Littoral Zone*. The next and penultimate chapter concentrates on the physical or the scientific and biological which grounds Livingstone's philosophy and the poetry of this collection. In analysing *A Littoral Zone* I carry across, with some modifications, the four ecological sub-themes identified in chapter three, but will explore them under Livingstone's own two categories of "humanity's physical and psychic elements" (Notes 62).

#### **The quixotic conundrum: the poet as knight errant and champion of the Earth**

Livingstone uses the figure of the knight errant as a mad (and futile) mediator between man and nature. This Quixote figure lurks in the shadows of *A Littoral Zone*, but first appears in *The Anvil's Undertone*, the final volume of the earlier work. Tracing the knight errant's genesis is important for a better understanding of Livingstone's self-appointed role as the Earth's eccentric champion. Livingstone says in "The Other Job" that his "comically chivalrous resolve" led him to decide "to devote my small energies to healing the planet" (1989b: 81 and 74).

"**The Black Knight**" (*AU* 26) explores humankind's ambivalent position within nature and is about Livingstone's job as a bacteriologist who measured the pollution levels in the seawater off Durban. Characteristically he refers to himself in the second person but is at the same time the speaker in the poem. The clue that the poem is about



his scientific work lies in the opening line: “most weekdays”. He extends his work into the ecological through the extended metaphor of the knight errant, the Quixote figure, who becomes the champion of Mother Earth. Livingstone is the “black knight” because he wages war against pollution and therefore death, and because he has a grim view of his quest. The black knight is not, as Chapman claims, “The black worker, who each day must trek from the outlying townships to the ‘white’ city” (1984: 94).

In the first stanza his accoutrements (line 1) are his scientific equipment. His attendants or “armourers” (line 2) are, presumably, his colleagues, while the “uniformed citizen” (line 6) possibly represents the bureaucratic organisation for which he works. It is significant that he is “unneutered” (line 5) or uncowed by the bureaucracy. The second stanza is a quixotic portrayal of his work, which he describes as a battle, using chivalric imagery such as “jousts” and “battlements”. His fight is against the “concrete” and “steel” of the built-up environment. He “tilts at windmills” (line 9), which alludes to his awareness of the futility of his task. He continues on his quixotic quest even though he knows his efforts are doomed to failure on a grand scale because he also knows that his intentions are good. The poem thus reflects a hidden irony: despite his “tilting at windmills”, Livingstone (unlike Quixote) is not deluded – he sees very clearly what the reality is, and this gives him a purpose to continue in his quest to fight pollution.

The final stanza of “The Black Knight” is both quixotic and clearly ecological. Livingstone sees himself as the Earth’s prophet of doom, but also as the labouring and sweating, if errant, saviour of the Earth. This double interpretation arises from the ambiguous phrase “apocalyptic for the Earth” (line 14). He is, further, “in training against” this ecological doom, if doom is to be found in the “Last Quartet” (line 15). The black knight, Livingstone’s alter ego, has inherited the mess of pollution, the “hustle” (line 13) which, presumably, has brought on the impending apocalypse. But he is resolved to train and fight, to pit his “muscle” against the tide and to sweat profusely to save the Earth. He will do this without thought, “improvident with his muscle” (line 17). The “Last Quartet” (line 15) alludes to Section II of *Little Gidding*, the final poem in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*:

Dead water and dead sand  
 Contending for the upper hand.  
 The parched eviscerate soil  
 Gapes at the vanity of toil,  
 Laughs without mirth.

This is the death of earth.  
(216)

For Livingstone as scientist “Dead water and dead sand” would be the effects of the polluted sea water.

“The Black Knight” anticipates the motif of the knight errant in *A Littoral Zone*; it is a camouflaged description of Livingstone’s scientific work and could be called a poem of ecological action. The language is highly romantic yet the message of the poem is starkly realistic: pollution will bring about the end of human life on Earth and it has to be combated.

Two other ratiocinative poems in *The Anvil’s Undertone* also portray the poet as knight errant or eccentric ecological champion. “**Isotopes**”<sup>28</sup> (60) postulates in a sweeping statement that humanity has upset the ecological balance: “In an orderly universe / only man is disorderly”. The problem, Livingstone claims, is “free-will”, and the implied solution is “the choice of chivalry”. Chivalry encompasses love, eccentricity and conviction, prerequisites for knight errantry. These are all important for they contain a touch of madness and point to a resolution through comedy. Jonathan Bate argues for the value of comedy as an ecological saviour. (See p 22 for a fuller discussion. See also Joseph W. Meeker’s essay “The Comic Mode”, in *Glotfelty* 155-169).

This motif of chivalry is explored in more depth in “**The Paladin in Conglomerate**” (*AU* 67). The paladin is the Christ figure. The title and the diction and syntax are, perhaps, deliberately convoluted to obfuscate the poem’s criticism of Christ as failed redeemer and the portrayal of Him as a knight errant who, therefore, was doomed to fail in His valiant championing of the human race. Livingstone here explores a chivalry devoid of the comic element where the tragic hero is doomed. It is nature which is valorised in this poem. History and religion are shown to be destructive. The ecological, then, rests on the firm foundation of “the stalwart anvil / of nature” (lines 1-2) which is, as it were, beaten by history and religion. This conglomerate of culture is imposed on nature and the world is “dissolved to disorderly clamour” (line 5). Christ is a

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<sup>28</sup> The OED defines isotope as: Each of two or more varieties of a particular chemical element which have different numbers of neutrons in the nucleus, and therefore different relative atomic masses and different nuclear (but the same chemical) properties. Also freq., any distinct kind of atom or nucleus. (OED)

"metallic man" (line 6) who comes, like an armoured knight or paladin, to attempt to right this "disaster" (line 8). He is crucified and suffers. His mortality is like "a tidal wave of grass" (line 16). Through the earth "which boiled up and held him" (line 23) and the soil which "rose on his eyes to blind him" (lines 26), nature gains dominion over the Christ figure.

So, this poem displays a tension between the religious and, broadly, the ecological. Nature, as the anvil upon which things are shaped, offers a better alternative. At least she can be 'found', unlike Christ after whom "men not dead / prospect" but "cannot find" (lines 28-9).

Livingstone as poet is both unacknowledged legislator or quixotic champion for the abused Earth, and prophet of ecological doom. That he sees himself as a misguided ecological knight errant is explicitly evident in *A Littoral Zone's* epigraphs from Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*:

I have always heard, Sancho, that doing good to base fellows is like throwing water into the sea.

A knight errant who turns mad for a reason deserves neither merit nor thanks. The thing is to do it without cause.

These are echoed by lines from the final poem "Road Back" (61): "Perhaps you do not need your knights, Gaia: / in the end, you have to win" (lines 39-40). As a microbiologist who fought water pollution for thirty years, Livingstone was certainly not an errant scientist and doggedly (like Quixote) and with a realistic purpose (unlike Quixote) continued in his quest to produce clean sea water.

### **The physical and psychic elements in *A Littoral Zone***

Tony Morphet uses the terms *biology* and *culture* to encompass these elements. The term culture is, however, problematic, for the psychic element contains both the spiritual and the societal. Morphet explains:

Livingstone gives his own definition of the representational field – it is the littoral zone of the title which he describes as '–that mysterious border that shifts restlessly between land and sea – (which) has, to me, always reflected that blurred and uneasy divide between humanity's physical and psychic elements.' The terms are powerful and get their close focus from the poetry. For my purpose I would like to extend each of them to cover what I see as the most striking feature of the whole representational order, which is the manner in which it registers the pushes

and pulls within an imagined totality of biology and culture; what the poet refers to as ‘unsundered creation’. (205-6)

The term “unsundered creation” implies an Edenic state where man is in harmony with nature. Morphet writes that Livingstone imagines this state – does this mean it is a possibility? This is a central conundrum of the work: scientific understanding of the way the world works is not enough; it needs to be extended into the psychic areas of the imagination and of the yearning associated with love (specifically biophilia). I have argued that Livingstone is a Romantic materialist who eschews the idea of nature as a nurturing mother. For him, nature’s maternal aspect is indifferent (see “Road Back”) and his poetry is informed by the contingency behind the evolutionary process. This does not mean he does not revere nature or concede to the Coleridgean and Romantic idea of “the one life within us and abroad” (“Eolian Harp” line 26). But man in a symbiotic relationship with nature is given short shrift in *A Littoral Zone*. Peter Sacks, in his insightful and considered review, suggests the opposite:

If much of Livingstone’s design throughout the book has been to restore mankind to its place in the natural world, we should notice in closing that he does not exempt poetry itself from that humbling restoration. (5)

Livingstone’s recurring tone of ecological despair in *A Littoral Zone* suggests that for him this ‘restoration’ is an impossibility. Humankind cannot return to “its place in the natural world” because the human race has evolved beyond this place. Julian Huxley’s cogent (if idealistic) argument for what he calls Evolutionary Humanism and the virtuous use of a “psychosocial” evolution of the mind is one formulation of a possible way forward:

After man’s emergence as truly man, this same sort of thing [dominance as a species] continued to happen, but with an important difference. Man’s evolution is not biological but psychosocial: it operates by the mechanism of cultural tradition, which involves the cumulative self-production and self-variation of mental activities and their products. Accordingly, major steps in the human phase of evolution are achieved by breakthroughs to new dominant patterns of mental organization, of knowledge, ideas and beliefs – ideological instead of physiological or biological organization. (76)

Sacks’ idea of poetry as a form of restoration arguably offers an imaginative bridge between the biological and cultural. In contrast, poet and critic Basil du Toit sees no hope of restoration through the poetry itself. He says:

It [*A Littoral Zone*] might with equal justice have been called ‘A Marginal Zone’. Often the characters are marginal ... But more striking is the poet’s marginality, his loss of assurance in the world. He is shown relatively powerless to comfort or improve, at odds with other denizens of the shore – revellers, fishermen, vandals, desecraters – countering all this with, at best, a fatalistic ecological mysticism. (51)

Du Toit’s coupling of ecology and mysticism in fact negates the scientific ecological insight which informs Livingstone’s collection. Julia Martin offers a more accurate reading of the poet’s despair:

The poems ... offer tough, ironic, tender, compassionate observations of people, animals, and ecosystems, and recurrent demonstrations of human cruelty and ignorance. The context in which these are situated is the ongoing work of an *ecological scientist*: relentless activity in ‘rapt attendance of the sea’s health’ (48). The work may be hopeless, yet it must continue... The poems resist the easy logic of dualism, speaking rather of an attitude situated somewhere between despair and dogged resilience, between loss of faith in religious discourse and an awed love of ‘creation’. (1999: 237, my italics)

### **The structure of *A Littoral Zone***

The sequence of poems in *A Littoral Zone* represents, in Livingstone’s words, “a mythical sampling run” (LZ 62). The “run” refers to his journey along the Natal coast where he collects water samples for microbial analysis of water pollution. The sequence includes some of the sampling stations along the coast, other places, and three ‘traffic interludes’. These interludes remind the reader of Livingstone’s journey, which is framed by “Starting Out” and “Road Back”, the second and last poems in the collection. The journey can be read as a quixotic quest for ‘truth’ and has links with the bioregional narrative genre.

The American bioregional movement started in the mid-1970s, when Jim Cheney coined the term. Karla Armbruster argues that the nature-writing tradition is not adequate if literature is to show humankind how to live “*with* nature as a valued part of our local communities”. A middle ground needs to be found:

One school of thought that demonstrates such a middle ground is the American bioregional movement, which arose in the mid-1970s and has exhibited a deep concern, on both theoretical and practical levels, with how humans can live sustainably in collaboration with their local natural environments. While the definitions of a bioregion and bioregionalism are somewhat contested, most bioregionalists agree that a bioregion is characterized by its natural and cultural attributes and that bioregionalism is committed to the goal of ‘developing

communities integrated with ecosystems'. As bioregionalist Peter Berg puts it, a bioregion is a 'terrain of consciousness determined in large part by the place we dwell in, the work we do, and the people with whom we share our lives.' (Armbruster in Tallmadge 9)

*A Littoral Zone* contains two maps, one on the frontispiece and another, more detailed, map of the sampling stations on the final page. This geographical mapping of the geographical region in which the poems are set enhances the claim that *A Littoral Zone* is a bioregional narrative. The narrative is contained in the sequence of poems which recount incidents and observations at the various sampling stations which make up Livingstone's scientific and poetic journey. The poems are individually dated but are *not* arranged chronologically in time. Instead the datings jump back and forth between 1964 and 1991 and presumably indicate the year in which each poem was written. Following Livingstone's suggestion that the dating "is irrelevant except to me, a few friends and – possibly – the curious" (LZ 62), I have ignored the datings in favour of the chronological sequence of the poems in the collection.

Because *A Littoral Zone* is a "mythical" (LZ 62) account of Livingstone's work as a scientist, it takes the form of a story told in order to make meaning of life itself. Livingstone does venture into very deep philosophical water in many of the poems. In an article which appeared more than a decade after the publication of *A Littoral Zone*, Duncan Brown succinctly said: "The collection constitutes a remarkable 'narrative' of belonging and place: of a life lived along, in terms of, and dedicated to, the coastline of Durban and its inhabitants – of all species" (2002: 94).

### **Critical responses to *A Littoral Zone***

That *A Littoral Zone* is a difficult and dense collection is evident in the paucity of comprehensive reviews and detailed critical studies of this work. In a press review Reg Rumney notes that: "Such is the state and status of English-speaking culture in South Africa, however, that it seems to have passed almost unnoticed" (see Appendix B). Peter Sacks and Tony Morphet give scholarly and considered reviews of the collection, and Duncan Brown's earlier succinct but insightful review "Self and Society: Writing the New" (1992) notes the collection's ecological theme. In the same year, a clipped response from Basil du Toit appeared in *New Coin* and Dirk Klopper refers to some of the poems in this collection in "A Libidinal Zone: The Poetic Legacy of Douglas

Livingstone” (1997). David Levey’s review in *Unisa English Studies* is not insightful, and Simon Carnell says nothing of import in another review “Maps of Dereliction” (both appeared in 1992).

Duncan Brown observes that *A Littoral Zone* shows both continuities with and departures from Livingstone’s previous volume *The Anvil’s Undertone* and says (in a bracketed aside) that “Livingstone argues that the new volume is characterised by ‘ecological despair’” (1992: 134). In this thesis I use the phrase “ecological despair” repeatedly and unabashedly because it incisively summarises the tone and the overriding concern of *A Littoral Zone*. David Robbins’ article “Bleak Stuff”, written after the launch of *A Littoral Zone*, quotes Livingstone on this ecological despair:

A friend told me that this new volume is unusual because it has a map, a definite structure, and allusions to the internal combustion engine running through it... My friend also identified what he called ‘ancient Livingstone themes’: my running war with the Almighty; and a sense of ecological despair. (1992: 52)

(I suspect this “friend” is Livingstone himself.) Duncan Brown continues to discuss the ecological in the work:

Livingstone’s is not a trendy ‘green’ environmental awareness – it proceeds from a professional engagement with ecological problems. ‘Environmental awareness’ is an anthropocentric philosophy; in contrast Livingstone endorses the Gaia principle, according to which the Earth is regarded as a living cell. This is a non-hierarchical vision, as humans must live symbiotically with other species or risk death. (1992: 134-5)

Despite its brevity the review offers cogent explanations of a number of the poems. He mentions the scientific element in the work, the search for the mythical in the mundane, the military imagery, the “barely repressed humour”, Livingstone’s ironic self-deflation as Quixote and Philoctetes, and the unresolved political elements in “Beachfront Hotel” and “Waste Land” (135). The following observation points to the enticing difficulty of the work:

In reading *A Littoral Zone* the reader is forced to work hard: this has both positive and negative aspects. Positively, the poems constantly extend one’s frame of reference, subvert one’s assumptions, and encourage one to make challenging and illuminating connections. Negatively, though, the search for connections is often frustrated as one seeks evidence of Livingstone’s grappling with the struggles of human communities in the country, of his *own* attempts to make connections. (135)

Brown, in the final sentence, points to a search for political connections. More telling, I think, is the work's portrayal of the lack of ecological connections between man and nature. The point is that Livingstone depicts the lack of connections because (on the whole) they do not exist. It is hard to accept this harsh reality. As a reader, one does not want to see this bleak view and this is, in part, what makes the collection difficult to stomach. Reg Rumney alludes to this difficulty and admits defeat: "At its heart the collection is an attempt to refine a philosophical stance which can't easily be distilled out of the verse itself. (I'm not going to try)."

Rumney does point out that *A Littoral Zone* differs from Livingstone's previous work "because of its genesis in the quarrelsome tryst of art and science". He expands this idea: "Livingstone has said that science is humanity's search for truth and art man's interpretation of that truth, and that the two disciplines both aid and hamper each other. What's lacking from science is imagination, he had noted, the moving force of poetry".

Basil du Toit's review is a mixture of praise and censure which elides the ecological message in the collection. For example, he calls Livingstone's style "demotic" or, more fully, "a concern with a modern-sounding, informal, even rough or slangy language" (49) and claims that the most important poems of *A Littoral Zone* fall within the "demotic group". When this fails, he dismissively argues, there is "a lack-lustre quality in the verse" (49). Klopper has, in places, a more ecologically-informed interpretation. He notes that nature can offer Livingstone "sacred moments of mutuality between man and beast, as in the poem 'A Visitor at Station 21'" (47).

The reviews by Morphet and Sacks are the most substantial and will be referred to in greater detail in the next two chapters. Tony Morphet's highly technical and articulate article examines Livingstone's use of language: "My plan is to ... begin by considering the 'one long poem' as building the grammar of a single complex representational field" (205). Morphet summarises:

To return to the perspective of the 'one long poem', the case that I have tried to make thus far is that it builds a linguistic lattice which interlinks the culture of human exchange with the fundamentals of biological structure and process. Consciousness finds its link with biological process in their common point of origin in the sea. (208)

On Livingstone's engagement with language, Morphet argues: "I take the central dynamic of the poems to be the fact that the long evolutionary perspective both increases



and decreases the pressure on personal consciousness – that biology stands as threat to culture but for the self-same reason it renders the meaning of the cultural more intense” (209). He adds that Livingstone is present in the poems as both a figure of culture (as scientist, plain pragmatic man, homespun philosopher, poet, romantic lover and hero, Quixotic knight errant) and as a biological creature which is part of the evolutionary process (209). He explores this tension, or contradiction as he calls it, seeing in it the underlying source of Livingstone’s use of language:

I think it is in the pressure of the contradiction produced by the biological and the cultural that we can begin to see the sources of Livingstone’s engagement with language. The contradiction manifests itself in the poems in the form of counter disciplines. The biological disciplines the cultural by placing it in the long sequence of time, and the cultural disciplines the biological by lifting it into the expressive domain. In the biological register generation and extinction are the primary figures – in the cultural register these reappear as the expression of individual realization and of loss. The urge to language – of formal rhythmic language – arises where these two disciplines encounter each other in the poet.

...

It is impossible to know whether Livingstone’s engagement with language rose to meet his sense of the challenge which the *longue durée* of the biological process posed to him, or whether it was a consistently deepening sense of the power of language which led him to test his talent against the most severe and demanding of limits. What is, I think, clear, is that *the pivot of his work lies where biology spells extinction and language spells survival*. (209-10, my italics)

Morphet thus points to Livingstone’s tentative hope that, through the communicative power of the language of art, humankind’s ecological destructiveness may be apprehended, in both senses of the word. In Morphet’s words: “the volume reconstitutes the language of poetry as prime medium for the realization of the world” (210).

Morphet criticises the sometimes blunt or overexplicit tone, but praises the collection for its “depth at which the poems provide the poet and his readers with a measure of a life in this place at this time” (210). Duncan Brown, too, refers to the importance of place: “The crucial manoeuvre – evident in his previous work, but becoming explicit and pervasive here – is to refigure the place of humans in the broader context of biologically conceived, but nevertheless spiritual life” (2002: 98).

In his opening paragraph, Peter Sacks calls *A Littoral Zone* a superb collection which is as brilliant, versatile and enthralling as it is sober and menaced (1) and so immediately points to its underlying tensions. He also writes eloquently of Livingstone’s ecological preoccupation which is more sharply evident in *A Littoral Zone*:

Livingstone's originality itself undergirds one of his most unrelenting trials and gifts – the resistant staking out of kinds of constrained freedom – not of the ego, but of what we might call the individuated yet creaturely existence of us all. The poems remind us of what that existence might be, even as they lay out what complicates or actually threatens it. Admittedly, we've seen this in Livingstone's earlier work, but there is a new atmosphere and dramatic context to the current collection, so thoroughly marked and braced as it is by the combined threats of personal mortality, ecological waste, and historical cruelty. (1)

This is a penetrating comment on the collection's portrayal of humankind's position as both part of and apart from nature. Sacks turns to this theme in his analysis of "Reflections at Sunkist" where he grapples with the tension between humanity's evolutionary heritage and its consciousness which bestows freedom of choice:

[Livingstone] reflects on his long-standing 'disgust towards all coercion/ – the brain untameable as any ocean.' The comparison is crucial to the book at large, for it extends the Darwinian preface to suggest that our very capacity for freedom is linked with – perhaps even dependent on – the untamed natural force which is its origin. The inference follows that by literally serving the ocean, and by refreshing our deeper creatural memory, this biologist/poet is serving and seeking to preserve human freedom. (2-3)

Sacks is aware that this human freedom is a double-edged sword. Later he asks:

Does the resolution of the life and death question of free-will depend on remembering what we were, and the larger life of which we're still part? And are we indeed still a part of it, or just apart from it? ... Can there be a reconciliation between our kind and the natural world, or only a memorial tracing, as of vestigial gills ... (3)

Sacks thus identifies Livingstone's central preoccupation and indicates that the poems in *A Littoral Zone* incisively and repeatedly grapple with humankind's ambivalent (and destructive) position on this Earth. (This is not the only place in which Sacks uses questions in his review, pointing to the difficulty of interpreting the poetry.) He describes Livingstone's vision: "Deeper and more multiplicit than political orthodoxies allow, more honest than ideologies can employ, his perspectives are both radical and conservative in ways that go beyond the conventional political usage of such terms" (3). It is refreshing to read a critical review which does not insist on finding the political in Livingstone's work.

With reference to the littoral zone, Sacks argues: "It's not improbable that Livingstone's monitoring of the zone between man-made and natural worlds thus includes his patrolling of the equivalent zone at the centre of his own art" (5). He

suggests that much of Livingstone's design throughout the book is to restore mankind to its place in the natural world but later qualifies this view and teases his readers with "one last question":

In the absence of an orthodox religious vision, how is it that Livingstone's massively effacing or trans-human assurance of victory, for Gaia if not for mankind, is nonetheless so closely webbed to his often pained fidelity to the actual threatened pulse of human life and the creatures whose fate that general pulse has already too often decided for the worse? Can it be that his twinned devotions to the more than personal demands of science and the lyric, especially as these have so long converged on the natural world, have shaped, released or confirmed a force like that of an empirical faith in the ongoing life of the world?  
(5)

This "empirical faith" is a reformulation of Livingstone's philosophy of Romantic materialism. I would answer Sacks's question by saying that Livingstone's "empirical faith" rests in the Creative Principle which will ensure the continuation of the life of the planet. In his interview with Fazzini, Livingstone expresses his concern about man's destructiveness and hints at the possible extinction of the human race: "I think I am optimistic about the planet and its inherent life force but pessimistic about man – the ultimate polluter through his greed and numbers" (1990: 142). Brown explores this point and writes: "Livingstone explores kinship at the level of DNA linkages, as well as shared moral responsibility for each other and the planet" (2002: 105).

It is clear from the reviews which do not engage with the collection and those that do (notably Brown, Morphet and Sacks) that Livingstone has indeed given readers of *A Littoral Zone* a "fractious challenge" (the phrase is from "Scourings") and that anyone wanting to gain from their reading of the poems had best "buckle to" (from "A Darwinian Preface").

It is good thus to try in our imagination to give any form some advantage over another. Probably in no single instance should we know what to do, so as to succeed. It will convince us of our ignorance on the mutual relations of all organic beings; a conviction as necessary, as it seems to be difficult to acquire.

– *Charles Darwin*

## Chapter Five

### From Darwinism to Despair: the Material View in *A Littoral Zone*

Douglas Livingstone uses Darwin's elegant theory of natural selection as a metaphor for the inexorable biological process of "life pumping through as anyhow" (from "Cells" 35) and, in making his readers see that humanity is part of this relentless process of evolution, reminds us of our ecological position. But, in Livingstone's view, this position is in reality one of anthropocentrism and ecological destruction rather than of humanity knowing its place within the web of life. I therefore use the ecological themes of evolution and human abuse of nature (or ecological destruction) to explore Livingstone's physical element or his material view in *A Littoral Zone*.

#### Evolutionary theory

In *The Ascent of Science* Brian Silver makes this optimistic ecological claim:

[O]f all the revolutions caused by science, Darwin's struck most dangerously at the self-image of man. Apart from attacking the literal truth of Genesis, he had shown man to be an integral part of the animal kingdom. This historic turning point in our inner world is the factual justification for the increasing number of people who believe that we are not so much masters of this planet as part of it. (287)

Livingstone's examination of Darwinism becomes more pointed in *A Littoral Zone*. Four of its 35 poems deal directly with evolution, but they also explore the realms of contingency and teleology which lie beyond the careful elegance of Darwin's theory of natural selection. In these poems Livingstone uses evolutionary theory as a metaphor for the relentless and interconnected pattern of biological life and makes us aware of the ecological safety net which supports humankind's existence on Earth. His work is informed by James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis and by the theory of evolution and the philosophical issues connected with it.

Evolution and ecology are inextricably linked, for both take into account the effect of the environment on living creatures. In an article titled "Organism, Environment and Literary Representation", Joseph Carroll claims that "Evolutionists are of necessity ecological theorists – they understand biological relationships as complex, systemic

interactions within an ecosystem” (41). Jonathan Bate pushes the connection further: "At one level, the unit of natural selection is the gene, but at another it is the ecosystem; the species which destroys its ecosystem destroys itself" (2000: 229).

In opening the collection with “A Darwinian Preface”, Livingstone asks that we imagine where we came from (through an inexorable biological process of natural selection) and so questions humanity’s assumed position of superiority. In “Address to a Patrician at Station 8” we are made to view ourselves against the backdrop of prehistoric time, and in “Cells at Station 11” as dependent on the microbial function of cellular activity. Both views preclude anthropocentrism. This deeper, organic view of ourselves and the world is inordinately difficult to achieve, but may be the only way in which imagination and science can be synthesised. This is what the deep ecologists would term “an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life” (Naess in Sessions 151-2).

In the work as a whole Livingstone’s use of evolution is only one aspect of his scientific understanding of humankind’s biological and ecological position. In summarising Darwinism, Stephen Jay Gould says the “bare-bones mechanics” of natural selection are based on “three undeniable facts”: overproduction of offspring, variation, and heritability (2002:13). The biologist, novelist and essayist, Barbara Kingsolver, gives a simpler four-point summary of the evolutionary process:

1. Every organism produces more seeds or offspring than will actually survive to adulthood.
2. There is variation among the seeds or offspring.
3. Traits are passed down from one generation to the next.
4. In each generation the survivors succeed – that is; they survive – because they possess some advantage over the ones that don’t succeed, and *because* they survive, they will pass that advantage on to the next generation. Over time, therefore, the incidence of that trait will increase in the population. (95)

Kingsolver writes that Darwin’s theory of natural selection is “the greatest, simplest, most elegant logical construct ever to dawn across our curiosity about the workings of natural life. It is inarguable, and it explains everything” (96). But, does it ‘explain everything’? The problem of the so-called First Cause remained a mystery to Darwin himself, who admitted in a letter to J.D. Hooker: “My theology is a simple muddle; I cannot look at the universe as a result of blind chance, yet I can see no evidence of beneficent design, or indeed design of any kind, in the details” (Darwin 1958: 162). This

conundrum also plagues Livingstone and is explored in the poem “An Evolutionary Nod to God, Station 4”. Silver notes that most Darwinists believe that life on this planet originated by chance, although this is not an official part of the theory of evolution (271); but also says: “It is essential to realize that evolution is an automatic process; it involves no ‘will’ on the part of the organism involved, and the occurrence and type of a given variation ... is governed by chance” (273). Silver adds that: “Evolution has been taking place over a time scale that is so huge as to be beyond our ability to grasp” (274).

The aforementioned poems deal directly with the concept of evolution and “Low Tide at Station 20” (48) alludes to it. This poem ends: “I am a mere excrescence / on a giant’s spine dreamed up / by seas still veiled to fettered man”. The “giant’s spine” refers to the myth of Adamastor and, therefore, the continent of Africa, while the “seas” are Livingstone’s shorthand for his belief in a Creative Principle (the forming force of nature). These “veiled” seas allude to the primeval soup in which the Earth’s life-forms originated. The poet sees himself as an ecological disfigurement “fettered” by his incomprehension of humanity’s evolutionary history and origins. Livingstone’s admission of ignorance is evident in the poem’s unanswered question: “ARE THE CRE/A/TED PART OF THE / CRE/A/TOR OR SUN/DERED ON CRE/A/TION?” (lines 16-17). Charles Darwin problematises this position in his autobiography:

Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the reason and not with the feelings, impresses me as having much more weight. This follows from the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity of looking far backwards and far into futurity, as a result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.

...

The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic. (92-3 and 94)

Livingstone cannot rationally justify his belief in a Creative Principle. He referred to this dilemma as his “running war with the Almighty” (Robbins 1992: 52). The question in “Low Tide” can be linked to the fact that evolution only explains humankind’s orthogenesis, but does not offer a teleological answer (see Mayr 49, 66-7). “Low Tide at Station 20” marks the final stages of Livingstone’s journey, for the poem is placed towards the end of the collection.

*A Littoral Zone* opens with “**A Darwinian Preface**” (7). Evolution prefaces and informs the work. Written in the Petrarchan sonnet form (with a variation on the rhyme scheme), the poem contrasts the mechanical workings of the evolution of the human body with those aspects of our humanity which separate us from the biological process: bravery, love, and the intellectual operations of the neocortex. (The neocortex is evolutionarily the most recent part of the brain and it is here that higher cognitive functions like language are processed (Karmiloff-Smith in Rose 174).) The poem demonstrates various movements from the octave to the sestet: from night to day, from fear to determination, from the body to the heart, and from intimations of death to celebration of life. Each of these movements offers recognition or *anagnorisis*. The poem reflects the poet’s realisation that life does have purpose beyond the biological. This ‘meaning’ is contained in life itself and his purpose is reflected in the final phrase: “Best buckle to”.

#### A DARWINIAN PREFACE

The crab, the clot, the muzzle or the knife:  
 patiently, the nocturnal terrorisms  
 stalk. Even the brave know hardly of rest,  
 aware a body’s little but a glove  
 stretched from metatarsals to neocortex  
 on a stiffening frame. A hand as strange  
 clenches on coiled lengths of fear: that old vortex  
 steeled by the usual mundane heroisms.  
 Your heart wins armour from confronting life,  
 yet stays unlatched, anticipating love.  
 Each dawn claims thanks and welcome, and gets blessed.  
 Perhaps the sea indeed did suckle you  
 through all its prisms, its diurnal range.  
 There is no help for it. Best buckle to.

Most of the literary critics point to pertinent aspects of “A Darwinian Preface”, but do not offer a comprehensive analysis. Sacks’ review does not link the poem to evolutionary theory, but he does say: “It is redolent with a terse fortitude, as well as with a characteristic alliance of scientific precision, poetic élan, and stoicism under siege” (1-2). Morphet concentrates on the poem’s play between life and death and its evolutionary framework: “The evolutionary pattern that is the substratum of the poem both exposes and sustains the life of the body and the movements of consciousness” (209). Duncan Brown singles out the final eight lines and claims they are “as close to a credo as



anything Livingstone has written” (2002: 104), but does not explain why he says this.

Dirk Klopfer, in arguing that Livingstone depicts Africa as a place of predatory violence, says this poem offers “the hope of love” through the imagery of the knight’s armour and that this counters “the fact that life is predatory” (1997: 44).

The poem reflects Livingstone’s belief in Darwinism, his need for purpose in the face of contingency, and the role of the imagination in attaining this purpose. His technical acuity is evident here as throughout the collection. The Petrarchan form signifies order and pattern, but a variation of the traditional rhyme scheme reflects the contingency or chance which governs the process of natural selection. The octave explores the problem of fear and the sestet offers a resolution through determinedness. The sonnet as lyric traditionally uses the first person pronoun, but Livingstone replaces this with the distancing device of the second person pronoun *your* (line 9) and *you* (line 12).

The opening line’s regular iambic pentameter provides a scaffold for the list of apparently disparate objects. What is the connection between the crab, clot, muzzle and knife? They are all linked by the definite article “the”, but “or” separates the knife (a manmade object which I read as a trope for the faculty of reason which resides in the human neocortex) from the previous three natural objects. Given the title’s reference to Darwinism, these four objects represent the adaptive process (or variation) which constitutes natural selection.<sup>29</sup> The clot in this aspect is read as a coagulated mass of material and the muzzle as that of an animal. For the poet, they belong to a set of “nocturnal terrorisms” (line 2), an organised system of intimidation which is part of a recurring nightmare. If the four objects are read as a trope for the evolutionary process, then it is the contingency of existence which terrifies the poet. Metaphorically, each of the four objects also represents danger, or death, through the pincers of the crab, thrombosis induced by a blood clot, the muzzle of a gun, and the cutting sharpness of the knife. Both the evolutionary implications and the mechanical dangers contained in the four objects “patiently ... stalk” (lines 1 and 2) the consciousness of the speaker.

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<sup>29</sup> Stephen Jay Gould defines this as “(1) *agency*, or organismal struggle as the appropriate (and nearly exclusive) level of operation for natural selection [and] (2) *efficacy*, or natural selection as the creative force of evolutionary change (with complexly co-ordinated sequelae of inferred principles about the nature of variation...)” (2002: 59, my underlining).

He then refers to “the brave” (line 3) who also do not sleep soundly because they are aware of the aging process or frailty of the human body as a “stiffening frame” (line 6). If “frame” is interpreted as a biological framework the “stiffening frame” may be read as a trope for the end of an evolutionary road for humankind. The human body is described as “little but a glove / stretched from metatarsals to neocortex” (lines 4-5). Here the cadence of Shakespearean language is juxtaposed with scientific classification. The insignificance of the human body is underpinned by the allusion to the skeleton as a symbol of death and to an evolutionary “frame”.

This idea of fear is then explicitly examined. The hand – “as strange” as the human skeleton (described as the “stiffening frame” in the same line) – has miraculously emerged from the evolutionary ‘frame’. The hand “clenches on coiled lengths of fear” (line 7). The extra syllable in each of lines 7 and 8 upsets the iambic pentameter pattern, thus reflecting the irrationality of fear through a loss of control. The “coiled lengths” both refer to the human intestines or gut and evoke the archetypal image of the serpent. At the same time, the image contains both the convoluted mysteriousness of fear and the potential for action through the image of an unsprung spring. This fear is, however, confronted. The hand is made to “clench” it. The nature of the fear is further elucidated through “that old vortex” which carries connotations of both familiarity and remorselessness through the image of a whirlwind or whirlpool. But, like the coiled lengths, this vortex is confronted through what the poet calls “usual mundane heroisms”. The octave ends on a note of resolution: the way to face fear is to carry on regardless or “buckle to” (line 14).

At the end of the octave the rhyme of the poem starts coming into play, with heroisms linked to terrorisms and vortex to neocortex. The traditional Petrarchan rhyme scheme has been altered to delay the reader’s experience of the rhyming pattern. The octave examines three ideas, reflected in the three sentences: the fear of death; the frailty and insignificance of the human body; and fear itself. The second and third sentences start in the middle of a line, so the reader is led from one to the other and is forced to confront the links between death, aging and fear. Each sentence has a stressed and alliterated key word – “stalk”, “stretched” and “steeled” – placed at the beginning of a line to upset the iambic pattern.

The sestet explores the result of these “mundane heroisms”. The conquering of fear is indicated at the poem’s volta by “Your heart wins” (line 9). The poet, in referring to himself in the second person, objectifies his action and evokes a general application to the human condition. The fears of the octave (induced by awareness of the body’s frailty) are assuaged by the workings of the heart, but not without ambiguity. The participial phrase “confronting life” either refers to the predatory, biological process of life itself or (if “confronting” is read as the main verb) to the act of facing up to life. In either case, his protection against life is his human emotion. Like the crab of the first line he has a protective shell or “armour”, but his is earned through the workings of his heart. He leaves the armour “unlatched” or open to the possibility of love. Does he mean human love or Edward O. Wilson’s concept of biophilia? In an earlier poem, “Loving” (*RB* 32), Livingstone conflates eros and biophilia: “Loving you I love ... an unsullied earth” and offers love as the key to an ecological understanding of human existence. In “A Darwinian Preface” he opens himself to the Romantic ideal of the love of nature or biophilia. Reverence towards the Earth is evident: “Each dawn claims thanks and welcome, and gets blessed” (line 11). The “dawn” is a metaphor for both nature and continuing life. Livingstone intimates, through the passive form of “gets blessed”, that his reverence is beyond his control. This echoes the Romantic idea of the sublime and the power of nature to bless its communicant. In “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey”, Wordsworth introduces what he calls “that serene and blessed mood” as an

... aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened ...

The deep ecologists would say that Livingstone shows an atunement with wild nature. In *Wild Ideas*, David Rothenberg likewise argues: “We may be part of nature, but what we are part of remains larger than us, and deserves deference and enough respect so that we may flourish unimpeded – if we can, given that so much damage [to the Earth] has already been done” (xv).

But reverence is only part of Livingstone’s portrayal of man’s relationship to nature in this poem. Evolutionary theory is also contrasted with the human emotion of love. This tension between human biology and human consciousness creates an oscillating effect in the poem. It is through imagination that this tension may be resolved.

The poem arguably alludes to Don Quixote through “armour”, “heroisms”, “anticipating love” and “best buckle to”, and thus to an imaginative capacity for eccentric belief and chivalric compassion which could bridge the gap between the mind and the heart.

This prefatory poem reflects Livingstone’s preoccupation with the littoral zone where the physical and the psychic can come together. In “*Perhaps the sea indeed did suckle you*” (my italics) he is alluding, while retaining some doubt, to the mystery of life’s First Cause and, by implication, the theme of fear associated with not knowing one’s origin or teleology. Humankind’s possible provenance in the sea<sup>30</sup> has bred – along with the crab – the possibility of our “strange” future with our spiritual sense of blessedness, our “diurnal” hopes as well as our “nocturnal” fears.

This prefatory poem anticipates the following lines from the collection’s final poem, “Road Back” (60):

Today, the sea  
– your old ally against psychic apathy,  
who saves your soul from atrophy –  
was up to her ancient tricks and teased:  
“Child of my loins, conceived and born  
in solitude, here’s comfort for your grave substance.”

There’s her obverse face: a negligence verging  
without cruelty on maternal indifference.  
No other course before such wiles  
– usually limned by the sun or the moon –  
but to accept the gage and buckle to...

In these final stanzas of “Road Back” the “maternal” sea image evokes humankind’s primordial past. The phrase “buckle to” is reiterated, emphasising the human need for purpose, despite nature’s indifference and the contingency of existence. Julia Martin too notes that the collection’s “last poem recalls the initiatives of the first” (1999: 238). She offers an astute and “curiously comforting” (*ibid.*) interpretation of Livingstone’s view of the human race’s position on Earth:

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<sup>30</sup> In *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin concluded that humanity is descended from an aquatic animal: In the dim obscurity of the past we can see that the early progenitor of all Vertebrata must have been an aquatic animal provided with branchiae, with the two sexes united in the same individual, and with the most important organs of the body (such as the brain and heart) imperfectly or not at all developed. (in Appleman 199).

[W]hile human survival may be contingent, the systems of life prevail. Not absolute truths, or fundamentalist doctrines, but the endlessly changing planetary biosphere remains the only ground on which we can stand, the only sea in which we can swim. The Earth is Gaia, a mythic parent who contains and transcends our omnipotent strivings and desire. In a sense, the sea needs no saving. It is the sea, ‘your old ally against psychic apathy, / who saves your soul from atrophy’. It is the sea whose life, and our concern for it, saves *us*. (*ibid.*)

Significantly, the only two poems in *A Littoral Zone* which use the sonnet form both deal directly with evolution. In “**An Evolutionary Nod to God: Station 4**” (18) Livingstone admits that we cannot know the ultimate origin of things. Stephen Jay Gould, quoting extensively from Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, makes this same point:

We must ... specify the kinds of questions that *cannot* be answered. Many revealing statements in the *Origin* circumscribe the proper realm of historical inference by abjuring what cannot be known, or usefully comprehended under current limits. Darwin, for example, and following Hutton, Lyell and many other great thinkers, foreswore (as beyond the realm of science) all inquiry in the ultimate origins of things. (2002:101)

For Livingstone, too, the Creative Principle is “enigmatic” (line 2) and “evades the puppet-master’s role” (line 12). The poem’s three quatrains, which adhere to the Shakespearean sonnet form, offer detailed explanations of the biological process behind the evolution of life-forms. The epigrammatic turn in the concluding couplet hints at the poet’s inability to comprehend his origins. He can only intuit his and humanity’s beginnings: “vestiges in me / recall a time I once breathed in its sea”. The final lines use Livingstone’s recurring trope of the sea and contain the poem’s first use of the personal pronoun.

The first quatrain contains an implied question and echoes the “nod” which Livingstone gives to God in the title of the poem.<sup>31</sup> He states that “an enigmatic principle” (line 2) formed the first cells and so started the evolutionary process. The double stress on “formed cells” emphasises a conscious act by a creator, echoed in line

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<sup>31</sup> Idle curiosity makes we wonder if Livingstone owes the title of this poem to the following extract from *The Ages of Gaia*: “Hugh Montefiore, then Bishop of Birmingham ... asked which I thought came first, life or Gaia. My attempts to answer this question led to a correspondence... I suspect that some cosmologists are similarly visited by enquiries from those who imagine them to be at least *on nodding terms with God*” (Lovelock 1995: 191-2, my italics).

four by “informed”. The principle of creation, “informed with more ahead than heavens or hells” (line 4), thus sets in motion the future of life on the Earth.

The second quatrain offers a description of how life-forms evolved. The hand of the creator is still evident for it is said to be “irradiating slime-flecks day by day” (line 5) and “it watched (with love?)” (line 6) the process of mutation and transformation of these bits of slime from the “primeval soups” (line 8) into viable life-forms with DNA. But the enigmatic principle’s formative power or active participation appears to wane. It now stands back and watches the process.

The dense final quatrain deals with evolutionary contingency and “mistakes” (line 10) or “unstrung mutations” which led to evolutionary nightmares or monsters which did not survive because “Selection took its toll” (line 10). Selection, the basic principle of Darwinism, is shown to be a powerful levelling force, yet it does not have full control over free-will or the evolution of human consciousness. “Selection took its toll: / free-will incurs some debts. The debts get paid” (lines 10-12) may be read as a prediction of the future extinction of the human race or as a mistake made by the creator. The lines may also be read as an ecological statement; that humankind, with its free will, is responsible for the fate of the Earth. In either case, the process of Darwinian selection supersedes the role of the “puppet-master” (line 12). Thus, the poem claims, the “enigmatic principle” is not a controlling or omnipotent force.

The concluding couplet, in its switch to a personal statement, reflects the poet’s sense of disconnection from the ‘life force’. He is “far from its image” (line 13). Given the context, this is an allusion to Genesis: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...” (Gen 1:26). The poet cannot comprehend the idea of God, yet there are “vestiges” in him which still connect with his origins, “a time I once breathed in its sea” (line 14), where “its” refers to the Creative or “enigmatic principle”.

The implied question of whether the poet, and also humankind, owes its initial origin to a creator is left open. This is the “nod to God”. The poem offers a clear account of the process of evolution but hangs a question mark over the creationist exploration of origins.

**“Address to a Patrician at Station 8”** (24) is also about origins, but from the Darwinian perspective that all life-forms are descended from a common ancestor. It does not explore the idea of a creator, but does express awe at the unfolding pattern of life.

The poem uses the coelacanth, an ancient fish discovered in the Indian Ocean in 1938 and named *Latimeria chalumnae*, as a symbolic progenitor. Prior to its ‘discovery’ it was believed that the coelacanth was extinct and only existed in fossil form. Ironically, it was only more recently and after the writing of this poem (1987) that the coelacanth was found to be living off the KwaZulu Natal coast.

Livingstone outlines the coelacanth’s lineage, states that it is “cousin” (line 8) to creatures from the early Devonian period, and that these creatures of the sea are the forefathers of present humanity and all living creatures. The poem, particularly the final stanza, is about the interconnectedness of life on Earth. This idea is explored across the vast sweep of primordial time and, in taking us on a retrospective journey of 400 million years, Livingstone forces us to confront both our insignificance and the miracle of our existence. The final words of the poem, “everyone I know”, refer to all living creatures, and the poet suggests that the human race was spawned when the fathers of the coelacanth were “squirting on eggs”. Livingstone simultaneously pokes fun at human anthropocentrism and shows that the origin of life is an inexplicable miracle. He implies humankind’s provenance was not divinely ordained, but is part of the same spawning process which brought about other life-forms. This puts humankind firmly in its place, showing that we do not hold a privileged position in the natural order of things. The poem also assumes an aquatic stage in human evolution, a recurrent theme in Livingstone’s work.

Neil Evernden explores the ecological concept of interconnectedness in *The Natural Alien*. He claims that humanity is guilty of anthropocentrism through our search for boundaries or clear distinctions between ourselves and the rest of the natural world:

[O]ur assumptions of separateness are unacceptably simplistic, and ... we might more closely approximate the facts of existence by regarding ourselves less as objects than as sets of relationships, or as processes in time rather than as static forms. (40)

Livingstone’s poem, with its strange and ancient fish as metaphor for interrelatedness, echoes this plea for humanity to see itself as part of the ‘process in time’. Evernden laments human ecological ignorance or the inability to comprehend the myriad interconnections which underpin the physical world:

But the implications of an interrelated world are much greater than this. It is not a case of a world yet to be visualized but of a world which defies simple vision. And that is much harder to accept, or even to see the need to accept. Yet when we

examine our own personal understanding of the world, we may find that this concept is both necessary and familiar. (41)

Does Livingstone's poem help us both to visualise an interrelated world and to examine our understanding of this world? I believe it does. Its deeply ecological theme is not immediately apparent because this concept of interrelatedness is so hard to comprehend and describe. Livingstone uses ironic humour to convey this message – it takes a leap of imagination (or humour) to see the coelacanth as our progenitor.

“Address to a Patrician” takes the form of an address where the fish is given the status of patrician, a reference to a Roman founding father. The title contains the idea of a progenitor and of ancient lineage as well as the implied power which a patrician holds over the populace. The forms of address, placed at the beginning of each stanza, include: “old pea-brained survivor / – *Latimeria chalumnae*”, “early Devonian cousin”, “Bwana Coelacanth” (line 12), “ancient funny-bone of God”, and “fish from long ago”. In this series of addresses, the poem mimics a praise song, an African ‘izibongo’. Each stanza examines the ancient fish from a slightly different angle, but throughout the poem its “patrician” or ancient status is persistently emphasised. Hence, in stanza three Livingstone lauds the fish's royal status and its miraculous stasis. The parenthetical statement, “– may your shadow never grow less –” (line 16), is an evocation to the fish, literally, to remain as or where it is. The phrase is frequently used as a toast and is a wish for prosperity and happiness (OED). By implication, this is also an invocation to the thwarting of mutability.

The interconnectedness of life on Earth – indicated in the final lines “your fathers squirting on eggs / to sire everyone I know” – evokes awe in the poet. He sees this as an even greater miracle than either the coelacanth's survival of continental drift or its “changeless chinless lineage” (line 26). The Earth's re-formation and the cataclysmic force of continental drift are poetically described: “when waves clawed 200 metres up / or below today's makeshift shores” (lines 24-5). What seems to be the solid physical landscape is really “makeshift” and is a sombre reminder of the inevitability of change, whereas the coelacanth is lauded for its changelessness in a changing world.

In the above poems Livingstone explores the Darwinian concepts of selection and descent from a common ancestor and, particularly in “An Evolutionary Nod to God”, grapples with the ultimate cause behind life on Earth. “Cells at Station 11” (35)



examines evolution at cellular level. It is also important for its exploration of human purpose, for it demonstrates the limitations of human freedom and so contradicts the sentiments expressed in the sestet of "A Darwinian Preface". The poem uses as its base the evolution of bacteria into mitochondria, thus examining the interconnectedness of biological life from a microscopic perspective. The poem is about humanity's puny efforts to escape or deny our "interned energies" (line 30), the mitochondria cells which process energy and thus keep us alive. It implies that we are merely sets of cells, and, in the end, this is all we can rely on.<sup>32</sup> Human-constructed concepts like duty, ethics, autonomy, faithlessness and faith, scripture or religion, history, brotherhood and love pale into insignificance when life is viewed from a microbiological perspective. The poem concentrates on the physical aspect of being human, it is the "silent mitochondria" (line 16), that keep us alive, because without them our bodies would not be able to process energy from food molecules and we would die (Dawkins 1995: 45). This poem shows that despite our conscious actions, our claims to "autonomy" (line 22), we are held hostage by our biological structure.

Previous critics have not grappled with the full import of "Cells". Brown's review of the poem is short and superficial. He focuses on the poet's ethical and moral dilemma at examining the cell from the corpse and refers to "cellular fratricide" (99) to explain the final stanza's "Woe will betide, betimes, the man / who kills his brother". Sacks concentrates on this poem's treatment of free-will and calls it a "clenched meditation on choice and fate" (line 3). He does not examine its scientific backbone and it is not clear if by "fate" he means biological fate.

"Cells" takes the form of a meditation sparked by the sighting of a corpse in the sea. Livingstone, as scientist, takes a sample from the water, hoping that it will contain a cell from the repellent corpse, "that out there" (line 10), and looks forward to examining the contents of the cell through the miraculous voyeurism of the microscope. This intention to probe leads him into the third and central stanza which examines the power of the mitochondrion, an organelle that primarily functions to store and release energy

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<sup>32</sup> Silver, in trying scientifically to define life (and admitting failure), asks "What is a cell?" and answers: "A cell is an organized dissipative system of molecules, often capable of reproduction... In practical terms it looks as though *the unit of life is the cell*" (323). Lynn Margulis makes this point: "Whether bacterial or nucleated, the units of life are cells" (88).

through the Krebs cycle and is present (usually in great numbers) in the cytoplasm of most cells (OED). The final two stanzas are a meditation on humanity's mistaken claim to freedom in the face of the power of the mitochondria or "interned energies" (line 30).

The central stanza hints at the intricate and immense complexity of humanity's biological universe. Just as the stellar universe is mostly unmapped and incomprehensible to humanity, so is our biological structure. I concentrate on this stanza for it reflects remorseless cellular activity and thus provides an argument for the insignificance of human control explored in the final two stanzas:

Billion year-old invaders  
 – the silent mitochondria –  
 propel our mobile towers, shared cells  
 sparking, colonized by vandals:  
 a fifth column of DNA  
 in interstellar sequences,  
 bland in their promiscuity.

Livingstone explores the function of mitochondria through the trope of colonisation. They are "invaders" (line 15) and "vandals" (line 18). There is a scientific explanation for his use of these words. Bacteria first invaded other cells and then became mitochondria.<sup>33</sup> These mitochondria were formed billions of years ago when they first entered all living cells – "[they] are to be found in every cell of every plant, animal, fungus – every organism with nucleated cells" (Dennett 86).<sup>34</sup> Mitochondria have been called the power station (Dawkins 1995: 45) or the oxygen-processing energy-factories

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<sup>33</sup> Daniel Dennett explains: "At the time of the eukaryotic revolution, if we look in just the right place, we will see a bacterium entering the rudimentary body of some other prokaryote to create the first eukaryote. Its progeny all have a dual inheritance – they contain two entirely independent DNA sequences, one of the host cell and another for the 'parasite', sharing its fate with its host's, and linking the fate of all its descendants (now on their way to becoming benign resident mitochondria) to the fate of the cells they will inhabit, the descendants of the cell first invaded" (90).

<sup>34</sup> The scientific community only became aware of the existence of mitochondria when Lynn Margulis published her work *Symbiosis in Cell Evolution* (1981). Daniel Dennett gives a synopsis of her theory: [O]ne day, according to Lynn Margulis' wonderful story (1981), some prokaryotes were invaded by parasites of sorts, and this turned out to be a blessing in disguise, for, whereas parasites are – by definition – deleterious to the fitness of their hosts, these invaders turned out to be beneficial, and hence were *symbionts* but not parasites. They and those they invaded became more like *commensals* – literally, from the Latin, organisms that feed at the same table – or *mutualists*, benefiting from each other's company. They joined forces, creating a revolutionary new kind of entity, a eukaryotic cell. This opened up the Vast space of possibilities we know as multicellular life, a space previously unimaginable, to the say the least; prokaryotes are no doubt clueless on all topics. (340)

(Dennett 86) which “propel” the “mobile towers” of the human body. Livingstone calls mitochondria “shared cells” (line 17) because they are part of multicellular life.<sup>35</sup> The “mobile towers” is a metaphor for moving human beings. The word tower alludes, literally, to the fact that we are upright but also suggests that we see ourselves as both isolated from our biological functions and defensive of our assumed autonomy. But, humans as “mobile towers” are “colonised by vandals” (line 18). The mitochondria are invaders or vandals (an ironic reference to the Germanic Vandals who invaded new lands and were seen as destroyers of property) because they are not part of our inherent DNA, but are “a fifth column of DNA” (line 19). Mitochondria have their own DNA (Dawkins 1995: 46). The “interstellar sequences” refer to the mitochondria which are found between the sequences of human DNA. In the final line of the stanza the colonising mitochondria are said to be “bland in their promiscuity” (line 20). The oxymoron in this phrase accentuates the dispassionate but indiscriminate processes of nature. The promiscuity of the mitochondria (which do not reproduce sexually, but by division of cells) links with the act of colonisation, for both imply an act of possession, a strong underlying motif in this stanza. Livingstone is both ironically portraying the symbiotic function of the mitochondria and satirising humanity’s inability to accept a symbiotic relationship or mutuality with bacteria.

The final two stanzas explore humanity’s mistaken claim to freedom. We “claim autonomy” (line 22) but, in fact, are held hostage *and* are sustained by the myriad mitochondria which lurk in our cells and give us the energy to exist:

Sometimes we claim autonomy,  
 yet a ruthless fidelity  
 – to what self? – lies coiled at the heart  
 of our needy faithlessnesses.  
 The betrayals affirm our lives  
 in death: a death unfazed by faith,  
 life pumping through us anyhow.

The penultimate stanza examines the concepts of autonomy, faith, life and death – the big ones – and finds no answers. All it offers is the biological certainty of “life pumping

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Dawkins explains: “Two billion years ago, the remote ancestors of mitochondria were free-living bacteria. Together with other bacteria of different kinds, they took up residence inside larger cells. The resulting community of (‘prokaryotic’) bacteria became the large (‘eukaryotic’) cell we call our own. Each one of us is a community of a hundred million million mutually dependent eukaryotic cells” (1995:45-6).

through us anyhow” (line 28). The final stanza reiterates the mistaken human claim to freedom (“We think we choose”) which is countered by the “ruthless fidelity” of the mitochondria and, by implication, nature itself.

Thus, Livingstone’s scientific knowledge has led him to a position of extreme scepticism. He claims to find no purpose beyond the biological. Yet, paradoxically, he resorts to Biblical-like prophecy at the end of the poem: “Woe will betide, betimes, the man / who kills his brother: burns shared cells”. Despite his apparent denial of human purpose and autonomy, Livingstone nevertheless enunciates a moral principle here. Homo sapiens was not born with knowledge of its internal, biological workings. Science has given us some knowledge and, in the process, has “damned” us to “faithlessness” where we can no longer trust “scripture” and “decreed histories”. Yet Livingstone indicates that without an ethical system, humankind is left floundering in a state of “needy faithlessnesses” (line 34). Because the mitochondria are cells *and* energy-makers, they are an apposite organism for examining the paradoxes within the physical and psychic process of life.

In concluding my discussion of “Cells”, I return to “Low Tide at Station 20” where nature’s inexorable power over life and death is evident in the poem’s first refrain: “AF/RI/CA / AF/RI/CA HOW MAN/Y OF YOUR / CHIL/DREN WILL YOU KILL TO/DAY?” (lines 7-9). But, unlike in “Cells”, Livingstone here claims some autonomy. He believes he is “enough the captain of my soul” (line 14) to counter nature’s power with the question: “ARE THE CRE/A/TED PART OF THE / CRE/A/TOR OR SUN/DERED ON CRE/A/TION?” (line 16-18). He thus pits his spiritual questing and his rationality (evident in his ability to question) against nature’s power. But, despite this freedom, he again confronts faithlessness in the poem’s third refrain: “OF ALL THE DEATHS / THE WORST MUST BE THE LOSS OF FAITH” (lines 19-20). He concludes that he is nature’s “mere excrescence” and so explains the cause of his “old hopeless griefs” (line 10).

I have argued that Livingstone uses evolutionary theory as a lens through which to view and explain the intricate web of life on Earth. But, for him, scientific knowledge is not enough. He conflates the physical and the psychic by using evolutionary theory as a metaphor for the miracle of life, hence his belief in a Creative Principle and in the power of metaphor. Perhaps the human ability to make metaphors is the only way of

reconnecting with the Earth and finding or rediscovering the human race's proper sense of place on the planet? Livingstone's Creative Principle is not connected to a First Cause. He uses Darwinism or "continuing life" as the underlying base for his ecological view of the world, but concedes that there are no teleological answers. John Fowles, under the heading "'God'" in *The Aristos*, says: "The most we shall ever learn is why existence is *as it is*; why it requires such laws and such constituents to continue. We shall never learn ultimately why it is" (25). This is also Livingstone's position.

Fowles has this to say about the "The Contingency of Matter" and the evolutionary process:

From our very special human standpoint some changes in the form of matter – such as the leap in anthropoid brain size, the appearance of self-consciousness, the discovery of tools, of language – are unmistakable evidence of some beneficent universal intention towards us. But all this might appear, to some hypothetical outside observer, a mere result of the effects of time on matter. He would not see it in terms of *progress* ... but in terms of *process*. (27)

Livingstone oscillated between his belief in a Creative Principle and the bleak realism of an "outside observer" or objective scientist. I argue that he attempts to escape the scepticism inherent in the second view, but that he, too, does not see human evolution in terms of progress.

### **Humankind's abuse of nature and ecological destruction**

As "Cells" demonstrates, the human refusal (or inability) to see itself as part of nature leads to a position of alienation and "needy faithlessnesses". In his earlier work Livingstone explores the ambivalent position of man as both part of and apart from nature and seeks a reconciliation through the pastoral, or an ideal state of ecological equilibrium. In *A Littoral Zone* man's ambivalent relationship towards nature does not disappear, but Livingstone becomes more realistic and sceptical in his portrayal of this ambivalence. The collection repeatedly examines humankind's alienation from and abuse of nature. In chapter three I argued that the earlier poems reflect, amongst others, the themes of (a) humankind's ambivalent relationship to nature and (b) ecological destruction. While these two themes do overlap in the earlier work, the outright destructiveness of human abuse of the Earth (as opposed to a more unconscious separation from nature) is evident in the earlier poems. In *A Littoral Zone* wanton misuse of natural resources is strongly

evident. The theme of humankind as part of nature, or the possibility of a symbiotic relationship between the two, disappears and is replaced by ecological despair. However, symbiosis is mentioned twice in the anthology: in a tone of yearning in “Eland About Station 17” where Livingstone refers to the now marginalized San as “symbiotic man about / the business of getting on with the earth” (lines 21-2) and as a dire warning of humanity’s future extinction in “Road Back” where the option is given as “symbiosis or death” (line 36) because “The planet counterattacks. / Its choice is plain: kill or be killed” (lines 34-5).

Humankind’s abuse of nature is explored through pollution of the Earth (“Christmas Chefs at Station 1a”), materialistic concerns (“Old Harbour”), cruelty towards animals (“Beach Terminal”, “Bad Run at King’s Rest” and “Carnivores at Station 22”) and abuse of other human beings in, amongst others, the holocaust poems “South Beach Transients” and “The Metallic Aviator”. Ecological destruction through the erosion of social structures is strongly evident in “Eland About Station 17” and “Children at Station 16”.

In “**Christmas Chefs at Station 1a**” (12) the disgusting mess left on the beach after a Christmas party causes Livingstone to ponder humanity’s imperfections. The tone of the poem moves from disgust at the “incredible” mess on the beach to despair in the second and final stanza where he laments humankind’s inability to attain “truth” (line 12). He implies that humanity’s psychic evolution is still in its infancy and that we need to strive (line 15) to attain the following ideals:

The approximation to justice,  
the perfectability of man,  
the conservation of beauty,  
the final attainment of truth  
(lines 9-12)

The argument in these lines is that if humankind could approximate the idea of justice, if we could understand that man contains the possibility of perfection, and if we could appreciate and therefore conserve beauty (or live ecologically), then we would finally arrive at “truth”. But these are “salients that ever evade” our consciousness (line 13). The final three lines explore this ‘but’. The problem is humanity’s youth, or ignorance, which precludes responsibility. Even though the apprehension of these eternal verities is “salient”, is a prominent if not vital part of our consciousness, we are too stupid or

ignorant or arrogant to see this. Yet we are still aware. This is “part of our yoke in being human” (line 14). The final line, “part of the joke on our youth”, refers to humankind’s newly evolved consciousness which has not yet learnt ecological sensibility. Is it a cosmic joke that we have been given the miracle of life on Earth and, in our ignorance or “youth”, are systematically destroying the source of our existence? A sense of duty could, perhaps, save us. But Livingstone implies that we are in danger of losing this as well: “the striving still *almost* a duty” (line 15, my emphasis). The parallelism and internal rhyme of “part of our yoke” (line 14) and “part of the joke” (line 16) emphasises both the inner human struggle and the external restrictions of our evolutionary adolescence. The ideal of “the perfectability of man” is contrasted with the human struggle to reach understanding. There is a movement from “our” to “the” in the pattern. We possess the yoke, but the joke is imposed from the outside.

Writing in the 1960s, the biologist Julian Huxley gives a positive (if not opposite) view of the human capacity to attain ‘truth’:

[T]he evolution of mind or sentiency is an extremely rare event in the vast meaninglessness of the insentient universe, and man’s particular brand of sentiency may well be unique. But in any case he is highly significant. He is a reminder of the existence, here and there, in the quantitative vastness of cosmic matter and its energy-equivalents, or a trend towards mind, with its accompaniment of quality and richness of existence; and, what is more, a proof of the importance of kind and quality in the all-embracing evolutionary process.

It is only through possessing a mind that he has become the dominant portion of this planet and the agent responsible for its future evolution; and it will only be by the right use of that mind that he will be able to exercise that responsibility rightly. He could all too readily be a failure in the job; he will only succeed if he faces it consciously and if he uses all his mental resources – knowledge and reason, imagination and sensitivity, capacities for wonder and love, for comprehension and compassion, for spiritual aspiration and moral effort. (78)

“Christmas Chefs”, one of the opening poems in the collection, uses a seemingly small act of pollution – the aftermath of a beach party – to pinpoint broader human ecological ignorance. The sordidness of the scene with its human vomit and excrement as well as the litter of crushed beer cans and cartons graphically illustrates human abuse of natural surroundings. This is further symptomatic of a form of global human self-abuse.

Through exposing human profiteering and greed in “Old Harbour”, “Beach Terminal” and “Bad Run at King’s Rest”, Livingstone offers another view of the divide between humankind and nature. As discussed in chapter three (see p 76), nature is a

tricky term with layered meanings and the human relationship with nature is highly complex. It is not for nothing that Raymond Williams links the complexity of the word nature to the major variations in human thought (1976: 189). The OED defines nature as “The creative and regulative physical power conceived of as operating in the material world and as the immediate cause of all its phenomena... these phenomena collectively”. Jonathan Bate points out that this part of the definition would include humankind (2000: 33). The dictionary definition of nature also glosses: “the material world; specifically, plants, animals, and other features of the earth itself, as opposed to humans or human creations or civilization”. This part of the definition indicates an opposition between humans and their “civilization” and the physical world of nature. Livingstone here specifically explores this opposition. Through the actions of the profiteers and perpetrators of cruelty on the one hand, and through the response of the poet on the other, these poems offer a dialectic. The actions of the perpetrators show that society is the negation of nature (Bate 32) and that nature is regarded by humans as the “Other” (35). Bate (quoting Rousseau) argues that “conscience” is the “voice of nature” working within us (35). In the above poems Livingstone, in effect, speaks for voiceless nature and so pricks the human conscience. Through the Romantic sublime he is reading the voice of nature and communicating on its behalf. Nature is here seen as something beyond the material chemical processes of life and thus acquires a voice; it is imaginatively personified.

In discussing the opposition between man and nature and a possible panacea to this alienation, Bate argues that:

Society is the negation of nature. The work of the thinker is to negate the negation, to accuse civilization, which is characterized by its negativity with respect to nature. (32)

Livingstone may be seen as the “thinker” who does “accuse civilization” in these poems. His accusation is in particular against profit-making and its consequent cruelty.

One of the themes of “**Old Harbour**” (26) is human alienation from nature through sea trafficking for profit. The personified harbour, portrayed as an empty nurturer, is depicted as the matriarch of a materialistic world. The harbour is an impostor, a deceiving mother figure who is “pretending suckle” (lines 1 and 22) and is “aborting nurture” (line 19). For Livingstone, the true mother or Creative Principle is embodied in the sea itself. Does this poem imply that true nurture can only be found in nature itself?



This densely layered poem explores the questing of the men who set sail from the harbour. Their metaphorical destinations are contained in the highly symbolic cities of “Byzantium and Samarkand” (lines 4 and 24) which, apart from being ancient trade centres, also represent art and the spiritual (see W.B. Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium”). These men are “seeking life, seeking love” (line 11). The Durban-based poets Fernando Pessoa and Roy Campbell are included in the group of seekers in “How many a Fernando, how many a Roy” (line 13). The poetic process therefore forms part of this quest for spiritual fulfilment.

This poem’s examination of the misuse of nature through materialistic greed and the resultant abortive nurture is strongly evident in the penultimate stanza. The harbour itself is an inanimate object and is therefore powerless. The real subject of the poem is the human greed and human longing which the harbour fosters. In personifying the harbour Livingstone directs his venom at the materialistic as a constructed process. If he were to rail at human greed, the poem would not carry the same import.

Another poem which exposes human greed is “**Beach Terminal**” (36). This poem recounts the butchering which occurred at the now closed whaling station. The following poem in the sequence, “**Bad Run at King’s Rest**” (37), tells the story of a mauled loggerhead turtle. In these poems humanity’s self-imposed alienation from nature is portrayed through the exploitation of the whales and the cruelty towards the loggerhead turtle. Human profit-seeking and cruelty become cousins in “Beach Terminal”. The poems are unsentimental yet powerful accounts. Livingstone makes the reader acutely aware of the wantonness of the “thick-skinned bread” (“Beach Terminal” line 16). But, the underlying twist to the poems is that those unfeeling and unthinking perpetrators of cruelty are part of the human race, just as we, the readers, are. In both poems human cruelty is symptomatic of human alienation from nature.

“Beach Terminal” is framed by stanzas written in the present tense. Stanzas two to six recount, in the past tense, the bloody activities which took place at the whaling station. The penultimate stanza returns to the present tense and Livingstone’s activity of collecting sea samples. He says the sea is “slimy with reject, / with whale-washings, hereabouts unclean” (lines 27-8). This contradicts his statement in the first stanza that the sea is “clean now”. This can best be read as metaphorical: his memory of the activities at the now abandoned whaling station has polluted his mind. The whale-washings are the

emotional aftermath he confronts on returning to the old whaling station. This aftermath is emphasised in the final words of the poem: “a bad prospect”. This literally refers to a distasteful scene or view, but the phrase also contains the idea of the sins of the past returning to cloud the future. The activities of the whaling station, with its “vats bubbling” and “crane-chains clattering” (line 29), does not augur well for the future.

(A bigger question outside of the poem is: can humanity exist without exploiting natural resources? And, if not, can whaling be practised without cruelty?)

“Bad Run at King’s Rest” tells how the poet found a beached and injured loggerhead turtle and slit its throat to end its misery. The turtle was injured by an “errant propellor-blade” (line 6) and, when beached, had its nails ripped out and eyes “stabbed or pecked” out by “some lout’s / hacking” (lines 10-11). In “Beach Terminal” the poet remembers and recounts the plight of the harpooned whales, whereas here he tells of a face-to-face encounter with, and the delivering of a *coup de grâce* for, the suffering animal. He becomes part of the action of the poem when he slits its throat and “dumbly” asks for its carcass to be returned to the Earth in the final line. As in “Gentling a Wildcat” (EC 18) his anthropomorphic identification with the animal is shown through his empathy and need for some kind of burial rite. (See Sacks 4; Brown 2002: 104.) But here his action is both grisly and courageous. He does not gentle the creature into death. His killing of the turtle (lines 12 to 15) is described in one sentence and the style flows more easily than that of surrounding lines: the poem slips out of shorthand into more lyrical lines. The final stanza returns to shorthand and is staccato in style. Despite the cryptic style, the poet’s reactions are keenly communicated in “Rinse off queasily” (line 16) and “Circle wide / back, past” (lines 16-17). The prepositions used indicate his disquiet and anxious avoidance of the dead turtle. He does not want to look too closely at what both he and other humans have done to the animal. Instead he offers up a mute plea to nature. He calls on the gulls and the sea to perform a kind of burial, asks them to dispose of the carcass through natural means. The words “call dumbly” (line 18) indicate an inarticulate need for some kind of blessing. The lyrical fifth stanza contains the poem’s only use of the first person pronoun and it is here that the poet communicates his emotion in “asking pardon” (line 15). Brown briefly notes that the word “pardon” evokes the religious and then refers to the interconnection of all life (104). Livingstone seems to be saying that it

is best to leave nature to do its work, that there has been enough human interference in the death of this unfortunate turtle. Sacks' analysis is comprehensive and penetrating:

Finally, the context of this collection gives the poem added resonance, as if that brutalized turtle becomes an embodiment of the entire natural world under the errant and loutish hacking of mankind. (4)

A later poem in the sequence, "**Carnivores at Station 22**" (55) also deals with a beached sea creature and human cruelty towards it. In this poem, hungry fishermen ignore Livingstone's plea to help him return a beached dolphin to the sea. The poem is about the predatory nature of animals, including man. Here the "carnivores" are the fishermen. Ironically, dolphins "are the only carnivores on earth / that have never attacked man" (lines 22-3). There are many stories of how dolphins have saved people from drowning and protected them from shark attacks. Yet, the fishermen of this poem are either unaware of, or ignore, this relationship between people and dolphins. Their intention is not to save, but to kill, the creature. The poem ends powerfully. The reader is made to imagine, rather than witness, the gruesome death of the dolphin through a fisherman's drawn "rusty bayonet".

When the fishermen refuse to help Livingstone in his desperate attempt "to dislodge her back into her world" (line 8), he "offer[s] up a curse on *Homo sap*" (line 16). By abbreviating *sapiens* (from the Latin root, wise), he puns on humankind's loss of wisdom. He parodies humanity's claim to wisdom and confers, instead, the draining or undermining effect of human actions (and non-action in refusing to help save the dolphin) on the nonhuman natural world.

Duncan Brown explores the physical or biological base to the poem:

The title deliberately displaces human behaviour into the biological context: people become 'carnivores'; the fishermen are 'birds of prey' who 'stab sea and sky with bamboo beaks' (their rods). Their response to the speaker's pleas for help is to 'look away', for they perceive the dolphin simply as bait or food. Thus they are damned in the poem as a species ... not as individuals with moral choices. The speaker's compassion for the dolphin is not offered in terms of its perceived intelligence, humanity, or beauty, but in the biological contract between species. (2002: 99)

I would argue that the failed relationship between humanity and nature is, for Livingstone, deeper than merely biological. The figure of the dolphin is symbolic of a psychic connection for the dolphin is traditionally seen as man's mythical friend and symbol of social love (Brewer 334).

These animal poems link social responsibility and ecology because Livingstone's imaginative identification with the animals points to a deeper understanding of the ecological matrix. I quote at length from J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* because his character Elizabeth Costello's explanation of the "bodying forth" of Ted Hughes' jaguar finds a parallel function in Livingstone's animal poems:

'... writers teach us more than they are aware of. By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquillity, we are for a brief while the jaguar.

...

'It is also the kind of poetry with which hunters and the people I call ecology-managers can feel comfortable. When Hughes the poet stands before the jaguar cage, he looks at an individual jaguar and is possessed by that individual jaguar life. It has to be that way. Jaguars in general, the subspecies jaguar, the idea of a jaguar, will fail to move him because we cannot experience abstractions. Nevertheless, the poem that Hughes writes is about *the* jaguar, about jaguariness embodied in this jaguar.

...

'...In the dance, each organism has a role: it is these multiple roles, rather than the particular beings who play them, that participate in the dance. As for the actual role-players, as long as they are self-renewing, as long as they keep coming forward, we need pay them no heed.

'I called this Platonic and I do so again. Our eye is on the creature itself, but our mind is on the system of interactions of which it is the earthly, material embodiment.

'The irony is a terrible one. An ecological philosophy that tells us to live side by side with other creatures justifies itself by appealing to an idea, an idea of a higher order than any living creature. An idea, finally – and this is the crushing twist to the irony – which no creature except Man is capable of comprehending...' (1999: 53-4)

Coetzee, through Elizabeth Costello, places ecological responsibility firmly in the human court. The failing in Coetzee's argument is that, while he allows for imaginative identification with 'the lives of animals', he views this purely as a function of mind. He gives no credence in his Platonic system of the function of the human heart and the workings of sympathy or empathy. It is the human capacity for love and the concomitant power of compassion which he does not explore and which, I submit, is a necessary partner to wisdom. Coetzee's irony would, therefore, be compounded: man is not only the only creature capable of comprehending this ecological philosophy but is also capable of feeling reverence at its miraculous intricacy. That humankind on the whole refuses to feel

this reverence is an even greater, twisting irony. Livingstone's poems, analysed above, show that a lack of compassion for the suffering of animals leads to a lack of comprehension. Earlier in *The Lives of Animals* Costello does valorise sympathy but does not explore the idea of empathy (see p 193).

Two further poems from *A Littoral Zone*, "Children at Station 16" and "Eland About Station 17" explore the idea of social responsibility or reciprocity from a human to human point of view. I include them under the theme of ecological abuse because both poems paint bleak pictures of human destructiveness and – in contrast – both use the process of nature as a metaphor for a state of interconnectedness.

**"Children at Station 16"** (42) is a complex poem which demonstrates the viciousness of humans towards each other and towards the 'near-perfection' of nature. The mutated starfish – with its six points instead of the normal five – is the base image of this poem. Through transmutation and mental alchemy, Livingstone transforms the starfish so that it comes to represent – imaginatively – the Star of David (itself a complex and loaded image) and abandoned children. This leads to an examination of both evolutionary theory and, if not faith, then at least human caring or mutuality in the final stanza. The poem asks its readers to confront the workings of nature and our own imperfections. It moves, with big leaps, from a dead starfish to an uncaring society.

The beached starfish with its extra limb or point is a mutant. Mutation is a change in genetic material which can result in heritable variations in offspring (OED) or "evolutionary novelty" (Gould 2002: 431). In calling this starfish an "artefact" (line 9) Livingstone offers it (and the poem itself) as a product of craftsmanship and thus implies that natural selection is a crafting force. The "near-perfectness" of the natural process is contrasted with the imperfectness of an artificial social system, or the vagaries of human society. The starfish "evokes / images" (lines 23-4) of abandoned children who have been robbed of their childhood by a non-functional social system. The natural world and humankind's artificial or cultural world are contrasted in this poem which shows the divide between the biological and the cultural. Read on another level, the mutant starfish and the orphaned children are paralleled through the orphaned status of both. The now dead starfish has been discarded by nature or the biological, while the human children are cultural discards. The starfish, now beached and dead, is out of its natural element, the sea. The nurturing agency of the ocean and nature itself is conveyed in "great menstruum,

/ solvent and transmuter” (lines 1-2). The beaching of the starfish serves as a trope for the no-man’s-land, or littoral zone, which abandoned children inhabit.

The poem is written in six six-line stanzas. The first five stanzas are enjambed and consist of four long sentences. The subject of the first two sentences is the starfish and of the second two, the children. The syntax demands that the poem be read rapidly until the final stanza is reached where one is confronted by a big question rather than a resolution. We are asked whether it is possible for humanity to emulate the near-perfection of nature. The final lines of the poem reiterate the abandoned status of these “children / with no historian” (lines 31-2).

Livingstone describes the star as “hexact” (a pun which he has created). The new word is a combination of 'hexagon' and 'exact'. The "*Asterina*" is a perfect six-pointed star, for it is both “hexact” and “symmetrical” (line 12) and it displays this perfection “in death” (line 13). The starfish is a metonym for the creative process. Something went wrong with this particular starfish, but its extra limb results in a new symmetry (line 12) which causes the poet to ponder the idea of perfection. It becomes a talisman which signifies a bigger process, or the Creative Principle. The “near-perfect creation” of the mutated starfish becomes a metaphoric example:

Near-perfect creation:  
 does it deploy such gaps  
 for men to perfect? Maws  
 of sand spread waiting on  
 countless starfish, children  
 with no historian.

Creation is qualified through “near-perfect” and by the question mark concerning its function: “does it deploy such gaps / for men to perfect?”. Creation is given the status of an organising principle through the word “deploy”, which can either mean to bring into position for effective action, or to make good use of (OED). The creative force uses contingency and builds on worthwhile mutations ("such gaps") to make new forms. It does not discard the 'outcasts' as human society does. This is why the beautiful mutated starfish is held up as an example "for men to perfect" and not to ignore the "countless ... children / with no historian". These "gaps" also refer to gaps in human knowledge.

Human consciousness without compassion and wisdom alienates us from the natural world. In this poem the alienation is portrayed as so severe that humankind no longer takes care of its young, one of the most basic natural functions which ensures the

continuation of a species. The poem shows that cultural systems are not always strong enough to replace the biological or instinctual functions necessary to sustain life.

Livingstone first uses death as a connecting link between the starfish and the malnourished children who suffer from “kwashiorkor” (line 15). Unlike the dead starfish human corpses are not beautiful “artefacts” or relics of ancient workmanship. But the comparison is macabrely extended to describe the effects of kwashiorkor, where the extended stomachs of the malnourished children give a sixth point to their bodies (along with the head, arms and legs) and so give them the shape of a six-pointed “David’s star” (line 22). Earlier in the poem the starfish is compared to Solomon’s seal (line 11), a synonym for the Star of David (line 22) (Brewer 1018), and so becomes a symbol for the ancient religion of Judaism.

In stanza five Livingstone describes the still living children in their too-large cast-off clothes and their “blanched faces” (line 26). Earlier he refers to their “dried-out little visages” (lines 18-19). Both descriptions poignantly emphasise their suffering for it is their expressions which are:

... exacting  
 shrift for inviolable  
 childhood forced to war with  
 intimations of dread.  
 (lines 27-30)

The “shrift” or penance and need for absolution are exacted or demanded of humankind who has abandoned its children. The word shrift, like the Star of David, has obvious religious connotations. The Holocaust and its atrocities are evoked through Livingstone's choice of the Judaic element and the suffering children, while the African word “kwashiorkor” globalises the abuse of the world’s children. The poet intimates that children should be shielded from the terror of abandonment, that childhood should be “inviolable” and not filled with “intimations of dread”.

The poem thus moves out of the realm of biology into that of faith. This links with the idea of conscience as a way of righting humankind’s imperfections, specifically the abandonment of children. This helps to make sense of the concluding lines where the starfish is a metaphor for the abandoned children who are lost to history and are devoured by death and time, figured as the “maws / of sand”.

“Children at Station 16” exposes the divide between nature and humankind and implies that there is no human ecological interconnection with nature. Humanity is shown to be very much apart from the rest of nature and to be divided from itself in this poem. The implicit moral of the poem is that compassion is the first step towards ecological health. If humankind cannot take care of her children then there is no hope of a wider nurturance of and respect for the rest of the living world.

The next poem in *A Littoral Zone* also examines human alienation from “near-perfect creation”. In “**Eland About Station 17**” (44), Livingstone imagines a time of harmony between man and nature so vividly that he “dreamed into eland” (final line) or transports himself into the San culture. The eland is a symbolic animal of exceptional potency in Bushman belief and is connected with the state of trance. The eland is the most frequently depicted animal in their paintings and appears in four important rituals: first-kill, girls’ puberty, marriage and shaman trance (Lewis-Williams 120).<sup>36</sup>

Livingstone finds an unrecorded or undiscovered San cave where the rock paintings transport him back in time. The art speaks to him in this “hub / of silence” (lines 3-4), where the cave is likened to a sacred place. The eland becomes a ‘mystic’ symbol which represents a time when the animals and the “sunfolk” (line 39) or San, the hunted and the hunter, were at one with one another, knew how to live symbiotically with and on the Earth. He mourns the passing of this time. The final stanza is a lament on the present day plight of the San people, who have been robbed both of their homeland and of their life-sustaining symbol, the Eland. Livingstone expresses his helplessness in an address to the San: “the least / I can do is to keep this cave hid for you” (lines 45-6).

Livingstone says he cannot forgive “my race”, the colonial South Africans who have dislocated the San people, have changed their status from the hunters to the “hunted” (line 42). Paul Garner says the victimisation of the San people began when they came into contact with cattle-owning people:

The Bushmen over much of Southern Africa suffered greatly from interaction with cattle owning groups because they preyed on the cattle, having no concept of animal ownership in their culture, and they were hunted to extinction about 100 years ago by both white and black colonists. (1)

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis-Williams adds: “No wonder that the southern Bushmen believed the eland to be /Kaggen’s (The Mantis’s) favourite animal... The eland was also the Mantis’s first creation and he loved it dearly” (120).



The remnants of the San people now live in the Kalahari, “the westward wastes” (line 43). In short, they are now treated like animals, “hunted and herded” (line 42).

The ecological import – the interconnection between man, nature and the Earth – is very clear in Livingstone’s description of the San as

... swarms of symbiotic man about  
the business of getting on with the earth  
– my fathers, such candour! – and it with him  
(lines 20-2)

As “symbiotic man” they were able to live in harmony with nature. This way of life is sharply contrasted with that of modern man (the “my race” of the final stanza) who has hunted the San and herded them into the “westward wastes” (line 43) of a foreign territory. The contrast emphasises the present lack of human awareness or knowledge of mutuality with the Earth.

Dirk Klopper finds the sentiments expressed in this poem “unexpected” and, in reading the poem politically rather than ecologically, incorrectly claims:

It might be argued that empathy for an extinct African culture is Livingstone’s way, through recourse to sentimental nostalgia, of avoiding the imperative to come to terms with the living African culture with which he is confronted in contemporary life. (1997: 45)

Brown is more sensitive to the nuances and ecological undertone of the poem: “these artists are understood in the complexity of their mythological representation” (2002: 112); Livingstone’s awareness is “a real recognition of the brutal history which is inextricably bound up with a white African identity” (113).

I think the core of the poem is Livingstone’s interpretation of the San as symbiotic man. His interpretation is based on imaginative identification and the power of their art, which is then re-presented through the poem. We, the readers, are shown the world of the San people through a double-reflection: their rock paintings are filtered by Livingstone, who then refilters the images into words. Through language or poetry, we are made to imagine the rock paintings and, in doing this, are then made to imagine the actual lives of the San people. This process uses language to explore an ecological eden or *oikos*. Karl Kroeber argues that literary ecocriticism, in expressing humanity’s place on Earth, “would adapt to humanistic studies conceptions of wholeness that – in fashions appropriate to imaginative activities – reaffirm the significance of individuals and

individual actions” (24). Therefore language both reveals and hides, both distances and connects us to nature. “Eland About Station 17” certainly demands “imaginative activities” of its readers and explores an ancient concept of wholeness through the San way of life. In the poem Livingstone says he can take no action except to keep the cave hidden from the rest of humankind. But, in writing the poem which tells of his discovery he does not keep it hidden, even if he does not give its exact location.<sup>37</sup> What he does do is praise the ancient San culture and lament the destruction of their way of life.

The first stanza describes the cave as an active agent which “drills” (line 3) into the layers of rock “like a hub / of silence” (lines 3-4). The hub as a centre of silence and not of activity (usually associated with the word hub) indicates that this is a sacred place or shrine; a place which commands reverence through silence. The word “hub” also reflects the activities which took place in the cave in the past and which are explored later in the poem. The cave is inaccessible or hidden, “except to outlaws or to idiots” (line 5). The idiot here is Livingstone, the Quixotic figure who found the cave because he took a “foolish short-cut” (line 16). The “outlaws” are, I think, abusive humankind in general. The remainder of the first stanza describes the vegetation, the hillside, and the fact that the cave is on a cliff above the sea.

He enters the cave and is transported into the past, imagines what it must have been like “once” (line 9) when the mouth of the cave was not overgrown, “plugged by thorns” (line 7), and “you” could see the sea and sit “scratching yourself / breathing slow, stretched out on this sunburnt ledge” (lines 9-10). A meditative mood is evoked by the slow rhythms and long vowel sounds in this line. Through the pronoun “you”, Livingstone is both addressing the absent San people, long ago inhabitants of the cave, and is imagining himself as one of them. He later addresses them as “my fathers” (line 22), echoing the connection he feels with these people and alluding to the Darwinian theory of a common ancestry (as shown more explicitly in “Address to a Patrician”). He is humbled to be in this place, sees it as his “privilege” (line 12), a gift from the gods. These gods are presumably the gods of San mythology which he explores in greater depth at the end of stanza four.

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<sup>37</sup> In the “Notes” at the end of *A Littoral Zone*, Livingstone reports that the cave was covered by landfill to buttress the roads and housing development above it.

In the third stanza he sees the profusion of rock paintings: "The stone sides are crammed: blazed / with swarms of symbiotic man" (lines 19-20). Livingstone does not use the words 'rock paintings', perhaps to obviate preconceptions. The word "blazed" has connotations of a reddish colour, illumination, passion and excitement, and conveys both power and a life force. Before he describes the paintings in the final two lines of the stanza, he concentrates on what they convey: the ecological activities of "symbiotic man about / the business of getting on with the earth" (lines 20-1). The phrase "man about the business" echoes the "eland about" of the title. Symbiotic man is concerned with living his life, of survival, but he does it with respect for the Earth, knows how to 'get on with' or live alongside nature. In this way he is like the Eland, for he knows his place in the ecosystem. His interjection "– my fathers, such candour –" is an exclamation of praise and wonder at their innocence and freedom from bias and an implicit lament at a lost connection with his evolutionary and spiritual forefathers.

The word "swarms" to describe the San refers to great numbers and connects them – through association – with the industry and social structure of ants and bees. Some of the men are "mantid-cowled" (line 23), taking on the shape of the preying mantis. In San folklore the Mantis is shown as a kind of trickster, sometimes as a bumbling fool, yet possessed of supernatural powers (Biesele in Tobias 169). The mantis is called /Kaggen or, as Livingstone spells it in the following stanza, Xagen. The single dolphin and "one wondrous elephant" are noticeable for the break they make in the pattern of "swarms of symbiotic man" and represent animals of the sea and land, thus extending the metaphoric connection of the San with other forms of life.

The next stanza opens by personifying Africa and, through an extended metaphor of the functioning (and non-functioning) of a living body, powerfully communicates the now lost symbiosis of the previous stanza. This is given in one line, presented as one sentence: "Such infarcts rue the heart-shaped continent.". Africa's physical shape and psychic relevance is communicated in "heart-shaped". The heart image signifies the driving force or machine of life as well as (curiously) the idea that nature is compassionate and caring, because it has heart and "rues" the loss of the San way of life. The "infarcts" refer to this through the image of dead or dying tissue which has been cut off from the blood supply. The use of "heart-shaped" may also refer to Africa as the cradle of the human race which first evolved (or was shaped) there. The continent's

ruefulness may, on the other hand, be read as awareness of a threat to its own survival because those who knew how to live symbiotically with it are dying out. Embedded in the body imagery is the idea of Gaia (or Mother Nature) as a heart or life-support system.

Livingstone then compares the paintings in this cave on the Natal coast with those of another cave beyond Macheke in Zimbabwe. He says the latter cave is also “unknown” (line 27) by other people. But the poet has obviously been in it, even ‘discovered’ it, for he knows it also contains “crowded” (line 27) rock art. Both caves depict “pristine hangups”. The unspoilt paintings reflect the ancient knowledge of the San people, but why “hangups”? Is Livingstone deliberately introducing the idea of paranoia, or does the word simply describe the ‘exhibition’ of rock paintings which have been suspended in time? This modern, slang word jars with the surrounding poetic diction. The word “hangups” may also be read as a hint that ancient San life was not wholly Edenic, as indicated by the colon at the end of the line, which introduces a version of the mythical feud between Kogaz and /Kaggen.<sup>38</sup>

The penultimate stanza concentrates on the role of the shaman in the San culture. Paul Garner thinks it is likely that all the San artists were shamans who painted remembrances of what they saw during their trance:

Fortunately many Bushman beliefs were recorded in the last century before the painting Bushman became extinct. At the centre of Bushman religion are people known as medicine people or shamans. A shaman is someone in a hunter-gatherer society who enters a trance in order to heal people, protect them from evil spirits and sickness, foretell the future, control the weather, ensure good hunting and generally try to look after the well being of their group. (2)

The shaman is said to purge an evil, invoke rain or healing, preside over wedding ceremonies, rites of puberty and burials. The eland plays a central role in these rites. “During trance, they [the shamans] assume the potency of various animals, especially the eland, so that they are able to communicate with and plead with the spirits” (Garner 2). It is through “the souls of eland” (line 34) that the shaman is able to enter the trance. The

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<sup>38</sup> Megan Biesele says the stories collected a hundred years ago in the Cape revolve primarily around the Mantis /Kaggen and his family. Mantis’ wife is a dassie. They have three children, a daughter and two sons. One of the sons, !gauna-ts’axau [could this be Livingstone’s Kogaz?] is killed by baboons and restored to life by his father (in Tobias 169). According to Livingstone’s version, the Mantis’s son was abducted and killed and the Mantis turned these abductors or “first kidnappers” into baboons.

implication is that the San shaman has a spiritually symbiotic relationship with the animal (as well as a physical one through the hunt and the need for physical sustenance).

The stanza's final three lines refer directly to this symbiotic relationship and lament its passing:

and, always, in that almost mundane merge  
of hunter and prey, the sunfolk, the San,  
their eland – long gone from here – everywhere.

The phrase “almost mundane merge” refers to the natural (mundane) relationship between the San, as the hunter, and the eland, as the prey. This indicates that there is another, spiritual dimension to this relationship. They are called “sunfolk” because the San believe that the Great God is the supreme good being and dwells in the eastern sky, where the sun rises (in Tobias 162).

The dislocation of the San culture is explored in detail in the final stanza. Livingstone refers to the fact that the San have been used as trackers by the modern South African army and have even been conscripted so that they are “now learning metallic intricacies / of automatic weaponry” (lines 44-5). The poem ends on a note of rage and helplessness. The final line alludes to a mystic experience: it appears that Livingstone himself has experienced a trance-like state, has “dreamed into eland” the life and thought of “symbiotic man”.<sup>39</sup>

The final poem selected under the theme of human abuse of nature does not quite fit, for in “**Scourings at Station 19**” (47) nature gains the upper hand. Or does it? In this poem Livingstone uses the deluge myth to explore the ideas of nature's cataclysmic power and man's determination to survive. The latter is evident in the final line: “life / triumphs even on no longer trusted planets”. Livingstone, in the guise of a bantam, makes this announcement. The figurative meaning for this domestic fowl is “a small but spirited person” (OED). The ridiculous, dishevelled, teapot-like bantam cock parodies the poet's self-appointed role as knight-errant for the Earth. This amusing poem nevertheless has a serious undertone, for it is a reworking of the ancient deluge myths.

The flood was used by the gods to punish the wickedness of man. In Genesis God tells Noah why the flood is necessary:

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<sup>39</sup> “When viewing Bushman rock art we should remember that we are looking at a bridge between two worlds. An incredibly intricate bridge coming from the very heart of Bushman religious experience. Painted sites were storehouses of potency that made contact with the spiritual world possible” (Garner 3).

And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. (Genesis 6: 12-13)

There are corresponding Babylonian, Indian, Chinese, Burmese, New Guinean and native North and South American deluge stories (Brewer 310-11). The story of the flood is also found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ted Hughes' version ends with "Drowned mankind, imploring limbs outspread, / Floats like a plague of dead frogs" (23).

In Livingstone's modern rendition of the myth, humans are not wiped out by the flood. His is a minor natural disaster which can be put right by the bulldozers. But, until the bulldozers move in, the stinking mess on the beach is "Bad for the tourists" (line 9) and there will be a loss of revenue. This subtly mocks the modern preoccupation with money and shows how humanity has become estranged from nature. The flood is seen primarily as an inconvenience. The bantam, which dominates the remaining three stanzas of the poem, raucously crows out his outrage and in doing so reminds us of the power of nature.

The ecological message of this poem lies in the juxtaposition of the power of nature and the puniness of man. Nature's workings contain "too much / inexorability" (lines 19-20) for humankind to rest easily in "a straight All Clear" (line 20). Even though we think we can bulldoze nature back into submission, we are mistaken. Through the flood, or natural disaster, we are made aware of our tenuous position. Livingstone uses the voice, or crowing, of the bantam to prompt his readers into awareness. The crow of the cock traditionally announces the new day. In this poem the bantam announces a new start, signified by survival of the flood. This demands "thanksgiving" (line 24). But, says Livingstone through the voice of chanticleer, we do not realise just how lucky we are to still be alive. We no longer trust "planets" or the Earth – are too distanced from nature to appreciate her power and workings – and yet life still triumphs. Humanity continues to live on the Earth, even though it is "no longer trusted" or acknowledged as a life-support system. Because this ecological message is delivered in the voice of the bantam we are tempted not to take it seriously. The tone of the final three stanzas is both humorous and ridiculous. But it changes to deeply serious in the final lines of the poem. The reader has to confront the bantam's "rage" (line 21) and face his crowing "challenge" (line 23). Why is his rage "writ too large"? Is he merely angry at the devastation caused by the flood, or

is his anger extended to humankind which refuses to acknowledge the warning contained in the deluge myth? His rage is communicated as a “fractious challenge” (line 23), which would indicate that he is railing against both nature and humankind.

The plural form of “scourings” in the title of the poem indicates that it contains levels of meaning. The flood literally scours the land clean of man-made material, plants and animals. The results of this cleansing action of the water are the “scourings” or debris which have been washed into the sea and then deposited by the ocean on the beaches. The poem deals with the results of these cleansing or purging actions of the water.

The first two stanzas describe the aftermath of the flood and the remaining three give voice to the unlikely crow of the indignant bantam. The colourful and handsome cock with his range of orange, brown, scarlet and black feathers mirrors Chaucer’s Chauntecleer whose “coomb was redder than fyn coral” (line 2859, in Robinson 199), his bill jet black and the colour of his feathers “lyk the burned gold” (line 2864). The bantam is aptly compared to “chanticleer” because Chaucer’s Chauntecleer is the cock which crows the loudest, “In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer” (4040) and who is said, by his wife Pertelote, to have too strong an imagination which comes from “the grette superfluytee / or youre rede colera” (2927-8). By alluding to this literary bird, Livingstone emphasises the bantam’s delusions of grandeur. How can one bird, no matter how loudly it crows, reverse the effects of this natural cataclysm?

In stanza four he “bellows” his “fierce” outrage as an “epithet” (lines 16 and 17), a swear word, directed at the sun. This is not the rising sun, traditionally hailed by all cocks, but a sun which has been cowed by the flood and which now seems wary and is hiding (“crouched”) behind or on the horizon. The sun “hesitates / on the threshold” (lines 18-19) as it surveys the flood damage or “all that vehemence” (line 19). The bantam rails against this “vehemence” of nature and the “inexorability” of the ravaging effects of the flood by chastising the sun for its cowardice. He wants the sun to come out and the normal cycle of nature to return. This is why he is reduced to “polysyllabic epithets” and not his usual daily greeting of the sun. He swears at the disruption and cannot give the “All Clear” (line 20). The sun serves as metaphor for the energy of the life force and for humankind’s need for rational order. Livingstone regarded the sun and philosophy as masculine (Fazzini 1990: 140).

The opening of the final stanza mocks the bantam's (and therefore Livingstone's) simplistic reaction by aptly comparing the bird to a "teapot" (line 21). The bantam's ridiculousness is shown in the amazed reaction of the "gulls and gannets" (line 23). He might be ridiculous, but his sentiments and his rage are real. His "fractious challenge" is the kernel of the poem. While it is "tempting" to interpret the bantam's crowing as "thanksgiving" (line 24) for having survived the flood, it is more complicated than this. The final line – "life / triumphs even no longer trusted planets" – foreshadows the closing lines of "Road Back", where "The sound of pounding / hooves drums up the trophy: life?" Both convolutedly examine the concept of the triumph or trophy of life. Livingstone alludes to Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "The Triumph of Life", where the speaker meets the shade of the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau and questions him. Rousseau warns against giving way to inaction because of despair (Reiman 454). The unfinished poem ends tantalisingly: Shelley asks Rousseau "Then what is Life?" (line 543) but died before he could write Rousseau's answer to the question.

To summarise this section, the pastoral (a theme sporadically explored in the earlier work) all but disappears in *A Littoral Zone*. The pastoral element in "Eland" is starkly juxtaposed with modern reality and the death of a symbiotic way of life. In the collection as a whole, Livingstone concentrates on the abuse of nature through pollution, materialism, misuse of natural resources, needless cruelty towards sea animals, and human-to-human cruelty. In this final work, his view of man and nature firmly reflects humankind's non-relationship with nature and its ecological destruction.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the how and the what of humankind's physical element – how we evolved and what we have made of that evolution – and presents Livingstone's material view. The poems which use evolutionary theory ("A Darwinian Preface", "An Evolutionary Nod to God", "Address to a Patrician", "Cells" and, even, "Low Tide") all point to the miracle of this process. Perhaps the patent (and poignant) underlying message of *A Littoral Zone* is that humankind is blind to this miracle. The result has been destruction (rather than reverence) of nature and of other human beings. The destruction of nature is demonstrated in "Christmas Chefs", "Beach Terminal", "Bad Run" and



“Carnivores” and social destruction in “Children” and “Eland”. The poem “Old Harbour” examines the motives behind this destructive human impulse.

The power of nature and the triumph of life are juxtaposed in “Scourings” where human determination (but delivered through the voice of a bantam) challenges nature’s impersonal power. Is Livingstone suggesting that this is the root of the ecological problem? Humankind appears to view life and nature as separate forces. But can they be separated? As previously discussed, nature is inordinately difficult to define. James Lovelock claims that life is the *most* difficult concept to understand and that scientists cannot explain what life is in scientific terms (1988: 16). Lovelock ventures into the realms of evolutionary psychology in trying to explain why we intuitively know what life is, but cannot define it:

I have long thought that the answer to the question “What is life?” was deemed so important to our survival that it was classed “top secret” and kept locked up as a secret in the automatic levels of our mind. During evolution, there was great selection pressure for immediate action; crucial to our survival is the instant distinction of predator from prey and kin from foe, and the recognition of a potential mate. We cannot afford the delay of conscious thought or debate in the committees of the mind. We must compute the imperatives of recognition at the fastest speed and, therefore, in the earliest-evolved and unconscious recesses of the mind. This is why we know intuitively what life is. (16)

Stephen Jay Gould writes that morality is outside the realm of nature:

The answers to moral questions cannot be found in nature’s factuality in any case, so why not take the ‘cold bath’ of recognizing nature as nonmoral, and not constructed to match our hopes? After all, life existed on earth for three and a half billion years before we arrived; why should life’s causal ways match our prescription for human meaning or decency? (in Rose 104)

Is “the joke on our youth” humanity’s simultaneous regression from and progression past our evolutionary heritage? Or is the “joke” that we conceive ‘morally’ but appear biologically incapable of implementing that morality? We cannot know if stone-age man even stopped to think about life and nature, let alone whether he treated them as separate entities. But I submit that it is this separation which is the root of the ecological mess humans are making, and that this is Livingstone’s point. He does not pontificate, merely demonstrates the results of humankind’s abuse of nature. As the “negatio bacillus”, humankind is currently a destroyer of its own life-support system. Any hope of changing this lies in humankind’s psychic sensibility. The following chapter will explore a more hopeful separation of man and nature.

Blake's focus on Imagination seems, at least in part, to be a way of making the point that human consciousness is that which confers value in the world, and has the capacity for the acts of imaginative identification that are involved in sympathy or love or compassion.

– *Julia Martin*

## Chapter Six

### “Seeking life, seeking love”: The New Romantic View in *A Littoral Zone*

In *Small Wonder* Barbara Kingsolver bemoans the fact that, since 1996, more than half the world’s humans now live in cities. “What we lose in our great human exodus from the land is a rooted sense, as deep and intangible as religious faith, of why we need to hold on to the wild and beautiful places that once surrounded us” (39). In this essay titled “Knowing Our Place”, her plea for the protection or conservation of the land is simultaneously a plea for psychic understanding: “Barry Lopez writes that if we hope to succeed in the endeavor of protecting natures other than our own, ‘it will require that we *reimagine* our lives. ... It will require of many of us a humanity we’ve not yet mustered, and a grace we were not aware we desired until we had tasted it” (39, my italics).

Livingstone does muster this and offers, through the shifting lens of psychic insight, a glimpse of what it means to know one’s place. Kingsolver says:

Whether we are leaving it or coming into it, it’s *here* that matters, it is place. Whether we understand where we are or don’t, that is the story: To be *here* or not to be. Storytelling is as old as our need to remember where the water is, where the best food grows, where we find our courage for the hunt. It’s as persistent as our desire to teach our children how to live in this place that we have known longer than they have. Our greatest and smallest explanations for ourselves grow from place, as surely as carrots grow in the dirt. I’m presuming to tell you something that I could not prove rationally but instead feel as a religious faith.

...

We sing the song of our home because we are animals, and an animal is not better or wiser or safer than its habitat and its food chain. Among the greatest of all gifts is to know our place. (39-40)

Paradoxically, Livingstone’s ‘psychic’<sup>40</sup> poems show that it is through the power of art and the power of love that humankind may find a way to return to that animal state of knowing our place. In chapter three I introduced the theme of ecological equilibrium as an ideal state which, in Livingstone’s poetry, is presented as not sustainable. Yet he keeps returning to variations of this theme, which is typified by an at-oneness with the

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<sup>40</sup> My use of the term psychic does not refer to the supernatural or paranormal *per se* but rather to the human imaginative and spiritual capacities.

forming force of nature, what Livingstone refers to as the Creative Principle. The previous chapter argued that despite humanity's scientific knowledge of the physical evolutionary animalness of our species, we do not see ourselves as part of nature. This has led to ecological destruction and the abuse of the environment (and ourselves). Livingstone intimates that fact and reason are not adequate teachers, and that Wordsworth's idea of "Nature's book" is a Romantic pipe dream unless it is read from a psychic perspective.

This chapter examines a tentative thread of hope contained in human creativity which may counter ecological destruction: psychic hope is offered in some of Livingstone's poems as a stay against the physical despair depicted in others. The quotation "seeking life, seeking love" (*LZ* 26) in the title of the chapter refers to two undefinable concepts. What is love? And even the biological scientists have failed to define life (see Lovelock 16 and Silver 321). In "Old Harbour" Livingstone intimates that the human need to seek out love and life causes men to journey to faraway exotic places like "Byzantium and Sarmarkand". I argue in this chapter that it is the psychic quest for fulfilment which fuels this search and that a sense of belonging is synonymous with a state of ecological equilibrium, but that this state is as elusive as the search for life and love. However, Livingstone shows in *A Littoral Zone* that it is more likely to be found on home ground (in his case on a Natal beach where he watches a duiker doe, or contemplates San rock art in an undiscovered cave) than it is across the oceans in Byzantium. His poetry demonstrates that to know one's place (or to find atunement within one's local environment) is to quell, in part, the dissatisfaction which causes the men to go adventuring and set sail from the "Old Harbour".

Livingstone's Creative Principle is a figurative embodiment of the power of life and the phrase "The Creative Principle of the universe" occurs in "**Traffic interlude: Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake**" (16). I open the analysis of the 'psychic' element in *A Littoral Zone* with this poem because the snake is a layered metaphor for the forces of creation and destruction and for humankind's perception of (or way of looking at) the Creative Principle. Humanity was given consciousness when, as the myth has it, Eve chose to taste of the knowledge of good and evil. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake" explores what humankind has done with this gift of consciousness and how we abnegate the gift of life. It does not paint a pretty picture. The black snake does not

symbolise cosmic evil, but rather human evil or cruelty induced by ignorance and fear. So what has happened to the ‘knowledge of good’? This is the tension upon which the poem is based. Livingstone seeks to reverse man’s customary antipathy towards the snake. Because we connect the snake with sin we believe it must be either repressed or killed. The poem offers a new perspective on this age-old belief.

Where do this fear and antipathy originate? The image of the snake is both powerful and contradictory with strong mythical resonance. Mircea Eliade says the serpent symbolises chaos, the formless and nonmanifested (19). But this is not the whole story. The psychologist James Hillman sees the snake as a symbol for the unconscious psyche and claims: “It is always a ‘both’: creative-destructive, male-female, poisonous-healing, dry-moist, spiritual-material, and many other irreconcilable opposites” (26)<sup>41</sup>. It is these “irreconcilable opposites” which Livingstone explores and exposes. After a series of destructive scenarios centred around or aimed at the snake, the poem ends on a tentative note of hope through renewal.

If Eve had not heeded the snake and eaten the apple humanity would, as the Christian myth has it, still be living unconsciously in paradise. In *The Power of Myth* Joseph Campbell reinterprets the myth and valorises the snake:

Why was the knowledge of good and evil forbidden to Adam and Eve? Without that knowledge, we’d all be a bunch of babies still in Eden, *without any participation in life*. Woman brings life into the world. Eve is the mother of this temporal world. Formerly you had a dreamtime paradise there in the Garden of Eden – no time, no birth, no death – *no life*. The serpent, who dies and is resurrected, shedding its skin and renewing its life, is the lord of the central tree, where time and eternity come together. He is the primary god, actually, in the Garden of Eden. Yahweh, the one who walks there in the cool of the evening, is just a visitor. The Garden is the serpent’s place. (54 my italics)

The poem as a “traffic interlude” is one of Livingstone’s three ‘road reveries’. It is also an imitation of the form used by Wallace Stevens in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”. Livingstone follows the pattern of Stevens’ poem which is written in 13

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<sup>41</sup> Hillman gives twelve interpretations of what the snake represents. He says it symbolises renewal and rebirth; it represents the negative mother; it is the embodiment of evil; it is a feminine symbol and is connected with both Eve and the mother goddesses; it is a phallus; it represents the material earth world and is the enemy of the spirit; it is a healer; it is a guardian of holy and wise men; it brings fertility; it is Death; it is the inmost truth of the body; and, finally, it is the symbol for the unconscious psyche (25-6)

sections, headed by Roman numerals. The blackbird poem is 54 lines long, while the snake poem has 52 lines, and is therefore neatly divisible by 13.

Livingstone's poem is an astounding examination of how man's relationship to nature has degenerated into one of terror with no countering sense of fascination. The poem repeatedly explores human inflicted cruelty on the snake and struggles to find humankind's lost connections with nature through the image of the black snake. In contrast, Wallace Stevens' poem (which examines various ways of looking at the blackbird) implies an ideal ecological state:

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

#### section IV

The symbolic import of Livingstone's snake is a function of human attitude or perspective. His portrayal of human antipathy towards the snake shows that the ecological ideal implied by Wallace has been lost or betrayed. In Livingstone's poem, the feminine and the masculine are shown to be diametrically opposed (section VI). The snake, unlike the blackbird, is not "one" with humanity.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake" implies: (a) that man's destructive relationship with nature is based on fear, betrayal and cruelty; (b) that the black snake, for Livingstone, represents humanity's confused consciousness; and (c) that the snake also represents earthly (as opposed to heavenly) life where reverence towards the Creative Principle behind nature is offered as a means of righting humankind's destructive perspective.

Section I introduces the theme of betrayal through the reference to "an Iscariot",<sup>42</sup> an indefinite or universal betrayer, who is both unaware of and surprised by the snake:

... an Iscariot awakening with a start  
to see a black snake worm out of his heart.

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<sup>42</sup> Judas of Iscariot betrayed Christ and so was directly instrumental in His crucifixion. There may be a connection, through "an Iscariot", with the unlucky number 13. The superstition of it being unlucky for 13 people to be seated at a table has its roots in Norse mythology where Loki, the god of strife, intruded on a banquet at Valhalla and Balder was slain. For Christians, this superstition was confirmed through the last supper of Christ and his 12 disciples (Brewer 1075).

The snake here symbolises self-destruction and, by implication, self-betrayal, for it comes from the human heart. The reaction of this Iscariot also points to self-denial that this destruction and betrayal exist. The theme of betrayal is implicitly present throughout the poem, but its effects rather than the betrayal itself are more graphically examined.

The second section depicts the first scenario of human cruelty against the snake (followed by more chilling scenes of intentional cruelty in section VII and XI):

A pair of youths find a black snake.  
There is a stick nearby. One has a plastic bag.  
At the other's home there is a microwave oven.

In section IV a black snake is also about to be killed by a man, a bespectacled gardener who is poised with the “open jaws” of his hedge cutters. Intentional cruelty is not evident in this section which hints, rather, at humankind's unthinking destructiveness. The “pebble-lenses” (line 14) of the bespectacled gardener can be read as a metaphor for humankind's myopic and confused consciousness. This is symptomatic of a deeper destructiveness which is explored more fully in Section VI.

Section IX is a more bizarre and elusive depiction of human destructiveness. A “white room” (an operating theatre or a madman's cell?) is illuminated by a snake-like electrical fitting. The “distant generator” as the source of power locates the surreal scene in rural Africa and portrays, perhaps, the emasculation of the snake's symbolic power over life and death, or the reduction of the natural to the technological.

Sections I through to V display a pattern of alternating four and three-line sections. The two three-line sections (II and IV) recount the incidents of human cruelty already touched on, while the framing sections (I, III, and V) offer comment on the human concepts of betrayal and incomprehension (I and III) and the survival of the knowledge of evil (V). I will examine this incomprehension and the knowledge of evil later under the theme of confused consciousness.

Section VI can be read as a summary of the content of the poem thus far: accepted norms (orthodoxies) have superseded humanity's intuitive understanding of the world.

The section opens with a statement:

The Creative Principle of the universe  
used to be feminine  
before it was swallowed by the black snake  
of orthodoxies.

The black snake has become, for humans, a symbol of destruction rather than creation. Livingstone's feminine "Creative Principle" may be read as a version of Mother Earth or Gaia. Joseph Campbell says: "Myths of the Great Goddess teach compassion for all living beings. There you come to appreciate the real sanctity of the earth itself, because it is the body of the Goddess" (207). It is the loss of the appreciation of this sanctity which Livingstone portrays – and implicitly bemoans – in this section. Campbell traces the rise of male-orientated myth (Livingstone's "black snake / of orthodoxies") back to the overthrow of the mother goddess Tiamut at the time of the rise of the city of Babylon. He describes Tiamut as the "All-Mother Goddess ... the Abyss, the inexhaustible Source" (213) who is destroyed by the young god Marduk of Babylon who then "becomes – apparently – the creator" (214). Campbell does, however, offer a possible resolution: "I would see three situations here. First, the early one of the Goddess, when the male is hardly a significant divinity. Then the reverse, when the male takes over her role. And finally, then, the classical stage, where the two are in interaction" (216). This final stage could be called a state of ecological equilibrium.

Campbell connects the images of the serpent and the goddess: "We have Sumerian seals from as early as 3500 B.C. showing the serpent and the tree and the goddess, with the goddess giving the fruit of life to a visiting male. The old mythology of the goddess is right there" (55). So, the serpent and the goddess, or Livingstone's feminine "Creative Principle of the universe", are interlinked. Monica Sjöö also makes the connection: "Everywhere in world myth and imagery, the Goddess-Creatrix was coupled with the sacred serpent. In Egypt she was the Cobra Goddess... Isis was also pictured as a Serpent-Goddess" (57-8).

Livingstone's use of "orthodoxies" encapsulates the artificiality of religion through its connection with doctrine, the received or established beliefs of religion (what Camille Paglia calls the "sky-cult" of the Apollonian and Judeo-Christian traditions which "seek to surmount or transcend nature" (8)). The contrast between "Creative" and "orthodoxies" reflects the movement from the earth-centred or natural to the artificial. Perhaps Livingstone is intimating that, through religion, humankind has re-ordered the relations of power and made a symbolic scapegoat of the snake's creativity which is now depicted as evil. Nietzsche says, "Almost everything we call 'higher culture' is based on the spiritualization of *cruelty*" (quoted in Paglia 29). Given the content of "Thirteen Ways



of Looking at a Black Snake” and its repeated examination of human cruelty towards the snake, it can be argued that Livingstone offers religion or “orthodoxies” as a form of misguided ‘higher culture’. This is highly ironic because “the black snake / of orthodoxies” is a human construct, which would make doctrine a self-imposed human cruelty.

Section VI’s opening statement is then followed by a question: Livingstone introduces “a votary”, a devoted worshipper, a chthonian cultist who (misguidedly) aims to catch the black snake with “a forked stick” and kill it with a panga or African knife. She is misguided because it is not the snake which is the ‘problem’ but the human confusion over what the snake represents as well as a masculine, artificial, rational or Apollonian view of the world. The votary’s actions are symptomatic of humankind’s stunted knowledge of good and evil. It is because of this stunted knowledge that Livingstone asks:

Is that why, tonight, a votary will raid  
the Snake Park  
armed with a forked-stick and a panga?

The above lines contain incongruous juxtapositions which point to the chasm between ancient ways and contemporary practice. The word “votary” indicates the ancient or religious, in contrast to the modern, artificial “Snake Park” where snakes are kept in captivity as exhibits. Perhaps the capitalised Snake Park refers to more than an actual place in Durban; the capitalisation could also intimate that it has replaced the temple or religious place of worship in modern society. The “forked-stick” and the “panga” represent natural and artificially constructed tools respectively and also hint at the juxtaposition of ancient and modern methods. These three, short lines thus convey a tone of confusion. Livingstone intimates here that confusion of consciousness leads to destructive physical acts. The conventional ‘cure’ for confusion is reason and humankind’s rational faculty does have a role to play in the overcoming of this antipathy towards the snake. Livingstone suggests (through the metaphor of the masculine-feminine opposition) that reason and reverence towards the Creative Principle are, paradoxically, both necessary. Camille Paglia approaches it from the opposite perspective: “Apollo links society and religion. He is fabricated form. He is exclusion and exclusiveness”; *but* she also claims: “Apollo can swerve from nature, but he cannot obliterate it” (73 and 14).

This masculine-feminine opposition resurfaces in section X's examination of what is left of a pagan ritual:

The remains of an arcane Roman rite survive  
 involving women, their secret recesses  
 and devenomed black snakes.  
 The lay art of devenoming is lost;  
 the snakes now merely lethargic from drugged smoke.

The description of this ritual stirs what Paglia would call the chthonian and points to the theme of the snake and humankind cohabiting in an earthly form of paradise. The section, in part, valorises female sexuality (women with their "secret recesses") but also displays a diminishing of both masculine ("snakes now merely lethargic") and feminine sexuality. The snake is not merely a symbol for the penis; the masculine side of the Great Mother is often expressed in serpents (Paglia 43). But the serpent, or snake, is now devenomed, an image for the waning of the creative, natural power of the feminine *and* the masculine. This "ancient rite" has been further modified because the "art of devenoming" is now lost and drugged snakes are used instead. Only vestiges of the rite survive. If the "women" in this section are a trope for the Great Mother herself, then it speaks of what humanity has "lost": not only the common or "lay art of devenoming", but also our ecological intuition. Humanity no longer understands the organic power of ritual. The surviving "remains" of the ritual represent human confusion. A tentative hope rests in the fact that *something* of humankind's mythic memory "remains", even if the power has gone from the rite.

The limp snake in this section echoes the dangling rubber snake suspended on the car's rear-view mirror in the first section of the poem and the snake-as-electric-cord in section IX. These are implicit statements on the impotence and artificiality of modern life. The poet's reverie is initially induced by the rubber snake. The rear-view mirror, with its implication of a reflection or another reality, serves as an image for humanity's baggage of consciousness. The dangling rubber snake reduces the concept of betrayal to a powerless bauble.

The idea of a lost earthly paradise, hinted at in section X of the poem and analysed above, is explicitly examined in section III:

Baked dry by the sun, the stiff black snake  
 forms a parched question-mark between  
 highwater-mark and the dunes.  
 Eden was ever too far for the crawling back.

The dead snake lies on the beach beyond the littoral zone (“between / the high-water mark and the dunes”) and forms the shape of a question mark. The water snake is literally stranded and out of its natural habitat, the sea. It is also metaphorically exiled from “Eden”. Livingstone cryptically conflates the ocean and Eden, or evolutionary theory and creationist theory, and shows the snake to be an outcast from both. He asks his readers to make a quantum mythological leap from the garden to the sea as the place of origin of life-forms. At the same time he asks us to question our understanding or apprehension of the nature of paradise and the role of the snake in that paradise. The dead snake is “Baked dry” and “parched”. This, too, portrays the literal desiccation and metaphorical dislocation of the figure of the snake. In death, it poses a life question: why has humanity reviled the snake and refused to see it as part of the web of life? The snake becomes more than an ironic question mark in the sand; it signifies that humankind has denigrated and ignored the snake as our original key to knowledge. It is therefore the human race which is stranded beyond the highwater mark, without recourse to the littoral zone where the “physical and psychic can come together” (*LZ* 62). And the final twist is that there is (and never was) any hope of reconciliation: “Eden was ever too far for the crawling back”.

Section III’s examination of the lost Eden is followed by another version of the search for an earthly paradise in section IV, which alludes to the Biblical great flood, engineered by God to get rid of the evil on Earth. The deluge myth is reworked. The section uses the narrative of a canoeist’s mini-shipwreck and swim for survival. As the canoe-less speaker swims to shore he sees a black snake “zig-zagging lithely on the flood”. The snake survives the flood independently of the ark. If Eden marked humanity’s fall into the knowledge of good and evil or, narrowly, sin, the flood marks an unsuccessful attempt to get rid of that sin. I do not use sin in the narrow sense of moral offence, but as part of human knowledge or consciousness.

Two figures in this poem show a more benign, although still confused, attitude towards the black snake. Section VIII includes the themes of Eden, innocence and betrayal. It portrays a child’s distress and helplessness in the face of parental strife as he watches “a black snake squirm down a crack in the rockery”. The snake is a reflection of the “voices coiling” in argument. Why does the child seek out the snake? Whether literal or figurative, the child’s action of sticking his hand into the viper’s nest is anathema, a

fall from grace. The child's active seeking out of the snake echoes the myth of Eve's temptation by the snake in the Garden of Eden. The child is also in a garden and pursues the snake in a quest, perhaps, for the knowledge of good and evil. The implication is that this will help him make sense of his parents' reason for fighting. Yet the physical danger of this act remains palpable.

The penultimate section explores the common fear of finding a snake in one's bed or sleeping bag. The protagonist makes an "exhausted slide" into his sleeping bag and finds a snake inside it. His "slide" echoes the movement of a snake, as does the crawling of the child in Section VIII. Both these personae (the innocent child and the nature lover camping in the wilderness) appear to have an affinity with the snake. In this section the snake is not killed, is merely felt as "a chill muscled presence", where "muscled" hints at a possible return to power, and "chill" serves as a certain reminder of human limits, and that old, archetypal fear of the serpent.

In the final section the black snake finds freedom:

A ribbon of black writhes silently through the bush;  
the intermittent moon flickers over – are those scales?

This offers some relief after the bombardment of human cruelty and betrayal explored in the preceding sections of the poem. The snake's grace, stealth and possible pain are communicated in "writhes silently". The snake becomes an image of the bearer of both its own and human suffering. The final line is loaded with innuendo, emphasised by the use of the question mark and the instability of the moonlight. But the poet does catch a flickering glimpse of the snake as it disappears into the bush, returning to its natural habitat. The "scales" could be over his eyes, a trope for the human inability to see clearly, or understand, the creative power of nature. Alternatively, the "scales" may literally be the scales on the snake, connecting it with its order of reptiles, or, thirdly, it may refer to a balance or natural order of things. The balancing function of scales and the regulatory function of the moon on the sea's tides are evoked in the poem's final line. Further, both the moon and the snake symbolise renewal. Joseph Campbell explains:

The power of life causes the snake to shed its skin, just as the moon sheds its shadow. The serpent sheds its skin to be born again, as the moon its shadow to be born again. They are equivalent symbols. (53).

Campbell also says the serpent is symbolic of the bondage to the earth (23):

[A] constant image is that of the conflict of the eagle and the serpent. The serpent bound to the earth, the eagle in spiritual flight – isn't that conflict something we all experience? And then, when the two amalgamate, we get a wonderful dragon, a serpent with wings. (45)

Campbell also claims the serpent carries in itself the sense of both the fascination and the terror of life (53) and that the “interplay of man and nature is illustrated in this relationship with the serpent” (54).

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake” juxtaposes masculine action and the feminine Creative Principle and suggests that the latter is a powerful force which humanity has (almost) negated. The theme of betrayal is relentlessly explored through both the symbol of the snake (a masculine image) and human actions towards this unfortunate, cursed creature. The final section of the poem offers a glimmer of resolution or hope, through a falling away of the scales before the human eyes, a possible freeing of the snake into its natural habitat, and a rebalancing of the scales through understanding or ecological awareness.

The poem implicitly exposes the black snake of repression in the human heart (section I) through the vivid depictions and images in the thirteen sections. The poem opens by telling us that we are all Iscariots and then offers different “Ways of Looking” at ourselves *through* the way we see the snake. This cryptic poem with its incisive imagery targets humankind's stunted knowledge and confused consciousness. As a reader one has to question one's own relationship towards snakes. The poem is centred around this question: Why is there such a strong human antipathy towards snakes? Because humanity lacks compassion and wisdom, it has become afraid of snakes and afraid of the creative power of life itself. An imaginative or psychic shift is humanity's only hope if wisdom and compassion – or what I call a state of ecological equilibrium – is to be attained.

### **The psychic perspective: a ‘way of looking’ – and seeing**

In chapter one I argued that the Romantic poets did not discount reason at the expense of the unifying power of the imagination (see p 32). Coleridge, in particular, saw reason as part of the conscious and psychic human process. It is Romantic thinking – and particularly its focus on the “esemplastic” or synthesising power of the imagination –

which informs Livingstone's counsel that an organic or nondual position is essential if humanity is to survive.

In "**A Visitor at Station 21**" (53) Livingstone 'twins' the will and the imagination, where the will is taken to mean conscious intention which is engineered through the working of reason. He thus recognises the need for a return to synthesis between imagination and reason. In an article titled "Imagination as Value", the American poet, Wallace Stevens, conflates the two processes:

A single, strong imagination is like a single, strong reason in this, that the extreme good of each is a spiritual good. It is not possible to say, as between the two, which is paramount. For that matter it is not always possible to say that they are two. (735)

A few pages later Stevens places more value on the imagination than on reason: "The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them. If this is true, then reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination" (738). Like Coleridge, Stevens sees the imagination as the power which enables us to perceive (737). Stevens, however, uses romantic in its descriptive sense and discounts the idea that the romantic and the imagination are necessarily coupled: "we must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic". He sees the romantic as a form of sentimentality which "belittles" the imagination (727) and explains:

The imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is to the imagination what sentimentality is to feeling. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling. The imagination is the only genius. (728)

Curiously, Stevens here reflects the philosophy of the Romantics. The article's underlying premise is that the imagination has been undervalued or, in Livingstone's word, "sundered" so that humanity's conscious actions are no longer tempered by its spiritualising and psychic power.

"A Visitor at Station 21" emphasises mutuality between reason and imagination and shows that apprehension of this mutuality is necessary for symbiosis. In this manifesto or 'coming of age' poem, an organic glimpse of his place in the world stills "the old latent argument" (line 2) and gives him perspective. The "old latent argument" encompasses the pondering on the existence of God (including William Paley's argument from design) and – more obliquely – questions like: What is life? Why are we here? What does it mean to be human? After complex philosophical ponderings, the poem ends

with a duiker doe – the visitor – licking the salt on the speaker’s wrist: “These frail shared seconds halt the debate” (line 41). The poem deals with enormous concepts: will, imagination, God, intellect, science, reason and the mental processes or consciousness of the poet who tries to work out how these all fit together. Of course he cannot and, as the poem demonstrates, need not, because the quiddity of experience overrides (momentarily) this questioning. He calls the duiker’s visit a “holy event” (line 26). The final stanza recounts a sublime moment which is both Romantic and ecological. As Peter Sacks notes: “For Livingstone, this may be as close as we come to the sacred” (4). Julia Martin refers to this as “another order of awareness” (1999: 237).

In trying to unravel the various threads of the “old latent argument”, Livingstone takes us through a potted history of the development of human intellect and examines different philosophers’ views of its nub or “*the source*” (line 16). Livingstone as speaker grapples with whether philosophy can reveal this underlying latency and concludes that it cannot. It is the heart, not the mind, which holds the key. (See also the discussion on “Loving” where love unlocks the latency of existence, p 105.)

“A Visitor” examines the effects of a dualistic world view where the splitting of reason and imagination results in confusion and, arguably, leads ultimately to ecological destructiveness. This view precludes what Julia Martin calls “the possibility of nondualism” (130), a holistic perspective which might lead to a state of ecological equilibrium. Livingstone explicitly refers to this split in: “*A modern will, sundered from its twin / – imagination – has had God killed.*” (lines 7-8). The will, or conscious intention, and the imagination are (ideally?) twinned, for it is through imagining that we are able to anticipate the consequences of our actions. The above line carries an unstated correlation between God and the imagination: it is not clear whether the phrasing implies that they are one and the same, or that God is a (necessary?) figment of the imagination. What the line does explicitly stress is the importance of the imagination.

The different typefaces represent Livingstone’s present physical position on the one hand and his concomitant “mentation” (line 35) or internal mental debate (*set in italics*) on the other. The presence of the duiker is a grounding point of reference. It is, ironically, the duiker and not his philosophic contemplation of the sweep of religious and anti-religious thought which brings psychic succour.

The italicised sections show Livingstone at his most cryptic and could be called “A Brief History of the Development of the Intellect in Shorthand”. Stanza two examines the causes of the sundering of the will and the imagination and concentrates on Nietzsche’s idea that “God is dead”.<sup>43</sup> Livingstone uses the Bible as a starting point (“*So long Matthew, Mark, Luke, / John!*”). As one of the first German materialist philosophers, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) “*slackly targeted*” religion through the use of religious psychology. Then follows a list of other 19<sup>th</sup> Century influential thinkers who argued against the existence of God from the perspectives of evolutionary theory (*Darwin*), scientific socialism (*Marx*), rationality and ‘the will to power’ (*Nietzsche*) and the human unconscious (*Freud*). The stanza ends with the development of logical positivism as a 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy through the reference to “*Ayer and Russell*”.

The next stanza examines the idea of morality through a reference to the German theo-philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1904), who argued that reason is the final authority for morality or what Livingstone calls “*conscience*”. The later American philosopher Clarence Irving Lewis (1883-1964) was concerned with logic, epistemology and moral philosophy. The stanza ends with a reference to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century German monk Thomas à Kempis who in *The Imitation of Christ* argued for the moral example set by Christ.

Livingstone then grapples with Paley’s argument from design (stanza four). The English theologian William Paley (1743-1805) used the figure of a watchmaker as an intelligent designer to argue for the existence of God and his contemporary, the philosopher David Hume, refuted it. This argument from design causes convoluted questioning, conveyed in cryptic diction, which – along with the use of questions and half answers – reflects Livingstone’s uncertainty:

*Capitals there? Perhaps not, these days.  
Paley Versus Hume: the watchmaker,  
or: the child hurling prodigal cogs.  
Whose is the child’s, if not the maker’s?*

The remainder of the stanza reflects a subtle move into mysticism. The sun strokes him (line 23) and it seems that it is this awareness of the physical world and the

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<sup>43</sup> Information on all the philosophers examined in this poem comes from the electronic encyclopaedia, *Encarta*.



life force (signified by the sun) which takes him back first to 11<sup>th</sup> Century religious thought (*Anselm*) and then to early Christian times (*Scotus*). Anselm was an 11<sup>th</sup> Century Roman Catholic and Archbishop of Canterbury who wrote on the existence of God; Scotus, the Irish theologian (c800-880) expressed rationalist opinions and speculations and is best known for his works *On Divine Predestination* and *On the Division of Nature*. Livingstone groups them in the poem under the statement: “*Nothing greater can be conceived of*” (line 24). Presumably this refers to God as the greatest force.

In the following stanza he turns to science for clarification and intimates that there are inexplicable things here too: “*quirks / and quarks*” (lines 28-9). His “mentation” finally returns him to the importance of the imagination and to 17<sup>th</sup> Century French philosopher, mathematician and mystical writer Blaise Pascal’s realisation that it is in the heart that understanding occurs:

*The need grows for Pascal’s: the heart has  
its reasons that reason cannot know*

(lines 31-2).

Livingstone implies that ‘true’ understanding lies in the metaphorical (or mystical?) realm of the ‘fourth dimension’ of the brain. Reason alone cannot bring full understanding. Does this mean it is unattainable? The poem intimates that it can be felt or glimpsed, but not articulated. This leads into the realm of the mystical and it is the heart which holds the key to this realm. The inability to reach full cognitive understanding of the mystical is introduced by “*my three-tiered brain: waiting on its fourth?*” (line 20). The numbers represent the dimensions of space and a reference to the cerebrum, the cerebellum and the cortex which make up the human brain. Consciousness is present in different ways in the three-tiered brain. The fourth tier or dimension offers something more: perhaps imaginative or psychic or, even, mystical insight which has its genesis in the workings of the heart.

The poem shows that the great thinkers of the world have led humankind to an intellectually sophisticated but spiritually empty modern position because humanity has severed itself from the power of the imagination. It is only the mystical thinkers like Pascal who offer true insight. The poem also shows that an organic attunement with nature supersedes the reason-imagination dualism and quells – fleetingly – the philosophical questing for answers to the meaning of life. Livingstone encounters this quiddity through the meeting – and communing – with the duiker doe.

A brief comparison between “A Visitor at Station 21” and an earlier poem in the collection, “**The Chargers at Station 7**” (23), shows a shift in Livingstone’s treatment of the irreconcilable tension between reason and passion. In “Chargers” Apollo (reason) and Dionysus (passion) are “bound for sundering, / bound for exploding” (lines 13-14) whereas in “A Visitor” a fleeting glimpse of “unsundered creation” (Morphet 206) is attained. This is attained through imaginative identification and Livingstone’s uncanny (inexplicable) ability to physically touch and psychically commune with a wild animal. An organic state beyond “mentation” (line 35) is apprehended during the poet’s physical *and* psychic encounter with the duiker. This momentarily frees him from his tangled philosophical agonising over the apparently irreconcilable contraries of the will and the imagination. Is this poem, then, intimating that humankind should best forego thinking and return to a more physical state of being in the world? This is not possible and, even if it were, it would not be sustainable.

### **The power of art**

Art, as an imaginative process, is one of the saving graces which may help heal the “sundered” psyche of humankind. If Livingstone’s aim is to make us know our place, or *see* our true position within the natural framework of the Earth, how can the artificial construct of art serve this aim? An analysis of the treatment of art in four of the poems in *A Littoral Zone* will hopefully go some way towards answering this conundrum.

“**Haunted Estuary**” (11) lauds Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), the medieval nun and visionary, who produced divinely inspired writings and illuminations. Her prophecies and work live on through her art. In the final lines of the poem Livingstone beseeches her (or, more accurately, her art) to “cosset” what remains of humanity’s atunement with the cycles of nature: “this residuum of the moon’s”. Scholars suggest that Hildegard of Bingen was deeply ecological, hundreds of years before the concept was formalised. She used the term *viriditas*, translated as ‘moisture in greenness’, in her writings. The following extract is from her *Scivias II* (5, 46):

I have the green land under my control. Did I give that to you, man, so that you could make whatever crop you wanted germinate? And if you sow seed upon it surely you cannot induce it to fruit? No. For you can neither provide dew, nor produce rain, nor bestow *moisture in greenness*, nor draw heat with the glow of the sun – of which are required for producing a crop. (quoted in Bowie 76)

This poem describes the first stop in Livingstone's "mythical sampling run" (LZ 62) along the Natal coastline. Its prayerful or meditative tone is immediately conveyed by the opening word "Attended". The first stanza describes the meeting of the river and sea and the misty effect of the "dawn's condensation" (line 2). This symbolises the speaker's passage into a new, visionary awareness. In the second stanza Hildegard's spirit, an elusive "form of a woman / the wraith of all women", appears through the "mists" (lines 12-14). Her life as child oblate, Benedictine nun and Abbess of the Order is eulogised in the remainder of the second stanza, although she is only named at the start of the next and final stanza. Here the eulogy gains a powerful momentum as her achievements are listed and emphasised through the linking rhyme of "songstress", "enchantress", "scientist" and "Abbess" (lines 23-6). These rhymes also beautifully encapsulate her multi-facetedness. Like Livingstone, she was both poet and scientist. Matthew Fox goes so far as to claim that Hildegard of Bingen holds the key to healing the dangerous Western dualism between nature and history, creation and salvation, mysticism and prophecy (15):

Hildegard brings together the holy trinity of art, science, and religion. She was so in love with nature, so taken by the revelation of the divine in creation, that she sought out the finest scientific minds of her day, made encyclopedias of their knowledge ... followed the scientific speculations on the shapes and elements of the universe, and wedded these to her own prayer, her own imagery, her own spirituality and art. (14)

Hildegard made her prophecies more than 800 years ago. Livingstone's poem is a riverine journey back into this time, yet it is written in the present tense. For the poet the spirit or "wraith" of Hildegard is still present. She did not, as far as I know, predict our current ecological climacteric. What she did offer in the following extract from *The Book of Divine Works* (2, 18) was the means to avoid it:

If meanwhile, we give up the green vitality of these virtues and surrender to the drought of our indolence, so that we do not have the sap of life and the greening power of good deeds, then the power of our very soul will begin to fade and dry up. (quoted in Bowie 32)

Had humanity taken note of her teachings – both practical and spiritual – we would be living more harmoniously with the Earth. The poem's use of the future tense in the last lines reflects a hope for change and an appeal to both Hildegard and her order. (The poem ends with no concluding fullstop.)

In your mystery & strength  
 You & your Benedictines  
 Pray will you cosset  
 This residuum of the moon's

He addresses both Hildegard and her order presumably because her work lives on through them. The Benedictines were a great civilising influence in early Western Europe and are renowned for their learning. They are also teachers and manual labourers (Brewer 100). Does Livingstone appeal to them because he believes their efforts may contribute to a more hopeful future? Is he asking that the spirituality of the Benedictines and the art of Hildegard of Bingen be used as a stay against ecological destruction? The poem ends on an inconclusive note: what is the moon describing? Beauty? Truth? Hope? Or the rhythm of the Earth? Mircea Eliade argues that the lunar rhythms are an archetype for extended durations:

[T]he 'birth' of a humanity, its growth, decrepitude ('wear'), and disappearance are assimilated to the lunar cycle. And this assimilation is important not only because it shows us the 'lunar' structure of universal becoming but also because of its optimistic consequences; for, just as the disappearance of the moon is never final, since it is necessarily followed by a new moon, the disappearance of man is not final either; in particular, even the disappearance of an entire humanity (deluge, flood, submersion of a continent, and so on) is never total, for a new humanity is born from a pair of survivors. (87)

Eliade's use of myth to make sense of the world is akin to Livingstone's appeal to art (and spirituality) in this poem.

"Haunted Estuary" gives a more holistic view of the role of theology than does "A Visitor". In the latter poem intellectualisation gets in the way, both for both the reader in reading the poem and for Livingstone in 'reading' the ecology. Both poems point to the mystical, but where the figure of Hildegard herself is the mystic link, the theologians in "A Visitor" sever rather than make this connection. There, it is the duiker which provides the "holy event" in the poem.

In contrast to "Haunted Estuary", "**Coronach at Cave Rock**" (29) concentrates more explicitly on the role of art through the figures of the musician and the poet. It is, broadly, about the lasting power of art. The "pieces will live" (line 30). But the poem shows that fame is really just a by-product; it is the creative process and the power of metaphor which are the central issues. Livingstone eulogises the work of the Austrian composer Anton von Webern (1833-1945), and laments his untimely death.

The poem works with the idea of association. A holster stock inscribed with the name “A VON WEBERN” (line 5) and found on the beach sets up an association with the musician of the same name (stanza 1); the writer Anton Chekov is associated with Anton von Webern (stanza 2); and various (unlikely) images are used to ‘describe’ Webern’s music (stanza 4). Association is a close cousin of representation or *mimesis*. In his *Poetics* Aristotle defines poetry as an imitation (Greek, *mimesis*) of human actions. M.H. Abrams explains: “By ‘imitation’ he means something like ‘representation’, in its root sense: the poem imitates by taking some kind of human action and re-presenting it in a new ‘medium’ or material – that of words” (83). In the poem Webern is depicted as denying the idea that art represents life; art rather “enfolds” the essences that move unseen beneath or through what we usually picture as ‘life’. For Livingstone Webern’s music represents human yearning, the “unspeakable sounds of music from my skull” (line 22). The evocative nature of the music is explored through the effect of its sounds; through Livingstone’s use of words in the poem; and through the shape of the poem’s four central stanzas where the blank zig-zag pattern reflects the “variation and space” (line 17) within the music and invokes the silence between the notes.

The poem has two voices, that of the poet and that of the musician. In the opening and closing stanzas, the driftwood and the shape it takes in the mind of the poet act as a locus of association. In the final stanza the association between the poet and the musician is compared to a game of chess: “my move” and “the piece” (line 31), where the “piece” also refers back to the “small pieces” or compositions of the previous stanza. It is the poet’s turn to answer to the voice of the musician. He does this by paying tribute to Webern’s “long-lived notes” which, he implies, are more lasting or “durable” than “headstones” or physical monuments to the dead.

Livingstone, as speaker in the first and final stanzas, frames the bracketed voice of Webern (“I am Anton” (line 7)) who cryptically speaks from the grave. An American soldier mistakenly shot him “at Mittersill in 1945” (line 6). The central four stanzas are a virtuoso display of Livingstone’s poetic skill where the power of the musician’s art speaks through the poet’s voice. Tony Morphet explains: “Just as it is, and is not, Webern, this speech is, and is not, the voice of Livingstone. Similarly it is, and is not, an account of Livingstone’s poetics” (206). In making the dead musician speak Livingstone gives his account of Webern’s manifesto: to create art even though “the notes [are] so

delicate they can only be thought” (line 29). Webern refers to art in general. In his opening ‘speech’ he says: “I am Anton. As in Chekov” (line 7) and, in closing, states: “my small pieces will live” (line 30). Here the use of the future tense “marks both the composer’s confidence and the poet’s ambition” (Morphet 206).

Webern’s music was revolutionary and misunderstood. In the poem he is made to recount how he suffered a figurative “fusilade” (line 27) of criticism and mockery. He says he does not care. Because “the notes [are] so delicate they can only be thought” (line 29), his real message lies behind or beyond the music. Through his revolutionary “twelve-tones” (line 30) or serial technique he was able to blend or “temper” his world, able (perhaps) to communicate the vision of interconnection he found in the Austrian Alps when he saw “in physical nature ... the highest metaphysical theosophy” (Sudie 279).

The poem is written in six, six-line stanzas with a skeleton rhyme scheme where lines one and five of each stanza either rhyme or half-rhyme. This structure may be a half-echo of Webern’s serial technique, also known as twelve-tone which he developed along with his fellow musicians, Schoenberg and Berg (Sudie 270). *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* attempts to describe Webern’s style:

Those broad features which remain constant – brevity, the importance of silence, the usually restrained dynamic range, clarity of texture and simplicity of harmony – *do not go far* in explaining what makes up Webern’s style. (Sudie 278, my italics)

The poem refers to Webern’s simplicity and sparseness: “Even now I care naught for such dense cluttered lives.” (line 10).

Webern’s source of inspiration was nature, which he had learnt to appreciate as a boy in the Carinthian Alps. In 1919 Webern wrote to Berg:

I love all nature, but, most of all, that which is found in the mountains. For a start I want to progress in the purely physical knowledge of all these phenomena ... Experimenting, observing in physical nature is the highest metaphysical theosophy to me. (in Sudie 279)

The poem echoes this philosophy: “I touched my pencils to varihued manuscripts / spare beauties in profile like these Austrian peaks” (lines 10-12).

The next stanza explains that his “bagatelle” or small pieces of music are “enfolded essences” (line 16), delivered through the technique of “variation and space counterpoint and silence” (line 17). The music never developed into something beyond

itself and so managed to capture the essence or the thing-in-itself, became “beauty parenthesised” (line 18). His music becomes a trope for beauty which is contained (enfolded, parenthesised). The music is quiddity, or, in Hopkins’ terminology, displays its inscape. In reading the poem we do not hear the music, but are made to imagine its power. The various images in the third stanza are connected with silence in sound (“strings touched with a feather”, “tiptoed emanations”, “unspeakable sounds” and “blurt of depth-charged thunder” (lines 19, 21, 22 and 23)) and energy (“electric shiver”, “the boiling of plasmas” and “an abrupt lightning flash” (lines 19, 21 and 23)). The complex imagery in “the electric shiver / up the dangerous stairs of a crumbling mansion” alludes to Yeats’ “winding ancient stair” (“A Dialogue of Self and Soul”) and the latter poem’s use of the Eastern symbol of upward mental pilgrimage and the pursuit of wisdom. It also evokes “The Wall Beyond Station X”, the previous poem in *A Littoral Zone*, and is a trope for a terrifying inner journey, where the “dangerous stairs” represent this process and the “crumbling mansion” the unconscious.

Where Webern uses what is represented beyond the music (the silence), Livingstone uses what lies beyond the language (metaphor and imagery) to communicate the ‘essence’. Webern’s inspiration was nature or, specifically, the Alps. Livingstone’s inspiration in this poem is Webern’s music. Both are re-presented through the creative process so that the art comes to embody the original ‘essence’. The Zen poet, Gary Snyder, claims: “Art is an assimilator of unfelt experience, sensation, and memory for the whole society” (quoted in Bate 246). Jonathan Bate interprets Snyder’s philosophy:

For Snyder, then, there is a powerful analogy between poetry and climax ecosystem. His own belief in a Zen theory of the interconnectedness of all things means that he does not have to worry that the analogy is *merely a metaphor*. He would reply that metaphor is a way of understanding hidden connections, of reunifying the world which scientific understanding has fragmented. (247)

Bate points out that among intellectuals Snyder’s analogy would be seen as “mere mystification” and that:

Language and imagination have come to be defined as realms that are split off from nature because they only function by means of representation. What is produced by representation is by definition something other than the thing-in-itself (Kant’s *Ding an sich*). (247)

Livingstone's "Coronach" is about reversing the above (incorrect) perception of representation and shows that language and music (or art) offer a way into seeing "the-things-of-nature-in-themselves" (Bate 247).

In the final poem of this group, "**The Waste Land at Station 14**" (38), Livingstone shows that the power of art, particularly *poiesis* or the creation of art, is "deeper" (line 40) than the racial divisions signified by the 'whites only' signs of the South African Apartheid system. The poem addresses Shoji Bhengu, Livingstone's "Brother-poet" (line 46), and is not about their different skin colour, but about their common yearning to "hymn the earth" (line 45). Dirk Klopper argues the opposite: "Livingstone finds it difficult, even in the midst of denunciation of social evils, to relinquish a dialectical awareness of division and struggle at the heart of existence" (45). I believe this poem is about imaginative identification rather than dialectical division. Likewise, "Beachfront Hotel at Station 5" (19) explores Livingstone's mutuality through art with the writers of the *Drum* Decade.

Jonathan Bate argues in *The Song of the Earth* that poetry offers humankind a way in which to reunify with nature, how to "hymn the earth". He refers to this as "a special kind of expression which may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature" and names the concept ecopoetics (245). It is ironic that Livingstone, who categorically stated that he was not a political poet, should (deliberately?) choose to combine politics with what is the most obviously ecopoetic poem in *A Littoral Zone*. Section 5 of "The Waste Land" expresses a strong ecopoetic yearning, but most of the remainder of the poem takes the form of pale protest poetry. Ecological awareness and political discord do not make good bedfellows and, as a result, the poem is too disparate. The style, too, is contradictory and, in places, facile. The jocular tone of sections one and three jars when read alongside the lyricism of the end of section four and of section five. I suspect Livingstone is deliberately parodying protest poetry. Duncan Brown also reads the poem as a parody and adds that Livingstone's is an "inaccurate portrayal of important aspects of black writing" (2002: 111-12). I argue that the poem is not about black writing, but about writing as a whole, and therefore the poem should not be interpreted politically. Peter Sacks' interpretation is more inclusive: "it is precisely by getting beyond the skin-deep surface that the mind may turn at last to 'hymn the earth perhaps'" (4).



The title of the poem alludes to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", and the political parts echo Eliot's "heap of broken images". Eliot's despair at a lack of synthesis ("I can connect / Nothing with nothing") is, however, not Livingstone's despair. Livingstone sees interconnection – "a glad profusion ... struck from one Mind" (lines 39-40) – but admits that he cannot express it. The heart of the poem is introduced at the end of section four: "The earth you and I now know is a Karoo / of the mind" (lines 32-3), a semi-arid state which is in danger of turning into the desert of "murderous oceans of sand" (line 35). This aridity defines the "now" (line 32), the current, politically segregated relationship between Livingstone and Bhengu. Section five explores, in contrast, their poetic and ancient brotherhood. Through an invocation to the ancient poets, or the ancient art of *poiesis*, they can return to a dreamtime and "walk" (line 38) the "strand / older than old the ancient poets keep" (lines 36-7). The power of the Earth is conveyed through the energy of "Africa's sun" (line 38) and "the love which Africa has fanned" (line 44). In this place of the dreamtime it would be possible to "wake those old ones from their sleep" (line 42) and write poems in praise of the Earth. But these poems are "not yet begun" (line 43). Livingstone is referring to what Wallace Stevens calls "the great poem of the earth":

I speak of the poet because we think of him as the orator of the imagination. And I say that the world is lost to him, certainly, because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written. (Stevens 730)

Both Livingstone and Stevens imply that it is possible to "hymn the earth". There is hope. And, as in "Beachfront Hotel", this hope for the attainment of a state of ecological equilibrium may be brought to fruition through the power of love ("the love which Africa [or the Earth] has fanned") and the power of art. So, love creeps into these two poems which concentrate on the power of the written word (in "Beachfront Hotel") and the ancient power of poetry.

To return to my initial question: can the artificial construct of art lead to a natural or organic view of the world, a state of ecological equilibrium? The above poems show that art can make us 'see' or imagine this state through opening the doors of perception, as William Blake put it. Whether this is enough is highly dubious. (A cynic might argue that Livingstone's appeal to a "one Mind" or a primal interconnecting force is specious.) Seeing or understanding humankind's organic place in the world is one thing, but living it

is quite another. Perhaps the power of art can inspire people to at least live more lightly on the Earth. A bigger question is: Has poetry ever managed to sway the hearts and minds of any but a few isolated readers?<sup>44</sup> So, *how* can poets promote an ecological sensibility? By continuing to write and continuing to hope. In Livingstone's words: "No other course ... but to accept the gage and buckle to" (*LZ* 61).

### **The power of love**

As indicated earlier in this chapter, I am not going to attempt to define love. I will venture to say that the capacity to love is a human attribute and is (partly) what separates us from other living creatures.<sup>45</sup> I will argue that (conversely) Livingstone shows that this capacity for love is also that which could unite us with the rest of the living world. Further, there are different forms of love, such as passion and compassion, and Livingstone shows that compassion is a higher form of love.

While "Beachfront Hotel" and "The Waste Land" connect love with art, the poems which are analysed in this section deal more specifically with the power of love. In her PhD dissertation "The Jewelled Net", Julia Martin repeatedly refers to the importance of the heart and argues it is "crucial" for the attainment of an environmentally literate, or ecologically aware, society (83). She explains her use of the term 'heart':

In the broader sense, when I refer to the heart I mean first to indicate modes of experience and knowledge which are not wholly governed by the rational. More specifically, I am using the term to indicate responses of compassion and imagination. (90)

Martin stresses the importance of love to an ecological reading: "This nondual wisdom is inextricably related to the imaginative identification we call love or sympathy or compassion for every thing that lives" (172). Her "imaginative identification" is a way to

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<sup>44</sup> Gillian Beer claims that the reading of Milton's poems influenced Charles Darwin profoundly: What kind of imaginative sustenance did Milton offer to Darwin at this intensely formative period? One of the crucial discoveries that came to Darwin as a result of the voyage was that the green control of the English landscape with its many man-induced harmonies and its sober beauties could not be considered normative. Beyond England lay other natural landscapes full of tumultuous colour and life... Darwin walks the tropical rain forests with Milton. His intense sense-arousal takes him beyond his own power of language. (29-30)

And it can be taken as a fact that Darwin has influenced present-day thought equally profoundly.

<sup>45</sup> This is not to deny that animals are sentient beings, but as humans we can never know whether a dog's devotion, for example, is experienced as love by the dog.

resolve humankind's psychomachia, the battle between spirit and flesh or "the uneasy divide between humanity's physical and psychic elements" (*LZ* 62). In *The Lives of Animals*, J.M.Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello also connects the heart, or sympathy, with imaginative capacity and points out that "imaginative identification" is not necessarily an outcome of the imaginative process:

'The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the "another", as we see at once when we think of the object not as a bat ... but as another human being. There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity ... and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it.[']  
(34-5)

What about empathy? This is a question I would like to ask Elizabeth Costello. Sympathy implies a feeling of pity through the ability to share the other's emotion, while empathy implies a full comprehension of the other's emotion. Empathy – the power of mentally identifying oneself with (and so fully comprehending) a person or object of contemplation (OED) – thus leads to compassion; Costello lacks empathy. Her sympathy leads, instead, to the quality or state of being affected with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of another (OED).

Of the following four poems from *A Littoral Zone* which deal with the power of love, "Elementals at Station 24" most vividly takes its readers into the realm of the imagination. In this surreal poem the 'animal' women the speaker loves seem to be simultaneously the object and the subject of his love-expressed-as-passion. But (the poem implies at the end) passion without compassion is not much use.

The first love poem in the collection is "**An African Loving, Station 3**" (15). It explores the meaning which the object of love gives to the life of the now lovelorn and lonely speaker who is in a state of "dry beached fright" (line 9). Like the unfortunate beached whale in "Carnivores at Station 22" (55) or the snake in section III of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake (16), the speaker is, metaphorically, out of his element. This early and more personal poem introduces the image of the sea as a reflection of his emotions. This is more explicitly explored in "**Subjectivities at Station 15**" (40) where the speaker's view of the seascape is coloured by his emotions. This subjective view or dimension becomes what may be termed an emotional ecology. The speaker's lovelorn state is, again, the theme of the poem and is emphasised by the

opening, and repeated, phrase “Without you”. His alienation and feeling of dislocation are made palpable: the sand on the beach is no longer solid underfoot, the sun burns him, the rocks look menacing, and the sound of the waves is like the knell of doom (stanza one). The second stanza describes the speaker’s unbalanced and “homeless” (line 10) state. The two stanzas mirror one another through an almost matching rhyme scheme (abcde fbcde) and the final lines of each stanza (“waves interrupting” and “the torn homeless sea corrupting”) refer explicitly to his emotional dislocation through the image of a discordant sea. Without the object of his love he cannot find atunement or ecological equilibrium. “An African Loving” and “Subjectivities” show that love which concentrates solely on a human object is found to be lacking once the object of love is gone. The following poems examine another, more comprehensive, form of love.

Part of the implication of “**Beachfront Hotel at Station 5**” (19) is that the cosmic force is greater than political repression. And, Livingstone implies, love is part of this cosmic force. The poem takes the form of nine stanzas, or “nine steps” (line 1), towards the final stanza which offers a resolution through love:

Yet love vaults unbidden from memory’s dungeon,  
 its lyricism whirled from the seabed of this world  
 to bounce off heedless constellations, to be hurled  
 back some day when the undraped sun salves ridden men  
 – hangers on the land’s crucifix.

The lyricism of love represents a form of hope. This love springs from primordial memory, described as “memory’s dungeon” and “the seabed of this world”. There is a movement from an image of imprisonment to a loosening, or freeing, of the poet’s imagination in the words “whirled”, “bounce” and “hurled”. The dungeon transforms into the seabed. The phrase “the seabed of this world”, while referring again to the evolutionary theory that the sea was the medium which spawned life, contains more than scientific evolutionary theory. The “seabed” is also, metaphorically, a unifying principle which feeds the imagination. Livingstone’s glimpse of a possible resolution through hope has come from a deeply-buried place which contains love. Jonathan Bate says: “The dream of deep ecology will never be realized upon the earth, but our survival as a species may be dependent on our capacity to dream it in the work of our imagination” (37-8). This is, I believe, exactly what Livingstone says in the final stanza of this poem where “love vaults unbidden” and the “sun salves ridden men”.

The above ‘conventional’ love poems (“An African Loving” and “Subjectivities”) deal with the aftermath of passion, rather than with compassion. Are passion and compassion both part of love? Or is passion – with its concentration on the object of love – a *doppelgänger* which offers no real succour? “**A Tide in the Affairs of Station 18**” (46) convolutedly examines this question. Here passion is reduced to the man’s “ditherings, his slime” (or ejaculations) (line 12). True existence is glimpsed through an imaginative identification with the subject and rests in the “woman beloved” (line 2), who is presented as an incarnation of the Creative Principle. The poem explores the possibility of the attainment of nondualism through a bodily reconnection with the Creative Principle. The catalyst is love which, it is implied, is a latent faculty in the human psyche. Through the poem’s Jekyll and Hyde image, this ‘true existence’ is juxtaposed with man as “hunter-killer” (line 13), who is intent on ownership of “self-possessed coasts” (line 11). Even though man is “the clown of creation” (line 10), he does also possess the “power” (line 21) to attain ecological equilibrium.

The second stanza ponders man’s odd position. He is neither beast nor angel and has no clearly defined place. He is both a fool with delusions of grandeur and a visionary who has the humility to “bow and scrape” (line 14). Given these conflicts and man’s marginalized position as the “clown of creation”, how can he attain ecological equilibrium? If he is lucky – through love. Or, as the poem has it, through communion with “his destiny’s bride” (line 3). She holds the key to life, courage, emotional interconnection and consciousness, for she “livens spine, plexus, mind” (line 4). This woman is a trope for the feminine principle and represents the underlying substance or essence of life itself (the hypostasis of line 14). Despite the poem’s references to “a woman” (line 2) and “a man” (lines 8 and 20), it is more an examination of humankind’s confused position on Earth than it is about the segregation of the feminine and the masculine. Humankind is shown to be miraculously complex, neither wholly an animal (“this hunter-killer”) nor quite an angel capable of “sublimities” (line 13) and “tak[ing] on the stars” (line 17).

The poem explores an ecological necessity: we as humans must unfreeze and tap into those “solidified seas” buried “inside a man’s skull” (lines 1 and 2). We must take cognisance of our evolutionary position and heritage if we are to find our proper place. The “seas” of the brain are metaphorically connected to the rhythms of nature through the

“tide” of the title, and structurally through the placing of the word at the end of each stanza as a closing rhyme (note the intricate rhyming link: lines 1 and 3 of each stanza rhyme with “tide”). The tide is a trope for the pulsations or cycles of life. The extended metaphor of the sea signifies mystery, power and creativity, or the intangibles of life itself. The word tide also has connotations of a rise and fall in fortune and can be connected to the “luck” and “destiny” of line 3.

Man thus enacts in his own body the whole of evolutionary history but the “cool Jekyll” or “manic Hyde” (or both?) of the third stanza precludes him from knowing this. This split personality or inability to synthesise reason and passion results in a dualistic and consequently unecological view of the world. Possible salvation lies in the “durable and permanent” (line 21) power of love, spiced with a sprinkling of luck. This poem asks that we imagine that this is possible. “A Tide in the Affairs” is a love poem to the Earth rather than an address to a woman as the object of the speaker’s passion. This makes it an unlikely, but more poignant, love poem, since the “power” lies in compassion rather than in passion. The poem also contains the realistic recognition of man’s (biological) limits. He competes “hollowly” like mindless fish “sprats” (lines 18 and 19) for this “woman beloved”. Mother Earth is a highly unlikely paramour, but a wholly necessary one.

In “**Elementals at Station 24**” (57) Livingstone addresses not one, but four womanly figments of his imagination, and loves each of them passionately. In this poem the act of loving is more obviously connected to an act of Earthly reverence than it is in “A Tide”. He imaginatively identifies with the basic elements of life and with the genesis of the planet Earth.

“Elementals” recounts an imaginative and surreal encounter with the four elements. The encounter starts realistically enough when the speaker’s “concupiscence” (line 15) leads him to offer a lift to four young women caught in a rainstorm. The poet imaginatively loves and copulates with the women who are embodiments of fire, air, water and earth, in this order. This exhilarating encounter leaves him “quite transfigured” (line 59), or psychically in tune with the universe. Livingstone connects the figures of these four elemental women to each of the elements’ essential role in the creation of the Earth. The love lyrics, set in italics, provide the heart of the poem, which is framed by a description of a storm in sections one and three. The storm is compared to Wagner’s

opera, *Lohengrin* so that the power of nature and the power of art metaphorically complement one another.

The poem is mostly written in free verse, but the invocations to the four women or “elementals” are written in the same five-line stanza form, with a consistent rhyming of lines two and four. The final line of each of these stanzas is linked through a rhyme pattern which ends on “*sun*”. This serves to emphasize that the “*licit sun*” is an image of hope and a reference to the sustaining laws of nature. Each of the four stanzas is introduced by an appellation to the particular woman, followed by the phrase “*loving you is ...*” with a continuation of the use of the present participle, indicating an ongoing natural process.

In ancient and medieval philosophy, earth, air, fire and water were the four elements from which all other substances were composed (Brewer 369). David Suzuki points out in *The Sacred Balance* that each of the elements is essential to the ecology of the planet. He says that fire was the forming substance of the planet Earth, that water was the amniotic fluid for the evolution of life-forms on Earth, and that without water, air to breathe, and earth in which to grow food for sustenance, humans, other animals and plants would not be able to survive. Beneath the lyrical layer of loving the individual women, Livingstone reminds us of the elemental interconnections which support life as a whole on the Earth.

Fire is evoked by his “*Phoenix-Woman*” (line 19). The phoenix’s legendary destruction and resurrection are refigured in electrically scientific terms – “*coiling*”, “*electrics*”, “*kinetics*” and “*induction*” – which also convey the passion of the embrace. The invocation to the *Phoenix-Woman* is followed by a question (lines 24-6) in which he wonders if the birth of the planet took place during a greater storm than the one he is presently witnessing. By referring to “the planet’s birth” immediately after his address to “*Phoenix-Woman*”, he alludes to the function of fire – and passion – in the forming of the planet. And, for him, the act of loving becomes a regenerative experience akin to the forming of the planet! And, further, as in the phoenix legend, there is always hope of regeneration.

He then addresses “*Falcon-Woman*” (line 27), the huntress and powerful bird of prey who symbolises air. Livingstone’s description of this type of loving is one of freedom and exhilaration where instinct rules in “*senses spun to mindlessness*” (line 30)

and speed overtakes the “*tardy stars*” (line 31). The ‘commentary’ which follows this stanza is rather strange, but connects the falcon’s predatory nature with that of a “famished dinosaur” (line 33). He compares the noise of the storm to the imagined dinosaur’s poundings on the roof of the car and so directs the reader’s imagination towards prehistoric life and the possibility of extinction. He and the four women are the dinosaur’s prey: it “disbelieves this meal’s inedible” (line 34). Later in the poem he states that “creation’s still the carnivore” (line 42), indicating that the Earth or Gaia finally has the upper hand. Humanity cannot escape the natural laws which govern existence. Creation as the carnivore resurfaces in “Road Back”: “The planet counterattacks” (line 34) says Livingstone, and predicts that our fate rests in the “hands of a bright blue cell” (line 37) or the Earth as a superorganism.

His next act of loving, this time of the water element signified by the *Dolphin-Woman*, contains obvious references to swimming through water in “*surfing*” and “*streaming*” (lines 35 and 37). The water imagery returns us to less obvious references to the evolutionary process which is “*arrowing straight for some goal / in a blind horizon*” (lines 38-9), an image which underlines the contingency of the evolutionary process. Charles Darwin grappled with the possibility that the universe was formed as a result of “blind chance” (1958: 92 and 162), and Livingstone intimates here that there is no ultimate future purpose to (or design behind) the evolution of life: the “*horizon*” is “*blind*”. He hints that this “*goal*” may well be, ironically, the extinction of the human race.

What is the “exhilarating fiction” which “wins” for Livingstone in the ‘commentary’ which follows the invocation to *Dolphin-Woman* (lines 40-2)? That the hypothesis that life on Earth was first formed in the sea (the aquatic stage of evolution)? Or that contingency is the driving force in the evolutionary process? Or simply that, given the exhilarating descriptions of swimming with *Dolphin-Woman* and his earlier admission to “concupiscence”, the imagined copulation is the “fiction” which “wins”. He then adds the sobering reminder that humanity, as part of the life on Earth, occupies a precarious position as prey to a force much greater than itself. (This poem is an odd mixture of sexual delight and scientific seriousness.)

His final invocation to “*Tiger-Woman*”, who symbolises the element of earth, is on one level a description of playfulness (indicated in “*tumbling, / rolling*” (lines 43-4))



redolent of the happier moments with the tigress in “Descent from the Tower”. It can also be read as a statement of earthly bliss or ecological balance where they are “*freed from striated meadows*” (line 46). If these striations refer to furrowed plough lines, then the implication is that farming and its technologies have been left behind, that there has been a return to the abundance of an Edenlike state, overseen by “*the licit sun*” (line 47) which provides the necessary and permissible energy for life. Symbiosis or a mutually beneficial relationship is alluded to in the “*clawed and clawing*” (line 45) which forms part of the passionate playfulness between the poet and *Tiger-Woman*.

He offers a one-line ‘commentary’ on this final imaginative and loving encounter: “This sort of thing can leave you breathless” (line 48). This anticipates his “quite transfigured” state (line 59) and indicates that – in loving and playing with the tigress – he has imagined a perfect state, an ecological Eden, which he cannot put into words.

The final section returns to the present and the ‘real’ world. The storm abates and the metaphoric music fades. He asks “Who was that son of Parsifal’s? Who / on earth, in heaven, the hell was Wagner?” (lines 52-3). The importance of culture – both in literature and in music – has disappeared for the poet. This line does not indicate amnesia, but a shift in focus and a transcendence of the fake distinctions between earth, heaven, and hell. What Livingstone has imagined makes human cultural endeavours pale into insignificance. The “beauties” of the opening section are now “anthropopsychic athletes” (line 54). Anthropopsychic is a word coined by Livingstone to indicate a synthesis of human physical and psychic awareness. His imagination has both physically and psychically transported him: he is “breathless” (line 48) and his “neocortex quite transfigured” (line 59). This physical/psychic transfiguration is an imaginary ideal which, momentarily, replaces the transcendental power of art (Wagner’s music fades). Livingstone in his “slightly touched” and “pleasantly ruffled” animal-like state now sees and feels in a new way.

The final stand-alone line, “Perhaps there was only one of her” conveys self-doubt and irony through the use of “perhaps” *and* concedes to the interconnectedness of life. His half-realisation that there was “only one of her” indicates that, in biological law, the four elements operate both separately and together to sustain life. This poem is a celebration of life and the power of passionate love and, perhaps (!), a warning that the imagination can be stretched beyond its limit.

What is one to make of the fact that Livingstone's descriptions of his encounters with these elemental women point to the workings of passion rather than of a more reciprocal love, even though he prefaces each invocation with "*loving you*"? To talk about love as the glue which binds humanity and, perhaps, the whole of the natural world is much harder than to talk of the scientific facts which support evolutionary theory. David Suzuki, in a chapter titled "The Law of Love" in *The Sacred Balance*, mostly examines human communities, but does try to extend this to the rest of the natural world. He concludes:

Built into the fundamental properties of matter is mutual attraction that could be thought of as the basis of love. For human beings, love ... is the humanizing force that confers health in body and mind. Receiving love releases the capacity for love and compassion that is a critical part of living together as social beings. That love extends beyond those of our own species – we have an innate affinity for other life forms. If we are to deliberately plot a sustainable future, the opportunity for each of us to experience love, family and other species must be a fundamental component. (182-3)

Suzuki's claim that we have "an innate affinity for other life forms" is an expression of Edward O. Wilson's concept of biophilia. Livingstone analogously gives an imaginative account of elemental "loving", where his love is for the basic elements which make up life. He uses surrealism to mesh the physical and the psychic; his descriptions are sexually explicit yet we know that the women he loves with such passion are not real. They are psychic manifestations of elemental forces.

In conclusion, Livingstone portrays passion as a biological form of love. Passion is instinctual and selfish and, in the pursuit of pleasure, concentrates on the object of love as only an object. This is (crudely) the dynamic behind "An African Loving" and "Subjectivities". Compassion is a higher form of human love; it is conscious and unselfish and it empathetically identifies with the subject towards which the love is directed. Compassion informs "Beachfront Hotel" and "A Tide in the Affairs" (if one interprets Dr Jekyll as the stronger 'character'). Human-to-animal compassion is also a recurring theme in Livingstone's work and is evident in *A Littoral Zone* in "Bad Run at King's Rest" and "Carnivores". A combination of passion and compassion is the highest form of love, for it would combine empathy with fervour. "Elementals" possibly belongs in this category.

I conclude this chapter with an examination of two poems which can best be called psychic quests for personal symbiosis.

### **The surreal as a gateway to a clearer understanding of the real**

Why does Livingstone venture into the bizarre world of the surreal, and what, if any, are the ecological implications of these psychic quests? With this question in mind, this section examines “The Wall Beyond Station X” and “Traffic Interlude: Descent from the Tower”. It is significant that the first poem is set at station x, a surreal or imaginary sampling station. The second poem, as a ‘traffic interlude’, is one of Livingstone’s three road reveries, the other notably ecological one being “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake”.

Michael Chapman notes that “Livingstone does often successfully venture into unusual, sometimes daring areas of experience. An element of the hallucinatory has figured in his poetry from the beginning” (1981:153). He adds:

Bizarre elements have of course featured importantly in twentieth-century literature. A failure of rationalism, a loss of faith, coupled with advances in psychology, have influenced movements such as Surrealism, which attempts to express the workings of the unconscious... Livingstone, too, attempts to shape his bizarre subject-matter into exact images and disciplined forms, as in ‘The Voice of the Experiment’[AU] (p.30):

Scribbling at shutters and screens,  
lamenting under locked doors,  
the cold skeletal notes keen  
whistling through wire vocal chords.

forty years ago, this wind  
found in a place of stasis  
its tongue, to sing tonight in  
spectral Hebraic accents

(*ibid.*)

This wind is also a predominant image in “The Wall Beyond Station X” where it signifies personal loss rather than the horror of the Nazi death-camps. Further, “The Wall” is one of the poems which “attempts to express the workings of the unconscious” (*ibid.*).

In “**The Wall Beyond Station X**” (27) both the speaker and the hearer are Livingstone himself. He addresses himself as “you”, a self-dislocating ironising technical quirk also used in “A Darwinian Preface”, “Road Back” and many other poems. The poem traces an attempt to reconcile the scientist and the writer, signified by “one plume

from a seagull's wing" as a trope for the marine biologist and "a goose-quill" for the poet (lines 10-11). His use of an implied I-figure which is also the "you" in the poem indicates a move between the physical and psychic elements in his personality, where the "I" represents the scientist and the "you" the romantic or questing persona. The scientist objectively describes the actions of the poet as he walks along the wall. Water is a dominant image and is frequently referred to in the plural: "the waters" (lines 10, 40, 54, 60) and "the seas" (lines 21, 27, 43, 66). The waters to the left of the wall represent the scientist or the rational left-brain activity and the waters to the right, the creative right-brain of the poet. It is the poet who undertakes the journey and the scientist who comments on the poet's actions.

The poem is written in five 14-line stanzas. Although there is no rhyme scheme, the stanzas can be seen as a series of reformulated Shakespearean sonnets which mostly follow the form of three quatrains or statements with a concluding couplet. The final line of each stanza comments on the position of the poet and shows a progression, or further stage, of the journey. At the end of stanza one, the speaker admits that "there is something you foolishly forgot". The ending of the next stanza finds him resolved to continue walking along the wall or "isthmus". Stanza three concludes with the speaker re-assessing his position and the state of the wall. By the end of stanza four he is being buffeted by "erratic crosswinds" until, finally, the wall dissolves behind him.

"The Wall" is prefaced by "Philoctetes at Station X" (25) where the poet confronts his weakness and mortality as he meditates on a cut on his heel which threatens to "never heal".<sup>46</sup> So, in "The Wall" Livingstone as a lame god figure sets out on a mythical journey along an (imaginary) two-brick-wide wall into the sea or the unknown. It can best be described as a journey into the Jungian unconscious. By this I mean an awareness of both his own unique nature *and* his intimate relationship with all life (Fordham 63). C.J. Jung refers to the unconscious as "the fundamental stratum or core of human nature where the instincts dwell" (363) and describes the content of the unconscious as:

Everything of which I know, but of which I am not at the moment thinking;  
everything of which I was once conscious but have now forgotten; everything

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<sup>46</sup> There appears to be a typographical error in this poem: "Could be this bloody heel with never heal" (line 7) which should (grammatically) read 'will never heal'.

perceived by my senses, but not noted by my conscious mind; everything which, involuntarily and without paying attention to it, I feel, think, remember, want and do; all the future things that are taking shape in me and will sometimes come to consciousness: all this is the content of the unconscious. (Jung 419-20)

Livingstone's quest in "The Wall" is to find synthesis between the rational and creative sides of his mind. He says he goes in search of "some promised land" (line 9) but, in the end, experiences "manic songs of dissonance and loss" (line 65); finds little light (line 66); and encounters a "dissolving" wall (line 70) which offers no way back. What does Livingstone's (errant) quest achieve? The short answer is a deeper understanding of the power both of the poet and of poetry itself – and its fragility or temporality. If

Livingstone's quest is to reconcile the rational and creative aspects of his brain, then his search includes poetic creativity. It could be argued that "The Wall" reflects Samuel Taylor Coleridge's formulation of the "poetic genius" and the Imagination in *Biographia Literaria*:

What is poetry?– is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet?– that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control *laxis effertur habenis*, reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. (166)

Livingstone's poem ends ambiguously:

Equilibrium  
at risk, you try a quick glance back:  
the wall is dissolving as you pass.

This either means he is in a nightmare place of no return, or it could mean that there has been "a balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" (*BL* 166), that the

wall which divides the poet and the scientist has been ‘dissolved’ by “that synthetic and magical power”, the Imagination.

Like Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, Livingstone’s “The Wall Beyond Station X” is a poem of pure imagination (as Robert Penn Warren calls the former). In “The Rime” the mariner kills the albatross, seemingly unthinkingly, and then embarks on a nightmare journey of thirst, becalmedness, storms, loneliness, pain, death in life, dreams, nightmare, penance, homelessness and the need to keep retelling his story. He carries the dead albatross around his neck as a metaphorical cross on this journey. The albatross can be read as a symbol of Coleridge’s “poetic genius” (*BL* 166). His shooting of the bird “of good omen” (Coleridge’s gloss to stanza 20) is a fall from grace which spirals the mariner into a quest to regain the blessed state – a state implied by the arrival of the albatross at the start of the sea voyage in Part I. The mariner’s quest is a search for atonement which mostly eludes him. In Part VII of the poem the Hermit cannot shrive the mariner; he can only offer him temporary relief through the telling – and consequent retellings – of his story.

There are similarities between “The Rime” and “The Wall”. Both are poems about the questing imagination in which the sea is both the setting and a trope for the unconscious and for creativity. Both questors encounter strong winds, both are solitary figures, and both poems offer no resolution. Most importantly, both are an allegory for the creative process. The sun is a dominant image in both poems, although “The Rime” also uses the moon.<sup>47</sup> In “The Rime” the sun is a metaphor for the primary imagination, for when the sun is shining the mariner is powerless to bring about any change in his situation. It is in the moonlight – a metaphor for the secondary imagination or human creativity – that the mariner is inspired, and is able to change his situation.

The most striking difference between “The Rime” and “The Wall” is the presence and absence of God. “The Rime” is centred around the redeeming power of God and contains numerous references to blessings, saints and prayer. The mariner seeks

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<sup>47</sup> For Coleridge, the sun and the moon signify what he called the primary and the secondary imagination respectively. Coleridge called the primary imagination the “infinite I am” (*BL* 159) and said it represents the life force, it is the prime agent which perceives. It is through the primary imagination that we know the world. The secondary imagination represents human creativity for it “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or when this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify” (*BL* 159-60). The primary and secondary imagination are its passive and active aspects respectively.

resolution through atonement, which he does not reach. There is no deity in “The Wall”, rather, the rational fulfils this function. But, as in “The Rime”, no concrete resolution is reached. Both poets in effect quest after the albatross of poetic genius. Coleridge kills his and so lives in a “death in life” torment. Livingstone quests for possession of the “goose-quill” (line 10) which he sees in the first stanza.

I concentrate on the imagery in the following closer analysis of “The Wall Beyond Station X”. The extended metaphor of the quest or journey includes the path and the destination. Both keep shifting. The anticipated destination is “some promised land” (line 9), a metaphor for reconciliation and peace. Other more direct references to the destination in stanzas two and three are: “that distant shore” (line 25); “journey’s end in sight” (line 30) and then the drawing in of “all visible horizons” (line 34). There are no further references to the destination in the remaining two stanzas of the poem.

The wall, as metaphor for the path or way, is safe and solid at the start of the poem and is described in concrete terms: “two bricks wide, about two hands high” (line 7). By the end of the poem the wall becomes precariously high and narrow (line 57 and 60) and then ‘dissolves’ as Livingstone ventures more deeply into the unconscious.

Even as it advances, the wall is strongly used as a trope for division. This is introduced at the start of stanza two with the uneasy observation that “the history of walls is not good”, followed by the image of cutting sharpness and the repeated use of the preposition “through”: “The wall / cleaves through” (lines 31-2) and “the wall knives through” (line 35), a metaphor ominously extended in the final stanza where the wall’s “haft / spears blackness” (lines 57-8).

The description of pastoral ease (of which Livingstone is not part) in the opening quatrain of the poem serves as a metaphor for an idyllic state and contrasts with the speaker’s quest for a “promised land”:

The promenade along this sunbright bank  
is pleasant: folk amble; engage in talk  
at tables beneath the trees; or recline  
upon the springy turf, intent on love.

The degree of visibility metaphorically represents Livingstone’s journey into uncertainty. At the start of stanza two the seabed was still visible (line 16), but by the end of it “the seas on either hand have turned opaque” (line 27). In the final stanza “Little light remains” (line 66). The poet’s resolve carries him forward: “You soldier on” (line

29). This military image is extended to the “ranks of reeds” he encounters in the third stanza. He stops to reassess his position (another military inference) and experiences a “vertiginous moment” (line 37). This is not so much a result of his physical situation as of his psychic confusion. This “moment” occurs in the central stanza of the poem, at the midpoint of his journey and among tall reeds. This invokes the opening lines of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*: “In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost” (Sinclair (trans) 23). The poet decides “to plod on” (line 39), to brave his confusion and continue with his quest.

The snake image in stanza four is highly significant. The snake is a symbol of “irreconcilable opposites” (Hillman 26), but paradoxically offers a way to bridge the two sides of the brain because it is draped across the separating wall. Livingstone’s snake is not the oroboros, “the serpent curled with its tail in its mouth, forming the perfect circle, or female O, or zero – the cycle of all, and of nothing” (Sjöö 62). While the snake represents a connection between the two sides, it does not represent complete unity or cosmic harmony. He “nears it stealthily” (line 46), then steps “across hesitantly” (line 53). The idea of synthesis is also present in Livingstone’s perception of the setting: at the start of this stanza the seas on either side of the wall “appear” (line 43) to be flowing towards “one point” (line 44). This represents a possible synthesis of the scientific and the intuitive (or the artificial and the natural) as does the literal point that the snake is, in fact, an electrical cable. This synthesis is further explored through the image of the snake. The head of the “python” is “down left” of the wall (in the sea which represents the rational scientist) and its tail is “down right” (line 45) in the sea of intuition.

The final stanza describes in detail the poet’s “dissonance and loss” through the imagery of wind and discordant sound. He is stranded and exposed to the elements with no way back. The objective tone of the narration by the scientist paradoxically adds to the feeling of desperation. He is “fearfully exposed” (line 59), but there is no turning back (lines 58-9). His exposure is emphasized by the waters which churn “far beneath” (line 60) and the “vaulting” gale-force winds: a trope for chaos, or more specifically, creativity become chaotic. Disembodied auditory imagery emphasises his dislocation: irredeemable “torn tatters of melody from one side / their strident voices screaming opposite” (lines 62-3). The “strident voices” of the gales mirror his own “incoherent” thoughts. This opposition of sounds does come together “at times” (line 64) but this is of little use for



they “meld / in manic songs of dissonance and loss” (lines 64-5). So, while there is a hint of synthesis, this synthesis does not offer any coherence or resolution.

The poem's predominant images of water, wind and the snake all can be linked to the elements of chaos in creation mythology. The Pelasgian creation myth says:

In the beginning, Euronyme, the Goddess of All Things, rose naked from Chaos, but found nothing substantial for her feet to rest upon and therefore divided the sea from the sky, dancing lonely upon its waves. She danced towards the south, and the wind set in motion behind her seemed as something new and apart with which to begin the work of creation. Wheeling about, She caught hold of this north wind, rubbed it between her hands and behold! The great serpent Ophion. Euronyme danced to warm herself, wildly and more wildly, until Ophion, grown lustful, coiled about those divine limbs and was moved to couple with her... so She was with child. (Sjöö 57)

Livingstone's poem can be read as a reworking of this form of myth where creativity rather than Creation is mythologised.

If the sea is a trope for the unconscious and the poet's creativity, then the change from the calm surface at the opening of the poem to the churning waters at the end represents a creative change. What is lost is certainty. Wind often signifies change, and here it symbolises a terrifying force which overwhelms the poet. Perhaps the underlying message is that he cannot control his creativity. His precarious position is figured in the increased height and narrowing of the wall in the final stanza.

If the aim of his quest was to find synthesis between his scientific (physical) and poetic (psychic) sides, this has either not been realised (“dissonance and loss”) or if it has (“the wall is dissolving”) he cannot describe it. The poem begins with cocksure bravado and expectation and ends with terrifying uncertainty.

At the simplest level, “The Wall” shows what historical ages have demonstrated: there is no easy way to balance or reconcile reason and imagination. “The Wall” explores the dichotomy between science and poetry and can be seen as a manifesto poem, for it is a mythical exploration of a tension which appears to have terrified Livingstone. As an earlier poem in the chronological order of *A Littoral Zone*, it points to Livingstone's initial exploration of the “uneasy divide between humanity's physical and psychic elements” (LZ 62).

This questing, using the surreal as a means to delve into the unconscious, continues in a later poem in the sequence, “*Traffic interlude: Descent from the Tower*” (49). By imaginatively journeying downward instead of out to sea Livingstone reaches a

form of personal symbiosis which, while again not complete, *is* more positive in its denial of false reason and in its attainment of instinctual understanding. “Descent from the Tower” has a strong narrative and is even more obviously allegorical than “The Wall”. It is a fable (a type of allegory) using the figure of the beast in the form of the tigress and illustrating Livingstone’s quest for a moral position, rather than the existential one of “The Wall”. There is a clear development of the ‘plot’ which moves from ignorance to recognition and finally reconciliation with the tigress, who represents the man’s own animal nature or passion.

I think “Descent” can fruitfully be read as a coda to “The Wall”. Here the naked and erect man represents reason while the tigress represents passion: “From the mangroves on the left / glides a man, a tigress from the right” (lines 5-6). The man and the tigress can also be read as Livingstone’s masculine and feminine sides, which are temporarily reconciled at the end of the poem. The poem intimates that the true “Source” is the inner reconciliation of reason and passion, rather than the falsely elevated muse figure of the ‘black’ goddess. Although the poem is a personal quest, it does have ecological implications. This personal reconciliation of opposites, where the inner man can accept and heal his animal (intuitive) nature, even play with her, is an essential starting point for an ecological way of life. But it is only a starting point, for, as the end of the poem indicates, the sparring will continue.

The poem, written in seven 18-line stanzas, has a consistent bracketing rhyme where the first and final lines of each stanza rhyme. The first stanza sets the scene and introduces the figures in the story. It starts in the ‘real world’ when the sight of a toy tiger placed on the rear dashboard of the car ahead transports Livingstone into the fabulous world which the poem explores. As in the earlier traffic interlude, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake”, the sighting of a toy creature acts as a material stimulus for an imaginative identification where ‘scientific observation’ and the imaginative transformation of this observation take on an ethical dimension. The first five stanzas deal with the poet’s ascent of the tower (symbol for culture and false reason). The sixth and penultimate stanza contains both his invocation to the muse and his rapid descent from the tower. So, half a stanza is given to the descent, yet the title of the poem is “Descent from the Tower”.

A brief review will be useful. The central figures of the man, a tigress, the lake, and the tower on the island are introduced in the first stanza. At the end of the second stanza we meet the other important figure, the woman who is also the goddess, “the Source” (line 90) and the muse. The third stanza explores his vacillations: he briefly contemplates turning back, but the idea of the glimpsed goddess ensnares him and lures him on. The angry tigress follows him. In stanza four he climbs the stairs of the tower and fights the tigress. At the start of the next stanza he cuts off her paw and the tigress does not retaliate. The man then mounts the final set of stairs to the goddess who sits on a black, stone throne, “empty-eyed, lips parted, legs apart” (line 85). He says she must be “the Source” (line 90). In stanza six he utters a macabre invocation to the muse (line 91-6) and prays that she “‘make poems within me’” (line 96). He rips off her shift but fails to ravish her when her thighs burst into flame. He then retreats, finds the tigress’ paw, then the tigress, binds her stump and helps her down to the lake. The tower starts to disintegrate as they descend. The final stanza tells of the healing power of the water of the lake. He replaces the paw on the stump and it regenerates. The pair swim and play together. As they reach the shore the tower crumbles and falls. The poem ends with reconciliation between the man and the tigress. They kiss. And then, the final twist:

It is not over for them:  
they will meet here on this bank again  
to spar in the mud

(lines 124-6).

Tony Morphet offers a more succinct summary of the poem:

A stage set, replete with tiger and naked man; lake and tower; magic sword, black stone throne and muse-goddess, sets the scene for the encounter at its centre. The poet prays to the muse figure ... She spits back his pleas and he makes his way back to the tiger and the lake, leaving the island, its tower collapsing behind him as he returns ‘to spar in the mud’ with the animal. (206-7)

This, however, contains some inaccuracies. The animal is female, a tigress, not a tiger. And they do not spar in the mud at the end of the poem: the poet contemplates this as a future action. They frolic in the water and kiss. Both these points are important. The femaleness of the animal is central to the poem, for she offers another side of the woman or goddess figure and is imaginatively part of the poet himself. The reconciliation between the two is also central and Morphet’s reading does not make this point. He does, however, eloquently pinpoint the tension and dynamics of the poem:

I think it is an important poem in the book because of the way it sets an extended limit to the range of cultural representation. The poem is a highly specialized cultural dramatization of the conjunction and separation between the animal and the spiritual in the man. The stage set, with its shades of Arthurianism, of Yeats, and Graves and others, creaks badly, but the grim core stands as a horrible manifestation of a cultural world which has broken its ties with animal creation. It is a poem about ‘sundering’, in which human culture appears as *thanatos*. (207)

While I agree with Morphet that the poem is about “sundering”, I think it also contains reconciliation between, to use his terms, a cultural world and animal creation. The attainment of this requires a descent from the tower of culture and reason into the healing waters of the lake and the realm of the animal world and passion.

Livingstone goes in search of the muse but, when he asks her to “make poems within me” (line 96), she spits at him. The real muse is his intuitive self. It is significant that he cuts off the tigress’s front paw (his own writing hand) and then later reconnects it: “presses paw to stump / where it seems to knit” (lines 113-4).

The tower of culture and reason disintegrates and “dies” (line 120). This disintegration represents the eradication of false reason. The tower is placed on an island (an isolated piece of land) to signify that reason seen in isolation is dangerous. There is a danger of becoming lost in the maze of possible allusions contained in the poem. But it is important to note Livingstone’s address to “the Source” (line 90).

‘God of the Holocaust heaps;  
of carcharhinids, carcinomas  
in children, floods, quakes;  
of grief, Down’s syndrome’, he prays,  
‘cruelty in men, leukaemias –  
make poems within me’

(lines 91-6)

This is a strangely mixed invocation to the muse and to death. He prays to the god who brings suffering and death to “make poems within me”. There is a mixture here of human-induced catastrophe – the Holocaust and cruelty in men – and biological or natural cataclysms, from man-eating sharks to cancers, from genetic disease to floods and earthquakes. In short, this invocation contains a mixture of the cultural and the biological. They both cause death. I disagree with Morphet’s implication that only “human culture

appears as *thanatos*" (207). The biological or natural world does too. They both lead to "grief" (line 94) or human suffering.

After the poet's invocation the goddess spits at him. Is this an answer? If the poem does offer an answer it is in the form of an implication: Any reconciliations are temporary healings of wounds perpetually inflicted. At another level, this poem may be read as a criticism of the type of eco-feminism which conflates the natural and the feminine. The woman-goddess-source is a version of the "belle dame sans merci" figure, redolent with a ghastly, even destructive, sexuality and a false attraction. She is therefore a subversion of the mythical Muse figure who can be linked not only with Livingstone's desire for a different source of poetic inspiration but also with his ambivalent desire for women. This is expressed early on in the poem:

‘Something terrible has struck  
the earth: the older I get the more  
lovely the women’

(lines 40-3)

and, for example, in the poem "Isipingo" (59).

"Descent from the Tower" is more obviously ecological than "The Wall Beyond Station X", but both are informed by the search for personal synthesis of the intuitive and the rational. This synthesis is, arguably, the cornerstone for the interconnections upon which human ecological sensibility can be built. Both poems also suggest that human intuition is the source of human creativity. This raises an interesting link between the cultural and the biological, for these poems suggest that the making of art has its genesis in the creative, instinctual right-brain of man. Or, more simply, art is not that far from nature.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that it is not knowledge of our biological and evolutionary heritage but, rather, our uniquely human capacity to love and to make art which *may* reunite humankind with the rest of the natural world. The section on the power of art examines a connecting thread between mysticism and art in "Haunted Estuary"; the power of metaphor to explain in words the otherwise inexplicable in "Coronach"; and the ancient unifying power of poetry in "The Waste Land". The poems which explore the convolutions of love can be divided into those which concentrate on passion ("An

African Loving” and “Subjectivities”); and those which explore the role of compassion (“Beachfront Hotel”, “A Tide in the Affairs” and “Elementals”). The latter two poems are also invocations and love poems to Mother Earth herself.

The poems in *A Littoral Zone* which have not been included in this thesis are: “Starting Out” (8), “Reflections at Sunkist” (13), “South Beach Transients” (21), “The Cursing of Darryl Hook” (31), “Libation to the Geoid, Station 23” (56), “Isipingo” (59) and “Road Back” (60). They deal, in brief summary, with the start of Livingstone’s journey and an examination of his quixotic purpose; an autobiographical account of his descent into madness in “Reflections”; the survivors of the Holocaust examined through the old couple who are the South Beach transients; the power of stories and the role of the enchantress in the ballad about Darryl Hook; a celebration of nature and a libation to Gaia; a South African slice of life at Isipingo, and a summing up of the contents of the collection in “Road Back”.

I realise that in dividing the analysis of the poems into two chapters on, alternatively, the material and Romantic views (or what Livingstone terms the physical and the psychic elements) I have perpetuated the “uneasy divide” which *A Littoral Zone* seeks to bridge. I chose this framework for reasons of clarity and hope that my analysis of the poems has shown that ecological destruction is the reality and ecological equilibrium the ideal. Given this reality, the volume is characterised by a tone of what Livingstone called “ecological despair”. Yet, he does offer a possibility of hope. This tentative strand of hope lies buried in the human psyche and may be unlocked through what Martin calls imaginative identification (172). It is through the imagination and the Romantic concept of the sublime (or an equivalent reverence of nature implicit in the view of deep ecology) that humankind may find symbiosis, may sidestep the dualist world view which puts us in the cusp between creatures who are part of nature and rational beings who have set ourselves apart from nature.

## Conclusion

The coming together of the artificial (constructed through human rationality) and the natural (which resides in the human intuition) can, in Shakespeare's words, be expressed as "an art / That nature makes". The quotation centres around the gardener's use of hybridisation to create new plants (or forms):

Yet nature is made better by no mean  
But nature makes that mean: so, over that art,  
Which you say adds to nature, is an art  
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry  
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,  
And make conceive a bark of baser kind  
By bud of nobler race. This is an art  
Which does mend nature – change it rather – but  
The art itself is nature.

*(The Winter's Tale IV:iv 89-96)*

But Livingstone should have the last word. In "**Libation to the Geoid, Station 23**" (56) he intimates that literature (art) is the butt of a cosmic joke and argues that man's fumbings are puny and insignificant in the face of natural forces. The poem is a eulogy to the power of the sea or, metaphorically, the Creative Principle. The poet offers a libation to this power, here represented as the Geoid<sup>48</sup> or the levelling force of the sea. As the hypothetical *and* metaphorical figure which imaginatively transforms the Earth to sea level (or flattens the earth and therefore puts it at risk of being swamped by the sea), the Geoid has power over the tenuous stability of the Earth. It is therefore another version of the Gaia figure. In comparison, man's preoccupation with "the self" (lines 4 and 7) and his cultural attempts "to remake the world" (line 5) are ridiculous. And so he toasts the Geoid:

Here's to the sea in its restive quest  
intent on drowning land;  
even the saddest poem's a jest  
writ on the ebb-tide's sand.

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<sup>48</sup> A geoid is the earth's figure; a hypothetical solid figure the surface of which corresponds to mean sea level (and its imagined extension under land) and is perpendicular to the direction of gravity at all points. (OED).

## Appendix A

### D.J. Livingstone's Published Scientific Papers<sup>49</sup>

“A bilious solution towards immortality, Or, the facts of life”

*Quarterly Review*, Vol 1 No 2, June 1958, 3pp.

“An introductory outline of immunology with reference to bacterial specificity”

*Quarterly Review*, Vol 2 No 2, June 1959, 9pp.

“Medicine slightly out of focus”

*Quarterly Review*, Vol 3 No 1, March 1960, 3pp.

“A clinical trial of a new compound (Dehydroemetine bismuth iodide) in amoebic dysentery” (with Drs D.L. Sladden and E. Taylor)

*The Central African Journal of Medicine*, Vol 10 No 11, November 1964, 2pp.

“An improved method for isolating salmonellae from polluted waters”

*Public Health*, Vol 65, February 1965, 2pp.

“Problems in Using the Sea as Part of a Waste Disposal System” (with Dr G.J. Stander and W.D. Oliff), Conference Paper No 3

*The Institute of Water Pollution* (London), June 1967, 11pp.

“Salmonellae in fish and food” (with Dr C.R. Mackenzie)

*South African Medical Journal*, Vol 24, October 1968, 5pp.

*The Distribution and Occurrence of Coliforms and Pathogenic Indicators of Pollution within the Surf-zone and Near-shore Waters of the Natal Coast* (with J.W. de Goede and B.A. Warren-Hansen)

*CSIR Research Report*, No 278, 1968, 65pp

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<sup>49</sup> Douglas Livingstone uses the initialised form of his name, D.J. Livingstone, on his scientific papers. This list of publications ending at 1983, was found in a file of his scientific notes and papers at NELM (National English Literary Museum)



“An appraisal of sewage pollution along a section of the Natal coast”

*Journal of Hygiene*, No 67 (Cambridge), 1969, 15pp.

“Factors determining dilution in the marine environment and affecting the return of effluent to shore” (with W.D. Oliff and V.C. Stones)

*Water Pollution Control*, Vol 68 No 5, 1969, 8pp.

“An appraisal of sewage pollution along a section of the Natal coast after the introduction of submarine outfalls”

*Journal of Hygiene*, No 77 (Cambridge), 1976, 4pp.

“Decay of Micro-Organisms in the Marine Environment”

Paper presented at NIWR-IWPC (Southern African Branch) Symposium on water Research: Selected In-Depth Studies; (Pretoria) November 1978, 22pp.

“The Effect of submarine wastewater discharge on the bacterial quality of the surf”

*Water Science Technology*, Vol 14, 1982, 11pp.

“Microbial classification of seawaters” (with Dr C.R. Mackenzie)

*South African Journal of Medicine*, Vol 64, September 1983, 3pp.

Microbial Studies on Seawater Quality off Durban

*CSIR Research Report*, No 704, 1990, 131 pp.

**Appendix B**

**Press Clippings**

Appendix B continued

Appendix B continued

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