

## *Douglas Livingstone — Natal Poet?*

Douglas Livingstone, according to *The Companion to South African Literature* is 'generally regarded as South Africa's leading contemporary poet'. It's a fair comment. In 1982, when he was awarded an honorary doctorate in literature by the University of Natal, the citation referred to him as 'a brilliant and universally respected poet'. Although born in the Far East to Scottish parents, he first came to Natal as a war refugee at the age of ten. He went to school here. And he has lived and worked in Durban, after a stay in Rhodesia, since 1964. Can the province properly claim him as one of its own?

There were mornings following rain:  
mornings of explicit langour  
when the grass and hedges, near flesh  
in their lushness, shone yellow in  
the sun's candour; when the sea called on  
its most proper blue, deploying  
leached energies at the fringes . . .

These lines from Livingstone's *A Morning* have a definite Natal feel. The 'langour', the 'lushness', the 'leached energies' and the sea's 'most proper blue' are immediately recognisable elements in the physical quality of Durban and the long yellow coastline which stretches to the north and south of the city.

Indeed, much of Livingstone's poetry is shot through with his perceptions, sometimes no more than acutely observed glances, of the environment he knows best. This is not so surprising for a man who recently advised would-be poets to 'make your skin (your carapace against the world and its slings and arrows) as thin as possible without actually bleeding to death through it'. (*Crux*, Aug. 1986). Durban and Natal have definitely penetrated Livingstone's thin skin. Listen to the busy yet somewhat bleak flavour, inimitably rendered in the final stanza from *Steel Giraffes*, of Durban harbour:

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

‘When I first came to Natal,’ Livingstone told me, ‘I was only ten years old, and I had already lived in Malaya (where I was born), in Scotland, Ceylon and Australia. Yet when I started my new life here I felt as if I’d come home.’

The unruly young Scot, who would later describe himself as a ‘white African’ and an ‘African poet’, lived with his mother and sister initially at Umkomaas (his father was a POW in the Far East) and felt immediately that he had ‘come home’. I asked why he thought he had felt that sense of homecoming with such surety.

‘Perhaps because this was the first place I’d walked through a village barefoot,’ he said, ‘I went **everywhere**, first in Umkomaas and then for years in St Michaels-on-Sea, in **my** bare feet. There may well be pulses in the earth which get to us **through** the soles of our feet but which we haven’t been able to measure yet. I think Africa is full of those pulses. There’s really nowhere else I want to live.’

We sat in Livingstone’s office, a smallish room cluttered with books and bottles of various coloured liquids and some scientific gadgets with calibrated gauges. A map of the world’s oceans adorned one wall. At fifty-five, there is something essentially lean and tough-looking about the poet who earns his ‘bread and butter’ by being a scientist. Lean body, thinning hair, direct eyes. Lean and tough — the words describe his intellect as well: there is space for passion, none for sentimentality. He said quite candidly that he disliked being interviewed. He told of a journalist who had asked why, as a poet, he did not wear his hair long. The answer was logical enough: ‘Because in a laboratory it’s preferable to have short back and sides.’ The journalist had then written something about this poet who preferred short backsides. He told me this not so much to put me in my place as simply to share an old joke with a new acquaintance. His eyes — as with many of his poems — are often full of laughter.

‘My scientific work is very important to me,’ Livingstone said. ‘As a young man, I had a great hankering after medicine. The impulse to heal has always been very strong. I became a laboratory technician in Rhodesia, studying part-time. After six years I qualified as a bacteriologist. I ended up in charge of a pathological diagnostic lab in Broken Hill, Zambia.’

I asked him if this desire to heal had manifested itself in his poetry as well as in his ‘bread and butter’ career.

He didn’t like the question much. ‘It’s possible, I suppose. But I would hate to be writing morally healing verses. Actually, poetry is a very ungentle thing.’

‘In what way?’

‘In its unflinching confrontation with any and every subject. And in the way it’s made, or at least in the way I make it,’ he replied. ‘I write in four-hour sessions. I drink lots and lots of wine and heap up the ashtrays. I don’t care whether I’m popular or not. I read critics with amusement. I write my poetry for an audience of one: an ideal person who is ironical, witty, civilised, but not too civilised. I guess I’m just celebrating those things about the earth which excite me.’

I steered the conversation back to his scientific career.

‘In Broken Hill I started getting a bit tired of diagnostic lab work. I finally had a meeting with myself and I decided to bring this healing impulse of

mine to the earth, or more accurately to its waters. So I came back to Durban and got a job here in an oceanographic research institute'. 'The sea,' he added with a smile, 'is an extremely difficult and reticent patient.'

'Do you think,' I asked, 'that your scientific work has had an impact on your poetry?'

'Of course it has. Mind you, for many years I held back on the scientific. It appeared in my poetry only in muted form. But recently I have said: to hell with it. Use science, otherwise you're not being true to your times.'

Livingstone lit a long brown cigarette at this point, and turned to me with eyes which were alight with amusement and irreverence. 'The anti-smoking lobby makes me laugh. You should see all the nasties that issue from the family car's exhaust. Now that overt racism is no longer acceptable, I think people transfer the same sort of antagonisms to other recognisable groups. These days it's the smokers. Next century it could be against bald men or people who wear glasses.'

I questioned him about his own perceptions of racism, and he said: 'You will have to realise that politically I'm a pathetic figure. Do you know that when I lived in Rhodesia I actually believed in the Central African Federation. But I eventually saw the worst face of colonialism there: people paying lip-service to the Federation while going out of their way to sink it. The KwaNatal Indaba reminds me of the Federation. I hope the lip-service saboteurs don't sink it.'

'I suppose I was a fairly unique animal when I first came to Africa. I had no concept of race at all. On the boat, my best friend was a Malay deckhand. We used to get up to all sorts of minor crime. And once in Natal, I had no idea of nor interest in the division here. My first friends were the young black caddies at the Umkomaas golf course, and later on at St Michaels.'

'Do you consider yourself to be a Natal poet now?' I asked. 'What does the province mean to you?'

'It means a great deal to me. It's my home. I certainly have no intention of moving. It's the laboratory of the world.'

He blew out a plume of grey smoke. 'Let me try to explain this. 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, and so on. If we don't make it here in Natal, South Africa is not going to make it. 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. Then there's that mixture of the feminine — those soft, undulating, green hills — and the masculine landscapes, all rugged and jagged and brutal. There's witchcraft here, and also the fact that the sea has risen and sunk two hundred metres from the original shoreline several dozen times in the remote past. I look at Oribi Gorge and think of the sea, the primaeval force of it there, lashing itself against the craggy cliffs.'

'Tell me about your relationship with Africa.'

'I see Europe as over-tidied, over-regimented, tame. Africa is none of these things. Africa has an immediacy which is absolutely thrilling.'

‘Do you see it as belligerent?’

He shook his head. ‘We might credit it with belligerence. But it’s not. It’s just there — to drag the upstart down.’

‘You mean, white people?’

Again he shook his head, this time with slight impatience. ‘People talk of the hostility of Africa. I’m only aware of that when there’s a necklacing or a bomb in a hotel or the bulldozing of squatter camps. But intrinsically it’s not hostile. I have spoken sometimes of its magnificence and malevolence. This combination is common to all continents, but on the tamer ones it only exists in pocket form. In Africa it’s everywhere. The magnificence and the malevolence co-existing. I think the conventional European mind doesn’t cope, and never has coped, too well with this dichotomy. One needs to accept the contradiction completely to maintain some balance. But humanity has not even been able to accept the contradiction in itself.’

Livingstone picked up a copy of his *Selected Poems* and began paging through it. In 1985 the collection won him the CNA Literary Award, but his mind was not on accolades now.

He looked up at me. ‘Man is sick,’ he said. He was silent a moment, then went on: ‘It’s a hell of a problem, looking at man. In a basic biological mode, man is just another life-form. If you add to this the art, music, religion and philosophy, however, he obviously isn’t just another life-form. But if you start going along this avenue of man as a life-form plus, sooner or later you stub your toe against things which definitely are not superior, say, to an eland. Elands don’t kill for pleasure, or in their mating rituals, and not even for their territorial imperatives.

‘Man is an anomaly, in a state of terrible imbalance. I think our so-called spiritual and ratiocinative sides are completely at odds. There’s been no real spiritual progress since the Greeks, but a great deal on the side of technical development. A result of this imbalance now is that man’s philosophical handling of the technological explosion has been totally inadequate.

‘We’re living at the beginning of a new age of barbarism,’ he told me. ‘Think of it like this: in our fathers’ time, the district surgeon had read his Dickens, and even the local station master could probably quote from Shakespeare. This applies to all the races I’ve had contact with. When I was a child, for example, my Chinese nanny could quote Confucius and Buddhist law to me. She was connected to her spiritual antecedents. But does this connection exist any longer?’

He pushed his book of poetry across the desk to me. ‘Have a look at this particular piece. It expresses pretty clearly what I believe.’ The book was open at a poem entitled *A Natural History of the Negatio Bacillus*. I read the first lines:

Definition of Negatio

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

Thought to be caused by a gram-negative, anaerobic, spore-forming bacillus, probably growing readily on artificial media, it is known to arrest psychogenesis.

‘Our technologically-based popular culture,’ Livingstone was saying, ‘is incredibly shallow. I call it Kleenex art, easily assimilable and as easily discarded. This would be bad enough, if the discarding left a void. Voids at

least can be filled with something else. But it leaves something worse. It leaves a murkiness, a sort of hardening which makes it almost impossible to assimilate the more spiritual material with which our various cultures abound.'

Onset of Negatio usually occurs at puberty and there is no known cure, except perhaps an awareness of itself but this is usually temporary . . .

Diagnosis of Negatio

When the patient's hand curls compulsively: aggressive knuckles up or acquisitively down, in whichever plane it is put.

When heaven is gone forever and earth gathers itself to flinch from the patient's foot.

'If you glance at our own history, in Cecil Rhodes's time the materialists stood out as exceptions. Today, everyone's a materialist. A man is judged by his earning power, his house, his Merc. I cannot accept this at all. I've known some wonderful people who didn't even have shoes. They're the ones who seem to have been able to maintain a balance between emotion and intellect.'

I was reading the final lines of the Negatio poem. They were in the form of a 'contra-Negatio mantra'.

'O father in heaven and my mother earth, love each other and keep contact with each other through me thy child.

Divorce not over me, condemn me not to the void between, and let me not be by nothingness beguiled.

'I look on the earth as a living cell,' Livingstone told me. 'It's a miracle. Yet inherent in it, in the whole of nature, there are implacable antagonisms. The main one, obviously, is the force of life versus the power of death.

'It's become something of an obsession with me to follow the data coming back from the space probes. Although our knowledge could hardly even be described as fragmentary yet, the data induce a sense of real bleakness. Are there populations out there who will one day send flying saucers to save us from our folly? One hopes so!

'But I have the terrible feeling that life is an upstart in a huge and inanimate universe. We're a lot lonelier than we think we are. Life seems sometimes to be fighting a losing battle. Trees turning to stone, living bones to fossils, grasslands to deserts. Perhaps the sheer mass of inanimate matter is our destiny. But I wish to deny it. I think that life is infinitely vulnerable and precious. This is why I became involved with pollution back in 1964. It's my impulse to heal, to nurture life. It's life versus inanimate matter, and I find I am getting more and more passionately involved on the side of life.'

This is the ultimate vision of Livingstone as both the scientist and the poet: a passionate involvement with life, an almost fierce resistance to inanimate matter, whether it be in the form of dead planets or the crippling inertias of Kleenex art. Livingstone, whose thin skin has been penetrated again and again by the magnificence and malevolence of Natal, of the continent beyond, is the custodian of what he calls in one of his Giovanni Jacopo poems the 'one Vision, one Integrity'. Life itself, whose perpetuation is dependent on an understanding of its inherent contradictions and on attempting to heal its imbalances.

It is worth quoting the poem *Giovanni Jacopo meditates (On Aspects of Art and Love)* in full. It is Livingstone's credo as a poet, and it is typical of his humour. The wryness of the final juxtaposition places the poet's function in an all too human setting; it also illumines that function's importance.

The Poet's or Playwright's Function  
 Is to embark physically  
 Upon the Consciousness of his Generation;  
 Not merely as the Conscience  
 Of his Time; nor solely to reflect  
 Disintegration, if Disintegration  
 Is the Shaker of his Time's stormy Seas.  
 But to anchor a Present,  
 Nail to its Mast  
 One Vision, one Integrity  
 In a Manner so memorable  
 It fills Part of a Past.  
 The Poet's or Playwright's enthusiasms,  
 These. The proper Pursuit  
 For a Gentleman remains to master  
 The Art of delaying his Orgasms.

DAVID ROBBINS