

## “Muscled Presence”: Douglas Livingstone’s

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Snake”

### *Mariss Everitt and Dan Wylie*

In his book *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* (2003), Randy Malamud outlines the fundamental questions for an ecologically sensitised poet or critic:

Why do animals matter in art? What relation do cultural representations of animals have to real animals? What ethical relationship and responsibility does the artist have to the animal subject? How can art about animals serve as a metaphor, or a testing ground, or a microcosm, for our real-world interactions with animals?

(2003, 44)

Douglas Livingstone’s poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake” is an artwork which addresses precisely these questions, seeking a manner of portraying the snake which is neither grossly appropriative nor wholly detached, neither ethically empty nor preachy. In its multi-angled structure, Livingstone attempts aesthetically “to establish and embellish . . . a contact zone with the nonhuman animals who share our world with us, but accepting also that there exist considerable venues on either side of this contact zone that are, on the one hand, only human, and on the other hand, only nonhuman” (Malamud 2003, 45). Even in his more formally scientific work, Livingstone argues for the inevitability of such limits to knowledge, and for the value of the imagination in addressing them. In his well-known 1986 paper, “Science and Truth,” Livingstone approvingly quotes Michael Whiteman’s assertion of a “Principle of the Whole Before the Parts.” In this

counter-Baconian conceptualisation of knowing, Whiteman argues, “‘if there is the creative determination of the whole . . . the parts which are to be found in its intelligible constitution . . . must go with it . . . as if substructure of the macroscopic whole’” (qtd. in Livingstone 1986, 100). Livingstone admits the force of that ‘if,’ but here lies the origin, or at least support for, his notion of some “Creative Principle” which comprises a wholeness behind our earth-bound – and culture-bound – fragments of knowledge. He confronts the primary philosophical question: “Can we ever know that which is apart from us by any other means than subjectively?” (1986, 101), answers it by citing “a growing school of thinking which maintains that . . . imaginatively expanded cognitive modes *can* transcend the purely subjective” (101). Livingstone goes on to quote one W. Thirring: “Order and symmetry must be sought in the underlying field” (105), admitting, however, that ‘true’ apprehension of that underlying order might remain eternally “chimera-like”:

Truth seems to reserve for itself a quality of subtlety or elusiveness, which would infer that the pursuit of 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’ . . . 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.

(1986, 106)

We argue here that “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake” is a poetical effort to embody this ideal, to suggest, through its objectified parts, an underlying ‘field’ and ethical stance without rigidifying it, and to negotiate the tensions between the subjective and the unitary, between evolutionary theory and mythological wisdoms. While a strongly materialist view of evolutionary change might balk at the notion of some quasi-divine “Creative Principle,” we accept that this was Livingstone’s view and interpret the poem in that light, recognising as he did that “the basic patterns of thinking” – and we would include mythic and imaginative, poetic thinking amongst these patterns – “are themselves a product of selection” (1986, 102). So, in this article, we unpack some of the broad mythic resonances of the poem, not to suggest that Livingstone was drawing consciously on them

all, but to create a fuller echo-chamber within which the poem might attain its richest ecological meaning.

Few animals can be more challenging to an idealistic reaching for an ‘ecological wholeness’ than a venomous African serpent. Humans generally have two very different reactions to snakes – terror and antipathy, or awe and amazement. Historically and culturally, however, the snake’s symbolic resonances are more complex. In his book *Dream Animals*, James Hillman offers twelve interpretations of what the image of 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 earthly 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 (1997, 25-6). In the Western world, of course, the Biblical myth of the Fall, and the subsequent equation of the serpent with sin, is pervasive, explaining to a large degree why the snake is more often reviled than revered. If Eve had not heeded the snake and eaten the apple humanity would, as the Hebrew myth has it, still be living unconsciously in paradise. In *The Power of Myth*, the doyen of mythographers Joseph Campbell reinterprets the myth of the Fall and re-values 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.

(1991, 54; emphasis added)

Furthermore, Mircea Eliade says the serpent symbolises chaos, the formless and nonmanifested (1989, 19), and Hillman sees the snake as a Jungian symbol for the unconscious psyche, both powerful and contradictory: “It is always a ‘both’: creative-destructive, male-female, poisonous-healing, dry-moist, spiritual-material, and many other irreconcilable opposites” (1997, 26).

While these mythic aspects are implicitly and, sometimes, explicitly present in Livingstone's poem, it is human destructiveness towards the snake which is foregrounded and, implicitly, the loss of a fruitful connection with a "Creative Principle of the universe" (6.1) which is lamented. The poem explores Hillman's "irreconcilable opposites" which reside in the snake image and so makes one reconsider one's attitude towards snakes, at both a physical and a symbolic level. After a series of scenarios in which snakes are destroyed or tortured, the poem ends on a tentative note of hope, and we will argue that this represents the faint possibility of ecological renewal.

In an autobiographical article "The Other Job – III," Livingstone says he had decided in the 1960s to "devote [his] small energies to healing the planet" (1989a, 74). This decision had its genesis during his work as a contract underwater diver on the Kariba Dam project, built in 1960 between what are now Zambia and Zimbabwe:

There were bones in the [Zambezi's] 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.

(Livingstone 1989, 74-5)

Livingstone's evolutionary perspectives and concerns for the health of the planet are implicit in many of his poems, culminating in the key, late volume, *A Littoral Zone* (1991). As a microbiologist, he was proactive in his 30-year fight against water pollution off the Natal Coast of South Africa. *A Littoral Zone*, in which "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake" appears,<sup>1</sup> is a poetic account or "mythical sampling run" (1991, 62n) of this scientific work, and is suffused with a tone of what Livingstone called "ecological despair" (Robbins 1992, 52). He habitually pointed out that the human is the only animal which fouls its own nest (Livingstone 1989a, 1; Fazzini 1990, 140), and is "the ultimate polluter through his greed and numbers" (Fazzini 1990, 142). As humans, he argues, we no longer know our natural place because civilization has fundamentally changed the way we live on the Earth. Despite the general acceptance of Darwinian theory, which has led to scientific knowledge of the physical evolutionary animalness of

our species, we tend not to see ourselves as part of nature. Livingstone would doubtless agree with Evan Eisenberg, who explains the evolved impossibility of an Edenic (or ecologically attuned) state:

Once, wilderness was our home . . . we see a garden: a place wholly benign, a place of harmony and plenty. We forget that the harmony, such as it was, was possibly only because we were still beasts, and the plenty only because we were scarce. As soon as we become fully human, we begin to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’. We begin to destroy Eden, and thereby expel ourselves.

(1999, 94)

Livingstone’s poetry repeatedly shows that human ecological attunement is an ideal state which is not attainable, that “Eden was ever too far for the crawling back” (“Thirteen Ways” 3.4).

This realistic and pessimistic view of humankind’s environmental destructiveness is tentatively counterbalanced by a thread of hope residing in what Livingstone calls the human “psychic element” (1991, 62n). “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake” evokes this psychic dimension through the use of ritual connecting human beings with what Livingstone in this poem and elsewhere terms the “Creative Principle of the universe” (see also Fazzini 1990, 139; Livingstone 1986, 106). This Creative Principle may be read as a metaphoric representation of the forming force of nature, an acknowledgement of which is a psychic process that can, at least imaginatively, lead towards a greater sense of at-oneness with the Earth.

This appeal to an overarching Principle is to promote a particular view of ecology, one which is founded on the key concept of interconnectedness. Charles Darwin’s metaphor of the “entangled bank” for the process of evolution on Earth which supports “endless [natural] forms” points to this intricately interconnected complexity of biological ecology (1860, 507), and more recently Fritjof Capra uses the metaphors of “the web of life” and “the hidden connections” to express the myriad links in both natural and man-made systems (1997, 2003). In short, ecology is “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 2001, 4). The trope of interconnectivity has arguably become as much fad as fact, but has had the value of alerting critics to both the infinite breadth and the intrinsic dynamism of these systems. This same complexity of the natural world, however, coupled with intensive human meddling in these natural systems, arguably makes ecology a self-defeating scientific pursuit. As Eisenberg puts it: “The young science of ecology is

scrambling to keep up with an object of study that is being scrambled and eaten up before its eyes” (1999, 104). If *Homo sapiens* did not have consciousness and the ability to interfere with ‘nature,’ in this view, then an ecological balance (natural disasters and achingly slow evolutionary changes aside) would largely be the *status quo* and there would be no need to define ecology or to try to manage the planet. The extent of human impacts, however, has made essential the extension of ecological studies to applied or ‘human ecology,’ focusing explicitly on how the human race interacts with the environment, if we are to understand our role in preserving our own livelihood within the vital and vivifying systems of the planet. The Greek roots of the word ecology (*oikos* as home or dwelling place, and *logos* as relation and as language) point to how this relatively new science is concerned with the human relationship to the Earth as a support system or ‘home.’

According to Jonathan Bate, the ecologist Elaine Swallow was the first to use ecology as an applied term in the late nineteenth century: “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” (qtd. in Bate 1991, 36). Swallow’s “knowledge of right living” points to the dynamic interplay between ecology’s *logos* (study through symbols) and the *oikos* (“dwelling place” or the biosphere which provides humans with a “living”). Here “right living” implies a mutually fructifying and respectful relation – necessarily expressed in both language and bodily activity – to the Earth. Fully *human* interaction with nature – interaction which is not only instinctual or biological, as in animals – is only possible through conscious thought expressed in language (*logos*).

Douglas Livingstone’s work shows that he grappled persistently with the conundrum of human consciousness. He clearly understood and applied Darwinian perspectives in his poetry, but there is strong evidence that he did not hold a purely non-teleological and materialist view of the world. For example, the opening lines of “An Evolutionary Nod to God” (1991, 18) acknowledge the possibility of a first cause: “Perhaps creationists are nearly right: / an enigmatic principle formed cells.” And, more convolutedly, in “A Darwinian Preface” (1991, 7), the speaker draws on the human capacity to love as a stay against the “nocturnal terrorisms” of a purely materialist view of the world. Given Livingstone’s various references to a Creative Principle as the forming force behind nature, we argue that he is a kind of 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 Stevens 2004, 55-6). Romantic materialism can be described as 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” (2000, 142).

Because we as humans are no longer simplistically animals and do not live purely instinctually on the Earth, our relationship to nature has become, unavoidably, also a symbolic one, our symbolic systems at once dividing us from and connecting us to the world. Livingstone’s poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake” explores this symbolic connection, even as it points to the limitations of our sense of belonging on earth. In this sense, Livingstone is echoing the growing concern about human degradation of the entire planet’s ecosystems. For example, in James Lovelock’s view (1987), the *oikos* is the whole Earth, a superorganism which supports life on the planet for which he coined the term “Gaia,” to which Livingstone himself adverts for its poetic as much as its scientific power (see “Road Back” 1991, 61n). Since statistics and facts about species extinction, diminishing ecosystems, denuded rain forests, and global warming are apparently having minimal effect on destructive human behaviours, perhaps poetry can persuade, as Jonathan Bate urges in *The Song of the Earth* (2000)? The power of myth, metaphor and symbol may yet help lead to an ecological awareness, using as a catalyst the human capacity to imagine. Thomas Berry claims that even in our modern condition the four primary archetypal symbols, “the Journey, the Great Mother, the Cosmic Tree and the Death-Rebirth symbol . . . constitute a psychic resource of enormous import for establishing ourselves as a viable species in a viable life system on the planet Earth” (1999, 70).

Ecologically-orientated literary criticism (simplistically, ecocriticism) treats precisely with these relationships between literary symbolisations and human behaviours within the natural world, today particularly with global ecosystemic degradation in mind. Most simply put, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xviii). More precisely, literary ecocriticism is the analysis of literature’s expression of humanity’s place on Earth, our *oikos* or home. We would extend this by suggesting that literary ecocriticism is also about a certain lost art of reading the land and its denizens, and about performing that reading through a mode of language which is not “just one more narcissistic avenue by which our culture

celebrates ourselves” (Malamud 2003, 57). Science avowedly uses objectified fact to explain the physical workings of the world, but it is clear that Livingstone found its materialist basis inadequate to what he experienced as the world’s mystery. Poetry, on the other hand, seeks to explore our imaginative engagement with the world by using metaphor and symbol: through imaginative identification we are able to relate to – even commune with – nature, at least up to a point. A failure of imagination can lead to the kind of destructive acts described in “Thirteen Ways.” Jonathan Bate, in reflecting on “the relationship with earthly things that is turned into language by the poetry of dwelling” (2000, 280), claims that “reanimation occurs in the human mind, the environment of the imagination” (281) and adds:

The poetic articulates both presence and absence: it is both the imaginary recreation and the trace on the sand which is all that remains of the wind itself. The poetic is ontologically double because it may be thought of 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*).

(281)

All the above in mind, then, we argue that “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake” can only fully be read ecocritically. At the most obvious level, the poem depicts a human betrayal of the snake and its world, and hence a betrayal of our own psychic connection with the natural world – an ecologically unviable position. The black snake functions as a layered metaphor for the forces of creation and destruction, for Death and Rebirth, and for humankind’s perceptions of (or ways of experiencing) nature. Humanity was given consciousness when, the Hebrew myth has it, Eve chose to taste of the knowledge of good and evil. The poem explores what humankind has done with this gift of consciousness and how we continue to abnegate the gift of life. It does not paint a pretty picture. The black snake does not symbolise cosmic evil, but rather nature’s victimisation at the hands of 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 – and it matters little that such a paradisaical state of pure good might never have existed. As Jung’s notion of the archetype expresses, such a state is a consistent myth of human consciousness almost everywhere, and, as Eisenberg demonstrates throughout his book *The Ecology of Eden*, arguably its most socially fruitful.



Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1991) to which Livingstone obviously alludes – down to the similar number of lines and the "epigrammatic and elliptic" style (Vendler 1970, 75) – seems at first blush a more "Edenic" view of human-natural relations. The presence of the blackbird often indicates natural harmony: "A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one" (line 9); "... the blackbird is involved / In what I know" (lines 30-1); "The river is moving / The blackbird must be flying" (line 45). Nevertheless, Stevens' poem also shows that the human relationship to nature is elusive and fraught:

He rode over Connecticut  
 In a glass coach.  
 Once, a fear pierced him,  
 In that he mistook  
 The shadow of his equipage  
 For blackbirds.

(lines 38-43)

For both poets, the elusiveness is entailed in limitations on human vision: Stevens explicitly uses the image of the eye (section 1), and the use of "see" (7) and "sight" (9, 10), while in Livingstone's poem the act of seeing is rather implied through the descriptions of the scenes. Stevens' poem contains two sections (6, qtd. below, and 11) which indicate human myopia, symbolised by looking through glass:

Icicles filled the long window  
 With barbaric glass.  
 The shadow of the blackbird  
 Crossed it, to and fro.  
 The mood  
 Traced in the shadow  
 An indecipherable cause.

(lines 18-24)

Adalaide Kirby Morris suggests that the glass image refers to the fallen human state where we can only see "through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13) and that "For both Saint Paul and Stevens, we know truth only through its refraction in reality. We see only in part" (1974, 36). As we will see, Livingstone also employs the image of seeing dimly through glass. Both poets, it seems clear, regard physical seeing as metonymic of what Helen Vendler has called "the imagination and its uneasy rapport with reality" (1970, 3). In discussing *Harmonium*, the collection that contains "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Frank Kermode writes:

Reality in *Harmonium*, as throughout Stevens, is that which the imagination, in different ways at different times and in different places, must contend with, compound with . . . It is always that upon which the light of the mind must beat, illuminating, warming, but not changing it. It matters *where* you see it from . . . It matters also *when* one is looking; for the relation of the mind to reality is always changing . . . The fictions necessarily grow obsolete; ‘the plum survives its poems’ [‘The Comedian as the Letter C’]. Stevens has in mind . . . something like Bergson’s *fonction fabulatrice*, a mental power evolved to assist adaptation to the environment and ensure comfort and survival. Poets, with this power, once made gods and myths, but these are irrelevant to modern reality. Now the same power must be our defence against the poverty of fact.

(1960, 38-39)

Both poems enact this ever-changing “relation of the mind to reality” in presenting multiple points-of-view on a single iconic animal. Stevens, in offering thirteen ways of looking at the common American blackbird, invites one to look beyond the ordinary and to dispel that “poverty of fact” which entails the absence of imaginative happiness (Kermode 1960, 39). In following Stevens, Livingstone similarly that individual views of the snake (and of nature more widely) is frequently impoverished and blinkered by inadequate imaginative identification.

A further similarity lies in the choice of black entities. Black is primal, originary: as Harold Bloom puts it, “the blackbird is Stevens’ first thinker of the First Idea. And so he mixes in everywhere” (1977, 105). Both Bloom and Helen Vendler state that in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” the colour black serves as the emblem of Ananke, of fate conceived as necessity. Vendler, drawing on lines from *Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery*, describes the Ananke as “the black principle, the eccentric which is the base of design, the strict, the final, the intrinsic, the limiting, the temporal” (1970, 75; cf. Bloom 1977, 105). In this reading, the blackbird also symbolises the natural order of things – evolutionary theory, mortality, death, contingency – aspects of which humans struggle to identify with:

O thin men of Haddam,  
 Why do you imagine golden birds?  
 Do you not see how the blackbird  
 Walks around the feet  
 Of the women about you?

(section 7)

Livingstone, in choosing the more loaded image of the snake, even more strongly incorporates elements of the limiting, the temporal, contingency, death. He also further extends the idea of Necessity (the biological) into the area of the spiritual and cultural, through his references to the Creative Principle and ancient rites. Both poets treat of the perhaps ineradicable tension between the necessity of identification with nature, even as it eludes and threatens us.

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake” is the tougher of the two. In what follows, we will argue that the poem implies (a) that man’s destructive relationship with nature is based on fear, betrayal and cruelty; (b) that humankind’s destructiveness towards the black snake, for Livingstone, represents humanity’s lost connection to nature; 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 understanding the *oikos*, a sense of place, and so of reconnecting with the natural world.

### **Fear, Betrayal and Cruelty**

In two early poems, both from his 1964 volume *Sjambok*, Livingstone gestured towards the emotion of fear of snakes, and of fear producing cruelty. In “Leviathan” (2004, 37), a puff-adder “fatter than a stocking of pus” swallows a “dozing lizard,” a shocking demise leading the poet to imagine and mythologise his own: “O Jonah, to tumble to / those sickly black depths, / slick walled, implacably black.” In “The Killers” (2004, 56-7), one killer – a cobra – confronts another – the human speaker, who then arms himself with a shotgun with which he finally despatches the threatening snake. The fear is there, an arguably necessary ruthlessness – and a tinge of guilt: “I had to shoot: I mean / that now her limp grey life lies understood.” It is an ironic and pointless kind of understanding of the power of the snake that accrues only once it is dead. In “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake,” these intimately bound reactions of fear and betrayal are more deftly developed.

Several of the poem’s three- to four-line sections vividly portray varieties of human cruelty or destructiveness, these being interspersed with sections which offer comment on the accompanying dimensions of betrayal, incomprehension, and the survival of the knowledge of evil. The juxtapositions between blindness and self-reflectiveness enact what we term humanity’s lost connection. Section 1 introduces an indefinite or universal betrayer, through the reference to “an Iscariot,”<sup>2</sup> who (like the speaker of “The Killers”) is initially unaware of and then surprised by the snake:

The rubber snake dangling from  
 the rear-view mirror in the next lane  
 evokes an Iscariot awakening with a start  
 to see a black snake worm out of his heart.

(1.1-4)

The manufactured, even commodified “rubber snake” ironically evokes, as good symbols do, a self-reflectiveness, figured as a snake rather like a maggot which, as it “worm[s]” out of the human “heart,” connotes rottenness and self-destructive betrayal. Betrayal of the other, then, entails self-betrayal, while this Iscariot’s reaction also indicates a denial that the self-destruction and self-betrayal exist. The theme of betrayal remains implicit throughout the poem, but its effects rather than the betrayal itself are examined.

The second section, compressed as a haiku, depicts the first of three scenarios of human cruelty against the snake (and is followed by similarly chilling scenes of intentional savagery in sections 7 and 11):

After the barbecue, a hubbub:  
 someone has caught a black snake.  
 The half-drum of coals is still glowing.

(2.1-3)

In section 4 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 an unthinking destructiveness. The “pebble-lenses” of the short-sighted gardener are a metaphor for humankind’s myopic (non)relationship to nature and are symptomatic of a deeper destructiveness which is explored more fully in section 6.

Section 6 can be read as a summary of the content of the poem thus far: accepted norms, that is, “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.

(6.1-4)

The black snake has become, for humans, a symbol of destruction rather than creation. Or, to put it another way, the feminine (or perpetually fecund) *oikos* has been “swallowed” or superseded by the masculine (linguistic and

rigidifying) *logos*. This is not to say that the eternal, creative feminine has ceased to exist, but that it has been subjugated or concealed by masculinist orthodoxy. Without the rejuvenating influence of respectful creativity (or imagination), orthodoxy can become destructive.

Livingstone's feminine "Creative Principle" may be read as a version of Mother Earth or Gaia. Joseph Campbell connects the images of the serpent and an originary goddess, noting that "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" (1991, 55). The Eve of the Hebrew myth is arguably a reworking of this goddess myth. So, the serpent and the goddess, or Livingstone's feminine "Creative Principle of the universe," are anciently 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" (1991, 57-8). Campbell further writes: "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" (1991, 207). It is the loss of the appreciation of this sanctity which Livingstone portrays – and implicitly laments – 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 Tiamat at the time of the rise of the city of Babylon. He describes Tiamat as the "All-Mother Goddess . . . the Abyss, the inexhaustible Source" (1991, 213), 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 or attunement. Livingstone's poem, even as it alludes to this mythic nexus, strongly suggests that this attunement is now all but a lost ideal.

Livingstone's use of the word "orthodoxies" encapsulates the artificiality of religion's attachment to doctrine, or what Camille Paglia calls the "sky-cult" of the Apollonian and Judeo-Christian traditions which "seek to surmount or transcend nature" (1992, 8). The contrast between "Creative" and "orthodoxies" reflects the movement from the earth-centred or natural to the masculinist and 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*” (qtd. in Paglia 1992, 29). Arguably, Livingstone similarly depicts religion or “orthodoxies” as a form of misguided “higher culture.”

Section 6’s opening statement, quoted above, is followed by a question:

Is that why, tonight, a votary will raid  
the Snake Park  
armed with a forked stick and a panga?

(6.5-7)

This “votary,” a devoted worshipper or a chthonian cultist who aims to catch the black snake with “a forked stick” and kill it with a panga or African knife, is evidently misguided: 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, the lines’ jarring juxtapositions pointing to the chasm between ancient ways and contemporary practice. The word “votary” sounds incongruously ancient or religious in relation to Durban city’s modern, artificial “Snake Park”: it ironically posits that the Park, its snakes kept in captivity as exhibits, has replaced the temple or religious place of worship in modern society – yet the intention is murderous. Alternatively, the concept of worship itself has become irretrievably debased, and the intended “raid” of the worshipper or “votary” deeply, almost sarcastically, ironic. If we assume the votary is female and is intent on eradicating modern religion’s masculinist “black snake / of orthodoxies,” these three lines intimate a profound confusion that leads to destructive physical acts which undermine the very object of worship itself.

### **Humankind’s Lost Connection**

The conventional ‘cure’ for confusion, it is often proposed, is reason; reason, an opposing view holds, is masculinist, mechanistic, and destructive of the natural. Camille Paglia notes that Apollo, conventionally symbolic of the masculine and rational, “is fabricated form. He is exclusion and exclusiveness.” But she also claims: “Apollo can swerve from nature, but he cannot obliterate it” (1992, 73; 14). Livingstone explores this ambivalent relationship; his poem in its entirety suggests (through the metaphor of the masculine–feminine opposition) that reason and reverence towards the Creative Principle are both necessary.

This masculine–feminine dynamic resurfaces in section 10’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.

(10.1-5)

The description of this ritual stirs what Paglia would call the chthonian, and points to a more hopeful theme of the snake and humankind cohabiting in an earthly form of paradise. Section 10, in part, valorises female sexuality (women with their “secret recesses”), but also implies a diminishing of both masculine (“snakes now merely lethargic”) and feminine sexuality. The serpent is not merely a symbol for the penis – the masculine side of the Great Mother is often expressed through images of serpents (Paglia 1992, 43) – but is now devenomed, an image for the waning of creative, natural power. This ancient rite has been further modified because even the “art of devenoming” is now lost and drugged snakes are used instead.

The “lethargic” snakes in this section echo the dangling rubber snake suspended on the car’s rear-view mirror in the first section of the poem. Ambiguity or contradiction are key to Livingstone’s methods here: the rear-view mirror implies self-reflection or of another reality, but the most powerful symbol of that reality is reduced to a powerless bauble. Similarly, in section 9’s bizarre and elusive depiction of a “white room” (an operating theatre or a madman’s cell?), the scene is illuminated by “a black snake hung from the ceiling, / an electric light-bulb in its fangs” (9.3-4). A “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.

In all three cases, only impotent vestiges of the chthonic and ritualistic survive, symbolic of what humanity has “lost”: not only the common or “lay art of devenoming,” but also our ecological intuition. Humanity no longer understands either the organic power of ritual or the pragmatic crafts of coexistence. Theologian Thomas Berry, too, bemoans the loss of ritual in modern life but optimistically clings to the ecological connections implicit in ritual:

Ancient rituals through which we communicated with the Earth  
 and fostered its productivity may no longer seem fully effective.

Yet they do express a profound respect for the mystery of the Earth. It would be philosophically unrealistic, historically inaccurate, and scientifically unwarranted to say that the human and the Earth no longer have an intimate and reciprocal emotional relationship.

(1999, 175)

In “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake,” Livingstone states that this “reciprocal emotional relationship” has been “swallowed” and replaced by “the black snake / of orthodoxies.” The ancient spiritual connection of man to nature has been all but lost, for only vestiges of the ancient rite survive. A tentative hope rests in the fact that *something* of humankind’s mythic memory “remains.”

### **The Necessary Search for an Earthly Paradise**

The idea of a lost earthly paradise as a trope for this tentative hope is explicitly examined in section 3:

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.

(3.1-5)

The dead snake, lying on the beach beyond the littoral zone and forming the shape of a question mark, is literally stranded and out of its natural habitat, the bush if it is a land snake or the sea if it is a water snake. It is metaphorically exiled from “Eden.” Livingstone here cryptically conflates the ocean and Eden, asking his readers to make a quantum mythological leap from the garden to the sea as the place of origin of life-forms.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, he asks us to question our understanding or apprehension of the nature of paradise, the role of the snake in that paradise, and the role of death itself as a mark of exile. The dead snake’s condition, “Baked dry” and “parched,” portrays both literal desiccation and the metaphorical dislocation of the value of the snake-symbol. 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? Is it not in fact the revulsion and refusal which is causing catastrophe? The snake becomes more than an ironic question mark in the sand; it signifies that humankind has denigrated and ignored the snake as an original key to knowledge. It is therefore, in actuality, the human race which is stranded beyond the highwater mark, without recourse to the littoral zone where, in



Livingstone's overarching bioregional mythos, "humanity's physical and psychic elements" can come together (1991, 62n). And the final twist is that there is (and probably never was) any hope of reconciliation: "Eden was ever too far for the crawling back."

Section 3's examination of the lost Eden is followed by another version of the search for an earthly paradise in section 5, which alludes to the Biblical great flood, engineered by God to get rid of the evil on Earth. The deluge myth is reworked, using the narrative of a canoeist's mini-shipwreck and "long angled swim" (5.2) for survival. As the canoe-less speaker, out of his element, swims to shore he sees a black snake "zig-zagging lithely on the flood" (5.3-4). The snake survives the flood independently of the ark, is even at home. 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 – not only sin in the restricted sense of moral offence, but as symptomatic of present-day human knowledge or consciousness.

This encounter shows a human dis-location, but at least human and snake are not in conflict, hinting at a tentative reconciliation. Two other figures in this poem show a more benign, although still confused, attitude towards the black snake. Section 8 includes the themes of Eden, innocence and betrayal. It describes 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" (8.2). The snake is a reflection of the adult "voices coiling" in argument. Why does the child seek out the snake, forcing "his hand into the hole: deeper, deeper"? Whether literal or figurative, this action is anathema, innocent, dangerous, even suicidal. The child's active seeking out of the snake echoes the myth of Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden. In its own garden, the child pursues the snake in a quest, perhaps, for company or common cause, but it can surely only result in tragedy – in a new knowledge of good and evil. One implication is that this will help him make sense of his parents' reason for fighting. Yet the physical danger of this act remains palpable and chilling.

In the penultimate section, the protagonist makes an "exhausted slide" (12.3) 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 8. Both these personae (the innocent child and the nature lover camping in the wilderness) appear to have a certain affinity with the snake. In this section the snake is not killed, is merely felt as "a chill muscled presence" (12.4) 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. As always, Livingstone leaves possible outcomes to the reader's imagination.

In the final section, 13, the black snake finds freedom:

A ribbon of black writhes silently through the bush;  
the intermittent moon flickers over – are those scales?

(13.1-2)

This image offers some relief after the bombardment of human cruelty and betrayal delivered in the preceding sections of the poem. The snake evinces grace, stealth and possible pain as it “writhes silently” away (13.1). It 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 understand clearly the creative power of nature (as hinted at in section 4 through the myopia of the gardener with his “pebble-lenses”). Alternatively, the “scales” might literally be the scales on the snake, connecting it with its order of reptiles, and even mythologically to the thrilling danger of dragons. Thirdly, it might refer to a justiciary balance or natural order of things, as the regulatory function of the moon on the sea’s tides is 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” (1991, 53). Campbell further notes that 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). Few modern poems, perhaps, capture this dynamic so succinctly as does Douglas Livingstone’s. In liberating the snake into this ambivalent space, he echoes Marianne Moore: “we dissent from the serpent as deity,” Moore says, replacing superstition with “a certain ritual of awe” – and the poem itself *is* that ritual (qtd. in Malamud 2003, 101). Moore and Livingstone alike depict an “acceptance of limitations in the human epistemological consciousness of animals,” which is “a necessary stance for the ideal account that we may render of animals in human art” (Malamud 2003, 98).

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Snake” might be seen as a distinctively ecological progression beyond, if not an obvious response to, some well-known ‘cobra’ poems by earlier South African poets. In “To My Pet Cobra,” Roy Campbell, with characteristic derring-do and egotism, fondles the lethal cobra and hopes to take on some of its power in order to blight his critics. In a later poem, “Salute,” Sidney Clouts’s ironic greeting “Good morning, gentle cobra, are you well?” is intended to challenge the complacencies of the “Very Profound Men” of Europe who have dared

trespass into Africa. Livingstone's approach reaches beyond the narrower parameters of both these poems: though an ecocritical reading of Campbell and Clouts is certainly possible, it is essential in Livingstone's case. In presenting, in almost Nietzschean mode, multiple views of the black snake, unfocussed on a single ego or dominant 'truth,' Livingstone encapsulates the ecological complexity of nature's presence in all of us: "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" (1976, 143). Quixotically, such preservation includes that which is potentially fatal to us. This, like many of Livingstone's poems, "resist[s] the easy logic of dualism, speaking rather of an attitude situated somewhere between despair and dogged resilience" (Martin 1999, 237). The crucial word, perhaps, is "sane." In Livingstone's presentation, humankind (to echo T. S. Eliot) cannot bear too much of the reality of what the snake represents, and therefore, peering through "pebble lenses," ignorantly or deliberately lapses into cruelty in order to repress, manipulate and control nature. This poem points to a new, more sane way of seeing in order to shift from a position of antipathy and terror to one of knowledgeable awe: the black snake as a metonym for the power and omnipresence of the natural, as well as for the reverence of lost ritual. Hence, 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. In a manner perhaps surprising in so rigorous a scientist, Livingstone intimates that an imaginative or psychic shift is our only hope if wisdom and compassion – or a state of ecological equilibrium – are to be attained.

The final section also intimates that the snake (and therefore nature) will survive. But will the human race? Only if we can reconnect and coexist non-destructively with the "muscled presence."

#### NOTES

1. *A Littoral Zone* has been reprinted in *A Ruthless Fidelity: The Collected Poems of Douglas Livingstone* (2004, 269).

2. 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 its 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 1993, 1075).

3. In scientific circles 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” (2000, 118); and James Lovelock cautiously says it is “reasonably certain” that life on the planet began in the sea (1987, 87).

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