



A narratological perspective on Douglas Livingstone's *A littoral zone* (1991)

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Abstract

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This article explores aspects of the contemporary South African poet Douglas Livingstone's "A littoral zone" (1991) from a narratological point of view, leaning largely on Peter Hühn's narratological concept of the event and Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "hypothesis of poetry as segmentivity" as formulated by Brian McHale (2009:18). A discussion of two juxtaposed poems from the said volume explores how the poems' respective anecdotes and events are segmented, then arranged and sequenced into specific narratives to highlight the speaker's conviction of the necessity of a biological and spiritual connection with the natural environment. In the larger context of the volume there are numerous other narrative lines (in the form of poems about specific experiences the poet had) that are juxtaposed in a similar fashion. Collectively these juxtaposed narrative lines then constitute on the level of the volume as a whole the autobiographical narrative of the poet's development as self-ironic individual. The various anecdotes also contribute to the formation and development of the theme of symbiosis, a theme that has a direct bearing on how the poet sees the gap between humankind's current and supposed connection with nature. The main event of the volume is to be found in the reader's mind: the realisation that bridging this gap is absolutely necessary and that it starts with the individual.

Opsomming

'n Narratologiese perspektief op Douglas Livingstone se *A littoral zone* (1991)

Hierdie artikel verken aspekte van die Suid-Afrikaanse digter Douglas Livingstone se bundel "A littoral zone" (1991) vanuit 'n narratologiese perspektief. Die argument steun grootliks op Peter Hühn se konsep van "event" as 'n bepalende verhalende gebeurtenis, asook Rachel Blau DuPlessis se "hipotese van poësie as segmentiwiteit" soos geformuleer deur Brian McHale (2009:18). 'n Bespreking van twee teenoorstaande gedigte uit die genoemde digbundel toon aan hoe anekdotes en gebeurtenisse gesegmenteer en in spesifieke narratiewe georden is om sodoende die spreker se oortuiging van die noodsaaklikheid van 'n biologiese en spirituele verbintenis met die natuurlike omgewing na vore te bring. In die groter konteks van die digbundel is daar verskeie ander narratiewe lyne (in die vorm van gedigte oor spesifieke ervarings van die digter) wat op 'n soortgelyke wyse teenoor mekaar gestel word. Op die vlak van die digbundel as geheel, dra hierdie teenoorstaande narratiewe lyne gesamentlik by tot die outobiografiese narratief van die digter se ontwikkeling as self-ironiserende individu. Die verskeie anekdotes dra ook by tot die vorming en ontwikkeling van die simbiosetema, 'n tema wat direk gekoppel is aan hoe die digter die gaping tussen die mensdom se huidige en veronderstelde posisie in die natuur beskou. Die hoofgebeurtenis van die digbundel word in die leser se denke gevind: die gewaarwording dat 'n oorbrugging van hierdie gaping absoluut noodsaaklik is en dat dit by die individu begin.

1. Introduction

Douglas Livingstone is regarded by some as South Africa's "first twenty-first century poet" (Chapman, 1995:6), and "South Africa's most important poet of the late twentieth century" (Glenn & Rybicky, 2006:78) writing in English. He is well-remembered for the poetic exploration of his scientific knowledge, resulting in realistic and undiluted portrayals of natural landscapes, without sacrificing his meticulous sense of poetic lyricism in the process. And yet, a closer look at his work reveals not only this lyricism, but also the extensive and ingenious use of narrative in his poetry. This article will explore *A littoral Zone* (1991) – Livingstone's penultimate (eighth) volume of poetry – from a narratological point of view to demonstrate the value such an approach has for the elucidation and enrichment of specific themes found in this volume.

Livingstone was born in Malaya in 1932 (Ullyatt, 1976:45). Because his father was in the colonial police, he travelled extensively around the world before coming to South Africa in 1942 during the “Jap war”. For work purposes he moved to the former Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and then later to Northern Rhodesia (Ullyatt, 1976:45). Livingstone finally settled and worked for the last three-odd decades of his life as “a marine bacteriologist, studying the quality of sea water in the Durban region” (Brown, 2006:101). Ever since his days in Rhodesia, Livingstone published poetry, his first volume being *The skull in the mud* (1960). From the onset Livingstone’s poems are largely inspired or influenced by nature and its creatures. However, in *A littoral zone* (1991) the poet seeks to find human beings’ ideal position in the natural world and re-establish our connection with it.

The latter volume suggests that we seem to have severed this connection with nature through our unwillingness to live symbiotically with (other creatures of) the planet. Instead of following the ancient Khoi-San’s example – a group of people described as “swarms of symbiotic man about / the business of getting on with the earth” (Livingstone, 1991:44) – modern man is depicted through its greed as “Carnivores” and “birds of prey” (Livingstone, 1991:55). The poet then uses *A littoral zone* as a map to show the incongruity between humankind’s current position in the world, and where science and history show we belong in terms of our ecological relation with the earth. He does this by relating various stories of his and others’ interaction with their natural environment and its creatures, highlighting similarities and differences between the various stories by means of the poems’ specific sequencing. In the “[n]otes” to *A littoral zone*, Livingstone writes that through the years

... I jotted down poems or notes triggered by my Durban beach sampling stations; the present collection is a selection from these poems. (The dating of the poems is irrelevant except to me, a few friends and – possibly – the curious.) Ideally, the sequence could suggest one long poem, the record of one daylong mythical sampling run. (Livingstone, 1991:62.)

Here the poet reveals a deliberate sequencing of the poems found in the volume, to represent a day in his life as marine bacteriologist doing research on water pollution levels off the coast of Durban. The dating of the poems Livingstone refers to appear below every poem and is the year in which each poem was written. The poems are not placed in chronological order of these dates, but rather the poems are sequenced in the order with which Livingstone visited his various water sampling stations every day. Thus, the discrepancy between

when the poems were written and where they are placed in the volume foregrounds the story the volume as a whole has to tell, rather than the isolated scrutiny of singular poems.

In addition, the poems mainly constitute the poet's experiences or inspirations at the different water sampling stations. Each of these experiences is then offered as a small narrative, even as multiple narratives contained in one poem. The volume's strong sequentiality of these experiences as one "daylong mythical sampling run" suggests that the "sampling run", *A littoral zone*, can be seen in part as an autobiographical narrative dealing with the development of the poet, from being a self-proclaimed quixotic knight who fights for the earth with his scientific knowledge ...

against the republics of ignorance and apathy,
with bust lance, flawed shield, lamed steed of action;
(“Starting Out”: Livingstone, 1991:10).

... to a much more disillusioned man who comes to the realisation that perhaps ...

you do not need your knights, Gaia:¹
in the end you have to win.
(“Road Back”: Livingstone, 1991:61.)

It is for these reasons that studying *A littoral zone* from a narrative point of view may be of great value. Understanding how the various poems' underlying narrative structures interact will firstly reveal how the poet presents to the reader humankind's current and supposed relationship with nature and secondly, where the poet sees himself fitting into the natural scheme of things. I will use Peter Hühn's concept of eventfulness in conjunction with Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "hypothesis of poetry as segmentivity" as formulated by McHale (2009:18), to show how Livingstone juxtaposes small narratives (as poems, or parts of poems) to explain his perception of humankind's distraught relationship with its natural environments, and how he presents (through the first person speaker) his own actions as apart from the rest of humankind, thus problematising his position within his own species and, more generally, how he fits into his natural environments.

1 This is a reference to the earth from the point of view that it functions like a living cell, with numerous interinfluential biosystems whose combined function is to keep the earth's atmospheric conditions favourable for life to exist and thrive in.

2. Theoretical background

DuPlessis, according to McHale (2009:14), proposes *segmentivity* as the defining feature of poetry.

Poetry is that form of discourse that depends critically on segmentation, on spacing, in its production of meaning. Poetry, [DuPlessis writes], involves ‘the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap (line break, stanza break, page space)’; conversely, then, segmentivity, ‘the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining segments,’ is ‘the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre’.

Poems constitute segments that indicate interrelated but identifiably distinct ideas, states of being, et cetera. Whole poems, stanzas, parts of stanzas, even parts of words, can be indicated through various poetic mechanisms to be segments. “The specific force of any individual poem occurs in the intricate interplay among the ‘scales’ (of size or kind of unit) or comes in ‘chords’ of these multiple possibilities for creating segments.” (DuPlessis quoted by McHale, 2009:15.) The “intricate interplay” between various segments, is what generates meaning in a poem. As I will duly demonstrate, *A littoral zone* heavily depends on segmentation of various narrative lines for the production of meaning; it consists of various interlinked layers of narrativity – on the level of the poem, poem groups and ultimately: the different lines of narrativity running through the volume as a whole due to the juxtaposition of various narrative lines on the level of poem groups. The volume’s insights come from the specific sequencing and/or juxtaposition of smaller narratives and poetic units, which cause distinct interactions among these segments. Often, the reader reaches a new insight when she/he grasps the function of the transition from one given segment to the next.

This relates closely with Hühn’s narrative concept of the *event*, defined in the book, *The narratological analysis of lyric poetry: studies in English poetry from the 16th to the 20th century* as “the decisive turning point in the sequence structure of a poem” (Hühn & Schönert, 2005:7). An event usually occurs when some kind of boundary is crossed, be it connected to a physical action, a mental boundary, or even the inability to cross a boundary. For instance, the speaker in Livingstone’s *A visitor at station 21* is able to cross the boundary from the restraining and often crippling intellectual space of the modern mind that seems to sever the relationship between human and environment, into the space of harmony between human and animal – a space characterised by physical,

real perception of the environment, rather than a mental construct of it. These two spaces are represented in the poem as two distinct narrative lines, identifiably segmented through their typographical and spatial differences. Thus the speaker's movement between the two above-mentioned spaces constitutes the event.

Furthermore, Hühn (2007) distinguishes between three main types of events, "according to the level of the narrative text at which the figure is located". The first event type is that of *events in the happenings*. He also refers to this as "story-world" events, and these are "situated [...] within the narrated incidents, with the protagonist as agent [...]". For example, the speaker in Livingstone's much anthologised poem "Gentling a wildcat" (published in *Eyes closed against the sun*, 1970) places the corpse of the dead wildcat "and at her firstborn in the topgallants / of a young tree, out of ground reach" (Hacksley & Maclennan, 2004:98) after gentling her until she died. The action of the speaker placing the two corpses in the tree constitutes an event in the happenings.

The second type of event is called a *presentation event*, "located at the level of discourse" (Hühn, 2007). In this event type, the narrator/speaker "typically undergoes a change in his attitude or consciousness, constituting a story of narration" (Hühn, 2007). To illustrate, in "Visitor at Station 21" the speaker realises that his internal debate regarding the modern intellectual mind interferes with his ability to connect with his natural environment, because it suppresses his physical and spiritual perception of it. He only realises this when a duiker doe approaches him and licks salt from his wrist, "halt[ing] the debate" (Livingstone, 1991:54) through this real and tangible experience.

Lastly, Hühn talks of *reception events*, which are "located at the level of reading, with the reader as agent" (2007). In this type of event

[...] neither the protagonist nor the narrator/speaker is able or willing to undergo a decisive change, which the composition of the text, however, signals as necessary or desirable and which the reader is meant to perform vicariously in his consciousness [...] (Hühn, 2007).

The decisive change in this instance is not within the text itself, but rather the reader. In "Carnivores at Station 22", the speaker has to give up trying to get a dolphin back into the water due to time constraints. As a result, instead of it being saved, opportunistic fish-

ermen slaughter it. The speaker narrates the events in such a manner, however, that the reader's sympathy is with the dolphin and not the hungry fishermen. This forces the reader to re-evaluate his/her own sentiments regarding this incident, and she/he then saves the dolphin "vicariously in his[/her] consciousness", to borrow Hühn's phrase.

Analysing *A littoral zone* according to these narrative categories, also keeping DuPlessis' concept of *segmentivity* in mind, reveals various mental and thematical progressions in the volume and leads the reader to grasp the volume's insights regarding humankind's position in the natural environment with sharp clarity. It reveals how the structuring of the volume causes the reader to do introspection about his/her own position in the natural environment. Alongside this, the motif of the volume as autobiographical text comes into focus when all the various narratives in *A littoral zone* are presented collectively as a day out of the speakers' life and how throughout the volume the speaker is characterised through his conduct and how he describes the conduct of others. The speaker's effort to position himself in his environment becomes evermore apparent as one continues to read accounts of incidents that are played out at the different water sampling stations.

3. Two poems considered

This article will focus on the narrative characteristics of two poems, "A visitor at station 21" and "Carnivores at station 22", to reveal how the relation between the respective poems' said characteristics contribute to the volume's themes. This discussion will specifically look at *A littoral zone*'s presentation of humankind's position in the natural world, and the speaker's attempts at demonstrating his personal position in his natural environment.

"A visitor at station 21" contains two clearly discernable, alternating narrative lines, distinguished by the poem's typography. One narrative is printed in a normal font, while the second is in italic font – it is thus always clear which narrative segment one is busy reading. Consider the poem:

- 1 Having lately learnt not every soul
conducts the old latent argument;
well ahead of schedule, I possess
a low dune – bush behind, sea up front –
ruefully light up, wishing I could
eschew both tobacco and debate.

- 7 *A modern will, sundered from its twin
– imagination – has had God killed.
Ludwig Feuerbach slackly targeted
religion. So long Matthew, Mark, Luke,
John! Hello Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud
– Ayer and Russell hanging in there.*
- 13 *In one corner of a cornea
a delicate duiker doe appears:
fawn, poised on the witch's claw that paws
this dune. To Kant, the source was conscience;
to Lewis: reason. Aquinas, then
à Kempis claimed: the experience.*
- 19 *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 sun strokes me. Anselm, then Scotus:
nothing greater can be conceived of.*
- 25 *A stolen glimpse: she's still there, hornless,
as tall as an upright man's kneecap.
Order, wit, enigmas in Ohm's law,
subatomic particles – their quirks
and quarks, the periodic table,
my three-tiered brain: waiting on its fourth?*
- 31 *The need grows for Pascal's: the heart has
its reasons that reason cannot know.
Stubbing the butt, a movement: small hooves
Tread delicately, pause for each wave-
break. I suspend mentation in view
of an impending holy event.*
- 37 *She walks, in quick trust, decidedly
up beside me. Her leaf-stained tongue flicks
out, licks salt from my wrists. One rust-fringed
brown eye rolls worriedly at the surf.
These frail shared seconds halt the debate.
She turns, steps unhurriedly away.*

(1975)

(Livingstone, 1991:53-54.)

Each narrative line represents a different space. The first narrative chronologically presents to the reader an account of the physical, concrete milieu found in the poem: a "low dune – bush behind, sea up front" with "witch's claw that paws / this dune." It is in this physical

space where the speaker and the duiker doe are introduced, described and characterised in detail. It tells the story of a man who “possess[es] / a low dune, wishing I could / eschew both tobacco and debate.” The latter quoted line shows he has distance from himself and is aware of what he sees as unnecessary in his life. Yet, he “ruefully” lights up a cigarette – a symbol of his inability to shun the very things he wants to get away from. And in this disability the debate begins as well (this forms the second narrative line, which will be discussed later). While he is sitting there, a duiker doe approaches him and licks salt from his wrist, turns around and “steps unhurriedly away”. The duiker is described as “hornless, / as tall as an upright man’s kneecap”, with “small hooves” that “tread delicately, pause for each wave- / break.” She has a “leaf-stained tongue” and “rust-fringed / brown eyes” [that] “frown worriedly at the surf”. The focus in the poem is thus on the speaker and the duiker, as their lucid characterisation suggests.

The second narrative (which is embedded in and framed by the first narrative line) describes a mental space, the “old latent argument” in the speaker’s mind, about the intellectual progression of humankind. Like the first narrative line, it follows a chronological timeline, but this timeline spans a much larger time scale. It sketches an outline of the evolution of modern thinking by way of the speaker’s naming of important scientific- and philosophical figures in history. These figures are characterised no more than what their historical significance is (at most) and their description strongly contrasts with the speaker’s and duiker’s more detailed characterisation. They are responsible for the “modern will” which the speaker would have us know “has had God killed”. The evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – are replaced by Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Ayer and Russell. The poem then continues to describe philosophical and scientific developments that all helped to shape modern intellect. Science and philosophy replaced religion, the poem suggests, but at what cost?

The physical alternation of the two narrative lines in the poem (by means of their typographical difference) visually signals the speaker’s thoughts (his “debate”) and sensory perceptions (of the physical environs in which he finds himself), which occur simultaneously. But by looking at the way in which they alternate in the poem, one sees that the debate in the speaker’s mind intermittently suppresses his perception of the concrete world, but that the contact between the duiker and the speaker, a moment he describes as a “holy event”, “halt[s] the debate” (l. 36 & 41). In that moment the speaker is able to transcend the limiting barriers of his modern mind and is

even able to stub the butt of his cigarette – a symbolic gesture in itself. When the duiker doe licks the salt from the speaker's wrist it signals the speaker as being part of the duiker's natural environment, and not merely in it. As Mariss Everitt (2004:13) notes (on the use of evolution in *A littoral zone*), Livingstone shows us that "humankind does not occupy a privileged position on Earth but is part of 'the life of the earth'" [...]. This change in the speaker's consciousness, what Hühn refers to as a presentation event, is the most important event described in the poem. From this moment onwards (l. 33-42), there is only one remaining narrative line: that of the concrete landscape, the speaker and the duiker doe – no interruptions from the intellectual world, and the speaker is able to reconnect with nature, if only momentarily.

Thus, the juxtaposition and subsequent interaction of the two alternating narrative lines demonstrate the speaker's realisation of the nature of his (and on the larger scale, humankind's) supposed relation with the natural environment and its non-human creatures. This incident makes him grasp that replacing one's spiritual awareness of the natural world (the poet's trope for humankind's psychic dimension) with science and pure intellect threatens our connection with nature. It is as much a spiritual as it is a biological connection and only seems possible if modern intellect is willing to share the stage with our equally important spirituality. Livingstone (1991:62) acknowledges this when he explicitly draws our attention to the relationship between our physical and spiritual dimensions in the "Notes".

The littoral zone – that mysterious border that shifts restlessly between land and sea – has, to me, always reflected that blurred and uneasy divide between humanity's physical and psychic elements.

The poet states that humankind has both a physical and psychic/spiritual side, but that balancing the two elements is difficult yet crucial. Consequently, *A littoral zone* becomes a space in which he seeks to explore the relation between these two dimensions and how they impact on our connection with the land.

However, the next poem in the volume, "Carnivores at station 22", shows that this fragile and precarious connection with nature is broken and that there are complex issues playing in on our (in)ability to restore the connection. The speaker relates the story of a man (the poet himself) trying to save a beached dolphin, but who is unable to do this without help. The fishermen, on the other hand, have no intention of helping him, because they see the dolphin as

easy food, or bait. Eventually the speaker has to give up and the poem ends just before the fishermen slaughter the dolphin:

- 1 This small sea-chest of a bay
is gripped by basalt outcrops on whose peaks
fishers poised like birds of prey
stab sea and sky with bamboo beaks.
- 5 Here, once, awash in shallows
a dolphin beached, or spent in strength was hurled
by the surf and I got soaked and desperate
trying to dislodge her back to her world.
- 9 The men weighed these failed attempts
– fishing for families, lean faces bland,
the tide ebbing with my receding hopes –
and looked away as I yelled and beckoned.
- 13 Her blowhole barely fluttered.
Strapped to a schedule, I had to give her up.
Winded, eyes stinging from the salt
I offered up a curse on *homo sap*.
- 17 Perhaps dolphins are no more
than raw fish-dogs of the sea; or bait;
food, even. The smile they have
for men, on her, was flattened by her weight.
- 21 The paradox has always haunted me:
these are the only carnivores on earth
that have never attacked men, yet
out of their element they gain new worth.
- 25 As I left, the fishermen stirred: stashing
rods, moving in that ugly minuet
of deliberate premeditation,
one drawing a long and rusted bayonet.

(1979)

(Livingstone, 1991:55.)

Although this poem follows a very simple narrative line (the physical events are related chronologically, with intermittent thoughts from the speaker), it is striking how the speaker characterises the fishermen and then signal them to represent humankind (*homo sap*, as he calls them). The poem title “Carnivores at station 22” does not refer to the dolphin, but to the fishermen; the speaker recalls how they stood on the basalt outcrops like “birds of prey” stabbing the sea and sky with their “bamboo beaks”. This introductory stanza thus

characterises the fishermen as animals waiting to hack into their discovered prey.

Opposing the brutality of the fishermen is the speaker's effort to get the dolphin back into water. Like the previous poem, the speaker – who is also the poet – presents his actions as examples to demonstrate what he understands is our supposed connection with nature. It does not mean he and his actions are flawless – on the contrary, he reflects on his own flaws throughout the volume. His self-awareness is most evident in his multiple references to himself as quixotic knight of the earth, a metaphor laden with a strong sense of self-irony. He does, however, explore his own sense of connection with nature in such a manner as to suggest the reader should do the same.

The speaker realises that his view is not the only valid one and that the fishermen's actions may be justified to a certain extent, however little he agrees with them. Where the speaker, from his extensive scientific knowledge about the environment as well as his perceived spiritual connection feels he should try and save the beached dolphin, the fishermen on the other hand are "fishing for families, lean faces bland". For a short moment the focaliser changes from the speaker to the fishermen. They are poor and responsible for the food on their families' table. In this specific socio-economical context dolphins, like any other sea creature, only "gain new worth" "on earth" (referring to land), as the pairing of these two rhyming words indicates. For the fishers, the beached dolphin is no more than "bait" or "food, even."

What the speaker is deeply troubled by, however, is the fact that the fishers don't seem bothered by the apparent symbiotic contract between humans and dolphins (stanza 6). There have been numerous accounts, for instance, of dolphins protecting humans from sharks or assisting in finding divers who were lost at sea.² In other words, the fishermen's arguably understandable urge to exploit what they see as a bonus source of food and bait, overpowers their sense of responsibility towards their source of life, the sea, even though dolphins would probably have helped them were they to find themselves in perilous circumstances. The relationship between human and nature is not a balanced one, the poet suggests.

2 See <http://www.dolphins-world.com> for some of these accounts.

The poet sequences the physical events and his personal sentiment in such a manner that the reader sees the imbalance in the relationship between human and nature. The first four stanzas relate the physical story, ending with the speaker giving up, thus failing. The next two stanzas articulate why he finds the fishermen's behaviour so incredulous – an opinion informed by his (scientific and general) knowledge of these sea creatures. This prepares the reader to read the last stanza from the speaker's point of view. Accordingly then, the last stanza triggers in the reader emotions as strong as disgust, with the same sense of loss that the speaker experienced when he had to give up the dolphin. It is also here where one sees the mental chasm between the speaker and the rest of *homo sap* most clearly and understands his preferred affinity with the dolphin. The implied event, *in the happenings* (Hühn, 2007), of the dolphin being slaughtered, is thus paired with the reception event in which the real event is a mental shift in the reader's mind; the speaker is unable to save the dolphin, but urges the reader to realise that, although poverty and other social issues are influencing the way we perceive our natural environment, our morality should still guide us in the decisions we make.

The question now arises whether it is just this poem that shapes these feelings in the reader, or is a larger poem group or cycle responsible for the said response to the happenings in "Carnivores". If one accepts that *A littoral zone* is a unit promoting over-arching themes (like the theme of symbiosis in this instance), then the juxtaposition of the individual narrative lines and events of the various poems constitute these. Consider the two given poems in relation to each other. Firstly, there is a strong contrast in events between "Visitor" and "Carnivores". In the former poem the speaker experiences a moment of unification with the natural world when he sets aside the intellectual debate that suppresses his sensory experience of the environment, intellectuality being a basic need of modern humankind. In the latter poem there seems to be no moment of transcendence into unity between human and nature exactly, because the fishermen, who represent humankind, are incapable of thinking about the natural environment other than a resource to satisfy their basic needs. This strong contrast between the events amplifies the emotions felt by the reader; because the speaker is able to transcend intellectual debate and experience a moment of complete union with his natural environment and the duiker doe in the first poem, the speaker's anger against humankind's drive for exploitation is so much more understandable in the second and this

specific sequence of poem narratives awakens in the reader those very feelings.

Secondly, the reader's tendency to accept the speaker's emotions as his/her own is furthermore augmented by the fact that the poet presents the same speaker as the main protagonist, so to speak, in both narratives. In fact, the speaker's characterisation as the self-aware scientist, who fights a relentless battle against the exploitation and pollution of the earth, carries on throughout the volume. In this the speaker's character is steady and for this reason perceived as reliable. His need to attempt getting the dolphin back into the sea comes from the same source of respect for his environment with which he embraces the moment with the duiker.

Lastly, the deliberate use of two different sound patterns to represent union (as found in "Visitor") and exploitation (in "Carnivores") sensitises the reader to the carefully constructed contrast between the poems. The short, quick sounds of the single-syllabic words found in the last stanza of "Visitor" – "[h]er leaf-stained tongue flicks / out, licks salt from my wrists" – are strongly associated with the moment of union between the speaker and duiker. They signal actions undiluted and uninterrupted by intellectual debate. These short sounds are juxtaposed with the long and stretched sounds, as well as multi-syllabic words in the last stanza of "Carnivores", associated with the slaughtering of the dolphin:

As I left, the fishermen *stirred: stashing*
rods, moving in that ugly minuet
of *deliberate premeditation*,
one *drawing a long and rusted bayonet*. (Italics – JHK.)

Together, juxtaposition of the different narrative lines, contrasts in events, the characterisation of (and focalisation through) the speaker, as well as the sound patterns of the respective poems help to carry forward the already-mentioned theme of symbiosis, as well as *A littoral zone's* autobiographical aspect.

4. The bigger picture – symbiosis as overarching theme in *A littoral zone*, and the volume as autobiographical text

The word *symbiosis* (which means the together-(*sym*)-living-(*biosis*) of different organisms, especially to the benefit of both) only appears twice in *A littoral zone*. The first appearance is in "Eland about station 17", where the Khoi-San community are depicted as "swarms

of symbiotic man / about the business of getting on with the earth” (Livingstone, 1991:44), through their ancient paintings the poet discovered in a hidden cave somewhere in the region of station 17. The speaker poses this as a sort of ideal that modern man is yet to reach, although in “Road Back” – the poem in which the word appears for the second time – its imperativeness is spelt out. We have a “plain” choice: “symbiosis or death” (Livingstone, 1991:61).

These two poems set the framework for the theme to be developed furthermore. They spell out the ideal and the imperative very plainly, but the theme develops throughout *A littoral zone*, by means of the poet presenting various poems that present different anecdotes (or narratives) of human and animal behaviour, like the two poems discussed earlier. Livingstone shows what people do, what animals do, what people should do and finally, what will happen if we refuse to live in symbiosis with our natural environs and its creatures.

These anecdotes include images of pollution for instance the mess described in “Christmas chefs of station 1A” (p. 12)³ and “Reflections at Sunkist” (p. 13), environmental mismanagement (the whaling station in “Beach terminal”, p. 36; and the cave near station 17, which was destroyed by landfill to buttress new hotels, p. 62), animal abuse (among other, the loggerhead turtle that was chopped up live for “medicines / or trophies”, p. 37) and violence among people themselves, most notably expressed by images of war – portrayed in poems like “South beach transients”, (p. 21), “The metallic aviator”, (p. 41), “Children at station 16” (p. 42). Combined, all these individual narratives constitute a reconstruction of how modern man is completely out of touch with both their natural environment, and each other. These anecdotes stand in stark contrast to the poet’s proposed ideal for symbiotic living, taken up in the story of the Khoi-San community as told in “Eland about station 17” (p. 45), a contrast that reveals the extent to which humankind is detached from its natural environments.

With regard to *A littoral zone* as autobiographical text, I have indicated in my introductory remarks that the volume’s poems are sequenced in the order with which the speaker would visit his water sampling stations along the Durban coastline every day of his scientific career. This gives the impression that the reader is on a journey with the poet, to explore not only humankind’s ideal position

3 References containing only a page number refer to Livingstone (1991).

in nature, but also the poet's development as person. The speaker in these poems is the poet himself, and not just a fictional persona. The scientist/poet/speaker's development becomes increasingly visible with each story the poet tells, as each story helps to explain a part of the speaker's complex character. To refer back to "Visitor", the speaker talks of what he considers flaws in his character – the yearning for tobacco and debate. It reveals that he is deeply aware of his own ontology – for that matter, his epistemology as well – and he is able to gain a healthy introspective distance from himself. Through the speaker's interaction with the duiker doe the reader learns that the speaker has a strong desire to have the same spiritual connection with nature as the Khoi-San had, a quality that, along with their symbiotic lifestyle, afforded them their strong sense of unity with their environment. "Visitor" shows that he is indeed able to attain this, if only for a moment, in that "holy event" which "halt[s] the debate". In "Eland about station 17" he also ends the poem with these words:

The least
I can do is keep this cave hid for you,
mounting no sign and exacting no due,
having called, stroked and dreamed into eland.
(Livingstone, 1991:45.)

The last line refers to the Khoi-San's shamans who gained access to their gods through nature, an image which foregrounds their spiritual connection with nature most explicitly. Through what the paintings reveal to the speaker, he is able to grasp their simultaneous physical and spiritual connection with the land and its creatures. Similarly, "Carnivores" demonstrates how the speaker tries to live by his understanding of having a personal connection with his natural environment; he honours the symbiotic contract between humans and dolphins by trying to save the dolphin. Other poems like "Bad run at King's rest" (p. 37) show a related passion when he, "asking for pardon" kills a badly butchered and tortured loggerhead turtle to put it out of its mystery brought on by people.

In addition, the poet's awareness of his own actions and position in the natural environment takes on a comical semblance in the already-mentioned form of the speaker as quixotic knight for the earth. *A littoral zone* starts with two quotes from Cervantes' "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. (Livingstone, 1991:6.)

Both quotes reveal something about the speaker's character that one gets to know better through his poems; the first quote hints at the sense of futility the speaker feels when he tries to make an actual difference in his fellow humans' sentiments and subsequent behaviour. The second quote, however, signals to the reader, whether or not the speaker's attempts are successful, he is still morally obliged to try. Both these sentiments are expressed with somewhat bitter comedy in "Starting out":

There's work ahead, futile,
scientifically delivered blows at sullage,
against the republics of ignorance and apathy,
with bust lance, flawed shield,
lamed steed of action; downhill
past Country Club to Blue Lagoon
brown with silt hell-bent of the surf.
Here is my daily bread's commencement.
(Livingstone, 1991:10.)

Very ironically the speaker does not seem to have any trust in his work having a noticeable effect in the end. As the epigraphs start to signal, the speaker describes himself and his work in terms of Don Quixote; he pictures himself as a knight with flawed weapons, trying to protect the earth against an ignorant public. Even this is as futile as Don Quixote trying to protect the village against the windmills he took for dragons. From this point onwards, the poet/speaker intermittently refers to this self-awareness, or self-irony, in various poems throughout the volume. As such the speaker's characterisation as a self-aware and self-ironic man is established and maintained throughout, as shown in the case of "Visitor". The speaker's sense of self-irony reaches a climax in the last poem "Road back" (p. 61) when he realises his role as quixotic knight is redundant on Gaia's time scale, a realisation that plunges him in deep despair and depression. He does, however, find rest for his troubled mind in his psychic connection with the sea:

Child of my loins, conceived and born
in solitude, here's comfort for your grave substance.
(Livingstone, 1991:61.)

5. In conclusion

The discussion of "Visitor" and "Carnivores" explores how their respective anecdotes and events are segmented, then arranged and sequenced into specific narratives, to highlight the speaker's conviction of the necessity of a biological and spiritual connection with the natural environment. It also reveals that the poet/speaker feels humankind has yet to get to this point, but that he at least is able to achieve this on a personal level. These two poems stand in the larger context of the volume, in which there are numerous other narrative lines (in the form of poems about specific experiences the poet had) that are juxtaposed in a similar fashion. All these juxtaposed narrative lines then constitute on the level of the volume as a whole the autobiographical narrative of the poet's development as self-ironic individual. Collectively, the various anecdotes also contribute to the formation and development of the theme of symbiosis, a theme that has direct bearing on how the poet posits humankind's current and supposed connection with nature. The main event of the volume then is not to be found in the volume itself, but in the reader's mind: the realisation that bridging this gap is absolutely necessary and that it starts with the individual. This is the true event.

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