

## Honouring Dennis Haskell: A Poet and an Amigo of *Asiatic* and Asian Literature

This issue of *Asiatic* (Vol. 13, No. 2) is dedicated to the life and works of Dennis Haskell (1948-), a long-standing friend of the Journal, who has been on its Advisory Board since the Journal's inception. He is also an ardent champion of Asian literature who has been at the forefront of literary representations of Australian-Asian interactions and has shown an extensive understanding of Asian cultures both in his creative and critical works. Together with Edwin Thumboo and late Bruce Bennett, he has been a driving force behind the Biennial Symposium on Literature and Culture in the Asia-Pacific Region, which began in 1982 and has been taking place since every two years in different countries of the region, two of which (2009, 2017) were, indeed, hosted by the same institution where *Asiatic* is also housed, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Moreover, he came to IIUM as a visiting professor in 2018.

Haskell is a leading Australian poet and an illustrious literary voice in the Asia-Pacific region. Born and brought up in Sydney, and educated at the University of Sydney, Haskell was a Professor of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia from 1984 to 2011. He has produced 14 volumes of literary scholarship and criticism in his capacity as a professor but he considers himself first and foremost a poet and often deprecates his role as a scholar/critic. In one of his early poems he wrote, "But who recalls a critic's face?/ What but verse lives on." Elsewhere, explaining that he would rather prefer raw responses from the audience to his readings than literary criticism, he said, "Bugger literary criticism, that's what I want." Strikingly, he is of the view that when it comes to poetry or other art forms, "criticism often misses the point."

As a poet, Haskell has produced eight collections of poetry, the most recent *What Are You Doing Here?* (University of the Philippines Press, 2015) and *Ahead of Us* (Fremantle Press, 2016). What makes this achievement exceptional is that Haskell was brought up in a family environment where there were hardly any books or reading culture. He had little familiarity with poetry in early life and came to it rather late when he was 20 or 21 years old. In the interview with Lucy Dougan, Haskell explains:

In fact, I grew up in a kind of culture where I wouldn't have heard of poetry except at school. It was the kind of environment where you wouldn't have dared mention that you read poetry, let alone write it. You would have got beaten up.

It really speaks volumes that brought up in that kind of indifferent and even hostile surroundings, Haskell has become not only a great admirer of poetry who has written books and articles on poets such as John Keats, Kenneth Slessor and Bruce Dawe, and a doctoral thesis on the poetry of W.B. Yeats, but an acclaimed poet himself. He is the recipient of the Western Australia Premier's Prize for Poetry, the A.A. Phillips Prize for a distinguished contribution to Australian literature (from the Association for the Study of Australian Literature), and of an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Western Australia. In 2015 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for "services to literature, particularly poetry, to education and to intercultural understanding."

Another point that deserves to be highlighted with regard to Haskell's encounter and engagement with poetry is that he came to it not inspired by other poets but through his love for classical music and painting. These two things – Haskell's working-class background and his love for music and painting – should explain the main characteristics of his poetry; that he loves rhythm, the quotidian, simplicity and austerity of language, and emotion and spontaneity over intellect. He loves being spare and unpretentious, and not write poetry for the sake of writing it. He believes that a poet should be authentic in his calling and write only when s/he feels emotionally compelled to do so, and write in a language that is unostentatious and plain but strong, vivid and visual. "I don't like very ornate verse. Or very ornate anything," Haskell explains, and adds elsewhere, "Only emotions endure; intellectual poems have no lasting power." On the subject of emotion, he further explains, "I believe the best poems come out of emotional situations." A poet can stir the depths only when he writes under emotional pressure.

It is evident that in spite of his scholarly background and academic career, Haskell doesn't subscribe to any intellectual or cultural theories of poetry, such as Modernism, Postmodernism or Deconstruction. He believes that such theories only muddle the poet's imagination and compromises his creativity and authenticity. "And to write with sincerity post modernism, let alone post-postmodernism – the hardest thing," Haskell explains. To keep himself honest as a poet, he focuses on issues close to his heart – his own experiences, family, friends and domestic life generally – and steer clear of issues that brew in the academia, or complex, intellectual poems that universities encourage.

To celebrate Haskell's poetry and poetics we have put together five articles, an interview and four poems in this issue. Interestingly, almost all the participants in the project are well-established poets themselves, and some are also academics, which would indicate that they have the advantage

of approaching and elucidating Haskell's poetry from more than one angle or frame of reference; wearing the hat of a poet or critic, or both, as required.

In the first article, "A Need for Voices': The Poetry of Dennis Haskell," Kieran Dolin, a colleague of Haskell in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia, explores the importance of "voice" in reading Haskell's poetry, where he identifies key aspects of voice in the poetry drawing on arguments by Robert Pinsky and Al Alvarez that voice implies a reaching out to an auditor or reader, and thus has social and cultural dimensions. The article is divided into two parts; in the first part, the attention is on the power of voice and how the poet uses it to achieve his different objectives in the poems, while in the second part, the focus changes to poems of international travel and how Haskell presents vivid intercultural encounters in them in a voice that is candid, observant and responsive to others.

In the second article, "The Poetry of Dennis Haskell: Stylisation and Elegy," David McCooley explores Haskell's elegiac poetry, broadly classifying them into two categories: "public" elegies or elegies for fellow poets, and "intimate" elegies or elegies for his family members and spouse. He argues that of the two categories, intimate elegies, which indicate a more profound, and sometimes troubled, engagement with the genre of elegy, may occasionally turn into anti-elegy and self-elegy. By undertaking textual analyses of various poems from within the different classes of elegy, McCooley illustrates the different ways in which Haskell deals with the profound challenge facing an elegist: how to express the intense emotion of grief, keeping within the stylistic conventions of poetry.

In the third article, "The Sliding Scale of Self-Repair in Dennis Haskell's Acts of Defiance," Page Richards focuses on lyric poetry's uneasy relationship with history and the rich potentials it has for resituating history and life stories, a largely unexplored area. She explains how Haskell's poetry, balancing on a delicate and self-referential focus on the human language itself, may help in exploring that hitherto unexplored possibilities. The article offers a critical study of ecosystems of human language as acts of self-repair, a perspective which permeates Haskell's pioneering and poetic cycle of work, resonant with medical discoveries of the present era. Richards provides a close reading of several poems from Haskell's volumes such as *All the Time in the World* (2006), *Acts of Defiance* (2010) and *Ahead of Us* (2016), to establish her argument.

In the fourth article, "Provisional Meanings: Belonging and Not-Belonging in the Poetry of Dennis Haskell," Paul Hetherington investigates how Haskell's poetry which abounds in images of home and departure, express ideas of belonging and not-belonging, often addressing the two simultaneously, suggesting that many of our understandings are provisional.

His poetry also frequently posits a gap between what might be desired and present reality, or an uncomfortable sense of the insufficiencies of knowledge and belief, thereby acknowledging life's shortcomings and permeating the poems with a sorrowful quality. In other words, Haskell's poetry, Hetherington argues, citing John G. McEllhenney, provides "The tug... between doubt and belief." Yet, they also provide a means of access to otherwise unapproachable thoughts and feelings and connects the poet (and reader) to an articulate human community. Furthermore, they delineate a simultaneously observant, detached and engaged subjectivity that consistently seeks to find connections – whether at home, while travelling or in international settings.

In the fifth and last of the articles, "Love, Death and Memories: On Dennis Haskell's Rhonda Poems," Fan Weina, as the title suggests, explicates the themes of love, death and memories in the poet's Rhonda poems, in *Ahead of Us* (2016). Fan argues that in spite of the overarching influence of various literary movements on the present age, Haskell's poetry has remained strikingly personal, accessible and lyrical, and his best poems are those dedicated to his wife, Rhonda, who Haskell loved passionately and who had helped to shape and deepen the poet's perception of humanity and human relationships. They are profoundly moving because they embody the poet's honest and candid emotions while striving to make sense of the dynamics of love in our mundane life.

In the interview by Lucy Dougan, a fellow Perth-based Australian poet, she provides a glimpse into Haskell's life, imagination and creative process and demonstrates how the poet's formative experiences, including his family background, class, education, reading and the place in which he grew up may have influenced his aesthetic and moral orientations, which constitute honesty, simplicity, unpretentiousness and ordinariness. Dougan concludes that it is Haskell's iconoclastic character which has kept his practice sharp, surprising and "on song" and helped to retain his relevance as a poet even today, at a time Triumpian populism, doubt, apprehension and scepticism.

Finally, the four poems, by the multi-award-winning poets from Australia, Ireland and Singapore: Aaron Lee (Singapore), Andrew Taylor (Australia), John Kinsella (Australia) and Tony Curtis (Ireland). Their presence brings novelty to the project and adds significantly to its value by having poets speak about a fellow poet and express how they feel about his work. Their sentiments are similar as they feel equally warm and vibrant in their praise of their compeer or "double"; fellow travellers who know one another intuitively from the breathings of their hearts and quest for vital truth. The poems also, of course, beautifully complement the critical articles and the interview discussed earlier, as the two approaches converge to highlight Haskell's overall success as a poet.

I would like to thank all the contributors for their enthusiastic participation in the project. Without their cooperation and the willingness to spare their time to come up with the contribution they have submitted for this issue, our intention to celebrate Dennis and his work would never materialise. So a big THANK YOU to all! Thanks also to Dennis for sharing your “dreams” with us, your beautiful “moves” with words; your poems are like balls of light in our hands; like hammers they help to shape our lives!

For the enjoyment of our readers, especially those who are not familiar with his work, we have included seven new and previously unpublished poems by Dennis Haskell in this issue of *Asiatic*.

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