Provisional Meanings: Belonging and Not-Belonging in the Poetry of Dennis Haskell

Paul Hetherington[1]
University of Canberra, Australia

Abstract

Dennis Haskell's poetry persistently explores images of home and departure. As it does, it questions what we may know and depend on, suggesting that many of our understandings are provisional. Haskell's poetry also contrasts what is imagined and desired with what is knowable – giving prominence to quotidian knowledge and observable reality – and restlessly explores the relationship of religious belief to lived experience. In this light, the elegiac strand in his work becomes a way of probing the gap between death and the limitations of language, highlighting the sometimes problematic relationship between thought and expression. Yet, poetry provides a means of access to otherwise unapproachable thoughts and feelings and connects the poet (and reader) to an articulate human community. It enables the delineation of a simultaneously observant, detached and engaged subjectivity that consistently seeks to find connections – whether at home, while travelling or in international settings. This poetry joins the familiar and unfamiliar in works that question how people understand one another and their unique circumstances, and how the ineffable, while it may be evoked in words, nevertheless retains its deep mysteries. Haskell is interested in the ways in which we make and disturb meaning, and in questioning how belief in God or an afterlife may be understood despite scepticism and doubt.

Keywords

Poetry, Haskell, home, departure, provisionality, belief

Home and Departure

Images of home and departure abound in Dennis Haskell's poems. Many of these images, diverse though they are, express ideas of belonging and not-belonging –

[1] **Professor Paul Hetherington** has published and/or edited 27 books, including 13 full-length poetry collections and nine chapbooks. Among these are *Moonlight on Oleander: Prose Poems* (UWAP, 2018) and *Palace of Memory* (RWP, 2019). He won the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards (poetry) and undertook an Australia Council for the Arts Literature Board Residency at the B.R. Whiting Studio in Rome in 2015-16. He was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize in the 2017 New South Wales Premier's Awards and commended in the Surprise Encounters: Headstuff Poetry Competition 2018 (Ireland). He is Professor of Writing in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI) and one of the founding editors of the international online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. He founded the International Prose Poetry Group in 2014. Email: paul.hetherington@canberra.edu.au.

and sometimes they address these ideas simultaneously. In almost every case, there is a sense of the provisional attendant on these images, so that Haskell's consideration of belonging often emphasises precarity; while his articulations of not-belonging frequently posit a gap between what might be desired and present reality. This lends a rueful quality to his poems, as he acknowledges many of life's shortcomings and – often implicitly – questions how best to address them.

It is not merely that Haskell's poetry presents an image of an unsettled and questioning subjectivity – although that is part of what it does – but, further, his poetry conveys a sense of living with a sometimes uncomfortable sense of the insufficiencies of knowledge and belief. Indeed, his poetry expresses what John G. McEllhenney, in discussing the poetry of R.S. Thomas, calls "The tug… between doubt and belief" (xiii). For McEllhenney, this "is not just an irritant that releases poetic creativity. It is… a necessary component of belief. For belief needs doubt to temper it, to make it more flexible" (xiii).

McEllhenney also remarks that a doubting-belief "is the response to God that correlates with the God who is absent to our intellect but occasionally present to our intuition" (14). As Haskell quizzes and explores related ideas, he also expresses a strong commitment to what he sees and knows, and to the quotidian experience. His poetry frequently examines the capacities and frustrations associated with the search for various kinds of knowledge and meaning; and, in the face of the abstract and ineffable, it often turns to the evidence of the senses – particularly to what may be seen and touched. This is especially true of many of Haskell's expressions of the importance and value of human connection.

For example, in a relatively early poem, "The Basis of All Knowledge," Haskell writes of his young son screaming with pain:

> for the simple fact that
> his teeth bite his gums like needles.
> Take him up.
> He has no beliefs.
> He displays no regret
> nor any knowledge
> of what regret could mean. (9)[2]

This image of a father and son at home conjures the love and care that parenting viscerally involves, yet the poem is also unsettled by the sheer vulnerability of the infant, who is "impotent" and whose fingers are "not yet curled/ around problems" (9). As the image of teeth biting gums becomes a symbol of what is uncontrollable and unresolvable despite a father's tenderness, the poem registers

[2] All in-text references to Dennis Haskell's poems are to his volume, *Acts of Defiance: Selected Poems* (2010).

the speaker's awareness of life's vicissitudes keenly. This is an ambiguously-freighted idea because the child's absence of the knowledge of regret – his innocence – is posited as problematic. The suggestion is that the pain which comes with knowledge, significantly discomfiting as it is, may be preferable to the pain of unresolvable – or *unthinkable* – suffering.

In another early poem, "Incomplete and Nagged At," Haskell addresses a sense of human isolation despite belief's consolations, stating:

> After all our struggling, study, our learning
> we are left, always
> incomplete and nagged at,
> waiting for happiness to turn the key, (6)

The poem implies that a resolving consolation never quite comes, and it finishes by ironically contemplating the wish that our lives might "come out/ as effortlessly as stars" (6). This does not deny the efficacy of belief, but it suggests that such efficacy is often hard won and cannot "complete" the believer. The insufficient nature of worldly knowledge, and the nagging hesitations of belief are foregrounded – and "happiness," however desirable, is problematised.

In "The Call," one of Haskell's most moving works, such ideas are elaborated, as he turns again to the idea of a young son in a father's arms – but here the emphasis is on a moment of communion between father and son, and on the origin of "the call" that has summoned the adult. The poet imagines it may have been "God's voice" (5), but this speculation is immediately quelled by "a silence so complete/ love itself might become a sickness" (5). The poet is reminded that "silence will one day flood our arteries," and of the "hope for some voice, come/ prowling through our sleep" (5). In this way, even the idea of God – or what we are able to know of God – becomes a kind of question, as the poet wonders what anyone can expect of the promise of an afterlife. The poem's final image of his son's body in his hands emphasises human vulnerability and an acute awareness of the transitory nature of existence and mortality.

The imagery and logic of these three poems give a good, composite idea of the persistently restless, and sometimes wary, way in which Haskell's work explores the key existential issue of how people may understand their place in the world. The poetry's registration of doubt informs many of its key moments, as it refuses to cease its sharp-eyed questioning of circumstance. As it does so, it relies on the deployment of key (usually visual) images that present brief, vivid scenes to the reader. These scenes function to reveal a world that Haskell explores in his poetry through close and questioning observation.

For instance, the poem "Samuel Johnson in Marrickville" speaks of "a kind of madness with no reason/ you can name,/ within you/ and outside you like a stone" (10). The introduction of the image of a stone into these otherwise abstract

lines is characteristic of Haskell's determination to tie puzzling or irrational experience, and also what is conventionally understood or believed, to tangible experience – so that we almost feel the weight of this "kind of madness" in our hands. Further, these lines allude to an episode in James Boswell's biography of Johnson:

> After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the nonexistence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, 'I refute it thus.' (143)

Following Johnson's example, Haskell insists on the materiality of the world, and the need to test more abstract or idealistic notions against common sense perceptions.

Further, the poet uses Johnson's depressive episodes as a way of questioning the foundations of our usual understandings of life and its rhythms – "why autumn?/ why winter?/ why these things happen" (10). Such resonant uncertainties and an accompanying consciousness of self are visualised in the lines, "A man walks along… kicking at the intent air" (11), and this image is a telling variation on Johnson's kicking a large stone. It reminds the reader that depression and madness have little recourse to rational or empirical means of refutation. The dynamism of this visual image, and Haskell's linking of it, in part two of the poem, to the "simple" "eternal hungering" of pets, points laterally to the human hunger for meaning; and for an understanding of belonging.

In this work, a known and apparently secure place – the suburb of Marrickville – is flooded until "the infinite and necessary/ trivialisations/ that order our lives/ drown in the most befuddled/ traffic jam of all time" (12-13). Eventually the poem asks, "How to explain your mind/ needs its complacency?" (14), after which it veers into the concluding statement that "before water [and madness]/ to be a child again/ is all there is,// to be as hungry as fish" (15). These are powerful declarations because the need to maintain an ordered world and mind, and the ready, intrusive and unruly disruptions of both world and mind, are simultaneously acknowledged as integral parts of human subjectivity.

The Involved Observer

The presentation of individual subjectivity is one of the key concerns of contemporary poets and such poetic articulations tend to conform to what M.H. Abrams calls the expressive theory of art, in which:

> A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feelings, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind; or if aspects of the external world, then these only as they are converted from fact to poetry by the feelings and operations of the poet's mind. (22)

This statement might be applied directly to Haskell's work, as the poem "Visiting Friends at Henley" attests. In its opening scene "the external world" is subtly invested with individual feeling: "We cross the street, and along the path/ to a house leaning on the river,/ a garden tangled with sticks and unopened jasmine,/ a simple house, grown eloquent with age" (3). The reader is immediately alert to the fact that what is "tangled" and "unopened" reaches beyond the sticks and jasmine and, further, that the "eloquence" the poet invests in the house suggests untold histories.

And, indeed, the poem then speaks of "three women," prints on the walls, and books – now largely unread. And of a death: "The man who read/ is absent for the first time" (3). At this juncture, where the first stanza ends, the reader may "see" the poem's location as if through the poet's eyes, knowing that the situation is invested with a rather mysterious significance – for example, one artwork, "The Tailor" "eyes us suspiciously" (3). Such imagery creates a developing sense of expectation and suspense by being combined with the poem's subdued yet carefully pointed narrative.

The second stanza develops these ideas subtly, showing "elegant shifts of light" and closed windows facing "the river/ which drifts past, unheard,/ as though not moving" (3). The sense of near-stasis is powerfully confirmed by the lines, "Something asks to be said/ and we cannot say it" (3). The image of unopened jasmine is activated when this "something" is characterised as "long-thwarted," and then as "blossom[ing]." When the poem's speaker and his companion leave the house, the subjective and the "internal" – as Abrams calls it – returns: "When we walk away, we walk/ with a loss of elegance" (3).

It is at this moment of leaving – of Haskell's explicit registration of a discomfited sense of not-belonging – that he introduces the idea of an irrationally consoling belief. The three women wait "needing to believe,/ that at any moment/ something might knock, come/ to refill their lives/ with his invisible and eternal happiness" (3-4). Here, as Haskell affirms the importance of belief and memory, he acknowledges that dependency on belief may easily become disproportionate. The poem's speaker is attuned to his world, and sympathetic to those he meets, yet also somewhat detached – critically examining what he sees and hears despite being cognisant of the power of affection and memory.

In other works, such as "Light the first light of evening" – the title taken from a line by Wallace Stevens – Haskell yields to a more lyrical impulse, bringing

"the world" (32) into a provisional and tentative focus – and, in this case, he observes his own responses rather than responding to others and follows a partly intuitive path towards meaning:

> In solitude
> the things of the world
> might become small birds
> or letters
> that ripple off the tongue (32)

The poem ends with the idea of "the world/ beyond words,// insistent, in the fragile/ stammering light" (32), asserting that language (the language of poetry in particular) and the "things of the world" exist in an uneasy relationship – one is not the other, no matter how carefully a poet may try to capture the world's things in words. This is similar to Simon Critchley's contention that Wallace Stevens' poetry – and poetry more generally – is "the experience of failure" because reality "retreats before the imagination that shapes and orders it" (6). For Critchley, as for Stevens – and for Haskell, too – "the real is the base… from which poetry begins" (24) and "the task of poetry to give us a sense of the world as it is, in the intricate evasions of as" (30).

"Light the first light of evening" acknowledges that poets belong uneasily in the intersections between world and word, while its images of things becoming "small birds" or "letters" "that ripple off our tongue" confirms that language is often at its most evocative and seductive when it figuratively transforms the "things" it encounters. Yet, as the poem acknowledges the imperfectability of the relationship between what we know and express – "birds beating in the dark,/ things which fall off/ the wings of their names" (32) – it also registers the possibility of transcendence, however fragile the intuition of "the world/ beyond words" may be, and however stammeringly it arrives. The poem gestures towards the ineffable and simultaneously understands that words cannot fully catch it.

Another poem, "One Clear Call," develops a similar idea in recounting how a "friend has rung/ you, caught on the hop; an engineer/ who never looks at a book, whose father's died" (33). The poet recites Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" so that his friend, and then his friend's wife, may take down the words, and both are overcome by emotion as they do so. By the end of this work, the poem reflects on "that past sensation of syllables sweeping you and your friends/ across the bar of technique, of grieving, of consolation" (33). This is a genuine consolation, where a poem's words connect with deep, ineffable feeling; where word and world connect in extraordinary ways – partly because Tennyson's poem, with its evocation of crossing "the bar" between life and death, acknowledges the intractable nature of this journey.

In such moments, Haskell's poetry probes the elegiac with great poignancy, acknowledging the gap between the realities of death and the limited reach of

language, yet celebrating how powerful the articulation of grief may be. Words offer a doorway to otherwise inaccessible thoughts and feelings and provide a sense of belonging to the speaking human community, even in the face of death's puzzling alienations. As a representative of this community, the poet becomes a kind of ventriloquist – as he puts it, "Tennyson's mouthpiece" – speaking into "a vast tide of silence" (33).

In an ekphrastic poem, "The Raising of the Cross," prompted by a Rembrandt sketch – and perhaps also by his famous painting of the same name – Haskell's engagement with such issues extends in various directions. It begins with an image of the human connection to earth, and the simultaneous urge to be lifted free of earthly matters: Christ's "strangely Y-shaped body/ is angled to the earth/ as he is lifted up out of it/ like a tree whose only fruit is flesh" (112). This is an observant consideration of Rembrandt's triangular composition, and the way the Christ figure seems to hover in a space that is neither quite of the earth nor free of earthly entanglements.

Haskell's focus is primarily on the poem's symbolism, as he writes that "locked on this tattered figure" are "all our hopes/ that there is a body beyond this body,/ more clear, more pure, more insubstantial" (112) – and he emphatically conjures the feeling of "relief" that would come "if this were not art but truth." As the poet considers the prospect of an afterlife, he registers keenly the sense that, as he puts it elsewhere, "we *are* given time, but only a limited amount of it, a fact that is life's greatest irony" (Haskell, "Roman Holiday" 1), and also that there is no clear evidence for life-after-death no matter how sincere our belief. The poem ends with the idea that the "scratchings of paint" might be "merely symbols/ substantial, insubstantial as the soul," suggesting that although Rembrandt's pictorial narrative may have no more credence – at least in some of its details – than a "B-grade movie," his sketch nevertheless takes part in the important and persistent human quest to probe material reality for its spiritual significance.

Acts of Defiance

Dennis Haskell's 2010 volume of new and selected poems is entitled *Acts of Defiance*. The title comes from his poem, "An Act of Defiance," in which he writes of someone unnamed: "It's as if he turned with a grin/ and a wave, then disappeared/ behind a door irrevocably/ marked 'No Entry'" (124). In the same poem, he asserts that "each attempt/ at meaning is an act/ of defiance of death" (124). In another poem, "I Am Well. Who are you?," the poet claims that "We don't find meanings. We make them,/ and they are deeper in meaning for that" (123). These statements give added point and poignancy to the elegiac strand in Haskell's writing, because they foreground the way many of his poems document the human struggle to find meaning and purpose in the face of the incomprehensible.

However, Haskell's acts of defiance are not only elegiac. In "Nights of Average Nerves" he conjures "An evening of soft, nonchalant cloud/ when a thin breeze, flexible as rumours,/ lifts off autumn branches" (129). This compelling vision of suburbia is characterised by "scratchy, orange-ribbed rooftops,/ wires twisted tight to the poles/ and the lights they enable/ awake in the living rooms" (129). Across these "milk carton suburbs/ intellectuals spread contempt/ as black as Vegemite, read reticence/ as simplicity, repetition as monotony,/ caution as selfishness" (129). Here, Haskell speaks out against those who he believes are belittling or patronising "average" human feeling and experience. As he does so, he identifies not as an intellectual (despite his academic credentials) but as one who shares "the ludicrous intimacy of pain,/ or joy hovering on the ridiculous" (129).

This identification with the ordinary or "average" and the quotidian – what Geoff Page refers to as "suburban felicities (including love and grief)… and tentative metaphysical speculations (or refusals of such)" (1) – are a consistent feature of Haskell's work, and become a basis for the making of meaning, discussed above. His poetry not only takes the suburbs of Marrickville or of Perth as grist for its linguistic mill but, more generally, it connects to Haskell's sense of his working-class origins and associated values. He stated in an interview in 2014:

> I grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney. For the most part in a suburb called Auburn which… was [then] very, you know, Anglo – newly settled, small house, working class suburb well out from the city. Now it's about the centre of Sydney, I think, but then it seemed to be a bit remote, it's near Parramatta. My dad was a carpenter, my mum was a florist… It was when I look back on it I realise it was a very happy environment in a way. My parents had no money but the people around us didn't have any money either so I didn't notice that but I never met middle class people 'til I went to high school. (Hetherington 3-4)

For all of its imagistic intensity, Haskell's poetry is often suburban and down-to-earth, and anchored in what he witnesses. If he is something of a latter-day flâneur, he brings a certain scepticism to his poetic excursions; yet, in many of his tendencies he is not so different from Baudelaire's conception of the artist as standing apart from, while also being immersed in, the urban (and suburban) hubbub – simultaneously involved and uninvolved. For example, in "Along Canton Street" we see and become immersed in the imagistic detail of "quick hands, where every action is profit or loss,/ crowd pavement boxes with lilies, thick velvet zinnias,/ daisies, hydrangeas' foxy hackles of colour" (137).

Such a poem relies on a kind of poetic impressionism, with the emphasis on observation and the passing moment (although, in this work, passing moments continue "24/7" as the world "turns into numbers duller/ than the dishwater sky"), and it also offers a gentle, even affectionate critique of postmodernity. As

the poem states that the blooming of flowers demonstrate that "the useless, and only the useless, can give/ a meaning, untouchable, outside style, fashion, cars," so Haskell affirms the value of a beauty and significance beyond the city's ephemeral life and its ebullient emphasis on trade and style. In another poem, "The Failures of Art," he more pointedly celebrates a "surfeit" of flowers, describing freesias as a form of beauty that is "spry and yet at its leisure," and commenting that "no treasured brushstroke, absurd/ awkward words or music/ could ever manage their seizure" (91).

In the moving "After Chemo," Haskell considers the effect of chemotherapy on his wife – "Your hair is falling like thin rain,/ like mizzle, like long, silent,/ lightening snow" (133) – and ponders how "our lives are fastened/ by more shadows/ than we cast" (133). The poem moves to the conclusion that, despite illness and suffering, "we are as we are/ together, alone, as you can see/ with elusive memories for company" (134). This is not only a persuasive love poem, but an attempt to defy the awfulness of serious illness and, in doing so, to assert persistent and lasting values connected to affection and care. If there is a "home" in Haskell's work, it is in the expression of feelings and in the attention to the particular details of his lived experience.

In other words, many of Haskell's poems encapsulate relatively gentle kinds of defiance, but in persistently noticing the quotidian world while asserting values connected to the importance of love, beauty and doubt, so his work constitutes an assertion of a broad ethical position that values observable truths and abiding compassion. And there is a tough, realistic sensibility behind the attentive glance of these poems. Haskell's work demonstrates that certainties are elusive and, where poetry is concerned, any sense of persuasive meaning is often hard won.

Crossing Borders

The clearest registration of Haskell's preoccupation with ideas of home and departure occurs in his poems about travel, visiting his past life, crossing continents and being resident in countries other than Australia. These poems include meditations on the in-between state occupied by passengers on international airline flights, in which he often emphasises an *otherworld* of suspension from conventional time and space. In commenting on such poems, Kate Rogers writes that "Haskell can be very good at evoking the psychological distance created by travelling long literal distances" (245), and she gives as an example the opening of Haskell's poem, "Understandings":

> The full measure of darkness
> dissipates like the value of English,
> the wheels tonguing their lingo
> of clicketty and clack
> as France so slowly becomes light.
> Now meaning must settle inside my head. (95)

Haskell's persistent preoccupation with the ways we make and unsettle meaning is explicit here, as is his interest in what joins rather than divides the world's human communities. At the end of this poem, we are presented with an image of a sky that is "sun-struck/ and every nation, because it is none" (95). In "Understandings" the poet registers keenly that he is not at home in France, yet he is enticed by the prospect of making new connections to a new place and in a language that, while it is a "mystery," is also "a *langue* easy to enjoy, the sense/ of falling so softly around you" (95). And close encounters with memory and the past also yield a sense of the provisionality of identity and home. In "Threads," for example, the aftermath of a trip that includes a visit to "gentle relatives" leads Haskell to reflect on how going "back to your past life/ is to meet yourself, and find/ it is no longer you" (20).

In other poems, such as "A Life in *Chaoxianshizhuyi*," he explores a sense of being simultaneously inside and outside his adopted community – in this case, Hong Kong – living "in a glass-plated sky" while traffic "went roaring by/ silently" (136). Chāoxiànshízhǔyì means "surrealism" and the poem's title suggests that its speaker is confronting a world so strangely different from the one he knows in Australia that aspects of it are not readily explicable – and certainly many of the poem's details emphasise unusual perspectives and juxtapositions.

As Haskell probes the particularities of what he sees and wonders why people's "days" are "spent in frantic ways" (136), he represents himself as both observer and observed, conscious of his outsider status yet trying to belong. The poem ends with an ambiguous image – "beside the anxious, oyster-edged pools/ umbrellas gaze up at me, like eyes" (136) – with the suggestion that watcher and watched are implicated in wary recognition of one another. A simultaneous sense of restlessness and incomplete belonging is powerfully registered in such imagery, along with an acute sense of the differences between the cultures of Hong Kong and Australia.

The poem, "Evening Flight" speaks of how "We left the hazy city/ in fretting light/ and lost each house,/ each line of fence,/ each shine of office" (80). These images of home are replaced by a "tiffin/ surrealism" and a profound sense of dislocation, where "distance moved faster/ than hours" and where "to touch each other/ might be to handle the flesh of clouds" (80). Before long the poem moves towards a contemplation of death and an unsettled questioning:

> … I wondered
> what could give meaning
> to the insistent
> inadequacies of flesh (80)

The poet leaves the answer to the reader, concluding the poem with an image of the aeroplane's wing as it "tilts/ a blank slab of dark/ end-tipped with fragile light" and the accompanying notion that, mid-air, in "commitment to comfort, and suspended,/ everybody's mind is lined with death" (81). In another poem, "Night Flight," air travel is understood to "fling us/ into the realms of absurd distances" and create "the dark assurance/ of absence – absence of shapes, of space,/ absence of relationships, absence of light" (21). These lines evoke and ponder the weird experience of suspension and dislocation that results from long-haul flying, along with associated feelings of the loss of place and identity. The poem concludes with images of fragmented perception and identity: "The shadow will hit the tarmac/ before the body, and meanwhile/ all the windows offer/ reflections of ourselves, white-jumpered,/ near transparent faces, in the twitching light" (21).

By emphasising the way time and movement are distorted on such flights, Haskell challenges the extent to which our usual and conventional assumptions about our lives – and the ways we make meaning from them – are true or reliable. He explores how the attenuation of thought and emotions results in experiences that are often unsettling and hard to reconcile. For instance, in "GA 873: The Meaning of Meaning," a Garuda flight reveals "a great, flat, flying saucer of cloud" and "stepped shades of blue/ at eye level, higher than the mind" (88). The cloud vanishes or envelops the aeroplane and Haskell reflects on feeling "strange, splashed with calm, and dry and ignorant" (88). Once again, this is poetry in which an experience of the ineffable overcomes any sense of available knowledge or "meaning." The poem may represent a kind of epiphany, but it is one which highlights the poet's understanding that his knowledge is not necessarily equal to the greater mysteries of the world. He is acutely aware that he does not belong among the clouds and is not at home there. However, despite his discomfort in the plane's interior – surrounded by what the poet refers to in "Night Flight" as "this symmetrical hulk of metal" (21) – he remains fascinated by his "leaps across continents,/ through time zones" and in "looking out to find/ immense knowledge, the perpetual ingenuity of humankind" ("Night Flight" 21).

Conclusion

The simultaneous sense of belonging and not-belonging, or of belonging only provisionally, represents a core feature of Haskell's poetry, and it is a basis for his many works that address or question aspects of human knowledge and belief. There is not always a great deal of easy consolation in such poems, but there is the abiding assertion of the need for complexity, tenderness and understanding, and the need, too, for scepticism about easy or too-convenient answers or claims to certainty.

These concerns lend a metaphysical aspect to his writing, and emphasise how much he, like Samuel Johnson, is inclined to believe what he can touch and

reach. Yet, if the quotidian and the observable make up a great deal of what is presented as valuable in his poetry, he is also constantly drawn to the mysteries at the heart of human existence, including what he names in one poem as a loved-one's "beauty/ deeper than flesh" ("Reality's Crow" 65). For Haskell, there is a quest to join the familiar and unfamiliar (including the foreign) in poetry that explores what it is to understand fact, feeling, the intuitive and the mysterious simultaneously, and to accept the puzzles and apparent contradictions that sometimes arrive unexpectedly.

Works Cited

Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.

Boswell, J. *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D*. London: John Sharpe, 1830.

Critchley, S. *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Haskell, D. *Acts of Defiance: New and Selected Poems*. London: Salt, 2010.

Haskell, D. "Roman Holiday." Review of *This Is What Gives Us Time* by Kevin Brophy. *TEXT* 20.2 (2016): 1. <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct16/haskell_rev.htm>. 2 September 2019.

Hetherington, P. "Interview with Dennis Haskell." Unpublished interview.

McEllhenney J.G. *A Masterwork of Doubting Belief: R.S. Thomas and his Poetry*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013.

Page, G. "Review Short: Dennis Haskell's *What Are You Doing Here?: Selected Poems*." *Cordite Poetry Review* (2 December 2015): 1. <http://cordite.org.au/reviews/page-haskell/>. 29 August 2019.

Rogers, K. Review of *What Are You Doing Here?: Selected Poems* by Dennis Haskell. *Asiatic* 10.1 (2016): 243-48. <https://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/AJELL/article/view/758/628>. 2 September 2019.