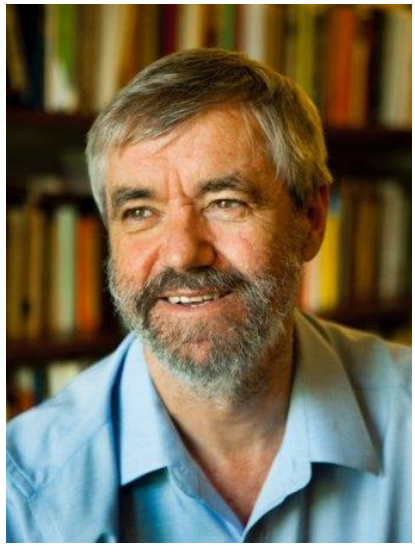
An Interview with Professor Dennis Haskell

Sami Rafiq[1]
Aligarh Muslim University, India



I met Professor Dennis Haskell some years ago at the 14th Biennial Symposium on Literature and Culture in the Asia-Pacific Region, in Perth. Even though his wife Rhonda was terminally ill at the time, he did not let the pressures and crisis interfere with his commitment as a host to participants like me who were from outside Australia. I remember how he offered to keep his mobile on at an unearthly hour at dawn because I was new to Australia and travelling alone.

Since then I have seen Dennis Haskell grow as a poet and emerge as a major poetic voice across the Asia-Pacific region. He is currently an Emeritus Professor/Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the School of English and Cultural Studies, University of Western Australia.

He was co-editor of the literary magazine *Westerly* from 1985 to 2009. Besides being a popular, much read poet, he is also an eminent critic of Australian and Asia-Pacific literatures. He has produced critical studies on several Australian writers and poets. In 2003, he was shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier's

[1] **Sami Rafiq** is a professor of English at the Aligarh Muslim University, India. She has translated and published the poetry of Asrarul Haque Majaz and Firaq Gorakhpuri from Urdu to English. Her areas of interest include Sufism, creative writing, translation studies and writings by women. She is also a poet, freelance writer, blogger and novelist. Her e-novel *The Small Town Woman* can be read online. Email: samirafiq10031@gmail.com.

Literary Award and in 2006 he won the Western Australian Premier's Book Award.

Haskell has eight collections of poetry to his credit and the most recent and probably the most read of them is *Ahead of Us* (Fremantle Press, 2016), which deals with the death of his wife Rhonda and her battle with cancer. Peter Kenneally has described the images of Australians from Will Dyson's drawings as "waiting, resting, sleeping… stumbling in his attempt to voice how Haskell brings a different awakened sensibility of being Australian in his book *Ahead of Us*."

However, Haskell's poetic oeuvre goes beyond the Australian consciousness towards a more extensive understanding of Asian cultures. He has had a longstanding interest in Asian literatures and cultures and would like Australia to be seen as part of them.

The present interview with Dennis Haskell brings out his experiences and perceptions as a poet. In the interview which was conducted online, in 2016, he speaks about himself, explaining his early inspirations in writing verse. He also speaks about his simple and unpretentious childhood and how it has shaped his poetry. Moreover, he talks about the literary movements in Australia and abroad which have influenced his work. Haskell strikes a rare chord when he chooses emotions over intellectual contents in poetry and supports his view by saying that the great strength of Eliot's poetry lies not in "the breakdown of civilisation statements but the rhythms."

When did you first start writing poetry?

I was later than most poets. I don't remember exactly but it was around 1968 or 1969, when I was 20 or 21.

Who inspired you?

No-one. I think that like many people of my generation I was influenced by popular music of the 1960s. This was the era of Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel etc. Through them I became very interested in folk music and I think that eventually led me to poetry. I read the *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (the Michael Roberts edition); the first individual book I read carefully was Ted Hughes' selection of Emily Dickinson's poetry.

Tell us something about your first volume of poetry.

I wrote for a long time before trying to put together a collection. By then I had published a number of poems in magazines. I sent the manuscript to Angus &

Robertson, then the leading poetry publisher in Australia. Les Murray was the editor; he encouraged me to work on it further. I did so for a year and then sent it in again. He rang me up and came out to our house – it was on a weekend – and went through the manuscript with me. I combined two poems into one at his suggestion but otherwise it didn't change much. The book was published in early 1984, just after I had moved from Sydney to Perth, but all the work was done while living in Sydney, so I think of it as my Sydney book. My great regret was that my father didn't live to see it; he died in 1983.

Perhaps the major concerns in your writing have something to do with your family background and childhood. Tell us something about those crucial influences.

I don't think that this is true. It's certainly not true in any obvious way. I come from a very working-class background – my father was a carpenter and my mother a florist. I grew up in a house without books and none of my family is interested in writing. Or any of the other arts. I was the scholarship boy growing up and I was the first person in my family to go to university. That experience was very important.

The way my childhood has affected me is in making me prefer plain speech and unpretentiousness. I don't like very ornate verse. Or very ornate anything.

Childhood memories and your understanding of women, figure recurrently in your poetry? Why are these so intense and clear in your poetry?

That's interesting; it's not something I'm conscious of. I suppose childhood is a strong force for almost all writers, and for almost all people. I'd like to believe that the understanding of women is there! I do think that I have more of a mix of the male and female than most men, perhaps than most people. It seems to me that women are the more admirable half of the species. I often feel a bit uncomfortable in groups of entirely men or entirely women.

Love and Death have various shades in your poems. Tell us about them.

Love and Death are the two great subjects of poetry, simply because they are the two great subjects of life. The most significant facts of our lives are that they begin – but we have no memory of that, it's a given that we live with – and that they end. In between, we seem hardwired to find love the most profound experience of all. Their emotional force has driven me to writing about them.

Have your works before Ahead of Us*, been inspired by actual life experiences?*

Yes, nearly always, but the actual experiences are often changed in the writing of the poems – for example, to make them more concise or more dramatic.

You said in an interview "Only emotions endure." Has this been the essence of your art?

Yes, I think that this is true. I think it's comparatively easy to write intellectual and complex poems; the fact of poetry audiences being placed to a large extent in universities encourages such poetry but I don't think it has lasting power. Of course, any poetry of substance requires intellectual and emotional elements but you will only have emotions present if there is some intellectual content. I sometimes asked my writing students would they prefer to have written "My love is like a red red rose" or "The Waste Land." I'd prefer the Burns poem; the great strength of Eliot's is not the breakdown of civilisation statements but the rhythms.

Have you been inspired by any particular literary movement?

I've always been drawn to imagistic poetry (which doesn't necessarily mean using visual imagery, but my other great artistic love is painting). My honours dissertation was on American Deep Image Poetry, especially that of W.S. Merwin and Robert Bly. I was enthralled by the expressive power of their irrational images. Now I'm much less interested in it. I was changed to a large extent by reading the poetry of Philip Larkin, which led me away from American poetry to British. Larkin is seen as part of the Movement, which, influenced by the austerity of the Second World War years and their dramatic demands, eschewed poeticness. It sought plain speech. I think this cohered with the influences from my working class background. Larkin remains extremely important to my writing. Writing as plain as this needs to stand up without any tricks. It has to be substantial.

Tell us something about your poetry written in the years when you were faculty at UWA.

Most of my poetry has been written during those years, given that I worked there from 1984-2011. However, much was written when on leave, as a visiting professor elsewhere, or during university vacations. The job was too demanding on my time for me to write when teaching or doing management jobs.

Did you feel a need to record the political realities of that time in your poems then?

Mostly not; I've only occasionally written consciously political poems. It's not that I'm not interested in politics but it's difficult to make it work in poetry.

There are a lot of personal images in your poems and emotions are woven around them. Is their occurrence planned or purely incidental?

True. It's certainly not planned. I don't force myself to write; there are plenty of poems in the world already and too many that seem to be written only because the poet wanted to write a poem. A poem should have emotional pressure behind it, the words like a dam wall. It's these personal experiences that seem to produce the need for the poems to be written.

Travelling appears to be the life blood of your poetic idiom? Could you talk about the influence that travelling has had on your work

"Life blood" is an overstatement I think. The best change in universities during my academic career has been internationalisation. It enabled my wife and me to enjoy many places, people and cultures. I found these new experiences inspiring. In a new place, normally mundane activities can become interesting.

In your collection, Ahead of Us, *is there a travel motif present? Do you feel it has prepared you and matured your art much further?*

Yes, I think that travel has had this effect by increasing the range of my experience, including the experience of different languages. It has seemed natural to write about it.

Do you pay close attention to images and metaphors in your poetry or are they purely unconscious?

A bit of both I think. They tend to start unconscious but sometimes need work. You can't come to them through entirely rational, conscious means.

Cancer has been described as "That Other Country" by you. Why is it a country and is this phrase a borrowed one?

It is a world of its own, with its own demands and ways of being. I didn't borrow the phrase but reviewers have pointed to Susan Sontag's writing on illness and her mention of passports; this was news to me, I've never read her work.

Though you say that your wife was an atheist – your volume Ahead of Us *tells us about some sort of religious belief in God and eternity? Is this true?*

Yes, that's true but they are my thoughts rather than my wife's. I am devoutly agnostic. Some of these poems are reprinted from my first book. I used to write

a lot of poems about God – really about the concept of God. I think if there is a God, which I doubt, he or she or it is unknowable. Philosophically, I don't understand atheism: how can you be sure that something does not exist?

Did you have a problem finding publishers for your work?

No, not really, which is surprising for a poet in Australia. I've even had a few books published as a result of approaches by publishers; each of my three Selected Poems came about that way. None of them has been published in Australia; two have been in England and one in The Philippines.

You happen to be both a critic and a poet. Which comes closest to your heart?

Undoubtedly poetry; for a time I was probably better known as a critic but even then poetry was more important for me. In my first book is a poem that says "But who recalls a critic's face?/What but verse lives on?"

Works Cited

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