In Memoriam: Robin Skelton (1925-1997)

In the past few years a number of poets who were also selfless facilitators of poetry have died. George Macbeth and Eric Mottram in particular spring to mind. However, it is appropriate for this particular issue of *Critical Survey* to memorialise the author of *Poetry*, in the ‘Teach Yourself Books’ series (1963), and editor of the Penguin anthologies of 1930s and 1940s poetry. There was a time when every other issue of *Critical Quarterly* seemed to include poems by Robin Skelton. Robin, like Tony Harrison more recently, liked to define himself simply as ‘Poet’ (though he was a superb critic too). But he also had a missionary vision of a poetic Everyperson. In *Poetry* he wrote:

> [The poet’s] imagination is no stronger than that of many people, although it is better trained. His [sic] experience of ‘inspiration’ differs very little from similar experiences which are felt from day to day by other people. He has, of course, learned a craft … but it is no more difficult to learn the craft of poetry than it is to learn the craft of carpentry. It may take a little longer, but it is no more difficult.

At the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Robin’s Creative Writing courses put that belief into action.

Robin’s move to Canada seems to have eventually severed his links to his British publishers. This is, no doubt, a story typical rather than unique, and one which reflects the increasing diffusion of poetry in English into separate nationality blocs – just one move in the era of literature-as-identity politics. Robin’s response was to set up a press of his own, as well as maintaining a personal influence on the *Malahat Review* – at one time conspicuous for publishing work by such international writers as Samuel Beckett, Robert Graves, Jorge Luis Borges, Evgeny Evtushenko, Joseph Brodsky or Pablo Neruda. At the same time, Sono Nis Press (based in Victoria) established a predominantly Canadian identity – with north-west coast writers to the fore (the quite distinctive Susan Musgrave among them). I trust it still delivers the goods.

In the heyday of the late 1960s and early 1970s Robin used to hold Thursday evening artie-parties at his home. One could chew the fat with visiting poets (especially Irish ones), local painters and native-
Canadian carvers. In a facetious campus novel (1978 – under a cunningly disguised name), I tried to evoke the Robin of those years:

… a bearded, gargantuan, middle-aged poet of considerable brilliance and seemingly boundless energy. He completed at least two volumes of verse a year plus an average of one and a half critical books and five articles on the whole range of literature. He also edited a review, ran the [University] Creative Writing Programme, gave poetry readings all over, brought up five children, gave shelter to disturbed artists, sat on innumerable university committees, organized a Schools’ Creative Writing Scheme, read voluminously, maintained a sense of humor, and provided gallons of Rockie Red Dry for anyone with anything to say every Friday night.

I hope something of the flavour of the man is in the fictive caricature. It was written with love – as others remember him with love.

In his poem ‘Afterwards’ (1997), Robin is ‘looking in’ from the other side of death:

… my thoughts assembling slowly
into an ordered procession of all that I have told
myself and others over the long dazed years
standing in front of the chalkboard watching faces …

My life was words,
written, spoken, chanted …

This is not the place or the time to assess the contribution of Robin Skelton, the poet. I wish simply to honour the man of words, the inspirer of others’ words, the apostle of the poetic. ‘Afterwards’ ends: ‘Do they know I am here?’ The ones he helped – they know the continuing power of his creative generosity: me among many others.

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