

On the Passing of Hayden Carruth

Hayden Carruth's death takes away an enormous presence from American poetry, not so much in terms of his public appearances—Hayden was never an “on the circuit” figure—but in terms of sheer commitment to poetry. When one looks over all those poems and essays, one gets dizzy. Hayden cared so deeply about poetry, again not as an aspect of his own ego but as a dimension of human existence, one that mattered deeply.

There have been only a handful of American poets who have possessed such breadth and depth. He wrote lyrics such as “The Cows at Night” that conjure up the word “imperishable” in their grace and calm. *The Sleeping Beauty* is as acute and moving long poem as anyone ever has written in the United States. It is a masterpiece awaiting the wide readership it deserves for it probes the human experience in ways that are at once playful and serious, determined and off-kilter, historical and anecdotal, mythic and down home. It is the performance of a poet who is profoundly engaged with his medium. Each one of those poems, as it goes through its paces in fifteen lines, is an essay in the writing of poetry. One could learn to write poetry from that book alone.

Hayden was one of the most sensitive people I ever met. He was gruff, too, to say nothing of perverse and irascible. All these features went together. Of his suffering there was no doubt nor was there any doubt about his zest for being alive. He was in his Scotch, hardscrabble way a visionary. The poems about jazz attest to that vision as much as anything that has been written in the United States. It is a vision of people who love life and art and aren't shackled by fears about money and status, people who are free to experience the joy and pain of creativity. It is a vision that honors tradition for making innovation possible. It is a vision of true comity, of people from different backgrounds coming together for mutual benefit. It is a vision founded in generosity and tempered by ecstasy.

Hayden said and wrote that poetry was about justice. That view is a strange one in this day and age where personality is so paramount in a celebrity drenched, mass society. The justice of poetry is the justice of opportunity: each person can feel the depths of feeling that reside in poetry and let that feeling into his or her life. The justice of poetry is that it doesn't back down. It seeks truth but never definitively finds it. It abhors any definitive finding. It is beautifully provisional. Hayden knew that and lived that. It was never easy but there was no reason it should be easy. He felt the fullness that was there. He partook of it and he gave it back to all of us.
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