



Robert Hayden

Collected Poems

Edited by Frederick Glaysher



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Perseus

Her sleeping head with its great gelid mass
of serpents torpidly astir
burned into the mirroring shield—
a scathing image dire
as hated truth the mind accepts at last
and festers on.
I struck. The shield flashed bare.

Yet even as I lifted up the head
and started from that place
of gazing silences and terrored stone,
I thirsted to destroy.
None could have passed me then—
no garland-bearing girl, no priest
or staring boy—and lived.

Theme and Variation (for Erma)

I
Fossil, fuchsia, mantis, man,
fire and water, earth and air—
all things alter even as I behold,
all things alter, the stranger said.

Alter, become a something more,
a something less. Are the reveling shadows
of a changing permanence. Are, are not
and same and other, the stranger said.

II
I sense, he said, the lurking rush, the sly
transience flickering at the edge of things.
I've spied from the corner of my eye
upon the striptease of reality.

There is, there is, he said, an imminence
that turns to curiosa all I know;
that changes light to rainbow darkness
wherein God waylays us and empowers.

Middle Passage

I

Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,
sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;
horror the corposant and compass rose.

Middle Passage:

voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

“10 April 1800—

Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
their moaning is a prayer for death,
ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.
Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under.”

Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann:

Standing to America, bringing home
black gold, black ivory, black seed.

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
of his bones New England pews are made,
those are altar lights that were his eyes.*

Jesus Saviour Pilot Me
Over Life's Tempestuous Sea

We pray that Thou wilt grant, O Lord,
safe passage to our vessels bringing
heathen souls unto Thy chastening.

Jesus Saviour

“8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick
with fear, but writing eases fear a little
since still my eyes can see these words take shape
upon the page & so I write, as one
would turn to exorcism. 4 days scudding,
but now the sea is calm again. Misfortune
follows in our wake like sharks (our grinning
tutelary gods). Which one of us
has killed an albatross? A plague among
our blacks—Ophthalmia: blindness—& we
have jettisoned the blind to no avail.
It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.
Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes
& there is blindness in the fo'c'sle
& we must sail 3 weeks before we come
to port.”

*What port awaits us, Davy Jones'
or home? I've heard of slavers drifting, drifting,
playthings of wind and storm and chance, their crews
gone blind, the jungle hatred
crawling up on deck.*

Thou Who Walked On Galilee

“Deponent further sayeth *The Bella J*
left the Guinea Coast
with cargo of five hundred blacks and odd
for the barracoons of Florida:

“That there was hardly room 'tween-decks for half
the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there;
that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh
and sucked the blood:

"That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest
of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins;
that there was one they called The Guinea Rose
and they cast lots and fought to lie with her:

"That when the Bo's'n piped all hands, the flames
spreading from starboard already were beyond
control, the negroes howling and their chains
entangled with the flames:

"That the burning blacks could not be reached,
that the Crew abandoned ship,
leaving their shrieking negresses behind,
that the Captain perished drunken with the wenches:

"Further Deponent sayeth not."

Pilot Oh Pilot Me

II

Aye, lad, and I have seen those factories,
Gambia, Rio Pongo, Calabar;
have watched the artful mongos baiting traps
of war wherein the victor and the vanquished

Were caught as prizes for our barracoons.
Have seen the nigger kings whose vanity
and greed turned wild black hides of Fellatah,
Mandingo, Ibo, Kru to gold for us.

And there was one—King Anthracite we named him—
fetish face beneath French parasols
of brass and orange velvet, impudent mouth
whose cups were carven skulls of enemies:

He'd honor us with drum and feast and conjo
and palm-oil-glistening wenches deft in love,
and for tin crowns that shone with paste,
red calico and German-silver trinkets

Would have the drums talk war and send
his warriors to burn the sleeping villages
and kill the sick and old and lead the young
in coffies to our factories.

Twenty years a trader, twenty years,
for there was wealth aplenty to be harvested
from those black fields, and I'd be trading still
but for the fevers melting down my bones.

III

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,
the dark ships move, the dark ships move,
their bright ironical names
like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;
plough through thrashing glister toward
fata morgana's lucent melting shore,
weave toward New World littorals that are
mirage and myth and actual shore.

Voyage through death,
voyage whose chartings are unlove.

A charnel stench, effluvium of living death
spreads outward from the hold,
where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,
lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement.

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
the corpse of mercy rots with him,
rats eat love's rotten gelid eyes.*

*But, oh, the living look at you
with human eyes whose suffering accuses you,
whose hatred reaches through the swill of dark
to strike you like a leper's claw.*

*You cannot stare that hatred down
or chain the fear that stalks the watches
and breathes on you its fetid scorching breath;
cannot kill the deep immortal human wish,
the timeless will.*

“But for the storm that flung up barriers
of wind and wave, *The Amistad*, señores,
would have reached the port of Príncipe in two,
three days at most; but for the storm we should
have been prepared for what befell.
Swift as the puma's leap it came. There was
that interval of moonless calm filled only
with the water's and the rigging's usual sounds,
then sudden movement, blows and snarling cries
and they had fallen on us with machete
and marlinspike. It was as though the very
air, the night itself were striking us.
Exhausted by the rigors of the storm,
we were no match for them. Our men went down
before the murderous Africans. Our loyal
Celestino ran from below with gun
and lantern and I saw, before the cane-
knife's wounding flash, Cinquez,
that surly brute who calls himself a prince,
directing, urging on the ghastly work.
He hacked the poor mulatto down, and then
he turned on me. The decks were slippery

when daylight finally came. It sickens me
to think of what I saw, of how these apes
threw overboard the butchered bodies of
our men, true Christians all, like so much jetsam.
Enough, enough. The rest is quickly told:
Cinquez was forced to spare the two of us
you see to steer the ship to Africa,
and we like phantoms doomed to rove the sea
voyaged east by day and west by night,
deceiving them, hoping for rescue,
prisoners on our own vessel, till
at length we drifted to the shores of this
your land, America, where we were freed
from our unspeakable misery. Now we
demand, good sirs, the extradition of
Cinquez and his accomplices to La
Havana. And it distresses us to know
there are so many here who seem inclined
to justify the mutiny of these blacks.
We find it paradoxical indeed
that you whose wealth, whose tree of liberty
are rooted in the labor of your slaves
should suffer the august John Quincy Adams
to speak with so much passion of the right
of chattel slaves to kill their lawful masters
and with his Roman rhetoric weave a hero's
garland for Cinquez. I tell you that
we are determined to return to Cuba
with our slaves and there see justice done. Cinquez—
or let us say 'the Prince'—Cinquez shall die.”

The deep immortal human wish,
the timeless will:

Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,
life that transfigures many lives.

Voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

O Daedalus, Fly Away Home
(For Maia and Julie)

Drifting night in the Georgia pines,
coonskin drum and jubilee banjo.
Pretty Malinda, dance with me.

Night is juba, nigh is conjo.
Pretty Malinda, dance with me.

Night is an African juju man
weaving a wish and a weariness together
to make two wings.

O fly away home fly away

Do you remember Africa?

O cleave the air fly away home

My gran, he flew back to Africa,
just spread his arms and
flew away home.

Drifting night in the windy pines;
night is a laughing, night is a longing.
Pretty Malinda, come to me.

Night is a mourning juju man
weaving a wish and a weariness together
to make two wings.

O fly away home fly away

Frederick Douglass

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

Words in the Mourning Time (1970)



*For Marie Alice Hanson
and Louis Martin
with gratitude*

Sphinx

If he could solve the riddle,
she would not leap
from those gaunt rocks to her death,
but devour him instead.

It pleasures her to hold
him captive there—
to keep him in the reach of her
blood-matted paws.

It is your fate, she has often
said, to endure
my riddling. Your fate to live
at the mercy of my

conundrum, which, in truth,
is only a kind
of psychic joke. No, you shall
not leave this place.

(Consider anyway the view from
here.) In time,
you will come to regard my questioning
with a certain pained

amusement; in time, get so
you would hardly find
it possible to live without
my joke and me.

Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves

I

Enacting someone's notion of themselves
(and me), The One And Only Aunt Jemima
and Kokimo The Dixie Dancing Fool
do a bally for the freak show.

I watch a moment, then move on,
pondering the logic that makes of them
(and me) confederates
of The Spider Girl, The Snake-skinned Man. . . .

Poor devils have to live somehow.

I cross the boardwalk to the beach,
lie in the sand and gaze beyond
the clutter at the sea.

II

Trouble you for a light?
I turn as Aunt Jemima settles down
beside me, her blue-rinsed hair
without the red bandanna now.

I hold the lighter to her cigarette.
Much obliged. Unmindful (perhaps)
of my embarrassment, she looks
at me and smiles: You sure

do favor a friend I used to have.
Guess that's why I bothered you
for a light. So much like him that I—
She pauses, watching white horses rush

to the shore. Way them big old waves
come slamming whopping in,
sometimes it's like they mean to smash
this no-good world to hell.

Well, it could happen. A book I read—
Crossed that very ocean years ago.
London, Paris, Rome,
Constantinople too—I've seen them all.

Back when they billed me everywhere
as the Sepia High Stepper.
Crowned heads applauded me.
Years before your time. Years and years.

I wore me plenty diamonds then,
and counts or dukes or whatever they were
would fill my dressing room
with the costliest flowers. But of course

there was this one you resemble so.
Get me? The sweetest gentleman.
Dead before his time. Killed in the war
to save the world for another war.

High-stepping days for me
were over after that. Still I'm not one
to let grief idle me for long.
I went out with a mental act—

mind-reading—Mysteria From
The Mystic East—veils and beads
and telling suckers how to get
stolen rings and sweethearts back.

One night he was standing by my bed,
seen him plain as I see you,
and warned me without a single word:
Baby, quit playing with spiritual stuff.

So here I am, so here I am,
fake mammy to God's mistakes.
And that's the beauty part,
I mean, ain't that the beauty part.

She laughs, but I do not, knowing what
her laughter shields. And mocks.
I light another cigarette for her.
She smokes, not saying any more.

Scream of children in the surf,
adagios of sun and flashing foam,
the sexual glitter, oppressive fun. . . .
An antique etching comes to mind:

"The Sable Venus" naked on
a baroque Cellini shell—voluptuous
imago floating in the wake
of slave-ships on fantastic seas.

Jemima sighs, Reckon I'd best
be getting back. I help her up.
Don't you take no wooden nickels, hear?
Tin dimes neither. So long, pal.

III

Black turkeys children
dogs foraged and played
under drying fishnets.

Vendors urged laquerwork
and glazed angels
with candles between their wings.

Alien, at home—as always
everywhere—I roamed
the cobbled island,

and thought of Yeats,
his passionate search for
a theme. Sought mine.

Zeus over Redeye
(The Redstone Arsenal)

Enclave where new mythologies
of power come to birth—
where corralled energy and power breed
like prized man-eating animals.
Like dragon, hydra, basilisk.

Radar corollas and Holland tulips
the colors of Easter eggs
form vistas for the ironist.
Where elm, ailanthus, redbud grew
parabola and gantry rise.

In soaring stasis rocket missiles loom,
the cherished weapons named for Nike
(O headless armless Victory),
for Zeus, Apollo, Hercules—
eponyms of redeyed fury
greater, lesser than their own.

Ignorant outlander, mere civilian,
not sure always of what it is
I see, I walk with you among
these totems of our fire-breathing age,
question and question you,

who are at home in terra guarded like
a sacred phallic grove.
Your partial answers reassure
me less than they appall.
I feel as though invisible fuses were

burning all around us burning all
around us. Heat-quiverings twitch
danger's hypersensitive skin.
The very sunlight here seems flammable.
And shadows give
us no relieving shade.

Unidentified Flying Object

It's true Mattie Lee
has clean disappeared.
And shouldn't we notify
the sheriff? No use, Will
insists, no earthly use.

He was sleeping one off
under the trees that night,
he claims, and woke up when
the space-ship
landed—a silvery dome

with gassy-green and red-
hot-looking lights like eyes
that stared blinked stared.
Says he hid himself
in the bushes and watched,

shaking. Pretty soon
a hatch slides open, a ramp
glides forward like
a glowing tongue poked out.
And who or what is it

silently present there?
Same as if Will's
trying to peer through webs
and bars of gauzy glare
screening, distorting a shape

For John and Margaret Thompson

Richard Hunt's "Arachne"

Human face becoming locked insect face
mouth of agony shaping a cry it cannot utter
eyes bulging brimming with the horrors
of her becoming

Dazed crazed
by godly vivisection husking her
gutting her
cutting hubris its fat and bones away

In goggling terror fleeing powerless to flee
Arachne not yet arachnid and no longer woman
in the moment's centrifuge of dying
becoming

*For Robert Burns Stepto,
for Stephen and Danny Dunning*

in love and service evermore

*For Michael S. Harper,
for William Meredith—
sustainers*

A Letter from Phillis Wheatley
London, 1773

Dear Obour

Our crossing was without event. I could not help, at times, reflecting on that first—my Destined—voyage long ago (I yet have some remembrance of its Horrors) and marvelling at God's Ways.

Last evening, her Ladyship presented me to her illustrious Friends.

I scarce could tell them anything of Africa, though much of Boston and my hope of Heaven. I read my latest Elegies to them.

"O Sable Muse!" the Countess cried, embracing me, when I had done. I held back tears, as is my wont, and there were tears in Dear Nathaniel's eyes.

At supper—I dined apart like captive Royalty—the Countess and her Guests promised signatures affirming me True Poetess, albeit once a slave. Indeed, they were most kind, and spoke, moreover, of presenting me at Court (I thought of Pocahontas)—an Honor, to be sure, but one, I should, no doubt, as Patriot decline.

My health is much improved; I feel I may, if God so Wills, entirely recover here. Idyllic England! Alas, there is no Eden without its Serpent. Under

the chiming Complaisance I hear him Hiss;
I see his flickering tongue
when foppish would-be Wits
murmur of the Yankee Pedlar
and his Cannibal Mockingbird.

Sister, forgive th'intrusion of
my Sombreness—Nocturnal Mood
I would not share with any save
your trusted Self. Let me disperse,
in closing, such unseemly Gloom
by mention of an Incident
you may, as I, consider Droll:
Today, a little Chimney Sweep,
his face and hands with soot quite Black,
staring hard at me, politely asked:
“Does you, M'lady, sweep chimneys too?”
I was amused, but dear Nathaniel
(ever Solicitous) was not.

I pray the Blessings of our Lord
and Saviour Jesus Christ be yours
Abundantly. In His Name,

Phillis

John Brown

I
Love feared hated:
aureoled
in violence.

Foredoomed to fail
in all but the prophetic
task?

Axe in Jehovah's
loving wrathful hand?

The face is not cruel,
the eyes are not mad but
unsparing;

the life
has the symmetry
of a cross:

John Brown
Ossawatomie De Old Man.

Afterword

It seems fair to say that with every passing year since his death in 1980 at the age of sixty-seven, our memory of the poet Robert Hayden threatens to slip deeper and deeper into obscurity. So it would be with all writers, unless each of us who love and value their work summons new readers to their texts. In Hayden's case, neglect would be truly unfortunate not simply because his verse is among the most accomplished to have been written in America in the last century but also because, emerging out of a complex set of potentially destructive forces, his body of verse has much to offer us as we ourselves engage and are engaged by many of those forces. As an individual, Hayden was a man subjected virtually from the start of his life to harsh personal pressures that might easily have silenced someone less courageous. His work is further testimony to the power of the artist to find and illuminate the profoundly human in the midst of chaos, and to produce art as a bulwark against the will to inhumanity that is such an essential part of the human condition.

Robert Earl Hayden was born in Detroit, Michigan, on August 4, 1913, the son of Asa and Ruth Sheffey. His parents named him Asa Bundy Sheffey. Before he was two, however, their marriage collapsed and his mother, traveling in search of work, gave him up to a poor but respectable couple in the neighborhood, William and Sue Ellen Hayden. Although the child remained aware of the identity of his natural parents, saw them from time to time, and eventually became close once again with his mother, he grew up as a foster child of the Haydens, who renamed him and reared him as their son. He would discover only when he was forty, by accident, that they had never adopted him legally or even officially changed his name, although they had led him to believe that they had done both. His adoptive father, a laborer who sometimes had trouble finding work, was a disciplinarian and a dedicated Baptist. His adoptive mother, according to the Hayden scholar Pontheolla Taylor Williams, "regaled Robert with

Afro-American folktales, stories of southern racial atrocities, and her own post-Civil War experiences, when she was a chambermaid on Ohio River steamers."

Robert Hayden was from the start a marked child. The Haydens created him well, according to their lights, but their marriage was chronically strained by bickering and other forms of conflict about which the poet eventually wrote, most movingly perhaps in his compelling piece "Those Winter Sundays." Poor eyesight painfully and endlessly complicated his youth and, indeed, his entire life. He could not take part in sports, and his thick lenses made him an easy target for the cruelty of other children. Poverty prevented his parents from making more than a token attempt to develop his artistic interests, such as music, outside of school.

His experience of racial difference was bittersweet. Hayden passed his earliest years in a section of Detroit (later nicknamed Paradise Valley) that remained racially diverse until an influx of Southern blacks in search of jobs, followed by reactive white flight, turned it virtually all-black. His early familiarity with Jews, Germans, Italians, and other whites, reflected in several of his poems, perhaps laid the foundation for the transracial philosophy that is a hallmark of Hayden's art. Attending a mainly white high school, he felt both a degree of ostracism and, at the same time, a degree of acceptance and understanding support.

Hayden's myopia and the cruelty it often inspired drove him inward and toward books, where he soon discovered the particular solace of poetry. Midway through his teenage years he already knew the most popular of the modern writers, including whites such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Carl Sandburg and blacks such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. He was especially taken with the example of Countee Cullen, whose emotional and lyrical blending of race consciousness with traditional poetics left an immediate mark on Hayden's youthful writing.

Although he was also drawn to the theater, Hayden's commitment to writing verse was probably set by the time he left high school in 1930. His dedication only intensified when he attended, from 1932 to 1936, Detroit City College (later Wayne State Uni-

versity), where he met other writers who encouraged his ambitions. Langston Hughes, visiting the area for the production of one of his plays, further inspired Hayden. As with so many other American writers during the Depression, which he and his family felt to the point of pauperism, Hayden became attracted to radical socialism as a political philosophy. After college, he worked on the Federal Writers' Project, which encouraged his socialist leanings and, more importantly for his future as a poet, deepened his knowledge of African-American history, especially through his official research into antislavery activity in Michigan and into slave culture in general.

Strains of a socialist esthetic, as well as of a far more traditional approach to art, coexist uneasily in Hayden's first volume of verse, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, which he published in 1940. The prevailing impression left by this volume is Hayden's imitativeness at this point in his career. Eventually he would regard almost all of these poems as immature and deny them a place in definitive collections of his work.

Also in 1940, Hayden married Erma Inez Morris, a gifted pianist and music teacher. Two years later, their only child, a daughter they named Maia, was born. Their marriage lasted until Hayden's death in 1980.

Probably neither Hughes nor Cullen was ultimately as large an influence on Hayden's mature art as was W. H. Auden. Hayden met Auden between 1941 and 1942, when Auden taught at the University of Michigan (Hayden was a student there from 1941 to 1946). Already an internationally famous poet, Auden steered Hayden in certain new directions. Auden had already repudiated his own earlier commitment to radical socialism, and Hayden now began to do the same. Increasingly he distanced himself from African-American cultural nationalism, with which he had been struggling as a force for some time, as Countee Cullen had struggled before him. Seeing Marxism and ultranationalism as, in different ways, inimical to the flourishing of art, Auden proposed a modernist poetry of technical and meditative complexity, in which judicious erudition and imagination, rather than pseudo-folk simplicity or didacticism,

were vital elements. He encouraged in Hayden an appreciation of the work of British poets such as Hopkins, Hardy, and Yeats, as well as that of genuine contemporaries such as Spender. W. B. Yeats's highly sophisticated response to Irish history and culture, with all its controversies and passions, showed Hayden that a poet could become saturated in nationalistic lore and love and still maintain independence of vision. He once declared that he sought to be a black poet "the way Yeats is an Irish poet."

As Hayden engaged these new influences, he absorbed yet another decisive force of change. He turned aside finally from the Baptist faith of his adoptive father, in which he had been stringently brought up, and committed himself for the rest of his life to his wife's religion; he became a member of the Baha'i faith. In the Baha'i faith, with its belief in the unity of all religions, as well as in universal education, the equality of the sexes, simplicity of living, the possibilities of an international government and language, and a life of service to one's suffering fellow human beings, Hayden found an intellectual and spiritual source to which he could turn as he wrestled with the powers of despair and doubt, negativism and nihilism, to which he was habitually vulnerable. The Baha'i faith fostered in him a spiritually evolved and yet socially engaged sense of humanity and the poetic function. While some of his critics found the Baha'i faith a peculiar choice for a writer insisting on freedom from system and dogma, Hayden alluded lovingly to his religion in several poems, including "From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes." In "Words in the Mourning Time," he hails its prophet Bahá'u'lláh as "Logos, poet, cosmic hero, surgeon, architect / of our hope for peace."

Hayden's emergence as a mature human being and poet did not lead to public recognition. In fact, for the next twenty years or more he struggled to assert himself professionally. In 1946 he moved to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he would teach English literature and, less frequently, creative writing until 1969. A heavy workload impeded his growth as a writer, although fellowships occasionally gave him respites and in 1954 allowed him to travel in Mexico (he had studied Spanish in college). Although he published little, his poems attracted a growing coterie of admirers.

Hayden also influenced a number of gifted young African-American writers at Fisk, including Myron O'Higgins and William Demby. With them he championed the need for an art free of crude propaganda and yet engaged with the realities of black American life; he also insisted on the importance of experimentation and innovation in art. Toward the end of his stay at Fisk, these views brought him into painful conflict with adherents of the new Black Power movement. Many of them openly rejected both Hayden's ideas and his art as outmoded, at best, and a form of racial treachery, at worst. In their view, the black poet must actively aid the revolution that was at hand. Refusing to compromise on his principles, rejecting "the chauvinistic and the doctrinaire," but unquestionably hurt by the controversy, Hayden went his own way.

About the same time, however, his career in other respects took a turn for the better. In 1966 he won the Grand Prize in Poetry at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. Also in 1966, Hayden published his *Selected Poems*, which brought him increased visibility as a writer. He began a series of visiting appointments at universities that culminated in his appointment in 1969 as a professor at the University of Michigan. Home at last, in a sense, Hayden taught there until his death in 1980. Between 1976 and 1978 he served two terms as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, a position then regarded as tantamount to being appointed poet laureate of the United States.

In 1979, he was diagnosed as suffering from cancer, for which he declined to undergo chemotherapy. The following year, Hayden died.



About ninety poems make up this volume, *The Collected Poems of Robert Hayden*. Hayden published many more than that number during the course of his life. However, in editing this collection, Frederick Glaysher clearly followed the wishes of the poet in taking a strict, even severe approach to his "prentice pieces," as

Hayden, in long retrospect, called the verse of *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, which is not represented here. *Collected Poems* also ignores Hayden's share of *The Lion and the Archer: Poems* (1948), published in collaboration with Myron O'Higgins, as well as Hayden's *Figure of Time* (1955). Well represented, however, are *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962), a pamphlet of verse published by Paul Breman in London to inaugurate Breman's important Heritage series; *Selected Poems* (1966); *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970), which was nominated for a National Book Award, as widespread notice finally began to be taken of Hayden; *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (1972); *Angle of Ascent: New and Selected Poems* (1975), from Liveright, which marked Hayden's first appearance, after more than thirty-five years of writing poetry, with a major book publisher; and *American Journal* (1978), put out by Effendi Press largely on the initiative of Hayden's admirer, the poet Michael S. Harper. The poems of Hayden's last years were collected in a posthumously published (1982) volume, also called *American Journal*, from Liveright.

Hayden's *Collected Poems* offers the reader a relatively slender volume, especially given the fact that it represents the product of a career of some forty years. However, this is precisely as the poet wanted it to be. Hayden was a relentless polisher and honer, what used to be called (often with a mixture of admiration and rebuke) a "laborious" poet. In other words, he believed in the working and reworking of texts, rather than in the original, irresistible power of inspiration and improvisation in writing verse. If his work sometimes suggests a clear will toward monumentality, it also reveals at the same time an appreciation for limits. Most of Hayden's poems do not exhaust a page, and even his several multipart pieces are relatively brief in totality. The amount of poetry he left behind reflects in some degree the personal and professional difficulties he faced as he strove to make a living for himself and his family. However, the polished conciseness of his *Collected Poems* also speaks to the high standards of craftsmanship by which he deliberately lived as a poet. Thus distilled, the quality of his verse in this volume should be more than sufficient to ensure the continuing of his reputation as one of the main pillars of African-American

poetry and also one of the more compelling talents among all American writers of his time, regardless of race.

To consider Hayden first as an African-American poet, then as an American poet, may appear to reopen needlessly one of the more troubling questions concerning him, as well as to risk violating his abiding wish that he should be seen not as a black poet but simply as a poet. Yet Hayden has little to fear from the reopening, which may be essential, given the realities of American culture. Like Cullen, Hayden was highly sensitive on the question of the relationship between race and poetry; both were appalled by any attempt to foreclose the range of a poet who happened to be born black. However, while Cullen found an achingly poignant contradiction between blackness in America and the poetic vocation (God had done, he writes in one place, "a curious thing, / To make a poet black and bid him sing!"), Hayden early came to a resolution of this tension.

Probably no other black poet of his age surpassed Hayden in the unconditional nature of his love of the English language. For many writers sensitive to the relationship between language and political power, the English language, and the canonical status of much English literature, can be a constant disturbance. Paul Laurence Dunbar, for instance, never reconciled his work in black dialect, which he both loved and despised, with his productions in standard English. ("A jingle in a broken tongue," he called the former in one poem.) Langston Hughes sought deeper meanings in "black" forms of speech and music, although he also wrote in standard English. In the case of Gwendolyn Brooks, the high-modernist eloquence (yoked uncomfortably, she came to believe, to her often racial subject matter) that won her the Pulitzer Prize and other honors gave way to the didactic, street-inflected verse that followed her acceptance of the Black Power movement in the 1960s.

While its specific biblical allusions are few, Hayden's poetry proclaims virtually everywhere his faith in the orthodox or "classical" language of the authors of the King James Bible and of the major English poets of the early seventeenth century. Sometimes his syntax is contorted, and arcane words stud his texts from time to time;

sometimes a blues or jazz riff enlivens the rhythms of his poetic discourse. On the whole, however, he was at peace writing in standard English. Over the course of his career he favored various styles. At times, his diction is complex and highly ornate; in another mode it is restrained and even austere; in yet another, he shows a sure ability to render verse in an easy colloquial manner that is remarkable, given the intricately formal diction he employs elsewhere.

He also revealed early an absolute sense of comfort with the tradition of British and American literature, black and white. "When I was in college," Hayden recalled, "I read all the poetry I could get hold of, and I read without discrimination." He took full advantage of a situation probably not available to a black American, in any real sense, before his time. He was aware not only of writers of the Harlem Renaissance but also of the beloved, older work of Paul Laurence Dunbar ("Poet of our youth— / his 'cri du coeur' our own"). Hayden would make the most of this patrimony even as he moved to absorb the work of poets in the wider world.

It is possible to see Hayden both as a preeminently racial poet and as one ultimately transcending race. The Dutch scholar Rosey Pool, who worked hard to bring his work to the attention of European readers, liked to call him the "poet laureate" of the race (a title that Langston Hughes, for one, coveted). On the other hand, the late Michael Cooke, in his study *The Achievement of Intimacy in Afro-American Literature*, gave Hayden pride of place among all black poets in this century mainly because of his ability to absorb, then transcend, racial feeling. Among modern black poets, Cooke argued, Hayden epitomized a supreme "sense of purpose arising from within and expressing an organic, vibrant humanity rather than a formal, plastic institutionality. The result has been a simultaneous manifestation of passivity and militancy, fused in another dimension."

Hayden came to accept the African-American past as an inexhaustible, primary poetic resource, rather than as a badge of shame, as it sometimes appears in Cullen's writing. Almost half of the poems in his first volume, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, acknowledge race in one form or another, and Hayden would persist in

writing memorable poems on the subject of African-American history and culture even as he became more complex as a thinker and more accomplished as an artist. Indeed, Hayden is best known for his historical poems, and above all those on African-American history. Pieces such as his sonnet "Frederick Douglass," his meditation on slavery "Middle Passage," his blues-haunted paean to Bessie Smith "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," as well as other pieces on slavery, racism, history, and African-American culture, repeatedly anthologized, confirm Hayden's profound commitment to the culture out of which he had come, even as he was also committed to linking the particularities of black culture to the universal concerns of the human condition. Rather than emphasize the power of racial feeling, he dwelt instead on the actualities of history and culture, even as those actualities became the launching place for his flights of imagination and intelligence.

In engaging African-American history and culture as a poet, Hayden was aware of the pitfalls often presented to the modern artist by folk art and folk culture. Rather than patronize the folk, he inevitably interpreted poetic modernism to mean mainly the subordination of folk or street culture to "high" culture, and by distinctly privileging the language of the latter over that of the former. This was no inconsequential move for an African-American writer, especially one who also favored the more egalitarian approach of poets such as Hughes and Sterling Brown. Certain poems based in the black experience, such as "Witch Doctor" (which mocks a black preacher-charlatan), "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves," and even the majestic "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," look down on mass culture from a certain height. Hayden was determined to subject all experience to the scrutiny of the intellect and the imagination fully empowered. However, he also developed, as Robert M. Greenberg has pointed out, a remarkable technique that involves the subtle, sometimes almost imperceptible fusion of a folk character, on the one hand, and the narrator's voice, on the other. This fusion allowed him to explore and develop his investment in folklore to the best of his ability, but without overpowering the folk material.

In his often anthologized piece "A Ballad of Remembrance," set in New Orleans at Mardi Gras, the speaker of the poem reels in dazed disgust before the surrealistic grotesqueries of Mardi Gras. In an example of the ornate stylistic mode that he himself called "baroque," Hayden stunningly captures, with a dazzling array of images of chaos and corruption, the peculiar horror of New Orleans in history ("the down-South arcane city with death / in its jaws like gold teeth"). Then, with his language suddenly subsiding into calm and lucidity, the speaker is rescued from all this disaster by the arrival of a friend, the critic Mark Van Doren, who is named. "Then you arrived," the poem recalls, "meditative, ironic, / richly human; and your presence was shore where I rested / released from the hoodoo of that dance, where I spoke / with my true voice again." Few American poets, perhaps, would have the courage or even the desire to make so ringing a declaration of humanistic values in a similar situation. Hayden judges contemporary culture as he would judge history, without compromise or fear of censure on political grounds.

History is of supreme importance to him as a poet. The five poems that conclude the first section of *Collected Poems*, which is from *A Ballad of Remembrance*, are all inspired by African-American history: "Middle Passage," about the vessels that brought unhappy blacks to America ("Shuttles in the rocking loom of history, / the dark ships move"); "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home," an entrancing merger of classical and African-American slave myths about ambition, freedom, and flight; "The Ballad of Nat Turner," a chilling poetic monologue by the violent slave insurrectionist of 1831 in Virginia ("Lord God my harshener, / speak to me now or let me die"); "Runagate Runagate," about a desperate search by a runaway slave for free ground ("Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness"); and the sonnet "Frederick Douglass," with its cleverly orchestrated anticipation of the arrival at last (as the sonnet ends) of "this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful / and terrible thing, needful to man as air, / usable as earth."

By the 1960s, when assassinations and insurrections in America made ordinary time, even the passage of a few weeks or months,

appear to resound with the lessons of history, Hayden had mastered the historic view, which is to say his prophetic ability to interpret the present in terms of both the past and the future. A small masterpiece in this regard is "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," an elegy in four parts on the death in 1965 of the most militant black leader of the civil rights era, the former Nation of Islam minister Malcolm X, who, following a pilgrimage to Mecca, turned away from the racial hatreds explicit in his former religion to embrace Islamic orthodoxy. Hayden celebrates this illumination even as he mourns the violence—historical and personal—that preceded and followed it. Malcolm, who had "X'd his name, became his people's anger, / exhorted them to vengeance for their past," had lived long enough to possess a more formidable truth: "He fell upon his face before / Allah the raceless in whose blazing Oneness all / were one. He rose renewed renamed, became / much more than there was time for him to be."

With such poems, one is tempted to see Hayden working as a kind of historical muralist. The reason or reasons for Hayden's affinity for the form may run deeper than a delight in history, or a sense of the peculiar significance of history to African Americans. It may be that Hayden tightly embraced black history, where the moral questions are conveniently stark, with something of a sense of release from having to reveal more about himself as an individual. Although he lived through the heyday of what is called "confessional" poetry, he appears to have had a genuine anxiety about poetry based on intimate personal revelation. "I could never write," he once said, "the confessional poems that Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, [and] John Berryman have become identified with." He added: "Reticence has its aesthetic value too."

Reticence can also be dangerous for a poet. Reticence in addition to Hayden's conservative sense of language and of literary tradition, as well as the potential mildness of the Baha'i religion, could easily have added up to a career of torpid verse. This is clearly not the case here. But what, if anything, did Hayden believe he had to hide with his reticence? Ponthella Taylor Williams, who regularly corresponded with him in the course of her research

into his life and art, has identified homoeroticism and bisexuality—which Hayden never publicly acknowledged—as a troubling source of guilt and shame for the poet. She cites poems such as “Sphinx,” “‘Mystery Boy’ Looks for Kin in Nashville,” and “The Mirages” as works in which Hayden engages, but only behind a thick concealing veil, his lifelong fears pertaining to his sexuality. This may well be so. For an individual of Hayden’s professional standing in the African-American community, confessionality that would reveal such interests was virtually not an option. When Hayden uses the details of his life as the core of a poem—and it is seldom absolutely clear that he is doing so—those details are heavily attended by invention and imagination so as to conceal the actual life of the poet himself.

Nevertheless, his nonhistorical poetry is anything but mild. From the start, Hayden struggled as a writer with a harrowing vision of human nature, a vision that finally eclipses in importance even racism as a power in his life and in life in general—although the relationship between racism and such a vision, in an African American, is perhaps necessarily symbiotic at some level. Most of Hayden’s poems between the 1940s and the 1960s seem to have at their core some act of violence or of actual or potential volatility, whose destructive potential is fearsome. Such poems typically begin in a specific act or situation of brutality, from which the poet moves scrupulously toward a conclusion, marked but undogmatic, about human nature and the world. In “The Lions,” a late poem, he writes of that “savage real that clues / my vision of the real— / my soul exults and Holy cries / and Holy Holy cries.” The “savage real” is central to Hayden’s vision and his poetry, which may be seen essentially as an act of containment, a “reflex of life-wish” (as he puts it in “The Diver”), that permits the “measured rise” from the cold, gloomy, fatally infested depths of experience.

Where this sense of violence came from is unclear. In a thinly veiled autobiographical reference to his youth, he recalls in one place “the chronic angers of that house,” as he grew up in the Hayden household; ultimately, no doubt, he was referring to all the twisted conflicts and anxieties that plagued him early in life.

This immersion in violence, albeit mainly psychological, was evidently enough to stamp in Hayden’s mind a fascination with it and, transcendently, with its illuminations. In “Electrical Storm” (“seeing the lightning’s / Mene Mene Tekel, / hearing the preaching thunder’s deep / Upharsin”), the terror is natural and yet supernatural; the poet is numbed by the thought of the casual imperatives of death. In “The Rabbi,” when “the synagogue became / New Calvary” and Hirschel and Molly, his friends, vanish before the scourge of urban change, the source of pain is human, societal, but no more explicable. In “Night, Death, Mississippi,” the source is topical, regional. Here the poet allows an old white man, willing but too decrepit to assist anymore in a lynching, to welcome home those who have just done so. In “Incense of the Lucky Virgin,” where a deranged black woman tries superstition and prayers to bring back her husband, then apparently slaughters her “daddyless” children (“Cleola, Willie Mae / won’t be hungry any more, / oh they’ll never cry and hunger any more”), the seed of the poem is only an item of journalism perhaps, yet it is no less vibrant in Hayden’s depiction of despair and insane resolve.

In Hayden’s world, violence is the central contagion. Violence subverts, infects, poisons. In “The Whipping,” an old woman flogs a boy (“Wildly he crashes through elephant ears, / pleads in dusty zinnias”). The child’s echoing, fruitless pleas haunt the poet (“His tears are rainy weather / to woundlike memories”). Exhausted at last, the woman leans against a tree, “. . . purged— / avenged in part for lifelong hidings / she has had to bear.” In “Perseus,” the mythological hero beheads Medusa, only to thirst for more blood: “None could have passed me then— / no garland-bearing girl, no priest / or staring boy—and lived.” In “From the Corpse Wood-piles, from the Ashes,” destruction is genocidal, global. The faces of Dachau (“O David, Hirschel, Eva, / cops and robbers with me once, / their faces are like yours”) are also like the faces in Johannesburg, Seoul, and, no doubt, America: “Their struggles are all horizons. / Their deaths encircle me.”

Violence is everywhere, but Hayden’s sense of the uses of violence evolved over his life. Early in his career, and in the context of

African-American history and the desire for freedom, violence is often seen as a necessary evil. The violence of African-American history, mostly endured by blacks, sometimes inflicted by blacks in retaliation, then kept the poet from an easy embrace of pacifism. In "Middle Passage," about the historic revolt of African slaves, led by the courageous Cinquez, on the ship *Amistad*, Hayden hails "The deep immortal human wish, / the timeless will: / Cinquez its deathless primaver image, / life that transfigures many lives." Nor does the poet censure Nat Turner, who, transfigured from slave to murderous insurrectionist, "praised my honer, harshener / till a sleep came over me, / a sleep heavy as death." The poet leaves Turner biding his time, awaiting the inflicting of slaughter. The slave in "Runagate Runagate" has the last word: "Mean mean mean to be free."

In *A Ballad of Remembrance*, freedom is the essence of life, and blood spilled in its behalf is blood nobly spilled. Perhaps a poem on the prophet of the Baha'i faith, "Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridwan," puts rage into philosophic perspective: "Agonies confirm His hour, / and swords like compass-needless turn / toward His heart." This approach gives way, by the appearance in 1970 of Hayden's *Words in the Mourning Time*, to a sense of the absolute futility of violence. Hayden openly disdains any ameliorative claims, especially those by political revolutionists, on behalf of bloodshed. By this time, as exemplified in a poem such as "Zeus over Redeye," after Hayden's visit to a missile arsenal, he also saw technology itself as the Medusa-like twentieth-century sibling of violence.

By the time he came to write his elegy for Malcolm X, as we have seen, Hayden would absolutely oppose violence. In *Words in the Mourning Time*, although violence remains central to the text, the main energy of the poems seeks to serve not only the elegiac but also the curbing of our will to suicide. The national horror is not easily transcended, but mourning is a necessary step toward that transcendence: ". . . for King for Kennedy I mourn. / And for America, self-destructive, self-betrayed." Grief is, nevertheless, a "vanity." The Baha'i faith ("The Blessed Exile's / transilluminating word") teaches that these agonies are "process, major means

whereby, / oh dreadfully, our humanness must be achieved." In such a time, art can console and enlighten where little else can. In poems such as "The Peacock Room," which is one of Hayden's finest, he proclaims the power of art to give meaning to life. In "Monet's 'Waterlilies,'" if "the news from Selma and Saigon / poisons the air like fallout," the poet takes refuge in the presence of "the serene great picture that I love": "Here space and time exist in light / the eye like the eye of faith believes."

O light beheld as through refracting tears.
Here is the aura of that world
each of us has lost.
Here is the shadow of its joy.

Hayden's verse reflects a profound regret about the myriad ways in which the will to destroy makes beauty and clarity almost impossible in the world, which must survive through refractions and paradoxes rather than through a serene apprehension of reality. Yet the heroic determination to survive and to assert the human is also a hallmark of his art. The brilliant seven poems of *The Night-Blooming Cereus*, especially the title poem, confirm Hayden's ability to suffer and see more clearly for his suffering—even if what he sees above all is his and our ultimate inability to see clearly, as in "Traveling through Fog": ". . . the cloudy dark / ensphering us seems all we can / be certain of. Is Plato's cave." The flower of the title poem becomes the sadly reduced spirit of the world, the speaker a humbled pleader on its behalf. "Lunar presence, / foredoomed, already dying," the night-blooming cereus flower "charged the room." The observers are rendered speechless: "We spoke / in whispers when / we spoke / at all. . . ."

Aptly titled, *Angle of Ascent* (1975) marks a kind of lift-off in the arc of Hayden's art. Curiously, it includes his autobiographical "Beginnings," in five parts, as if to signal that he can advance only by going backward to his origins. The tension between remembered terror and a dawning serenity is, at times, acute. Perhaps the evolved figure of the poet emerges most starkly in "For a

Young Artist." Central to the poem is "a naked old man / with bloodstained wings," who flops about ignominiously but finally, magically, hears "silken rustling in the air, / the angle of ascent / achieved." Hayden's concern is more and more cosmic, even fantastic, and yet it is brought down to earth by the din of public events in the decade (wars and rumors of wars, assassinations and famine, and—above all—the threat of nuclear annihilation). The poet finds irony and paradox in the onward rush of civilization toward destruction. An intensified hunger for meaning and for fresh inspiration haunts the aging Hayden as it haunted the aging Yeats. In Hayden's "Stars," itself in five fragmentary parts, the poet questions: "How shall the mind keep warm / save at spectral / fires—how thrive but by the light / of paradox?"

To the end, Hayden remained an inspired poet, one who chose to define himself in the largest way possible but also fastened himself and his craft to the realities of his place and time and history. He saw himself, in his central identity, as an American poet. His persistent recognition of violence is perhaps the main token of this identity. Hayden knew his country and its condition, and saw it whole. He paid America the tribute of a scrupulous and interrogatory art, but did not hesitate also to show America his love. *American Journal*, his last major attempt at poetry, found him settled in the persona of a visitor from outer space, evaluating the natives:

confess i am curiously drawn unmentionable to
 the americans doubt i could exist among them for
 long however psychic demands far too severe
 much violence much that repels i am attracted
 none the less their variousness their ingenuity
 their elan vital and that some thing essence
 quiddity i cannot penetrate or name

Arnold Rampersad
 Princeton University
 1996

Notes

Full Moon

"The Glorious One": one of the titles given to Bahá'u'lláh, prophet of the Bahá'i faith.

Dawnbreaker

"Dawnbreakers" is the title now used to designate the early Persian Bahá'is, thousands of whom were martyred.

"Incense of the Lucky Virgin"

"High John the Conqueror": a root said to have magical properties, used by conjurers.

"From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes"

"He, who is man beatified": Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned as a heretic in 1853.

Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridwan

He declared His mission in the Garden of Ridwan while on His way to prison and exile in 1863.

Middle Passage

Part III follows, in the main, the account of the *Amistad* mutiny given by Muriel Rukeyser in her biography of Willard Gibbs.

The Ballad of Nat Turner

Nat Turner led a slave revolt in Jerusalem, Virginia, in 1831.

For a Young Artist

After the story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," by Gabriel García Márquez.

from THE SNOW LAMP

The subject of *THE SNOW LAMP* is Peary's expedition to the North Pole in 1909. Its focal character is Matthew A. Henson, co-discoverer of the Pole, who became a legend among the Greenland Eskimos (or Inuit, as they called themselves). They considered him one of their own and named him Miypaluk. The title of the poem comes from an Inuit folktale. The opening section attempts to suggest the spirit and mode of an Eskimo song-poem.