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Life and Work

Legally, Robert Earl Hayden was never born. He had no birth certificate to show that Asa and Ruth Sheffey (born Gladys Finn), who separated before his birth, were his natural parents. So it was that Asa Bundy Sheffey came into this world, on 4 August 1913, in Paradise Valley, a ghetto on Detroit's East Side. At eighteen months, the boy was given to next-door neighbors William and Sue Ellen Hayden, who reared and rechristened him.

William "Pa" Hayden is immortalized in one of Robert's most anthologized poems, "Those Winter Sundays." He remained with who he thought were his adoptive parents until the

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Hayden, Robert

age of twenty-seven. In 1953, Robert was shocked to discover that the Haydens had never legally adopted him, contrary to their claim, and that he was really Asa Sheffey.

Paradise Valley was racially mixed but predominantly black, and poor. Like most of the neighborhood's residents, young Robert suffered from both poverty and prejudice. Although he would come to appreciate the great cultural vibrancy of the Valley, he also understood that life in one of Detroit's poorest sections rendered him vulnerable in a variety of ways. Handicapped by congenitally impaired vision, Hayden was acutely nearsighted, and his eyeglasses were extraordinarily thick. Being "four-eyed" and unathletic predisposed Hayden to reading and writing. Turning his myopia into an asset, introversion nur-

tured him as a poet.

In his senior year of high school, Robert was placed in Northern High, an East Side, predominantly white “sight-saving school,” where he graduated in 1930. At sixteen he discovered, entirely by accident, the Harlem Renaissance poets in Alain Locke’s anthology, *The New Negro* (1925). Hayden was instantly drawn to Countee Cullen, who declined to call himself a “Negro poet”—an example the young poet would later follow. Although the volume *Songs at Eighteen* was rejected by Harper Publishers, the poem “Africa”—Hayden’s first—appeared in a 1931 issue of Chicago’s *Abbott’s Monthly*, a popular ethnic magazine. Revealing the influence of the Harlem Renaissance in its twilight period, “Africa” echoed the primitivism of Cullen’s “Heritage.”

During the Depression era, Hayden attended Detroit City College (later Wayne State University) from 1932 to 1936. His family being on welfare, he could not afford the sixty-five dollars for tuition. Fortunately, the State Rehabilitation Service awarded Hayden the tuition scholarship he so desperately needed. A Spanish major and honor student, Hayden ended up just one credit hour short of graduation when his resources finally ran out.

Professional experience began where education ended. His job as writer and researcher for the Detroit branch of the Federal Writers Project (FWP) of the Works Progress Administration from 1936 to 1939 gave Hayden his first national exposure when “Autumnal” was anthologized in the FWP publication, *American Stuff* (1937).¹ More significant was the local recognition he achieved at a Detroit United Auto Workers Union rally, when Hayden read his eight-page mass chant, “These Are My People,” and was spontaneously proclaimed “People’s Poet” of Detroit. Like a fair number of his early poems, “These Are My People” reflected Hayden’s Depression Era leftist leanings. Originally composed for the Negro Culture Exhibit sponsored by the local National Negro Congress, his mass

chant

was later performed by a “verse chorus” and dramatized by Chicago’s Negro Group Theater. It was around this time when he first met Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, who came to see his play, “Drums of Haiti,” performed; Hayden played a voodoo priest. Moonlighting by taking on extra writing jobs in 1938, Hayden wrote weekly radio scripts based on episodes in African American history for CKLW Radio in Windsor, Ontario. He was hired in 1939 as director of Negro Research for the Federal Historical Records Survey but was fired in 1940. Hayden also worked part-time as a staff writer for the Michigan Chronicle for a mere six dollars per week.

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Hayden, Robert

Although still one credit shy of a Bachelor of Arts degree (which Wayne State would grant in 1942), Hayden was provisionally accepted, in 1938, into the graduate program in English at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. There, he won the Summer Jules and Avery Hopwood Award for the eleven-poem *Heart-Shape in the Dust*. The title came from Elinor Wylie’s *Hospes Comesque Coparis*, published in 1940 by Falcon, a local press.² *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, written during Hayden’s left-wing, proletarian phase, has a pronouncedly populist style, providing social commentary on racism, lynching, and economic oppression. Although they bear the germ of the themes and style that Hayden would cultivate throughout his mature career, he disdained his first book later in life. With characteristically harsh self-criticism, Hayden hoped that all extant copies would be destroyed, and he characterized these early poems as “prentice pieces.” Hayden’s

disdain for Heart-

Shape was likely rooted in what he perceived to be its aesthetic failures.

In June 1940, Hayden married Erma Inez Morris, who would be his companion for the re-

mainder of his life. A music teacher and concert pianist, Erma worked as a public school

teacher in Detroit, supporting his lifestyle as a struggling artist.

Eventually, they decided

that Hayden should go back to graduate school. Beyond her unflagging support of his

dream of becoming a great poet, his marriage to Erma would result in another major in-

fluence on his life and work. Soon after they moved to Ann Arbor in 1941, Erma em-

braced the Baha'i Faith, a new world religion promoting racial harmony, religious recon-

ciliation, and ideal international relations. Hayden, too, joined the Baha'is in 1943, while

still a graduate student.

In 1942, the year his only daughter, Maia, was born, Hayden won another Summer Jules

and Avery Hopwood Award, this time for his unpublished collection, *The Black Spear*

(originally titled *Heroic Bronze*). Hayden had decided that one of his primary objectives

was to "correct the distortions of Afro-American history." After he read Stephen Vincent

Benét's poem *John Brown's Body* (1928), Hayden's wish was to "be the one who'd fulfill

Benét's prophecy" and become the poet who would one day sing of the "black spear." The

Black Spear was a self-conscious effort in his quest to create a noble race memory. Sever-

al of Hayden's poems were elegies for African American heroes.

Later, Hayden took to heart advice from W. H. Auden, who counselled him to eschew

overtly political rhetoric. Wishing to move beyond overused racial themes, Hayden experi-

mented with a symbolist and surrealist method as a vehicle for social critique. With *My-*

ron O'Higgins, Hayden privately published *The Lion and the Archer* (1948), an impres-

sionistic, melismatic product of his "baroque" phase, his poems heavily ornamented and

symbol-laden.³

In 1944, Hayden earned his master's degree from the University of Michigan. He stayed on as a teaching fellow until, in 1946, he was appointed assistant professor of English at Fisk University, a highly respected, historically black institution of higher learning that was an oasis in segregated Nashville, Tennessee. Up until the era of civil rights and Black Power, the American professorate was highly exclusionary and populated almost entirely by white men. For midcentury black artist-intellectuals like Hayden, academic employ-

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Hayden, Robert

ment was only available at historically black colleges such as Fisk. Because Hayden had very few professional options in the American academy, he endured significant labor exploitation, often teaching five courses per semester at Fisk, where he was misled into believing that he would eventually be appointed writer-in-residence. Despite Fisk's reneging, Hayden taught there for over two decades. He was promoted to the rank of associate professor in 1954 and to full professor in 1967, all the while teaching a heavy course load that limited the time he could devote to his poetry.

In 1954, Hayden was awarded a Ford Foundation Fellowship in creative writing for an artistic sojourn throughout Mexico. The following year, *Figure of Time* (1955) appeared.⁴

One poem, "The Prophet," later published as "Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridwan," is his purest and fullest testimony of faith. *A Ballad of Remembrance*, his second collection, was published in 1962.⁵ The first two sections are reminiscence poems, intermixed with character portraits; the third section features his Mexico poems, followed by

tributes to African American heroes. A perfectionist, Hayden would publish revisions of his earlier poems in later works. Reworked poems took on a life of their own; they evolved over the course of their literary life, however slight their revisions were. They matured along with the poet.

Then came the big break that would bring Hayden international acclaim: on April 7, 1966, A Ballad of Remembrance was awarded, by unanimous vote, the “Grand Prix de la Poesie” (Grand prize for poetry) at the pan-diaspora First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. The festival had over ten thousand people from thirty-seven nations in attendance, making this literary prize comparable to an Olympic gold medal. Hayden himself was honored as poet laureate of Senegal. Immediately after, Senegal’s president Léopold Sédar Senghor personally presented Hayden with his award at a ceremony in New York City. The following year, Langston Hughes (one of the eight judges) asked Hayden to autograph Selected Poems (1966).⁶ This was a great honor for Hayden, who deeply respected and admired Hughes’s artistic accomplishments.

This honor was followed by an episode that literary historians have often regarded as an extreme trial and dishonor for Hayden. On April 22, 1966 at Fisk University’s First Black Writers’ Conference (organized by John Oliver Killens, appointed Fisk’s writer-in-residence by university administrators, instead of Hayden), Melvin Tolson used a conference panel on “The Role of the Black Writer” to publicly condemn Hayden for refusing to identify himself as a black poet. Tolson, who was Hayden’s generational peer and who worked with a high-modernist aesthetic that was similar to Hayden’s, never produced the militant, populist verse that is associated with the Black Arts Movement. But, responding to the cultural and political currents of the mid-1960s, Tolson appealed to revolutionary-minded conference attendees by ridiculing Hayden and his refusal of the “black poet” la-

bel.

Although Hayden was shaken by this public confrontation, and by subsequent critiques of his political aesthetics by young leaders like Haki Madhubuti, of the Black Arts Movement, many of these same militant artists and critics valued Hayden's work. As Stephen

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Hayden, Robert

Henderson, a prominent theorist of the Black Arts aesthetic, put it: "The fact of the matter is that the Black community does not intend to give up any of its beautiful singers, whether Countee Cullen or Melvin Tolson or Robert Hayden. We may quarrel with them sometimes, but ain't never gonna say good-bye." Indeed, just hours after his skirmish with Tolson at the Fisk Conference, Hayden gave a poetry reading that conference attendees honored with a spontaneous standing ovation.

Years earlier, in 1948, Hayden had issued a manifesto, published as an introductory leaflet for the Counterpoise Series, in which he disclaimed his role as an activist poet. He now believed there was really no such thing as black poetry or white poetry. There was only good poetry and soap opera. Rejecting the primacy of race consciousness and its sometimes-polarizing agenda came at some cost to Hayden's popularity, even though he claimed he could have been the "blackest of blacks" had he wanted to. In his estimation, to be a "black artist" was to ghettoize "black art." That genre was too typecast, "overspecialized." Such poetry, generating "more heat than light," sometimes entailed being anti-white—something that ran completely counter to Hayden's Baha'i-inspired vision of racial

harmony. Moreover, conceptions of a properly “black poetry” often involved the strict policing and limitation of identity and art—only certain themes and aesthetic modes were considered authentically black. Such restrictions were anathema to Hayden’s vision of the ideal poet, whose only aspiration was an artistic achievement that required freedom of expression. Nonetheless, a great deal of Hayden’s poetry treats racial themes. It explores African American history and folklore in a quest to reaffirm the black struggle as a part of the long human struggle toward potential freedom.

Hayden’s first publication by a commercial press, *Selected Poems* (1966), marked the beginning of his real career as a poet.⁷ It led to several academic posts: poet-in-residence at Indiana State University in 1967; Bingham Professor at the University of Louisville, and visiting poet at the University of Washington in 1969; visiting poet at the University of Connecticut in 1971; Dennison University in 1972; and Connecticut College in 1974. Just one year after being promoted to full professor at Fisk, Hayden resigned to assume an affiliation with the University of Michigan, where he taught from 1969 until his death in 1980.

After his move to the University of Michigan, Hayden continued his exploration of America’s identity, often using symbolist technique. *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970) focused on the turbulent 1960s and the Vietnam War and included elegies for Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.⁸ In 1970, Hayden was given the Russell Loines Award by the National Institute of Arts and Letters. *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (1972), a slender volume of eight poems, was followed by *Angle of Ascent: New and Selected Poems* (1975).^{9,10} That same year, Hayden was elected a fellow of the Academy of American Poets, with a citation for “distinguished poetic achievement” and a \$10,000 stipend.

Toward the end of his life Hayden was appointed “Consultant in Poetry” to the Library of

Congress, a post whose later occupants were named “Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry” of the United States. He won the appointment for 1976–1977, having declined an ear-

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lier invitation because, as a new hire, he could not get a leave of absence from the University of Michigan. Sadly, his reappointment for 1977–1978 came at a time when his health was failing. Health concerns and other mounting pressures led to a nervous breakdown in 1977.

Hayden’s tenure as America’s poet laureate coincided with America’s Bicentennial. In effect, this made Hayden America’s Bicentennial poet laureate. As a voice of America on this historic occasion, Hayden published *American Journal: Poems* in 1978; it was nominated for the National Book Award.¹¹ His vision of America would also be his final revision: dying of cancer, Hayden delivered an expanded version of *American Journal: Poems* (published in 1982) to his publisher in person.¹²

All this recognition was long overdue. Having spent most of career in relative obscurity, Hayden was bitter over the fact that it took some forty years of writing before he was finally published by a major East Coast press, Liveright. In 1976, Brown University conferred on Hayden an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree, as did Fisk in 1978. In January 1980, Hayden was honored, together with a group of other distinguished poets, in a reception, “White House Salute to American Poetry,” hosted by President Jimmy Carter and the First Lady in the East Room of the Executive Mansion. A testimonial in

honor of Hayden was held on February 24, 1980 at the University of Michigan. Too ill to attend, Hayden passed away the very next day in Ann Arbor. His acclaim was hard-won.

Craft and Creativity

For Hayden, craftsmanship was essential—a marriage between matter and manner, as Gwendolyn Brooks once described it. With missionary zeal, Hayden experimented with forms and techniques in an effort to arrive at what he characterized as something distinctively individual, patterned, yet wild and free. This even included expanding the language itself, with such neologisms as soulscape, snowlight, lifesquawk, mimosa's fancywork, and Absolute Otherwhere. The reader encounters such expressions as moonstruck trees, aural dark, famine fields, jazzbo strutting of a mouse, totemic flowers, paleocrystic ice, elgiac lace, glaucous poison jewels, and blazonry of farewell scarlet.

Hayden was also drawn to the vitality of black orality, and he often braided it into the erudite high-culture lexicon that guided his poetry. With roots deep in what he called Afro-American folk life, yet fully at home in the collegial language and culture associated with long academic study and training, Hayden used a mix of linguistic registers to express his paradoxically cleaved relation to the black folk matrix from which he emerged. In his mature poetry, Hayden frequently curated fragments of vernacular language to capture black cultural energy in his poetry; but his careful curation of this language in the context of his erudite poetic lexicon also reflected the vexed cultural status of the black artist-intellectual conversant with two worlds—one suffused with traditions of orality and the other highly literate.

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Hayden, Robert

Protean in his technique, Hayden employed a range of poetic and rhetorical devices to evoke each experience he sought to create. He was a virtuoso of rhythm, tonality, repetition, irony, oxymoron, paradox, and symbolism. Using sense to intensify, Hayden primarily relied on visual and auditory images. His gift for visual imagery grew out of his handicapped sight. Sensitivity to sound, tone, and cadence sprang from a keen sense of hearing, which Hayden developed to compensate for his poor vision. His work is full of dramatic tension, edged by irony, and tempered by religious emotions as echoes of the human spirit.

Themes and Theology

Poetry, for Hayden, is the illumination of experience through language.

Ideally, it can also

serve as an agent of social change. He spoke of poetry (thus his own poetry) as combining

the traditional roles of African griot (oral historian-balladeer), Irish bard (preserver of cul-

ture), and Eskimo shaman (medicine man). As an American griot, Hayden kept alive the

legends of great African American heroes, as in his tributes, "Frederick Douglass" (a qua-

si-sonnet) and "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)." African heritage, slavery, and Civil

War history anchor many of Hayden's poems in the shared experience of the American

past. His most anthologized black history poems are "Runagate Runagate" (an archaic

form of runaway; the poem is about the Underground Railroad) and "Middle Passage."

Arguably his greatest masterpiece, "Middle Passage" required considerable research on

slavery, which Hayden did at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Collection in

Harlem during the summer of 1941. Hayden's method, which involved diving into the his-

torical archive to bring to life a record of the past that had been marginalized and sup-

pressed, has proven paradigmatic for many history-minded poets of the late 20th

and ear-ly 21st centuries. Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey, Elizabeth Alexander, Kevin Young, and Douglas Kearney are only among the more notable of the many poets who have sought to continue a tradition of African American historical poetics that was largely shaped by Hayden's seminal work in the 1940s. Embracing the innovations of modernist poetics, Hayden's historical explorations would often use several voices in a single poem. They served as *dramatis personae* comparable to a collection of monologues. "Middle Passage" is a prime instance of this, for it dramatizes the Amistad mutiny of 1839 from the vantages of several "voices" who, through eyewitness accounts, depositions, ship's logs, and journal entries, recount the horrors and heroism of that experience. The speaker sings of the human heroism of the rebel leader Joseph Cinqué, while giving voice to slave traders, hymn chanters, and even the dead. Through this discordant chorus Hayden achieved an uncanny ethos that has an eerie, almost ethnographic authenticity. With epic effect, Hayden universalized the black experience as the heritage of America itself.

As an American bard, Hayden sustained an interest in heroic and exotic people—outsiders, pariahs, losers—and in the local color of places, localities, and landscapes. Drawing from folklore integral to African American literary tradition, voodoo magic casts its mythic spell over such poems as "A Ballad of Remembrance," "Incense of the Lucky Vir-

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gin," "Witch Doctor" (inspired by Prophet Jones), and "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home."

“Electrical Storm” is suffused with folkloric elements.

Hayden’s deeper interest was in getting at the reality behind appearances.

Reality in-

cludes both the metaphysical and the physical, which he connected through symbolism.

One of Hayden’s favorite symbols was the sunflower, which was used to illustrate Select-

ed Poems. As the one flower he was likely to see growing up in Paradise Valley, the sun-

flower was an American lotus, a thing of rare purity, symbolic of the inspiring will to life

and beauty found in so many of the nation’s economic dead zones. For Hayden, the sun-

flower symbolized vitality and hope in the midst of deprivation. Hayden thought of his po-

ems, whether patent or arcane, as a way of coming to grips with inner and outer realities.

Poetry was a spiritual act, a prayer for enlightenment.

The Patriot-Alien of “[American Journal]”

Despite making the improbable ascent from the destitution of Detroit’s Paradise Valley to

the cultural achievement of the American poet laureateship, Hayden could never feel fully

at ease in his nation—or in his skin. He was beset by a self-described

“sense of alienation

nothing could alter.” Yet, he was not acquiescent in the face of the natal dissonance he

felt; Hayden struggled mightily in what the speaker of one of his deathbed poems de-

scribed as the “World I have loved / and loving hated.” American Journal, his final book of

poems, brings together themes and aesthetics that he had developed for several decades.

He advances his historical poetics in a number of important poems; he considers the com-

plexities of the class mobility he achieved as a renowned artist; he documents his strug-

gles in faith while also affirming his Baha’i beliefs; and he repeatedly returns to the fig-

ure of the outsider, the alien whose liminality affords him a kind of second sight. Michael

Harper, Hayden’s friend, publisher, and fellow-poet, described the volume as “an indica-

tor of his [Hayden’s] new poetic resolve to speak freely about America’s conundrum, race

and identity.”

Although the poem that gives title to the book is not often considered one of Hayden's masterworks, it is perhaps the best reflection of his late-in-life relation to American identity. In "[American Journal]," written on the occasion of the American Bicentennial, while he served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, Hayden conjured a poetic persona from another planet, literalizing the figure of the alien, to offer a wide-ranging assessment of the nation. Issued from the office of the Poet Laureate, the poem is in many ways a final testament of Hayden's love for the culture, the style, and the vitality of his fellow Americans, "brash new comers lately sprung up in our galaxy." And yet, it also a deeply felt critique of a nation that, as Hayden—quoting Claude McKay—once put it, "feeds me bread of bitterness." By inhabiting an alien narrator who must report his findings to superiors, Hayden adopts a poetic vantage point that is in keeping with his experience as perpetual outsider. But by creating a speaker whose mission requires him to strategically adopt the "varied pigmentations" of the Americans, "white black / red brown yellow," Hayden attempts to eschew racial particularism, cloaking his Bicentennial report

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Hayden, Robert

in the appearance of racial objectivity. The transracial narrator is drawn to the American landscape and to the language and determination of its people; but the materialism, the violence and the simplistic nationalism of the Americans frighten him. Although the perceptive alien is a cultural sleuth who takes pride in his capacities of anthropological assessment, Hayden's speaker is finally baffled by the contradictions and the

variety of

America, “as much a problem in metaphysics as / it is a nation.”

In “[American Journal]” Hayden’s narrator is an advanced life-form, a being from a province of the universe that has “outgrown illusions cherished” by the Americans—illusions of racial, political, and class distinctions that lead to conflicts and persecutions. In some ways the poem suggests that the alien is of a civilization that has attained the ideals of American egalitarian democracy that are enshrined in the nation’s founding documents, but that have never been achieved in social and political practice. In conjuring this fantasy narrator and, by extension, the imagined civilization from which he emerges, Hayden posits hope and displays the radical imagination that is always required if social advancement is to be realized. If there is an underlying thesis in the poem, it is that social maturity is coefficient with limitless human solidarity. Ultimately, then, “[American Journal]” is at once utopian and realist, a reflection of Hayden’s belief in the efficacy of the American work-in-progress, despite the horrors of its history and its ongoing moral failings. Grounded in the teachings of his Baha’i Faith, Hayden believed that “America [would] be an instrument for peace in the future,” and particularly during his laureateship, he aspired to be a national poet, singing the American nation as patriot-alien.

For all its pain and redemption, it was the psychic evolution of America and the world that most interested Hayden. America is as much a spiritual idea as it is a geographical and political entity, and American life served as a point of departure for Hayden into an awareness of the universal. In all of this, freedom was a dominant theme. Widely recognized as a premier craftsman of American poetry, Hayden illuminated the human condition while writing from the deep wellsprings of the black experience. Artistically, what distinguished Hayden most was his fusing of history and symbol, of the natural and the

spiritual, to achieve an “intensification of reality” that triggers flashes of social insight, with unity as a touchstone of truth.

Discussion of the Literature

Critical appraisals of Robert Hayden’s poetry have largely fallen into two camps: laudatory admirations of the work’s apparent racial transcendence and technical achievement, and skeptical critiques of its apparent racial transcendence and sometimes baroque, high-culture aesthetic. In a 1949 article in the *New York Times Book Review*, Hayden’s volume, *The Lion and the Archer*, was hailed as “the entering wedge in the ‘emancipation’ of Negro poetry in America,” mostly because of its experiments with symbolist and imagist literary modernism and its refusal of the so-called protest mode that was dominant in the social realism of African American literature of the era. Yet, in a review of the same book, a critic writing for *Crisis* magazine mocked Hayden’s penchant for erudite neologism and

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Hayden, Robert

seeming rejection of racial exigency; aping Hayden’s baroque style, the critic notes the book’s “dazzleclustered trees and jokes of nacre and ormolu” and accuses the poet of trying to separate himself from the mainstream of Negro poetics. The dichotomous responses to *The Lion and the Archer* of the 1940s established a critical paradigm that has been associated with Hayden’s work ever since.¹³

In *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, Hayden’s effort to commit himself to art, rather than to black struggle, is celebrated as a primary aesthetic influence for university-based African American poets of the

post-Civil Rights/Black Power era.¹⁴ However, in a trenchant critique of the anthology published in Poetry, Amiri Baraka derided Hayden and his literary descendants for producing esoteric poetry having “nothing to do with the real world and real people.”¹⁵ At the height of his career in the late 1960s and the 1970s, critical responses to Hayden oscillated between ideologically inflected poles, with many literary critics marveling at his synthesis of modernist aesthetics and African American cultural material, and a few detractors chiding him for literary politics exemplified in his penchant for, what one critic called, “standard academic English with no black flavor.” However, even among the radical, militant black literary school of that era, Hayden’s art was respected—and his poems on African American history were particularly praised.

From the *Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden*, published by John Hatcher, the most comprehensive literary biography on the poet.¹⁶ Two other monographs on Hayden—by Ponthella Williams (1987) and Fred Fetrow (1984)—appeared in the 1980s.¹⁷ Hatcher’s work differs from that of Williams and Fetrow in that it uses Hayden’s religious commitment to the Bahá’í Faith as a primary lens through which to interpret the poetry. All three books abide by a narrative of literary history that makes much of Hayden’s conflict with the “Black Aesthetic” of the 1960s and 1970s, and with a few poets of that era.

Apart from a smattering of articles in the 1980s and 1990s, Hayden received surprisingly little critical attention in the decades following his death in 1980. The relative critical neglect was, on the one hand, a reflection of the paucity of scholarly analysis of African American poetry during that time, and on the other, a symptom of the period’s critical turn toward formal explorations of vernacular aesthetics and representations of orality in African American literature. Hayden’s “writerly” aesthetic did not

readily lend itself to treatment in critical studies of “speakerly” texts, which flourished in the 1980s and 1990s. And, although Hayden’s reputation grew, as his influence became increasingly perceptible in the work of late 20th century black poets, his art was rarely addressed by field-shaping literary critics like Henry Louis Gates and Houston Baker.

However, in 2001, the University of Michigan Press published a major collection of prose pieces on Hayden.¹⁸ Compiling original reviews, critical essays and some of Hayden’s prose and interviews, most of the work in the volume had been previously published; nevertheless, the publication of the compilation indicated that at the beginning of the 21st century Hayden was generating significant scholarly attention. Editorial work by Charles

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Hayden, Robert

Rowell at Callaloo journal helped to ensure that Hayden was not too badly neglected; indeed, Rowell was pivotal in advancing the profiles of poets who followed Hayden in their “aesthetic and ideational” choices. But Rowell and other important champions of Hayden’s work, like Phillip Richards, often extended the literary historical narrative that pit Hayden in an agonistic binary against advocates of the Black Arts Movement.

This critical trend was disrupted in 2001, when James Hall published a critical history of the 1960s—*Mercy, Mercy Me: African American Culture and the American Sixties*, which devoted a chapter to Hayden and argued that the poet’s work was a prime example of African American “anti-modernism.”¹⁹ Hall contended that Hayden, along with a host of 1960s black artists, was involved in a project that sought to critique and

imagine alternatives to racist, materialist, and nationalist Western modernity. Viewing Hayden as part of a sizable, diverse cadre of African American cultural producers similarly involved in a fundamental questioning of cultural, civic, and political tenets of 1960s America, Hall put pressure on what he called folkloric narratives surrounding black intellectual and cultural life of the decade. His work on Hayden, which recognized the poet's 1960s achievement, without a partisan disparagement of the Black Arts aesthetic that Hayden rejected, was an important development in the scholarship.

Although a thorough critical analysis of Hayden did not appear in the 1990s and early 2000s, his literary politics and aesthetics were deeply influential for a large cohort of academically trained poets who rose to prominence in that period. Rowell made efforts to point up Hayden's powerful legacy in the introductory material of the volume *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, which borrows its title from Hayden's poem "Angle of Ascent." In implicit agreement with Rowell, critics such as Phillip Richards (2006), Keith Leonard (2006), Edward Pavlic (2002), and Christopher Buck (2008) wrote chapter-length studies in which Hayden is featured as a major American poet of the middle decades of the 20th century.²⁰

Derik Smith's 2018 book, *Robert Hayden in Verse: New Histories of African American poetry and the Black Arts Era*, advanced the effort to challenge folkloric representations of Hayden's role in literary culture of the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ Noting Hayden's inclusion within several important Black Arts era poetry anthologies, Smith argued that Hayden could be understood as a dissenting participant in the Black Arts movement. Smith contends that Hayden, like poets of the BAM, was deeply engaged with the materials of black folk culture and language, but that in his poetry Hayden always addressed that material from an "aesthetic distance," which the poetic consciously cultivated.

While poets of the BAM sought to disappear the distance between themselves and the black folk masses, Hayden was more interested in measuring and exploring the distance between his erudite poetic personae and the black folk world. Smith also argued that Hayden, like the BAM poets, was alienated from both Western secular philosophy and the Christian mythos of the Negro Church. In Smith's account, this double alienation led Hayden toward his intense, but turbulent, commitment to the Baha'i Faith, which the scholar uses as a prism through which to interpret Hayden's extensive poetics of history.

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Hayden, Robert

Links to Digital Materials

Stamp Announcement 12-25: Twentieth-Century Poets. Commemorative postage stamps issued in April 2012, honoring ten American poets.

Robert Hayden: Essential American Poets. Archival recordings of the poet Robert Hayden, with an introduction to his life and work. Recorded 1968 and 1977, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Selected Works

Heart-Shape in the Dust (1940)

The Lion and the Archer (1948)

Figure of Time: Poems (1955)

A Ballad of Remembrance (1962)

Selected Poems (1966)

Words in the Mourning Time (1970)

The Night-Blooming Cereus (1972)

Angle of Ascent: New and Selected Poems (1975)

American Journal (1978, 1982)

Collected Prose (1984)

Collected Poems (1985)

Further Reading

Buck, Christopher. "Robert Hayden's '[American Journal]': A Multidimensional Analysis." *Online Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2 (2008): 1–37.

Extended literary analysis of "[American Journal]," which has been acclaimed as "America's Bicentennial Poem." Argues that Hayden's "[American Journal]" implies this thesis: "Social maturity is coefficient with human solidarity." As a kaleidoscopic tube of mirrors, "[American Journal]" implicitly describes social identities that render the American experience decidedly multidimensional, in which Hayden treats American identity in nine dimensions: (a) landscape identity; (b) alien (individual) identity; (c) racial identity; (d) political identity; (e) class identity; (f) material identity; (g) religious identity; (h) American (national) identity; (i) human identity.

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Hayden, Robert

Chrisman, Robert. "Robert Hayden: The Transition Years, 1946–1948." In *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry*. Edited by Laurence Goldstein and Robert Chrisman, 129–154. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

DeJong, Tim. "'Nothing Human Is Foreign': Polyphony and Recognition in the Poetry of Robert Hayden." *College Literature* 43, no. 3 (2016): 481–508.

Argues that Hayden's poems "often use polyphony in order to provoke recognition" such that, by "interweaving different voices through his poems," Hayden "explores the possibility of commonalities between subjects with markedly differing perspectives,

back-
grounds, and privileges” that, “while neither resolving systemic injustice
nor minimizing
the immediate facts of inequality, allow for a basic ‘humanness’ to
encounter difference”
and so “open up a space within which paths to reconciliation might begin to
be
articulated” (p. 483).

Fetrow, Fred M. Robert Hayden. Boston: Twayne, 1984.

Foundational biography, with comprehensive chronology.

Goldstein, Laurence, and Robert Chrisman, eds. Robert Hayden: Essays on the
Poetry.
Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Anthologizes “the most original and useful of the fugitive book reviews and
essays extant”
together with some new scholarship on Hayden.

Hall, James C. “Robert Hayden and the Politics of Memory.” In *Mercy, Mercy
Me: African-
American Culture and the American Sixties*, 39–77. Oxford: Oxford University
Press,
2001.

Harper, Michael, ed. *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review* 8, no. 1 (1982).

This special 210-page issue, guest-edited by Michael J. Harper (a close friend
of
Hayden’s), features thirty-two short articles (mostly personal reminiscences)
and six po-
ems in tribute, followed by “Robert Hayden: A Supplementary Biography,”
which adds to
the 18-page Hayden bibliography in *Obsidian* 7, no. 1 (1981): 109–127.

Hatcher, John. *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden*.
Oxford:
Ronald Books, 1984.

Biographical overview, followed by an in-depth treatment of Hayden’s legacy,
privileging
the Baha’i dimension of his work. Dismissive of prior scholarship for how
much of it polar-
izes Hayden’s dual perspectives as a poet and as a Baha’i, Hatcher argues
that Hayden’s
poetry “is empowered by his Baha’i perspective, not injured by it.”

Hayden, Robert, and Michael Harper. “Robert Hayden and Michael Harper: A
Literary
Friendship.” *Callaloo* 17, no. 4 (1994): 980–1016.

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Hayden, Robert

Leonard, Keith D. “‘Our Souls’ Strict Meaning’: Robert Hayden’s Spiritual History.” In *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights, 156–197*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006.

Pavlic, Edward M. “Blues and the Abstract Truth: The Politics of Abandonment and Democratic Vistas of Descent in Afro-Modernism.” In *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture, 79–173*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Rampersad, Arnold. “Afterword.” In *Collected Poems of Robert Hayden*. Edited by Robert Hayden, 197–212. New York: Liveright, 2013.

Rashid, Frank Damian. “Robert Hayden’s Detroit Blues Elegies.” *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (2001): 200–226.

Richards, Phillip M. “Robert Hayden: The Poet as Cosmopolitan Historian.” In *Black Heart: The Moral Life of Recent African American Letters, 171–182*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

Smith, Derik. “Quarreling in the Movement: Robert Hayden’s Black Arts Era.” *Callaloo* 33, no. 2 (2010): 449–466.

Argues that Robert Hayden’s “universalism, his reverence for the Western Canon, his disavowal of all types of poetic propaganda—are precisely the elements of Hayden’s artistic comportment that make him an influential figure in American poetry today.”

Derik Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse: New Histories of African American Poetry and the Black Arts Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

An extensive analysis of the poetry that explicates the genealogies of the political-aesthetic debates in which Hayden was embroiled during the Black Arts era, and traces the legacies of those poetic debates into the twenty-first century. The book also charts the evolution of Hayden's poetics of history, linking that evolution to the poet's commitment to the Baha'i Faith.

Williams, Ponthella. *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

A sequenced literary analysis of Hayden's work, preceded by a short biographical sketch that comes close to being an authorized biography, based on interviews with Hayden and privileged access to his personal files.

Notes:

(1.) Kenneth Rexroth et al., *American Stuff: An Anthology of Prose & Verse by Members of the Federal Writers' Project. With Sixteen Prints by the Federal Art Project* (New York: Viking Press, 1937).

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Subscriber: OUP-USA Mirror; date: 07 October 2019
Hayden, Robert

(2.) Robert Hayden, *Heart-Shape in the Dust* (Detroit: Falcon Press, 1940).

(3.) Robert Hayden and Myron O'Higgins, *The Lion and the Archer: Poems, Counterpoise Series 1* (Nashville: Counterpoise, 1948).

(4.) Robert Hayden, *Figure of Time, Counterpoise Series 3* (Nashville: Hemphill Press, 1955).

(5.) Robert Hayden, *A Ballad of Remembrance* (London: Paul Breman, 1962).

(6.) Robert Hayden, *Selected Poems* (New York: October House, 1966).

- (7.) Hayden, Selected Poems.
- (8.) Robert Hayden, *Words in the Mourning Time* (New York: October House, 1970).
- (9.) Robert Hayden, *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (London: Paul Breman, 1972).
- (10.) Robert Hayden, *Angle of Ascent: New and Selected Poems* (London: Liveright, 1975).
- (11.) Robert Hayden, *American Journal: Poems* (London: Liveright, 1978).
- (12.) Hayden, *American Journal: Poems*.
- (13.) Hayden, *The Lion and the Archer*.
- (14.) Charles H. Rowell, ed., *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry* (New York; Norton, 2013).
- (15.) Amiri Baraka, "Review: *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*," *Poetry Magazine* (May 2013).
- (16.) John Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984). Biographical overview, followed by an in-depth treatment of Hayden's legacy, privileging the Baha'i dimension of his work. Dismissive of prior scholarship for how much of it polarizes Hayden's dual perspectives as a poet and as a Baha'i, Hatcher argues that Hayden's poetry "is empowered by his Baha'i perspective, not injured by it."
- (17.) Ponthella Williams, *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987). A sequenced literary analysis of Hayden's work, preceded by a short biographical sketch that comes close to being an authorized biography, based on interviews with Hayden and privileged access to his personal files. Fred M. Fetrow's work, *Robert Hayden* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), is a foundational biography with comprehensive chronology.
- (18.) Laurence Goldstein and Robert Chrisman, eds., *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

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Hayden, Robert

(19.) James C. Hall, "Robert Hayden and the Politics of Memory," in *Mercy, Mercy Me: African American Culture and the American Sixties* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 39–77.

(20.) Phillip M. Richards, "Robert Hayden: The Poet as Cosmopolitan Historian," in *Black Heart: The Moral Life of Recent African American Letters* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006),

171–182; Keith D. Leonard, "'Our Souls' Strict Meaning': Robert Hayden's Spiritual History," in *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights*

(Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 156–197; Edward M. Pavlic, "Blues and the Abstract Truth: The Politics of Abandonment and Democratic Vistas of Descent in Afro-Modernism," in *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African American Literary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 79–173; and

Christopher Buck, "Robert Hayden's '[American Journal]': A Multidimensional Analysis," *Online Journal of Baha'i Studies* 2 (2008): 1–37. Extended literary analysis of what has

been acclaimed as "America's Bicentennial Poem," "[American Journal]," Buck argues that Hayden's "[American Journal]" implies this thesis: "Social maturity is coefficient with

human solidarity." As a kaleidoscopic tube of mirrors, "[American Journal]" implicitly describes social identities that render the American experience decidedly multidimensional,

in which Hayden treats American identity in nine dimensions: (1) landscape identity; (2)

alien (individual) identity; (3) racial identity; (4) political identity; (5) class identity; (6)

material identity; (7) religious identity; (8) American (national) identity;

and (9) human
identity.

(21.) Derik Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse: New Histories of African American Poetry and the Black Arts Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

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