THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Editor in Chief

Volume 1

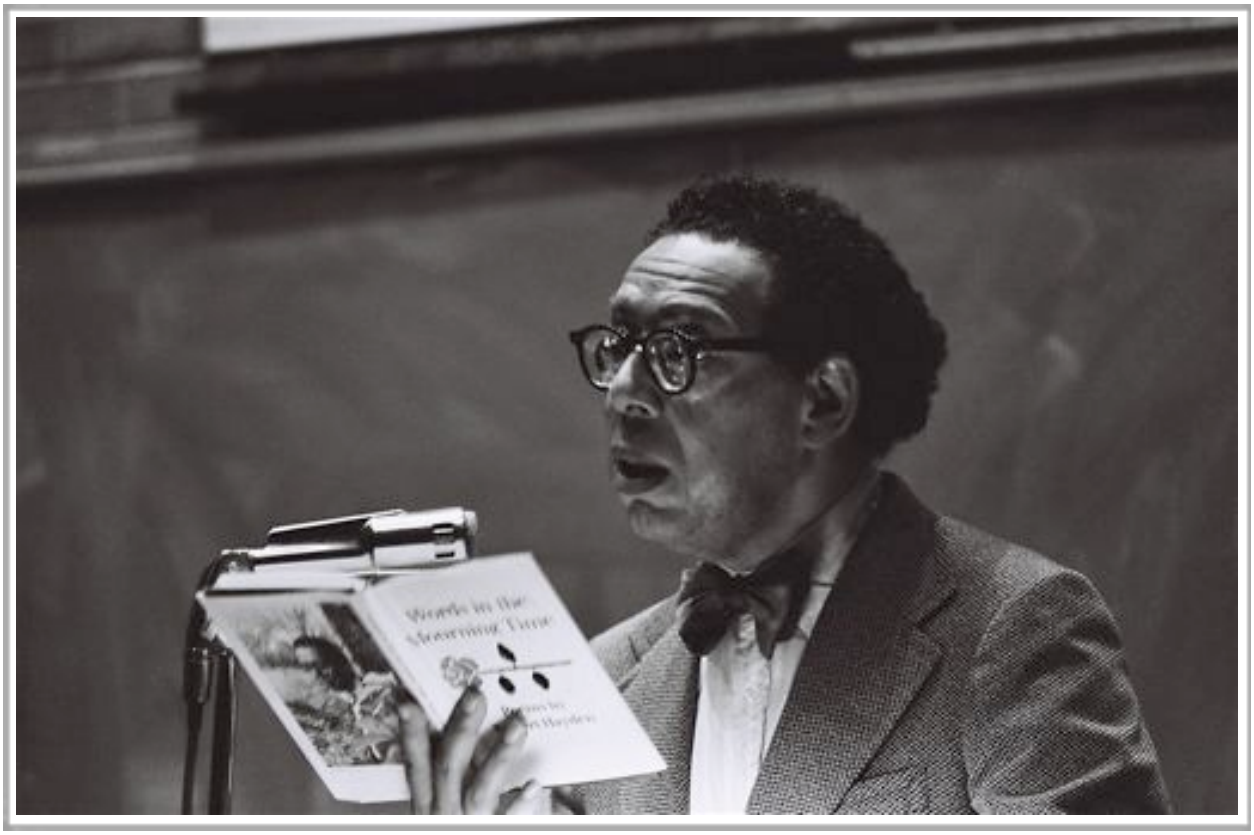
ACADEMIC NOVELS–THE ESSAY IN AMERICA

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2003

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
Oxford New York
Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
http://www.oup-usa.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Encyclopedia of American Literature / Jay Parini, editor-in-chief.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-19-516724-4 (v. 1: alk. paper)
ISBN 0-19-516725-2 (v. 2: alk. paper)
ISBN 0-19-516726-0 (v. 3: alk. paper)
ISBN 0-19-516727-9 (v. 4: alk. paper)
1. American literature—Encyclopedias. I. Parini, Jay.
PS21 .E537 2003
810′.3—dc21
2002156325
Printing number: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper



Robert Hayden reading to an audience from his book, *Words in the Mourning Time*, at Saginaw Valley College (now known as Saginaw Valley State University) located in University Center, Michigan, in October 1972. Photograph by David Smith, Lansing, Michigan. (Note: This is not the same photograph that appears in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*.)

The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature

Hayden, Robert

Robert Hayden was made poet laureate of Senegal in 1966 and ten years later became America's first black poet laureate. Acclaimed as “People's Poet” early in his career, later he was severely criticized for refusing to call himself a “Negro poet,” even though he wrote some of the most powerful “black history” poems in the English language. Hayden transcended the identity politics of what W. E. B. Du Bois called “art as propaganda”—something that elite African-American artists (the Talented Tenth) were expected to produce. On the principle that race divides while a higher identity unifies, Hayden presented himself as an American poet rather than as a black poet. His greatness is that he was really both, and that his art was a fusion music of the American experience.

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 what he thought were his adoptive parents until the 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. With color prejudice dividing dark- and light-skinned blacks, young Robert saw bigotry from within and without. By virtue of being underprivileged, however, the boy suffered more from poverty than prejudice. The very antithesis of the American Dream, Paradise Valley filled him with a perpetual sense of vulnerability and victimization. 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 nurtured 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 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). 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. 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 fired in 1940. Hayden also worked part-time as a staff writer for the *Michigan Chronicle* for a mere six dollars per week.

Although still one credit shy of a bachelor of arts degree (which Wayne State would grant in 1942), in 1938 Hayden was provisionally accepted 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. *Heart-Shape in the Dust* was written during Hayden's left-wing, proletarian phase. The poems have a pronouncedly populist style, providing social commentary on racism, lynching, and economic oppression. Hayden characterized these as “prentice pieces.” Yet he was an apprentice with no master.

Meanwhile, in June 1940 Hayden married Erma Inez Morris, a music teacher and concert pianist. She 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 influence on his life and work. Soon after they moved to Ann Arbor in 1941, Erma embraced the Bahá'í faith, a new world religion promoting racial harmony, religious reconciliation, and ideal international relations. Hayden, too, joined the Bahá'ís 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. Several of Hayden's poems were elegies for African-American heroes.

Later, Hayden took to heart advice from W. H. Auden against racial and political rhetoric. Wishing to transcend racial themes, Hayden experimented with a symbolist and surrealist method as a vehicle for social critique. With Myron O'Higgins, Hayden privately published *The Lion and the Archer* (1948), an impressionistic, melismatic product of his “baroque” phase, his poems heavily ornamented and symbol laden.

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, traditionally black institution of higher learning that was an oasis in segregated Nashville. Fisk, however, had informally misled him into believing that he would 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.

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. 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. 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 7 April 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). This was a great honor for Hayden, who idolized Hughes.

Strangely, this honor was followed by dishonor. On 22 April 1966 at Fisk University's First Black Writers' Conference (organized by John Oliver Killens, appointed Fisk's writer-in-residence instead of Hayden), a group of young protest poets led by Melvin Tolson condemned Hayden for refusing to identify himself as a black poet. The event was dominated by militant advocates of black cultural nationalism and the black revolution. The Black Arts controversy became a defining moment in Hayden's career.

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 black poet. He now believed there was really no such thing as black poetry or white poetry. There was only American poetry. Rejecting the tribalism of race consciousness and its polarizing agenda came at considerable cost to Hayden's popularity, even though he could have been the “blackest of blacks” had he wanted to. To be a “black artist” was to ghettoize “black art.” That genre was too typecast, “overspecialized.” Such poetry, generating “more heat than light,” entailed being anti-white—something that ran completely counter to Hayden's Bahá'í-

inspired vision of racial harmony. Nonetheless, a great deal of Hayden's poetry treats racial themes. It embraces African-American history and folklore in a quest to reaffirm the Negro struggle as a part of the long human struggle toward freedom.

Hayden's first publication by a commercial press, *Selected Poems* (1966), marked the beginning of his real career as a poet. 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; and 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.

As a symbolist poet using historical fact to make the synaptic leap into the consciousness behind events, Hayden explored America's identity with a probing searchlight. *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970) focused on the turbulent 1960s and the Vietnam War and included elegies for Malcolm X and Martin Luther KingJr. 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). 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 of the United States. He won the appointment for 1976–1977, having declined an earlier 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* in 1978; it was nominated for the National Book Award. His vision of America would also be his final revision: dying of cancer, Hayden delivered an expanded version of *American Journal* (published in 1982) to his publisher in person.

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 24 February 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,” “lifeswawk,” “mimosa's fancywork,” and “Absolute Otherwhere.” The reader encounters such expressions as “moonstruck trees,” “auroral dark,” “famine fields,” “jazzbo strutting of a mouse,” “totemic flowers,” “paleocrystic ice,” “elegiac lace,” “glaucous poison jewels,” and “blazonry of farewell scarlet.”

Adaptation was Hayden's primary method of innovation. Form flowed from content. 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 culture), 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 quasi-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 African-American past. His most anthologized black history poems are *Runagate Runagate* (an archaic form of “runaway”) 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 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 poet gives utterance to the rebel leader Cinque as well as slave traders, hymn singers, and even the dead. Through this discordant chorus he achieves 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 Virgin*, *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 includes 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 *Selected Poems*. As the one flower he was likely to see growing up in Paradise Valley, the sunflower was an

American lotus, a thing of rare purity in the social sinkhole of the slums. For Hayden, the sunflower symbolized life, vitality, and hope in the midst of deprivation. Hayden thought of his poems, 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.

As an American shaman, Hayden was an oracle mediating between gods and mortals. His poetry was medicinal. On a personal level, it provided psychic therapy, self-medication. Although he was not a confessional poet, his reminiscence poems were cathartic. *Those Winter Sundays* is the best example; at a number of his readings, people in the audience would be brought to tears by it. On a social level, his poems promoted racial healing.

The first African-American poet laureate, Hayden was decidedly transracial in that role at the American bicentennial. This is poignantly exemplified in the deliciously wry title poem of his last book, *American Journal*, in which the poet assumes the mask of an extraterrestrial, reporting his anthropological observations of Americans to his superiors, the Counselors. More human than racial, Hayden truly was an “alien, at home.”

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 the premier craftsman of African-American poetry, Hayden proved he could be the “blackest of blacks” at will, but he did so to put a face on race and bridge the black/white divide. 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. Hayden was more than America's first African-American poet laureate. He was decidedly transracial in his role as America's bicentennial poet laureate.

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

Fetrow, Fred M. *Robert Hayden*. Boston, 1984. Foundational biography, with comprehensive chronology.

Goldstein, Laurence, and Robert Chrisman, eds. *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry*. Ann Arbor, Mich., 2001. Anthologizes “the most original and useful of the fugitive book

reviews and essays extant" together with some new scholarship on Hayden.

Harper, Michael, ed. Obsidian: Black Literature in Review 8, no. 1 (Spring 1982). Guest edited by Michael J. Harper (a close friend of Hayden's), this special 210-page issue features thirty-two short articles (mostly personal reminiscences) and six poems in tribute, followed by "Robert Hayden: A Supplementary Biography," that adds to the 18-page Hayden bibliography in *Obsidian* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1981).

Hatcher, John. *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden*. Oxford, U.K., 1984. Biographical overview, followed by an in-depth treatment of Hayden's legacy, privileging the Bahá'í dimension of his work. Dismissive of prior scholarship for how much of it polarizes Hayden's dual perspectives as a poet and as a Bahá'í, Hatcher argues that Hayden's poetry "is empowered by his Bahá'í perspective, not injured by it."

Williams, Pontheolla. *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry*. Urbana, Ill., 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.

by Christopher Buck