



Robert Hayden, c. 1975.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-110604).

Hayden, Robert Earl (4 Aug. 1913-25 Feb. 1980), poet and teacher, was born Asa Bundy Sheffey in Detroit, Michigan, the son of Asa Sheffey, a steel-mill worker, and Gladys Ruth Finn. Early in his childhood, his parents separated and he was given to neighbors William and Sue Ellen Hayden, who also were black, and who reared and renamed him. Hayden grew up in a poor, racially mixed neighborhood. Extremely nearsighted, unathletic, and introverted, he spent much of his youth indoors reading and writing. When he was eighteen, he published his first poem. Hayden attended Detroit City College from 1932 to 1936; worked for the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) from 1936 to 1938; published his first volume of poetry, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, in 1940; and, studying with [W. H. Auden](#), completed an M.A. in English at the University of Michigan in 1944. In 1946 he began teaching English at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

During his twenty-three years at Fisk, he published four volumes of poetry: *The Lion and the Archer* (with Myron O'Higgins, 1948),

Figure of Time (1955), *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962), and *Selected Poems* (1966). These were years of demanding college teaching and creative isolation, but they were brightened by a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1947; a Ford Foundation grant to write in Mexico in 1954-1955; and the Grand Prize for Poetry in English at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966. At a writers' conference at Fisk, also in 1966, Hayden was attacked by younger blacks for a lack of racial militance in his poetry. Hayden's position, however, first articulated in 1948, was that he did not wish to be confined to racial themes or judged by ethnocentric standards. His philosophy of poetry was that it must not be limited by the individual or ethnic identity of the poet. Although inescapably rooted in these elements, poetry must rise to an order of creation that is broadly human and universally effective. He said, "I always wanted to be a Negro, or a black, poet . . . the same way Yeats is an Irish poet." He was trying, like Yeats, to join the myths, folk culture, and common humanity of his race with his special, transcendent powers of imagination. Hayden's Baha'i faith, which he adopted in the 1940s, and which emphasized the oneness of all peoples and the spiritual value of art, also helped sustain him as a poet. In the late 1970s he said, "today when so often one gets the feeling that everything is going downhill, that we're really on the brink of the abyss and what good is anything, I find myself sustained in my attempts to be a poet . . . because I have the assurance of my faith that this is of spiritual value and it is a way of performing some kind of service."

In 1969 Hayden joined the Department of English of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he taught until his death. During these years, he published *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970), *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (1973), *Angle of Ascent: New and Selected Poems* (1975), and *American Journal* (1978, rev. ed., 1982). He was elected to the American Academy of Poets in 1975 and appointed consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress in 1976-1978, the first African American to be selected.

Shifting from a romantic and proletarian approach in *Heart-Shape in the Dust* to an interest in rich language and baroque effects in *The Lion and the Archer*, Hayden's mature work did not appear until *A Ballad of Remembrance*. *Ballad* presents the first well-rounded picture of Hayden's protean subjects and styles as well as his devotion to craft. *Selected Poems* extends this impression and is followed by *Words in the Mourning Time*, which responds to the national experience of war, assassination, and racial militance in the late 1960s. Hayden's next volumes--*The Night-Blooming Cereus*, the eight new poems in *Angle of Ascent*, and *American Journal*--reveal an aging poet yielding to his aesthetic nature and his love of art and beauty for their own sake.

An obsessive wordsmith and experimenter in forms, Hayden searched for words and formal patterns that were cleansed of the egocentric and that gave his subjects their most objective aspect. Believing that expert craft was central, he rejected spontaneous expression in favor of precise realism, scrupulous attention to tone, and carefully wrought verbal mosaics. In Hayden's poetry, realism and romanticism interact, the former deriving significantly from his interest in black history and folk experience, the latter from his desire to explore subjective reality and to make poetry yield aesthetic pleasure. As Wilburn Williams, Jr., has observed, "spiritual enlightenment in his poetry is never the reward of evasion of material fact. The realities of the imagination and the actualities of history are bound together in an intimate symbiotic alliance that makes neither thinkable without the other." Some of the major themes of Hayden's poetry are the tension between the tragic nature of life and the richness of the imagination, the past in the present, art as a form of spiritual redemption, and the nurturing power of early life and folk memories. His favorite subjects include the spirit of places, folk characters, his childhood neighborhood, and African-American history.

In the debate about the purpose of art, Hayden's stance, closer to the aesthete than the propagandist, has exposed him to criticism. Yet the coalescence in Hayden's poetry of African-American material with a sophisticated modernism represents a singular achievement in the history of American poetry. His poetry about black culture and history, moreover, reveals the deepest of commitments to his own racial group as well as to humanity as a whole.

Hayden was married in 1940 to Erma Morris, with whom he had one child. He died in Ann Arbor.

Bibliography

Since Hayden's death, editions of his *Collected Prose* (1984) and *Collected Poems* (1985), both edited by Frederick Glaysher, have been published. The prose volume contains four invaluable interviews with Hayden. Another excellent source based on interview material is Dennis Joseph Gendron, "Robert Hayden: A View of His Life and Development as a Poet" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1975). For a summary of biographical information and a critical overview of Hayden's poetry, see Robert M. Greenberg, "Robert Hayden," in *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, suppl. 2, ed. A. Walton Litz (1981), or a shortened, updated version in *African American Writers*, ed. Valerie Smith and A. Walton Litz (1991). See also John Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden* (1984); Ponthella T. Williams, *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry* (1987), with a foreword by Blyden Jackson; Charles T. Davis, "Robert Hayden's Use of History," in *Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Donald B. Gibson (1973); Michael S. Harper, "Angle of Ascent," *New York Times Book Review*, 22 Feb. 1976; and Wilburn Williams, Jr., "Covenant of Timelessness and Time: Symbolism and History in Robert Hayden's *Angle of Ascent*," *Massachusetts Review* 18 (Winter 1977): 731-49. For a bibliography of secondary sources, see Nicholas Xavier, "Robert Hayden," *Bulletin of Bibliography* 42 (1985).

Robert M. Greenberg

Online Resources

- Robert Hayden

<http://www.poets.org/lit/poet/rhaydfst.htm>

From the Academy of American Poets. Includes the text of selected poems, a selected bibliography, and links to related online exhibits.
