Robert Hayden's Epic of Community

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Robert Hayden's Epic of Community

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As
early as 1941 Robert Hayden prepared himself for the task of writing a
"black-skinned
epic," an ambition he formed after reading Stephen Vincent Benet's long Civil
War
poem, John Brown's Body. Interviewed in 1972, Hayden spoke of this ambition in
the following manner:

I've always been interested in Afro-American
history, and when I was a young poet, since I knew that our history had been
misrepresented, I wanted to contribute toward an understanding of what our past
had really
been like. I set out to correct the misconceptions and to destroy some of the
stereotypes
and cliches which surrounded Negro history. (Collected Prose 162)

Speaking here of "our" history and
"our" past, Hayden shifts easily from the first person singular to first person
plural, a reminder that all historical epics are first of all affirmations of
community.
Yet readers familiar with Hayden's concerns, with the care of his writing, will
hear in
this particular affirmation a quiet but important ambiguity. For while he
speaks in this
passage in the first person plural, it is not entirely clear whether his "our"
is meant to encompass all of America, or only the Negro portion. As I shall try
to show,
the possibility afforded by this ambiguity is a major theme of Hayden's later
work.

Over the years Hayden's planned epic--his

ambitious corrective to cliches and misconceptions about black history--would assume many
forms, reaching temporary completion as a collection of poems called The Black Spear,

"a mixture of styles, idioms" submitted to various publishers but eventually withdrawn (Collected Prose 187). Asked about the genesis of this collection, Hayden recalled:

Specifically, I became interested in writing it
largely as a result of reading Stephen Vincent Benet's John Brown's Body. There's
a passage in which he says, "O, black-skinned epic, epic with the long black spear, I
cannot sing you now, having too white a heart." And he goes on to say that someday a
poet will rise to sing of the black spear. I dared to hope that I might be that poet.
(Collected Prose 162)

Hayden eventually abandoned The Black Spear,
but the inspiration driving the project remained strong. Indeed, the inclusion of a
sequence of meditations on John Brown in the posthumous volume American Journal--there
are also poems for Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar--indicates the depth of
Hayden's commitment to this original impetus of his work. The principal difference between
The Black Spear and American Journal is the nature of Hayden's use of
the first person plural--the pronoun of community. Implicit from the beginning in Benet's
call for a black epic was an essentialist understanding of the poet's relationship to this
pronoun. Hayden's increasingly deft interrogation of this essentialism thus provides an
especially useful means of tracing the development of Hayden's art. Leaving behind the
writing of Benet's "black-skinned epic," he increasingly took on the task of
writing a more generally American poetry, first under the aegis of a passionate
universalism, later through a stance somewhat akin to multiculturalism.

An early collation of The Black Spear
won for Hayden the Hopwood Award for 1942, judged by W. H. Auden; a single poem survives
from that manuscript in Hayden's Collected Poems--"O Daedelus, Fly Away
Home."(1) Another early poem, "Frederick Douglass," conceived originally as
the final sonnet in a sequence celebrating "outstanding figures in the antislavery

struggle," was also written for that project (Collected Prose 185). Then too
there's "Middle Passage," prepared specifically as The Black Spear's
opening, now Hayden's most famous poem, an early version of which appeared in
Phylon.
Epic in scale if not length, this astonishing work allows us to consider
Hayden's
abandonment of The Black Spear as something other than a sign of failure.

Of course, as is often the case with writers'
projects, The Black Spear was never really abandoned after all, but only
underwent a metamorphosis. As Hayden developed a more complicated relationship
to history,
his answer to Benet's call for an epic, poetic treatment of the black
experience became
muted, surviving in piecemeal fashion as the fifth and final section of
Selected Poems--now
the final five poems of the section "A Ballad of Remembrance" in Hayden's
Collected
Poems.(2) "What remains," declares Charles T. Davis, "is not simply `O
Daedalus, Fly Away Home' and `Frederick Douglass,' but a preoccupation with a
continuing
historical ambition" (253). A glance at the original dates of publication bears
out
Davis's observation that Hayden's "continuing historical ambition" lends
coherence to the fragments of the abandoned book. The section begins with
"Middle
Passage" (1943, revised 1962), continues with "Daedelus" (1942), "The
Ballad of Nat Turner" (1962) and "Runagate Runagate" (1949), then concludes
with "Frederick Douglass" (1945). The sequence, though it covers a twenty-year
period, is nonchronological; or rather, the logic of its chronology reflects
the
development of an African American community, does not follow the order of
composition. We
begin with the slave ships, hearing tell--principally from the slavers
themselves--of The
Amistad rebellion, and of Cinquez; now in the New World, we listen to the wind
and hear
its echoes of Africa; next we hear the biblically inflected stanzas of Hayden's
tribute to
Nat Turner; next, moving closer to the period of the Civil War, we're told
about the
Underground Railroad, and Harriet Tubman, in a language beautifully informed by
the rhythm
and phraseology of gospel singing, of sermon; finally, in a sonnet which
(according to
Hayden) "owes something to Gerard Manley Hopkins," we arrive at the very
threshold of emancipation.

For Charles T. Davis, Hayden's history poems are
distinguished throughout by an historiographic difference from the long Civil War poem of
Benet which inspired them. Principally, writes Davis, this difference consists in the
superiority of Hayden's documentation, in Hayden's deeper reliance on folk materials, and
in Hayden's vision of history. "Benet," declares Davis,

sees the Civil War as the "pastoral
rebellion of the earth / Against machines, Against the Age of Steam," and out of John
Brown's body grows "the new, mechanic birth, / ...the great, metallic Beast /
Expanding West and East." Hayden is not concerned with these problems, but rather
with the transformation of slave to man, a transfiguration frequently touched with
mystical overtones in his poems. (259)

Hayden corroborates Davis's claims in a 1967
statement:

I hope to add to the poems I have already
published on themes from Negro history and folklore, because this material interests me
and is untarnished by overuse, and because it gives me the chance to affirm the Negro
struggle as part of the long human struggle toward freedom. (Collected Prose 74-75)

Davis emphasizes the struggle for spiritual
liberation in Hayden's poetry. Michael Collins--addressing the same aspect--speaks of
Hayden as a universalist:

If ever anyone wanted to live the universal life,
the life of Emerson's transparent eyeball--all-seeing but nowhere present--it was Hayden.
If he could have chosen the material from which he was made, he might well have chosen
mercury, which no one can nail down or nail to any cross, yet which can calibrate the
interaction of all other things and assign them a number--a temperature, a heat. (334)

I'm not sure I agree with this characterization,
but certainly Hayden--a member of the Bahai faith--was concerned in his work to
"calibrate" the differences constitutive of America, without pretense that such
calibration might "penetrate or name" America's "essence" or
"quiddity." Thus the alien observer of Hayden's science fiction poem "[American

Journal]":

america as much a problem in metaphysics as

it is a nation earthly entity an iota in our

galaxy an organism that changes even as i

examine it fact or fantasy never twice the

same so many variables (Collected Poems 195)

In these lines from his final book, Hayden
identifies America as a problem whose many variables--as in an algebra problem--forever
threaten the viability of any single solution.

For Du Bois, the problem of community was the
problem of the color-line, "the relation of the darker to the lighter races,"
and to seek in poetry a solution to this problem was certainly one of Hayden's motivations
in writing--or attempting to write---The Black Spear (13). Yet if we take
seriously--as I think Hayden did--the possibility that the color-line is an algebraic
problem, it becomes clear The Black Spear could only be a solution for a
particular set of variables, for a particular moment in the history of that problem.
Indeed, if we return to John Brown's Body and the passage where Benet calls for a

"black skinned epic," we discover that the moment in question--the same moment
which preoccupies Du Bois in Souls--is the chaos and jubilation of emancipation,
what Du Bois calls "The Dawn of Freedom" (13). At this Dawn, and again after
Reconstruction, the necessity of upholding the character and contributions of the former
slaves appeared to depend on locating the "essence" or "quiddity" of
Negro life. For Hayden, however, writing after World War Two, America had become "as
much a problem of metaphysics" as an actual "nation" or

"organism." To examine, then, the "fact or fantasy" of America by
studying the specific situation of the Negro--a situation "that changes / even as
[we] examine it"--appeared more pertinent than honing a portrait of Negro life useful
as a weapon. For Hayden, the emphasis had shifted, and definitively, from a fixed concept
of race (in which humanity is the key "point"), to a fluid concept of humanity
(in which race is the key "measure"). Eventually, this shift would lead Hayden
to form his own Bahá'í-inflected version of multiculturalism. We get a hint

of this when
Hayden says in a Bicentennial year interview:

The Bahá'í Teachings assure us that America will
be an instrument for peace in the future. I think that maybe America is being
prepared for
that as a result of having all the races, cultures, and nationalities of the
world in one
way or another in the country. (Collected Prose 86)

The fruition of these ideas is "[American
Journal]," where Hayden refers to Americans as "this baffling / multi
people" (Collected Poems 182).

Such a view is not in evidence in the poems of The
Black Spear--or rather, in those fragments of The Black Spear which form the
last section of Hayden's Selected Poems. Neither do those poems contradict such
a
view--Hayden's multiculturalism is both an outgrowth of The Black Spear, and an
overcoming of The Black Spear's underlying assumptions about identity. Already
in
1948, in his manifesto "Counterpoise," Hayden had declared, "we believe in
the oneness of mankind and the importance of the arts in the struggle for peace
and
unity" (Collected Prose 42). Twenty years later, prefacing a new edition of
Alain Locke's The New Negro, Hayden wrote what might have been an assessment of
his own earlier aims:

The New Negro articulates the crucial
ideas of a generation in rebellion against accepted beliefs and engaged in
racial
self-discovery and cultural reassessment. It affirms the values of the Negro
heritage and
expresses hope for the future of the race in this country, stressing the black
man's
"Americanism." (Collected Prose 64)(3)

The combination of "rebellion,"

"self-discovery" and "reassessment" is "crucial," limited
primarily by the unexamined concept of Americanism. Yet Hayden shows himself
aware of this
limitation. Placing "Americanism" within quotes, he marks off that word as a
site for future contestation.

The particular foresight of Hayden's achievement
in The Black Spear was his bringing to bear upon the historical struggle of
African Americans a sense of human struggle that led him, in his subsequent
work, to
question Benet's division of American experience into "white" and

"black" epics. In Hayden's later work, the relation of such antinomies tells more than either side alone has power to articulate. This is nowhere clearer than in
"The Dream"--a poem part of and yet subsequent to The Black Spear--where Hayden puts into play such seemingly natural contraries as writing and speech, dream and
action, masculinity and femininity. Here, in a poem situated in the midst of the Civil
War, The Black Spear reveals itself as something other than a weapon in the historical war
for freedom. The Black Spear is now also revealed as a sign of the dream of freedom--a
freedom whose ultimate manifestation is the transhistorical power of hope. No longer,
moreover, is this transhistorical hope the abstract "oneness" of the "Counterpoise" manifesto; nor is it the privileged concept of "Americanness" implicit in The Black Spear. The sense of community promised by the dream within "The Dream" depends instead upon the particularity of the dreamer's experience--historically specific, and yet transcendent.

"The Dream" grows out of The Black
Spear and to some extent reads as a commentary on that project. For one thing, while
the poems of The Black Spear bring us to the threshold of emancipation, "The Dream" occurs just the other side of that event. For another, Hayden composed "The Dream" by combining two of the poems originally written for The Black Spear"--a doubleness that survives in "The Dream"'s very structure.(4)
Alternating sections of verse and prose record the stories of Sinda, an aged slave, and
Cal, a black soldier of the Union Army. Likewise, while Cal tells his own story in a
letter home (an historical document), Sinda's perceptions are given in a third-person
verse narration. Most importantly, while Cal is a man of action, Sinda is a dreamer. This
doubleness--a doubleness at the very heart of Hayden's hope for a "blackskinned epic"--forestalls us from ascribing to Hayden any single view of history. The sense
of community Hayden conjures in "The Dream" does not eradicate but is instead sustained by this doubleness--by the complementarity of Hayden's two visions of history.
Thus, Cal's offering of sacrifice--told by Hayden in a recreation of a Negro soldier's
prose--is only half of "The Dream." Sinda's deferral from participation is of equal weight, is perhaps more than half, since here Hayden gives reign to his own poetic
gifts. Yet neither half can really be said to consummate the poem proper; "The

Dream" is the two together. The poem's arrangement emphasizes this, for the two halves are so mutually dependent as to make a separate reading of Cal's and Sinda's
portions both difficult and unsatisfying. The effect of each depends upon the interruption
registered by the other. The two are conceptually intertwined.

THE DREAM (1863)

That evening Sinda thought she heard the drums

and hobbled from her cabin to the yard.

The quarters now were lonely-still in willow dusk

after the morning's ragged jubilo,

when laughing crying singing the folks went off

with Marse Lincum's soldier boys.

But Sinda hiding would not follow them: those

Buckras with their ornery

funning, cussed commands, oh they were not

the hosts the dream had promised her.

and hope when these few lines reches your hand they will fine you well. I

am tired some but it is war you know and ole jeff Davis muss be ketch an

hung to a sour apple tree like it says in the song I seen some akshun but

that is what i listed for not to see the sights ha ha More of our peeples

coming every day the Kernul calls them contrybans and has them work aroun

the Camp and learning to be soljurs. How is the wether home. Its warm this

evening but theres been lots of rain

How many times the dream had come to herb

more vision than a dream--

the greta big soldiers marching out of gunburst,

their faces those of Cal and Joe

and Charlie sold to the ricefields oh sold away

a-many and a-many a long year ago.

Fevered, gasping, Sinda listened, knew this was

the ending of her dream and prayed

that death, grown fretful and impatient, nagging her,

would wait a little longer, would let her see.

and we been marching sleeping too in cold rain and mirey mud a heap a

times. Tell Mama Thanks for The Bible an not worry so. Did brother fix the

roof yet like he promised? this mus of been a real nice place be-for the

fighting uglied it all up the judas tree is blossomed out so pretty same as

if this hurt and truble wasnt going on. Almos like something you mite dream

about i take it for a sign The Lord remembers Us Theres talk we will be

moving into Battle very soon agin

Trembling tottering Hep me Jesus Sinda crossed

the wavering yard, reached

a redbud tree in bloom, could go no farther, clung

to the bole and clinging fell

to her knees. She tried to stand, could not so much

as lift her head, tried to hold

the bannering sounds, heard only the whippoorwills

in tenuous moonlight; struggled to rise

and made her way to the road to welcome Joe and Cal

and Charlie, fought with brittle strength to rise.

So pray for me that if the Bullit with my name rote on it get me it will

not get me in retreet i do not think them kine of thots so much no need in

Dying till you die I all ways rigger, course if the hardtack and the

bullybeef do not kill me nuthing can i guess. Tell Joe I hav shure seen me

some ficety gals down here in Dixieland & i mite jus go ahead an jump over

the broomstick with one and bring her home, well I muss close with Love to

all & hope to see you soon Yrs Cal.

The poems of The Black Spear--as
presented in Hayden's Selected Poems--drew strength from their mutual
proximity.
"The Dream"-- second poem in Hayden's subsequent volume, Words in the Mourning
Time--occupies a more isolated position, occurring between two poems whose
concern with
history isn't immediately obvious, "Sphinx" and "'Mystery Boy' Looks for
Kin in Nashville"(5) History, we might infer, has become more mysterious for
Hayden,

its contemplation providing less a corrective than a riddle. These two not-necessarily-competing historiographic positions--history perceived as riddle, history offered as corrective--are represented in the poem by the twin concerns of Cal and Sinda.
Cal's purpose is putting slavery to an end, though the only goal he states in his letter is catching and hanging Jefferson Davis. The freedom he seeks is practical specific, and to the extent he so conceives it, already attained. For Sinda, emancipation is redemption.
Her vision requires "great big soldiers marching out of gunburst," and includes the faces, not only of Cal, but Joe (who may be Cal's brother) and Charlie ("sold to the ricefields oh sold away / a-many and a-many a long year ago"). For Cal--a soldier preoccupied with practical problems yet nonchalant in the face of death--such signs as God may send are interpreted without difficulty. For Sinda, on the other hand, tempted by stray sounds and stray forces, history is a more complicated affair. Indeed, when

"Marse Lincum's soldier boys" do finally arrive, Sinda hides and will not follow; "those / Buckras with their ornery / funning cussed commands, oh they were not were not / the hosts the dream had promised her." For Cal and Sinda, emancipation has distinct but supplementary meanings--a supplementarity to which Cal alludes when he describes his own experience as "somthing you mite dream about"(6) We have, then, two versions of what it means to enter history--which in "The Dream" means, pointedly enough, facing the future. While Sinda faces the future by persevering, by holding to "the bannering sounds" of her dream, Cal offers himself in sacrifice to "the Bullit with my name Rote on it." This figure of the bullet suggests an ironic reformulation of Benet's figure of the black spear. Only by sacrifice can the name of an African American enter history.

"The Dream" is subtitled with a date, 1863, the year of the Emancipation Proclamation. Hayden, who certainly knew his history, may have been recalling the second chapter of Du Bois's Souls of Black Folk, "Of the Dawn of Freedom":

Then the long-headed man with care-chiselled face who sat in the White House saw the inevitable and emancipated the slaves of

rebels on New
Year's 1863. A month later Congress called earnestly for the Negro Soldiers whom the act
of July, 1862, had half grudgingly allowed to enlist. Thus the barriers were levelled and
the deed was done. The stream of fugitives swelled to a flood.... (15)(7)

I suggested earlier that The Black Spear

offered a solution to the problem of America as posed at the moment when "the barriers were levelled." What does it mean, then, that Hayden, having finally laid The
Black Spear to rest, having gathered together and published the poems that were to
constitute it, returns to that moment, reimagining its meaning for two very different
African Americans? And what does it mean that this reimagination involves the portrait of
a slave-- Sinda--who sees no such levelling? Who refuses to join the stream of fugitives?
I say re-imagining: the link between The Black Spear and "The Dream" is maintained by other means than the incorporation of two early poems, for the content of
"The Dream" recalls, in addition to the abandoned or superseded project of writing "a blackskinned epic," the portion of John Brown's Body which inspired Hayden in the first place. In Book Eight, describing General Sherman's march to
the sea, Benet attempts to evoke the life of the freed slaves left behind by the Union
Army. No doubt Benet had read Souls of Black Folk and been impressed by Du Bois's
description of Sherman's entourage, the "dark human cloud that clung like remorse on
the rear of those swift columns, swelling at times to half their size, almost engulfing
and choking them" (17). In "The Dream," Du Bois's "dark human
cloud" is called "a ragged jubilo."(8) This is what Benet sees:

Chanting, dizzied, drunken with a strange fever,

A child's delight, a brightness too huge to grasp,

The hidden nation, untaught, unrecognized,

Free at last, but not yet free with the free,

Searching the army's road for this new wild thing

This dream, this pentecost changing, this
liberty. (353-54)(9)

He also sees those who fall away from the
phalanx, or who disdain joining in the first place. Writes Benet:

Some wander away to strange death or stranger
life,

Some wander awhile and starve and come back at last,

Some stay by the old plantation but will not work

Some faithful beyond the bond that they never
signed,

Hold to that bond in ruin as in the sun,

Steal food for a hungry mistress, keep her alive (354)

And then:

Oh, blackskinned epic, epic with the black spear,
I cannot sing you, having too white a heart,
And yet, some day, a poet will rise to sing you
And sing you with such truth and mellowness,
--Deep mellow of the husky golden voice
Crying dark heaven through the spirituals,
Soft mellow of the levee roustabouts,
Singing at night against the banjo moon--
That you will be a match for any song
Sung by old, populous nations in the past,
And stand like hills against the American sky,
And lay your black spear down by Roland's horn. (354)

It is not difficult to imagine Hayden's
enthusiasm when he first read these lines, for in their generosity and open
excitement
before the prospect of a Black poetry, they are still more uncommon than is
likely to make
us comfortable. The "coonskin drum and jubilee banjo" of Hayden's
"Daedalus," the "livid trees / where Ibo warriors / hung shadowless,
turning in wind / that moaned like Africa" in "Nat Turner," the
"darkness thicketed with shapes of terror" in "Runagate Runagate," all
fulfill Benet's prophecy, not only in their content, but through their "husky,
golden
voice / Crying dark heaven through the spirituals" (Collected Poems 55, 56,
59). How then does "The Dream" articulate a difference, not only from Benet,
but
from the poem Benet calls for? The answer lies in the relationship established
by Hayden's
poem between dream and history.

In his book on Hayden, Fred Fetrow cites
"The Dream" for its "thematic treatment of time as a barrier to human

realization"--a description in detail of a dream deferred (118). Indeed, Hayden's
poem defines "The Dream" as deferral. For Hayden, Sinda's persistence--the faith
she keeps with her vision, a vision of community--is no less admirable than Cal's
sacrifice, is in fact what signifies the ultimate worthiness of that sacrifice. Cal's
success at entering history depends upon his succumbing to the forces of history. Nor is
Cal the only instance of such a succumbing in Hayden's later poetry. The final piece in Angle
of Ascent registers another example of sacrifice:

CRISPUS ATTUCKS

Name in a footnote. Faceless name.

Moot hero shrouded in Betsy Ross

and Garvey flags--propped up

by bayonets, forever falling (Collected Poems 143)

Hayden is not derisory of Cal's willingness to
die, nor is he derisory of the achievement of Attucks (the first victim of the
Revolutionary War). To enter history as a hero even a "Moot" hero--is a
significant event, worthy of sacrifice, even as sacrifice is worthy of remembrance.
Moreover, the citation of both "Betsy Ross" and "Garvey" flags
indicates that Attucks is remembered by more than one community.(10) In the end, it is
community that redeems the losses of history, and insofar as the future of a memory is at
stake, such communities are always communities to come. In this, Cal depends as much as
Sinda on the promise of the dream. Though Sinda seems to hide from history, remaining true
instead to "the hosts" promised by her vision, her persistence is as much a
sacrifice as Cal's. In the penultimate stanza of Hayden's poem we thus find her close to
death, trembling and tottering to the road, as though only her utmost preparation could
bring the vision to fruition:

She tried to stand, could not so much
as lift her head, tried to hold
the bannering sounds, heard only the whippoorwills
in tenuous moonlight; struggled to rise
and made her way to the road to welcome Joe and Cal

and Charlie, fought with brittle strength to rise.

If "the Bullit with my name Rote on it"
is indeed Hayden's reformulation of Benet's figure of the "black spear," then
by
opposing to Cal's sacrifice Sinda's persistence, her struggle to stay alive so
as to
welcome a coming community, Hayden points the way to a new phase in his work.

The community Sinda awaits is not yet a community
of difference. For such a vision we must turn instead to Hayden's "Elegies for
Paradise Valley." In these eight poems from American Journal a lost
community is summoned--the centerpiece of the sequence ironically suggests a
seance--by
what is less an act of redemption than "a gazing upon the Medusa" (Collected
Prose 21). The community in question is the poor, predominantly black portion
of
Detroit where Hayden spent the early part of his life. Recalling this
neighborhood after a
visit back, Hayden once wrote:

How well he knew this part of the town, having
spent twenty-seven years of his life there, moving always, as he liked to say,
from one
dilapidated house to another. Still, these streets recalled for him voices,
faces he had
loved and whose loss even now, after how many years--close to forty maybe--he
mourned. A
way of life forever part of his consciousness as an artist, forever a source
for his
poems, and forever a source of joy and pain never to be assuaged.... (Collected
Prose
21-22)(11)

The importance of the "Elegies" in the
present context is Hayden's careful deconstruction of the opposition between
"us" and "them," an opposition which determines so much of our
discourse about identity, community and history, and which necessarily animates
the
narrative of transformation told in the poems of The Black Spear. In the

"Elegies," the progression of meanings taken on by these two pronouns itself
tells the story of Hayden's often difficult identifications.

In the first poem of the sequence, Hayden's
"them" is the police, for whom "us" is signified by a dead junkie
"shoved into a van," a sight Hayden catches from a "shared" bedroom
window. From that vantage, says the poet, "I saw the hatred for our kind /
glistening
like tears / in the policeman's eyes" (Collected Poems 163). "Our

kind": African Americans, perhaps; in any case the poor; an identification between
the child poet and the junkie recognized by the child and by the police alike. In the next
poem of the sequence, however, the meaning of this "us" has already metamorphosed. The first person plural now gathers together the children of the ghetto,
robbed of innocence; "them" is now the ghetto's adult population. Most importantly, the relationship between "us" and "them" has also
changed: "Godfearing / elders, Godless grifters, tried / as best they could to shelter / us. Rats fighting in their walls" (Collected Poems 164). Before, the relationship between "us" and "them" was one of suspicion and hate;
now, dependence and protection. Moreover, as in the first poem, an identification gathers
together what might have seemed hopelessly opposed figures--before, child and junkie; now,

"God-fearing" and "Godless."

The rest of the sequence, mournful to be sure, is
above all a celebration of lost community. Chinese, Italian, Gypsy and African American,
men and women, gay and straight--the procession of names and memories is vertiginous.
Especially moving to me is the seventh poem in the sequence, a recollection of Paradise
Valley's gypsy population, which again involves a wry consideration of the opposition
between "us" and "them":

Our parents warned us: Gypsies
kidnap you. And we must never play
with Gypsy children: Gypsies
all got lice in their hair.

Their queen was dark as Cleopatra
in the Negro History Book. Their king's
sinister arrogance flashed fire
like the diamonds on his dirty hands.

Quite suddenly he was dead,
his tribe clamoring in grief.
They take on bad as Colored Folks
Uncle Crip allowed. Die like us too.

Zingaros: Tzigeune: Gitanos: Gypsies:
pornographers of gaudy otherness:
aliens among the alien: thieves:
carriers of sickness: like us like us. (Collected Poems 169)

In his poems subsequent to The Black Spear,
Hayden increasingly concerns himself with the question of how communities are
constituted.
The meaning of the first person plural--the pronoun of community--can no longer
be
assumed, or left blankly open. At the start of his career, Hayden had
endeavored to
demonstrate "the black man's 'Americanness'"--a kind of universalism that
tended
toward the effacement of difference, witness the telling recourse to the male
gender.
Here, at the end of his career, the peculiar ("gaudy") quality of Americanness,
now identified as "otherness," overtakes this universalism and quietly
qualifies
it--a shift with enormous implications for a poetry that would draw the
contours of
community, that would speak in the first person plural.

Notes

(1.) In addition to Hayden's own comments given
in the interviews reprinted in his Collected Prose, I have relied on Appendix C
to Pantheolla T. Williams's book on Hayden, where a "Chronological Listing of
Robert
Hayden's Poetry, Including Reprints and Revised Works" is given. This
chronology
lists the contents of the Hopwood manuscript. See also Reginald Gibbons,
"Robert
Hayden in the 1940's," which presents several uncollected poems from the period
in
question.

(2.) Though Hayden's Collected Poems
appeared posthumously, the title of the section "Ballad of Remembrance" and the
order of the poems are Hayden's own, devised for the 1975 collection Angle of
Ascent:
New and Selected Poems.

(3.) The passage continues with an acknowledgment
of the centrism of Locke's position. "This hope," writes Hayden, "was not
shared by Garvey and other nationalists, as we know, and today's black
revolutionists
repudiate Negro `Americanism' in favor of separatism" (Collected Prose 64).

(4.) That Hayden would revisit these unpublished
poems after nearly 30 years tells us something useful about Hayden's sense of
craft, and
about the continuities and discontinuities which inform his work.

(5.) The ordering of Collected Poems

preserves and even highlights this sequencing by narrowing the space between volumes to a
single page. Thus, immediately after the five surviving poems of The Black Spear
we come upon "The Sphinx," and then "The Dream," and then
"`Mystery Boy Looks for Kin in Nashville'."

(6.) I assume that the "you" is Sinda.
Let me note in passing, however, the problems of interpretation posed in this poem by the
distinctness of the two sections. Is Cal writing Sinda? What is their relationship? And
has Cal's letter already arrived, or is it yet to find a recipient? The undecideability of
these questions tells us quite a bit about the condition of the Negro community after
slavery, and the difficulties this condition posed and poses for historians.

(7.) The reference in Hayden's poem to
"contrybans" also recalls Du Bois, who cites the Union Army's consideration of
slaves as "contraband of war" (14).

(8.) Here Hayden echoes Benet, whose "wind
of jubilo" is contrasted with the age of some of the slaves:

A wind blows into black faces, into old hands
Knotted with long rheumatics, cramped on the hoe,
Into old backs bent double over the cotton,
The wind of freedom, the wind of jubilo. (353)

Is Sinda's rejection of this "jubilo" a
comment on Hayden's abandonment--in favor of a "wind of freedom" yet to come--of
the project of The Black Spear? Some of the dialect in Cal's letter also echoes Benet,
whose "Linkum sits at a desk in his gold silk hat" Hayden recalls with the
phrase "Marse Lincum's soldier boys" (353).

(9.) Hayden echoes the last line cited here in
his sonnet for Frederick Douglass.

(10.) Note that Hayden doesn't say "banners
with black stars" (Collected Prose 19), or Stars and Stripes--these flags
are meant to recall names, the names of real women and men.

(11.) These sentences come from an unfinished
exercise in autobiography, The Life. The recourse to the third person is telling,
for Hayden was not, as John S. Wright notes, a confessional poet. See Wright's
"Homage to a Mystery Boy," where Hayden is quoted as having said "reticence
has its aesthetic values too" (905).

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