

integrity of the African-American identity was necessary and timely. At the conference all African-American writers were challenged to align themselves with the militant's definition of a Black Aesthetic, where "Blackness" was the central aim. Writers who did not comply faced rejection. Hayden would not submit. In turn, he was attacked.

Hayden had spent his life striving for excellence in his writing, to be accepted without a limiting designation, and was finally beginning to feel he had made some small achievements. Those attending the conference were largely young, inexperienced and had no perspective on Hayden's struggle. It was their intolerance that hurt Hayden the most.

The attacks on his independence continued for the rest of his life. His poetry was not sufficiently "Black" for the agenda of the militant Black Aesthetic. As the years passed the stridency of the attacks lessened and grudging respect was given to the quality of Hayden's work, but the chasm was there. It was only resolved the day before he died when the Center for Afro-American Studies at the University of Michigan hosted a tribute in his honor.

As Ponthella Williams explains in her work *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry* that "...he (Hayden) was severely attacked by a group of militant black nationalists who had convened at Fisk University (where Hayden taught) for the first Black Writers' Conference. Having achieved some status in American and international literary circles, he incurred the active displeasure, and perhaps jealousy, of the black militants who raised the political issue of the black writer's role during the 'searing sixties.' They espoused the Maoist-inspired philosophy, decreed by Ron Karenga and other black nationalists, that black literature should be didactic and propagandistic for the purpose of indoctrinating the masses in their revolutionary cause."(p.30-31) Hayden refused to participate that way.

Hayden did not back down from his four point position stated in 1948 (eighteen years earlier) in *Counterpoise 3*, that being: 1) opposition to the chauvinistic, the cultish, and special pleading; 2) support and encouragement for the 'experimental and the unconventional in writing, music and the graphic arts'; 3) opposition to criticism of work based 'entirely in the light of sociology and politics'; 4) opposition to 'criticism of work by editors, reviewers and anthologists who refuse encouragement or critical guidance because the work may deal with realities. (p.28)

The position statement ended with the affirmation that, "We believe in the oneness of mankind and the importance of the arts in the struggle for peace and unity." These points did not agree with the agenda of militant Black Power and Hayden was accused of being a traitor to his race who had "sold out."

When Hayden would not cave in to their demands he was attacked from another angle: on his refusal of long-standing to be labeled a "Black Poet." Hayden tried to explain that he was not rejecting his African-American heritage, nor relegating it to some inconsequential position, but he did not want any label; none at all. He only wanted to be a POET, and the best possible one he could

be. If his background happened to be African-American, so be it. He wanted to write the best possible poems so he could contribute quality work to the literature of the world, not because he was black, nor in spite of being black; he just happened to be black.

Williams explained, the militants voices were, "confusing artistic aims with political activism, they espoused political separatism and encouraged the rejection of traditional aesthetics and literary standards as monuments of a degenerate, racist culture. It was this artistically naive failure to recognize the necessity of individual integrity, demanding that the artist subordinate his creative talents and perception to the socio-political goals of the group, that Hayden would not condone." (p.31-32) The pain of this rejection lasted the rest of Hayden's lifetime.

Yet even in the few years since Hayden's death in February 1980, one result of Hayden's position can be noted. Increasingly, Hayden's poems are being chosen for inclusion in a broad range of anthologies, and a majority of these poems deal with the African-American experience. They bring to ever larger numbers of readers, from all backgrounds, an increasing appreciation for the African-American experience thereby increasing the level of understanding throughout American culture as a whole.

From the ghetto of Detroit, to Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress (now designated "Poet Laureate of the United States"), to a voice continuing to bring understanding between two races, Robert Earl Hayden has achieved a significant position in American Letters.

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