



©JILL KREMENTZ

# { Living in the Universe }

HIS VISION FOR MANKIND WAS SO ALL-ENCOMPASSING THAT HE WAS OSTRACIZED, FOR A TIME, FOR RENOUNCING HIS BLACK HERITAGE. BUT THE POET **ROBERT HAYDEN** NEVER LOST HIS FAITH IN THE IDEAL OF TRANSCENDING RACE. BY ELIZABETH HOOVER

*Poet Laureate Hayden stands in front of the Library of Congress in 1976, the year he became the first African-American named to the post.*

WHEN STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS ALIKE sported such black power fashions as Afros and dashikis on their college campuses, Robert Hayden dressed in impeccable three-piece suits and natty bow ties as he quoted Robert Browning and Aris-

totle to his restless class. Once, a University of Michigan student accused him of dressing “white.” Hayden, then in his sixties, peered through his bottle-thick glasses and replied: “Son, you ain’t seen nothing yet. I’m just coming into my style.”

Throughout his nearly 40-year career as a published poet, Hayden kept challenging stereotypes. He told a reporter in 1976, “There’s a tendency to regiment Afro-American artists and feel that they should all say the same thing. . . . But we are as complex and various as any other people.” He captured this complexity with humor, love, and grace in his nuanced portrayal of the black experience. But he also took a principled stand against limiting his subject matter to what others deemed appropriate to black writers.

Hayden was born in Detroit in 1913 to a mixed-race couple when there were laws against such a union, so he was

As a boy, Hayden’s extreme near-sightedness drove him from the playground into the public library, where he acquired an eclectic literary education that included everything from British Romantics to Harlem Renaissance writers. When a welfare case-worker spied him reading Countee Cullen at the office, she asked him about the book. He told her, “He’s a great Negro poet; you know, someday I am going to have a book published too.” Impressed, she then helped him get a scholarship to Detroit City College (now Wayne State University). Hayden matriculated in 1932. He eventually

There were other poems that were like arithmetic: You add them up and get the sum and that’s all there is to it. In the other kind of poetry you have to work: you have to try and find the unknown.”

Frederick Glaysher, who served as Hayden’s secretary in the late 1970s, calls the experience of working with Auden a “major threshold” for Hayden. Until that point, Hayden’s publications were mostly poems that dealt passionately but somewhat simplistically with the political situation of African-Americans. After meeting Auden, he wanted to write poetry that went, according to Glaysher, “beyond race.”

## While studying at the University of Michigan, Hayden worked with the renowned poet W. H. Auden. The black poet found the eccentric British writer “awe-inspiring.”

raised by black foster parents. He grew up in a slum ironically called Paradise Valley. Despite the poverty, it was a place of racial diversity and home to a vibrant street culture—one he participated in by surreptitiously running errands for prostitutes.

His relationship with his working-class parents was strained because of his bookish nature. There was also a tug-of-war between his devoted Baptist caretakers and his biological mother, an actress and performer of Irish heritage. Hayden’s daughter, Maia Potilo, recalls, “He always felt like a fish out of water. Maybe he never felt at home because he was a foster child and nothing was ever quite settled in his heart.” In the poem “Those Winter Sundays,” he writes of “fearing the chronic angers of that house.” But the poem concludes with a sympathetic portrait of his foster father:

. . . *slowly I rise and dress*

*Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love’s austere and lonely offices?*

graduated with a degree in Spanish. In 1940 he published his first book, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, with a small press in Detroit. Though it got some good notices, the book contains mostly derivative poems.

He went on to earn his master’s degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1942. While there, he worked with W. H. Auden, the leading poet of the day. Hayden found the eccentric British writer “awe-inspiring.” In a 1977 interview Hayden remembered Auden saying he liked “poems that were like algebra, in which you were solving for X. . . .

While Auden was changing Hayden’s ideas about poetry, the Baha’i faith was changing his ideas about humanity. He was introduced to this form of Islam through his wife, Erma, an ebullient music teacher and pianist. He converted in 1942, two years after the couple were wed. Baha’i teaches the oneness of all mankind and erases distinctions between races. Hayden was an active member of the Baha’i community, serving as poetry editor of its magazine, *World Order*. His own work reflects his commitment to his faith. His daughter says, “He wanted to be known as a serious poet, not just a black poet. It

was a struggle, but after a while he didn’t really care what others thought. In Baha’i, you can’t just stay and dance in that one spot. You’ve got to grow.”

Until the 1960s he would work largely in obscurity, trying to write



*Hayden’s work with the poet W. H. Auden (at left in 1969) proved a profound influence on his later poems.*

poems that, in Auden's words, solved for X. He also revised the collection of poems he'd titled *The Black Spear*, an early version of which had won a major award from the University of Michigan. It was originally conceived to be the "black-skinned epic" Stephen Vincent Benet calls for in his long poem *John Brown's Body*. But Hayden was beginning to question whether poetry should be based on racial categories at all. Instead he wanted to write poems that reflected the moral ambiguity and psychic struggle he saw in American history.

## Hayden wanted to write poems that reflected the moral ambiguity and psychic struggle he saw in American history.

In 1946 he moved his young family, including four-year-old Maia, to Nashville, Tennessee, and took up a professorship at Fisk University. His writing was slowed by his demanding teaching load and the difficulties of adjusting to the segregated South. His few publications were championed overseas by the Dutch scholar Rosey E. Pool. Forced into hiding during World War II, Pool had found comfort in the poetry of black Americans, which she recited to keep her spirits up. After the war, she worked to promote African-American poetry in Europe.

While in America as a Fulbright Visiting Scholar in 1959, Pool met Hayden, and the two became lifelong friends. Learning that his work had been rejected by American publishers, she connected him with the London publisher Paul Breman, who brought out Hayden's *A Ballad of Remembrance* in 1962.

The book, which contains 36 meticulously crafted poems, is radically different from *Heart-Shape in the Dust*. It is Hayden's original voice, rather than his imitation of other styles. The sonically dense poems show his facility with image and symbolism as well as his extraordinary economy of language. De-

spite the pressure under which the language is held, the poems are accessible, clear, and searing. The heart of the book is his masterwork, "Middle Passage," an exhaustively researched account of what would come to be known as the *Amistad* affair that blends the voices of the sailors with lyric passages, fragments from *The Tempest*, and song. In this poem, Hayden suggests that African-American history is a story of universal significance whose literature has the cultural weight of Shakespeare.

The poem opens:

*Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:  
Sails flashing to the wind like  
weapons,  
sharks following the moans the fever  
and the dying;  
horror the corposant and compass  
rose.*

The poem explores the moral complexity of an incident in 1839 when a group of enslaved Africans revolted, taking over the Spanish slave ship *Amistad*. The ship wound up in U.S. waters, and the trial and subsequent acquittal of the Africans became the subject of an 1841 Supreme Court case. The poem's formal experimentation was compared to T. S. Eliot's recombining of fragments in "The Waste Land." But, as Hayden wrote to a friend in 1970, he hadn't even read Eliot at the time. Glaysher remarks, "Saying he was just following Eliot is a way for white critics to dismiss him. This poem was a tremendous creative breakthrough. The turns of tragedy are visionary."

In 1966 the book won the Grand Prix de la Poésie at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, and his *Selected Poems* was published by Liveright, marking Hayden's first book



issued by a major American publisher.

Hayden seemed to have arrived on the world stage as a mature poet, but the year was marred by vociferous attacks on him by writers at home. As part of a panel at the First Black Writers Conference at Fisk, Hayden—perhaps reacting to reviews of *Selected Poems* that concentrated on his race rather than his craft—called himself “a poet who happens to be a Negro.”

His comments met sharp rebuke from no less a figure than the poet and educator Melvin B. Tolson, who had created the award-winning debate team at the historically black Wiley College in Texas and mentored the likes of civil rights activist James Farmer. Tolson accused Hayden of having a bad influence on his students by not stressing his race. Others joined the fray, denouncing Hayden as an Uncle Tom.

In the months after the conference, letters and essays appeared in *The Negro Digest* about the position and responsibilities of the black writer in the 1960s. Rather than enter the discussion, Hayden dedicated himself to his teaching—despite his students calling him an “Oreo”—



In 1975 Hayden was elected to the American Academy of Poets and published his sixth volume of poems, *The Angle of Ascent*.

slain civil rights leaders in “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz” and “Words in the Mourning Time.” He challenged stereotypes in “Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves” and wrote powerful poems for Crispus Attucks, Phillis Wheatley, and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

The attacks continued even after he left Fisk in 1969 to teach at the University of Michigan. His daughter remembers how at times the stress left him with crippling migraines that confined him to bed for days at a stretch.

Despite the anger he expressed pri-

dance, and music. Once a week her father would come home with a new record album; as the family danced together in the living room, he’d make them laugh with his funny poses.

There were also major publications: *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970), *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (1972), *Angle of Ascent* (1975), and *American Journal* (1978). In 1976 he was the first black to be named poetry consultant to the Library of Congress (the post now known as the poet laureate). Shortly after *American Journal* was nominated for a National Book Award, Hayden was diagnosed with terminal cancer. His failing health didn’t stop him from teaching. The laurels kept coming: In January 1980 he was honored by President Jimmy Carter at a White House reception. He died a month later of an embolism at age 67.

By the time he passed away, Hayden

By 1966 Hayden had arrived as a mature poet, but the year was marred by vociferous attacks after he called himself “a poet who happens to be a Negro.”

and his writing. He even included works by some of his attackers in the anthology he edited the following year.

The conference affected Hayden deeply. According to Glaysher, it was “traumatic,” and Hayden spoke about it for the rest of his life. In a letter to Pool he writes, “There was a time when the Negro struggle too was humanistic—when it generated a kind of moral beauty. . . . We are using the tactics of the old world order, and therein lie the seeds of destruction.”

Meanwhile, he was penning some of the most beautiful poetry ever written about black America. He paid tribute to

vately, Hayden treated those around him with gentleness, respect, and generosity. When he spoke out against pigeonholing African-American artists, he largely refrained from using names. Despite the demands on his time, he welcomed and championed young writers and scholars.

He was sustained by his friendships, his faith, and his family. Temperamentally, his wife, Erma, was his polar opposite, according to Glaysher. She was unrelentingly upbeat even when Hayden was thrown into despair. Potilo remembers her father not just as the eminent poet and scholar but also as a man of extraordinary humor who loved art,

was being welcomed into a community of black writers. This changing dynamic is captured in a 1971 review by the author Julius Lester, a former student of his at Fisk. “Now, I know,” Lester wrote, “that his desire to be regarded as nothing more or less than a poet was not a denial of his blackness but the only way he knew of saying that blackness was not big enough to contain him. He wanted to live in the universe.”

Elizabeth Hoover’s article “Soul Soldiers,” about a traveling exhibit that captured the black experience in Vietnam, appeared in the Spring 2008 issue.

ROBERT HAYDEN COLLECTION, PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS DIVISION, SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, ASTOR, LENOX, AND TILDEN FOUNDATIONS