

## **“The Angle of Ascent” Process and Achievement in the Work of Robert Hayden\***

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### ***Abstract***

The poetry of Robert Hayden explores the process of individual and collective social and spiritual transformation in a variety of contexts, including contemporary culture, the Bahá'í Faith, black history, art, literature, nature, disease, and suffering. In developing his themes and images, Hayden 'works through many of the central issues and events shaping the modern world and moves towards a "re-centering" or re-focusing of vision around a spiritual reality. A close reading of a number of Hayden's poems, including "Words in the Mourning Time," "The Broken Dark," "From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes," "Middle Passage," "Runagate, Runagate," "The Dream (1863)," "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," "The Night-Blooming Cereus," and "For a Young Artist" reveals the poet's concentration on this process of change and growth. In an age that champions despair and unbelief, Hayden's poems are records of a journey "from Can't to Can," from grief to hope, from death to life, from suffering to comfort, from brokenness to wholeness, from the earthbound state to flight. True to his vision of art as "ultimately religious in the broadest sense of the term," Hayden has created a body of work that eloquently depicts the struggles and achievements of the human spirit.

### ***Résumé***

Les poèmes de Robert Hayden explorent le processus de transformation sociale et spirituelle de l'être humain et de la collectivité et ce, dans une variété de contextes, dont la culture contemporaine, la Foi bahá'íe, l'histoire des Noirs, les arts, la littérature, la nature, la maladie et la souffrance. Hayden explore ses thèmes et ses images à travers des préoccupations et événements centraux qui ont façonné le monde moderne; il nous amène à nous «recentrer» et à rajuster notre vision autour d'une réalité spirituelle. Une lecture approfondie de nombreux poèmes de Hayden, dont «Words in the Mourning Time», «The Broken Dark», «From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes», «Middle Passage», «Runagate, Runagate», «The Dream (1863)», «El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz», «The Night-Blooming Cereus», et «For a Young Artist», nous révèle la concentration de ce poète sur ce processus de changement et croissance. À une époque où l'on faisait l'éloge du désespoir et de l'incroyance, les poèmes de Hayden sont le témoignage d'un cheminement allant de l'incapacité vers la capacité, du chagrin vers l'espoir, de la mort vers la vie, de la souffrance vers le bien-être, de la cassure vers ce qui est entier, de la condition terrestre vers l'envol. Fidèle à sa vision de l'art comme étant de nature «ultimement religieuse, dans le sens le plus large de ce terme», Hayden a créé un oeuvre qui illustre de façon éloquente les luttes et les réussites de l'esprit humain.

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### **Resumen**

La poesía de Robert Hayden explora el proceso de la transformación social y espiritual, individual y colectiva, dentro de un marco variado, así como la cultura contemporánea, la Fe Bahá'í, la historia de los Negros, el arte, la literatura, la naturaleza, la enfermedad y el sufrimiento. En el desarrollo de sus temas e imágenes Hayden abre paso por entre muchas cuestiones y hechos centrales a la formación del mundo moderno y se encamina hacia la recentralización o reenfoque de la visión en torno a una realidad espiritual. Una lectura bien fijada de varios de los poemas de Hayden, incluyendo, "Words in the Mourning Time," "The Broken Dark," "From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes," "Middle Passage," "Runagate, Runagate," "The Dream (1863)," "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," "The Night-Blooming Cereus," y "For a Young Artist" revelan la concentración del poeta en este proceso de cambio y crecimiento. En tiempos en donde se alardea el desespero y la incredulidad, los poemas de Hayden documentan el sendero del "No puedo hacia el puedo," del pesar hacia la esperanza, de la muerte hacia la vida, del sufrimiento hacia el confort, de lo rota hacia lo entero, de la condición térrea hacia el vuelo. Fiel a su visión del arte como, "en últimas religioso en el sentido más amplio de la palabra," Hayden ha creado un conjunto de obras que demuestra elocuentemente las luchas y los logros del espíritu humano.

The pivotal concept governing Robert Hayden's poetry is the perception of individual and collective life as a continuing process of spiritual evolution, and so the themes and motifs that run throughout Hayden's poetry—including black history, Bahá'í history, disease, suffering, evil, nature, art, and contexts of various religions and cultures—all reflect this basic orientation. Hayden's is a poetry of reconciliation, a coming to terms with and acceptance of often difficult issues in modern life, and yet the reconciliation is not facile but achieved through a full exploration and examination of the problems posed as a result of the poet's own spiritual search in the context of the Bahá'í Faith.

In Hayden's view, the world is engaged in a process like that each individual undergoes in his or her development from infancy to maturity, a process Howard Faulkner aptly calls "transformation" ("Transformed" 282–91). Such movement necessarily involves pain, but the suffering is not futile or gratuitous. The lengthy poem "Words in the Mourning Time," set in the 1960s, specifically treats this issue of suffering and growth, and, as numerous critics have recognized, this poem is central to Hayden's philosophy and beliefs as a Bahá'í. While the poem was originally published in ten parts, Hayden chose to include only three in *Angle of Ascent*, his volume of selected poems. The three he chose were the original first, sixth, and tenth sections, resulting in a sharper, stronger sequence. In Hayden's *Collected Poems*, the ten sections appear once again, but because of Hayden's own emphasis on I, VI, and X, I will focus the weight of my discussion on these sections, referring incidentally to the others.

"Words in the Mourning Time" is organic in its structure, growing through a progression of images and ideas to a culmination. It is set in the America of the Vietnam period, but most of the explicit references to the war appear in sections

cut from the shortened version, making the revised poem less dated and less emotional than the original.

I

For King, for Robert Kennedy,  
destroyed by those they could not save,  
for King for Kennedy I mourn.  
And for America, self-destructive, self-betrayed. 4

I grieve. Yet know the vanity  
of grief—through power of  
The Blessed Exile's  
transilluminating word 8

aware of how these deaths, how all  
the agonies of our deathbed childbed age  
are process, major means whereby,  
oh dreadfully, our humanness must be achieved. 12  
(“Words in the Mourning Time,” *Angle 59*)

The poem's departure point is an expression of grief for the violent deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, America's saviors of the sixties. However, the poet immediately recognizes that the prospects of salvation through ordinary mortals' efforts, no matter how idealistic and laudable, are unrealistic. King and Kennedy were “destroyed by those they could not save,” and while Hayden mourns their deaths, he has the clear-sightedness to see that America is “self-betrayed” to think that its path to salvation lies in political hands, and “self-destructive” when it sees that such power is not effective.

The second stanza moves the poet from the stance of grief (he knows the “vanity” of it) to the wider perspective of his religious beliefs. This is a stanza of transition, presenting a dualistic view of human beings, caught up in the values and perspectives of society and yet able to see beyond the limits of that society “through power of / The Blessed Exile's / transilluminating word” (lines 6–8). The “Blessed Exile” is Bahá'u'lláh, and “transilluminating” is an apt word for his teachings, since Bahá'ís see them as heralding a new dawn of oneness of humanity, linking all the previous religious revelations into a meaningful and harmonious whole.

By the third stanza, the transition from a “human” to a “divine” perspective is achieved, a “transillumination” that can be seen within the structure of section I itself. In the use of verbs, for example, Hayden has moved from “mourn” and “grieve” to “know.” The awareness has been brought about through religious faith, and it pushes Hayden on to the certainty of the final verb “must be achieved.”<sup>1</sup> These deaths no longer appear as futile, self-destructive

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1. This technique of building to a strong climactic verse is common in Hayden's poetry and is used again in section X, where the entire sequence ends with “is impelled,” the force of the verb providing a tremendous, forceful finale. 3

acts, nor do other acts of horror, painted at greater length in sections III, IV, and IX. These are all “agonies of our deathbed childbed age” (line 10), a paradoxical image that has its root in Bahá’í teachings. In *Interviews with Black Writers*, edited by John O’Brien, Hayden states, “Bahá’u’lláh urged the absolute, inescapable necessity for human unity, the recognition of the fundamental oneness of mankind. He also prophesied that we’d go through sheer hell before we achieved anything like world unity—partly owing to our inability to love” (119). However terrible the events may be, they are the “process” and “means” through which human beings develop spiritual capacities, their “humanness.” The word *dreadfully* shows that this will be no easy task, and *achieved* indicates that human beings must take responsibility for their progress (or seeming lack of it) along this path.

II

Lord Riot									
	naked								
		in flaming clothes							
cannibal ruler									
	of anger’s							5	
		carousals							
	sing hey nonny no								
terror									
	his tribute								
		shriek of bloody glass						10	
his praise									
	sing wrathful sing vengeful								
	sing hey nonny no								
gigantic									
	and laughing							15	
		sniper on tower							
I hate									
	I destroy								
		I am I am							
	sing hey nonny no							20	
	sing burn baby burn								
		(Angle 60)							

The second section of the revised version (section VI of the full version) plunges the reader into the midst of the world responsible for the deaths of King and Kennedy. Diametrically opposed to the divine teachings of love brought by “the Blessed Exile” in section I, here power belongs to “Lord Riot,” a “cannibal ruler” of a primitive, violent society. The description evokes the racial riots that plagued black American ghettos during the 1960s. In a series of images suggesting demonic ritual, Hayden paints the religion of hatred. Tribute to this

god is terror, “shriek of bloody glass / his praise” (lines 10–11). The recurring “sing hey nonny no” serves as a refrain to the god—a nonsense sequence that recalls Ophelia’s madsong in *Hamlet*, and more specifically, the song from *As You Like It*, “It was a lover and his lass” (Shakespeare, *As You Like It* 5.3.14–36). The ironic allusion carries a nonchalant air in opposition to the poem’s intensity of concern. Another variation of the refrain commands “sing wrathful sing vengeful,” invoking a sense of chaotic violence (line 12).

The second human image in the section is the sniper on the tower, “gigantic / and laughing” (lines 14–15). His credo is simply “I hate / I destroy / I am I am” (lines 17–19). This figure has twisted Descartes’ dictum, “I think, therefore I am,” indicating that violence, rather than reason, gives meaning to existence in this society. Added to the violence is the element of the ego as god, in the line “I am I am,” which is also an ironic echo of the Báb’s call to humanity: “‘I am’, He exclaimed, ‘I am, I am the Promised One!’” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 21). This credo is immediately followed by the refrain, to which is added this time, “sing burn baby burn” (line 21), a common slang expression of the time, yet one that also calls up images of satanic fires and takes the reader back to the original image of “Lord Riot / naked / in flaming clothes” (lines 1–3). Metaphorically, the anger of the blacks is what is now naked or unveiled, and the flaming clothes are the injustices that have hidden the anger in the past.

The element of festivity is not absent from this section of the poem. Lord Riot presides over “anger’s carousals,” which suggest an air of celebration—an accurate picture, since many black writers who witnessed race riots of this and earlier eras in places such as Harlem, Detroit, and Watts, speak of the holiday atmosphere, the air of release from tension during the violence and destruction. The sniper, too, is pictured as “laughing,” and the refrain is lively, not a dirge.

The poem achieves a breadth of effect with a great economy of words. In abbreviated fashion, Hayden takes the reader from the primitiveness of African tribal images to the depth of modern American race riots, mingling ritualistic and realistic images as in “shriek of bloody glass / his praise” (lines 10–11), and using more formal diction interspersed with slang terms. The end effect is to instill a kind of reason into the chaos and the violence; it is, in a sense, a kind of acting out—part of the “process” whereby human beings will achieve “humanness” no matter how “dreadfully” it is accomplished.

In an article in *World Order Magazine* (“Re-Centering” 9–17), Frederick Glaysher points out that in a world where the “center” has been lost, a world where chaos reigns and where few people see divine order, Robert Hayden’s poems seek to re-establish that center (at least in the literary world) and to give the chaos some meaning. This particular section of “Words in the Mourning Time” is, when examined in the light of Hayden’s worldview, an excellent example of this “re-centering.”

The process continues in the final section of both the original and revised poems, entitled “and all the atoms cry aloud,” a phrase that echoes the Bahá’í

writings.<sup>2</sup> The poem was first written specifically for the Bahá'í centennial celebration held in Chicago in October, 1967, and was read there by Hayden. Originally section X of the poem cycle, and in the selected poems part III, this piece begins with the simple phrase, "I bear Him witness now" (line 2). The phrase is familiar to Bahá'ís as a variation of the opening of the obligatory daily noon prayer, which begins, "I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 4). Hayden's "witnessing" provides sharp contrast to the "tribute" and "praise" of the Lord Riot section.

III

*and all the atoms cry aloud*

I bear Him witness now Who by the light of suns beyond the suns beyond the sun with shrill pen	4
revealed renewal of the covenant of timelessness with time, proclaimed advent of splendor joy	7
alone can comprehend and the imperious evils of an age could not withstand and stars	10
and stones and seas acclaimed—His life its crystal image and magnetic field.	13
I bear Him witness now— mystery Whose major clues are the heart of man, the mystery of God:	16
Bahá'u'lláh: Logos, poet, cosmic hero, surgeon, architect of our hope of peace,	19
wronged, exiled One, chosen to endure what agonies of knowledge, what auroral dark	22
bestowals of truth vision power anguish for our future's sake. "I was but a man	25

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2. See numerous passages, including Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 16, 62, 177.

“like others, asleep upon  
My couch, when, lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious  
were wafted over Me .... “ 28

Called, as in dead of night  
a dreamer is roused to help the helpless flee  
a burning house. 31

I bear Him witness now:  
toward Him our history in its disastrous quest  
for meaning is impelled. 34  
(*Angle 61–62*)

This section of the poem is a culmination of the previous images, a blending of spiritual, scientific, and philosophical approaches. It is imbued with allusions to and echoes from Bahá'í sacred writings. For example, in the first verse paragraph Hayden refers to Him “Who by the light of suns beyond the suns beyond / the sun ...” (lines 3–4). The scientific reference to solar systems and galaxies is present, but the image of the sun carries a spiritual meaning as well.<sup>3</sup> The repetition of the word *sun(s)* as well as the fact that these “suns” by whose light Bahá'u'lláh reveals himself are “beyond the sun” suggest a transcendence of both the physical limitations of the universe and of the human inability to comprehend what lies beyond. The image centers, too, on creation and the source of light, and by sound, the word *sun* evokes “son,” suggesting Bahá'u'lláh's claim to have come as the Son of Man returned in the glory of the Father.<sup>4</sup>

The “shrill pen” image is also taken from the Bahá'í writings and works on a symbolic as well as a concrete level. Bahá'u'lláh often referred to his pen as “shrill” in describing his exhortations to the world's peoples and rulers to turn to God and obey divine laws (*Proclamation 58, Epistle 40, 93*). Yet the image evokes the sound of the quill scratching across the page, making the phrase concrete as well.

The first sentence continues into the second verse paragraph of this section, which is extremely dense in reference and meaning, while at the same time expansive and airy in the texture of the language. It tells how Bahá'u'lláh “revealed renewal of / the covenant of timelessness with time ...” (lines 5–6), recalling the covenant of God with humanity in the Old Testament story of Noah, as well as other covenants or agreements in religious scriptures. That this is a covenant “of timelessness with time” reflects the world of the eternal (a variation of the image “the light of suns beyond the suns beyond / the sun”

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3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave many talks explaining how the sun, as the source of light and therefore life, is an appropriate symbol for God, perceived by Bahá'ís as an unknowable Essence. See, for example, *Paris Talks* 58–59. 7

4. See Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* 13–14.

[lines 3–4]), where time and space are non-existent, and indicates the connection of that world with the contingent mortal realm. Bahá'ís believe that the different prophets or manifestations have continually renewed that covenant with humanity throughout history and that in this age the covenant has been made in the form of specific written laws. Hayden continues beyond the theme of the renewal of this covenant to assert that Bahá'u'lláh “proclaimed / advent of splendor joy / alone can comprehend” (lines 6–8). The syntax here is complex, as indicated by the word-division on the page. One might expect that the line break might be accomplished more smoothly between “splendor” and “joy” than between “joy” and “alone,” as it stands. The weight thrown on the word *alone* by this arrangement indicates the importance of joy in this comprehension of splendor. On first reading, the meaning may not be clear. Yet the clause works toward the verb *comprehend*, and the syntax also forces the reader to work hard at comprehending.

The advent of splendor, Hayden goes on to say, was such that “the imperious evils of an age could not / withstand and stars / and stones and seas / acclaimed ...” (lines 9–12). The alliteration serves to link the natural phenomena in the acclamation of the Manifestation of God and pits them victoriously against the “imperious evils.” “Imperious” as an adjective for “evils,” with its Latin root similar to “imperial,” reflects the arrogant nature of the Turkish and Persian authorities who attempted to exterminate the Bahá'í. Yet Hayden also creates a parallel to his own time, since the wording is “an age” rather than the more specific “his age.”

The next phrase, which states that Bahá'u'lláh was the one “stars / and stones and seas / acclaimed,” recalls a passage from the Bahá'í writings claiming that when a prophet or Manifestation comes into the world even inanimate objects are affected and infused with a new energy.<sup>5</sup> Hayden extrapolates on the same idea in the subtitle of the section “*and all the atoms cry aloud*.”

However, the conclusion of this lengthy and complex first sentence of the poem brings us smoothly back to scientific language: “His life its crystal image and / magnetic field” (lines 12–13), where one sees again in Hayden the importance of the human life as example, inspiration, and proof of divine teachings. The importance of life as example is reflected by the important placing of this phrase at the conclusion of section III's first sentence. The antecedent of “its” is perhaps somewhat ambiguous, referring to the “covenant of timelessness with time” or the “advent of splendor.” Both images fit. “Crystal image” suggests clarity, the “unsullied mirror,” which, in the Bahá'í writings, is the station of the Manifestation in reflecting the divine rays of the

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5. See Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 189 and numerous other passages. This concept is also present in other religious traditions. Islam holds that the stones glorified Muhammad, for example.



sun (God). The term “magnetic field” is more scientific and yet mystical. This is the power that draws “stones” as well as hearts to the manifestation.

The next stanza reaffirms the opening, “I bear Him witness now,” after which Hayden attempts to define “Him.” He is a “mystery Whose major clues are the heart of man, / the mystery of God: / Bahá’u’lláh:” (lines 15–17). Bahá’u’lláh has written, “Out of the whole world He [God] hath chosen for Himself the hearts of men ...” (*Gleanings* 279) and again, “Thy heart is My home; sanctify it for My descent” (*Hidden Words* 59). The habitation of God, the clue to God’s existence, is within humankind itself. Yet God remains forever an Unknowable Essence, an unsolvable Mystery. Again, the Bahá’í writings say, “Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 101).

Paradoxically, the mystery of God is Bahá’u’lláh, as indicated by the colon (line 16). The mention of Bahá’u’lláh by name is the culmination of Hayden’s previous attempts to define God and God’s presence in the world, and marks both an arrival and a departure, as indicated by another colon (line 17). From this point, Hayden goes on to define Bahá’u’lláh in more specific terms, in comparison to the earlier, more universal terms.

First, Bahá’u’lláh is “Logos,” the Word of God: the revealer of God’s Word, the first Manifestation of God to present revelation in written form, and the first to reveal such a large number of teachings. The Word is supremely important to Hayden as a Bahá’í; it recalls, too, the biblical “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Proceeding from “Logos,” Hayden moves to “poet.” While Bahá’u’lláh’s poems are highly acclaimed in Persian and Arabic for the density of their language, “poet” also suggests the artistic aspect of the manifestation and is thus a showing forth of the creative attributes of God.

Next, Bahá’u’lláh is named “cosmic hero.” He is heroic in the same sense in which Christ is heroic—as the figure who takes on the suffering of the world (or the cosmos) for the sake of humanity, as Lynch has pointed out in *Christ and Apollo* (xiv). Then he is the “surgeon,” the “Divine Physician” who has come to heal the ills of the world, the most concrete and specific image given in this sequence. It recalls, too, T.S. Eliot’s image of the wounded surgeon in “East Coker,” used as a Christian metaphor. The next characterization combines the specific with the abstract, as Bahá’u’lláh is “architect / of our hope of peace” (lines 18–19). In this stanza, Hayden concisely outlines the all-encompassing nature of this revelation from “Logos” (and perhaps its related “logic” or reasoning) to artistic expression in poetry, to cosmic heroism, to skills of surgery, design, and construction.

Yet directly following the phrase “architect of our hope of peace,” Bahá’u’lláh is referred to as “wronged, exiled One,” the position at the beginning of the stanza suggesting the importance, for Hayden, of Bahá’u’lláh’s suffering and standing in sharp contrast to the preceding “hope.” The pronoun

*One* reinforces the uniqueness of the station of the manifestation as well as the loneliness of exile, but the word also paradoxically alludes to unity, which is the major theme of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. The adjectives *wronged* and *exiled* encapsule the history of Bahá'u'lláh's life, while in the next line the word *chosen* indicates that these sufferings were part of a preordained process destined to lead humanity through its "deathbed childbed age." The "agonies of knowledge" take humankind through the "auroral dark."

The manner in which Hayden has placed these abstract terms in the poem without any punctuation asks for a slow reading. The "agonies of knowledge" are demonstrated in this difficult combining of qualities. "Bestowals" suggest that truth, vision, power, and anguish are gifts from God, terms which have been redefined in the course of the poem, as Bahá'ís believe they have been redefined by the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The truth of which Hayden writes is not the political truth of the "betrayed" King and Kennedy, nor is it their vision of America with their definition of power. Nor is the "anguish" the same as the anguish of Lord Riot in section II. That pain is merely destructive, but the "anguish" Hayden sees as having been bestowed upon humankind by the manifestation is ultimately regenerative, "for our future's sake," and is, again, part of the "deathbed childbed age," the painful process whereby humankind achieves its destiny. This section of the poem also reflects the selfless purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's suffering: for "our future's sake," like Christ's suffering in the Christian revelation.

Following this section comes a direct quotation from the Bahá'í writings, where Bahá'u'lláh asserts that he was like other men until "the breezes of the All-Glorious" roused him from his slumber (*Proclamation* 57). The poetic force of direct quotation is very effective at this point because Hayden has prepared the reader adequately for it throughout the poem, including the reference to "vision" in the eighth stanza. The quotation is Bahá'u'lláh's account of receiving revelation from God. Hayden then takes up the analogy in his own words, comparing the manifestation to "a dreamer ... roused to help the helpless flee / a burning house" (lines 30–31), the fire image connecting vividly to the second section of the poem, where Lord Riot destroys and burns indiscriminately. In a sense, North Americans today are all "dreamers" and "helpless," trapped inside the "burning house" of a society that at times seems perilously close to self-destruction. The analogy of Bahá'u'lláh as the roused dreamer reflects the station of the manifestation as Bahá'ís see it, a human being infused with the Holy Spirit and so, partly human, partly divine.

The final stanza begins with the third repetition of "I bear Him witness now," another affirmation of faith, this time uniting past and future with the assertion, "toward Him our history in its disastrous quest / for meaning is impelled" (lines 33–34). That humankind is "impelled" suggests an impetus from an outside force: the manifestation of God is at once the moving force of the search and its goal: the poem achieves a cyclical effect. End and beginning

are the same—reflected, too, in the repetition of “I bear Him witness now.”

The cyclical structure recalls the contemplative exercises and the poems of Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, in lines such as “... In my end is my beginning” from “East Coker” and the following, from “Little Gidding”:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
(Eliot, *Collected Poems* 204, 222)

In section IX of Hayden’s original poem, this “first knowledge” is described as a renewal of vision:

Reclaim now, now renew the vision of  
a human world where godliness  
is possible and man  
is neither gook nigger honkey wop nor kike  
  
but man  
permitted to be man.  
(Hayden, *Collected Poems* 98)

The use of the stanza form in the final section, which is much more tightly controlled and spare on the page than that of the other sections of “Words in the Mourning Time,” also contributes to the feeling of thoughtful conclusion and order having grown out of chaos through the course of the poem’s sequence.

If we take “Words in the Mourning Time” as an expression of Hayden’s constant central position through his poetic career, we can look at his use of other contexts, such as black history, nature, art, and personal history as variations of one major theme, different perspectives on one constant vision. Thus, while “Words in the Mourning Time” treats the problems of evil and suffering in societal terms, Hayden’s perspective also allows for personal exploration.

In his poem “The Broken Dark” (*Angle* 39; *Collected Poems* 69), for example, Hayden wrestles with the problems of pain, suffering, and his own doubt before allowing himself and his reader to approach any religious answer to these problems. Here, the poet uses his own struggle with illness and pain as a means for exploring these issues. The world around his sickbed becomes, in effect, a microcosm.

The title of the poem suggests the stylistic vehicle through which the poet attempts to record his experience. The words “The Broken Dark” herald the disjointed stream-of-consciousness impressions that operate throughout the poem. The disjointedness may reflect the pain and doubt experienced by the

poet, as do the various images appearing throughout the poem. The reader moves from the image of a flower's shadow, to one of primitive religion, to an abstract concept of the poet's life as "A fool's errand given by fools" (line 12) (reminiscent of *Macbeth*), which is bolstered by a ridiculous request. From there, the reader moves back to the demons, then to a philosophical statement by a rabbi, then to the immediate situation of the hospital and a man who "Perhaps is dying" (line 22) interspersed with another echo, "Struggles in the pit. I have come back / to tell thee of struggles in the pit" (lines 20–21), reminiscent perhaps of the lines "... 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'" in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (Eliot, *Collected Poems* 16). These lines in "The Broken Dark" may refer to the dying man or, more likely, refer to Hayden himself, since the final lines of the poem lead the poet to a confrontation with his own death as "a theorem to be proved" (line 24). Yet, unlike the groaning dying man, he is free of pain and sees the religious domain, the "Healing Spirit," as "our forgiving cure." Here the microcosm takes on its universal significance, as the pronomial adjective "our" includes everyone, even the dying man, in the poem.

Therefore, although the style of the poem may seem disjointed, there is an internal non-logical ordering that leads from the primitive demons of Bali (suggested by the flower shadow on the wall)—a negative, frightening image that makes the poet see himself as a "shadow of deformed homunculus" (line 11)—to the more stoic statement, "Death on either side, / the Rabbi said, the way of life between" (lines 15–16). Finally, contemplating his own belief, the poet invokes the Arabic "Alláh'u'Abhá" (line 25), meaning "God is all-glorious." The conclusion shows a "Healing Spirit" that acts as a balm for spiritual as well as physical ills, and not only the poet but also the broken dark itself is healed by this spirit. The poet accepts the healing and forgiveness of God, no longer seeing himself "in the shadow of God's laser light— / shadow of deformed homunculus" (lines 10–11). This belief in God as the "Divine Physician" is central to the Bahá'í Faith.

"From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes" (*Angle* 116; *Collected Poems* 46) is another poem that deals with the problem of human suffering and its purpose, using a nightmare vision as the departure point.

From the corpse woodpiles, from the ashes  
and staring pits of Dachau,  
Buchenwald they come—

O David, Hirschel, Eva,  
cops and robbers with me once,  
their faces are like yours—

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From Johannesburg, from Seoul.

Their struggles are all horizons.  
Their deaths encircle me.

Through target streets I run, 10  
in light part nightmare  
and part vision fleeing

What I cannot flee, and reach  
that cold cloacal cell  
where He, who is man beatified 15

And Godly mystery, lies chained, His pain  
our anguish and our anodyne.  
(*Angle* 116)

In this poem Hayden is haunted by the spectres of victims of twentieth-century atrocities—Jews gassed in German concentration camps and victims “From Johannesburg, from Seoul.” This calling up of camps’ and cities’ names is simple but powerful, while the placing of the personal recollection and direct address, “O David, Hirschel, Eva / cops and robbers with me once, / their faces are like yours—” (lines 4–6) prepares Hayden’s leap from the global to the personal. “Their deaths encircle me,” he says (line 9). The vehicle for communicating the entrapment—a common one in Hayden’s work—is the dream. Prompted by the inescapable consciousness of this widespread suffering, the circle images of the poem are given a sinister aspect with the reference to “target streets” through which the speaker runs. As he attempts to flee what he cannot, the connection between his situation and the imprisonment of Bahá’u’lláh is developed. The line stating, “Their struggles are all horizons” (line 8) reflects the global nature of the suffering as well as a personal sense of exploration or journey brought about through the experience of suffering.

Here the poem turns towards its conclusion, The speaker runs “in light part nightmare / and part vision...” (lines 11–12), The nightmare has been well delineated, but Hayden’s “vision” is not a particularly comforting one, His final “arrival” in the poem, in the prison cell of Bahá’u’lláh, “that cold cloacal cell” (line 14), shows how Hayden deals with modern atrocities by relating them to the history of his faith. Bahá’u’lláh’s first imprisonment occurred in the *Síyáh-Chál*, the most dreaded prison of nineteenth-century Persia. Prisoners were kept in complete darkness in a pit below ground, forced to live in their own squalor with rats and other vermin, until either the prisoners died of disease, were tortured and executed, or were strong and lucky enough to survive and be released. The reference to the chain in the final stanza alludes to the huge chain that hung around the neck of Bahá’u’lláh during this imprisonment and that left permanent scars.

In Bahá’u’lláh’s cell, Hayden finds, if not an answer to the suffering, at least 13

an example that provides hope. Here “He, who is man beatified / And Godly mystery, flies chained” (line 15) and in Bahá’u’lláh’s suffering Hayden finds not only “our anguish” but also “our anodyne.” The presence and form of both anguish and anodyne reflect the two-edged nature of the dream. One sees the same dualism elsewhere in Hayden, as in the “deathbed childbed age” (1.10) of “Words in the Mourning Time.” In this dualism Hayden consistently transcends the negative in favor of a view that strives towards hope.

Hayden, in other poems, reveals a similar interest in those who have suffered for the sake of their beliefs. Black history, in particular, provides Hayden with another context in which to examine spirituality, suffering, and the moral and religious problems plaguing humankind. Critics have written at some length about Hayden’s use of history,<sup>6</sup> most prominently about his widely anthologized poem “Middle Passage” (*Angle* 118–23; *Collected Poems* 48–54). This poem uses many voices and styles to treat the slave revolt and subsequent trial of those being carried to America aboard the *Amistad*. As in Hayden’s other poems, the main figure, the slave Cinquez, transcends the suffering aboard the ship to move toward freedom and to assert his nobility of human spirit. His is a “life that transfigures many lives,” a “Voyage through death / to life upon these shores” (3.82–84). In this poem, Hayden’s effective juxtaposition of Christian imagery with the atrocity perpetrated results in tremendous irony. The first slave ships named are “Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy,” but the state of Christianity is quickly brought out in the corruption of Ariel’s song in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies,  
Of his bones are coral made,  
Those are pearls that were his eyes.  
(1.2.397–99)

Hayden’s version reads thus:

Deep in the festering hold thy father lies  
of his bones New England pews are made,  
those are altar lights that were his eyes.  
(*Angle* 3.15–17)

The use of lines from Christian hymns such as “Jesus Saviour Pilot Me” (line 20) and “Thou Who Walked On Galilee” (line 47) pushes the irony further. Even the spaces between the words on these lines force the reader to pause and consider the irony. After the Christian slaver’s prayer for safe passage “bringing / heathen souls unto Thy chastening” (lines 23–24) the hymn title appears again, this time even more fragmented. Christianity here is obviously

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6. See, notably, Davis, “Robert Hayden’s” 96–111, and Williams, “Covenant” 731–49.

dead, and the killing of the Christian crew is not lamentable in the least. What Hayden does champion is “the deep immortal human wish, / the timeless will” (3.79–80) personified by Cinquez, the rebel slave, whose life, like Frederick Douglass’s, “transfigures many lives” (3.82). The hollowness of the slavers’ claim to be “true Christians all” is devastatingly exposed.

As Bahá’u’lláh was continually exiled, so the black figures appearing in many of Hayden’s poems escape and travel, and the spiritual processes they undergo in the course of their journeys form the main thrust of the poems. For example, “Runagate, Runagate” (*Angle* 128–30; *Collected Poems* 59–61) concerns the story of Harriet Tubman and her role in leading escaped slaves to safety through the underground railroad. As he often does, Hayden uses the motif of darkness and light to advance his theme, and this motif is coupled with the process of motion in the first line: “Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness,” which soon progresses to “... and when shall I reach that somewhere / morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going ...” (lines 1, 6–7). In his study of Hayden’s poetry, John Hatcher points out that “rhythmically, the poem captures the mood of frantic flight of a ‘runagate’ (a *renegade* or escaped slave)” (*From the Auroral* 154). This journey “from Can’t to Can,” led by the undaunted Harriet (who has the nickname “Moses” with all its biblical implications) is as much a spiritual as a physical journey. The reference to the “mythic North / O star-shaped yonder Bible city” (lines 13–14) supports this reading. Further, lines such as “Tell me, Ezekiel, oh tell me do you see / mailed Jehovah coming to deliver me?” (2.23–24) reinforce the spiritual quality of this journey to freedom, with a possible echo of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” In the final lines of the poem, rife train carrying the runagates has its “first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah,” evoking the joy and thanksgiving felt by the travellers. But aside from the specific references to the Bible and to Christian deliverance, the language of the poem suggests in many sections the rhythm and repetition of gospel hymns and black spirituals. While other voices are also present, this gospel rhythm carries the poem.

Another poem that portrays a spiritually significant journey is “The Dream (1863),” (*Angle* 36–37; *Collected Poems* 66–67). Critical readings of this poem have focused mostly on the elements of black history, which obviously form the basis of the poem, but the poem contains a definite spiritual element that has been largely if not completely overlooked.

The first obvious point about the poem is that there are two distinct voices; the first is that of the narrator, who tells the story of Sinda, an old slave woman whose dream forms the focus of the poem. The second voice is that of Cal, a member of Sinda’s family, who writes letters home from the Civil War. The two voices represent two different worlds. Sinda lives a simple life in the confines of her small cabin’s yard, but her physical existence is secondary to her spiritual being, which is sustained by the dream. Cal’s world is the brutal

reality of the war, a reality he softens in his letters by uttering clichés or by asking about homely details like the fixing of the roof. The juxtaposition of these two worlds produces a striking contrast, a tension that makes the poem much deeper than it first appears.

The first clue to this depth is the title. The date is important, first because it is the year of the Emancipation Act during the Civil War. This obvious reference works well for the parts of the poem that deal specifically with Cal's world, largely shown in his letters, and it affects Sinda's material world, too. The year 1863 is also when Bahá'u'lláh announced his mission, infusing a new energy into all created things, whether or not they were aware of the source of that energy. This bears an important role in Sinda's spiritual life.

Sinda's dream focuses on this universal spiritual renewal rather than merely on the limited victories of the Civil War. The first verse paragraph sets the scene. Sinda, the old woman, has been left alone at home after the other inhabitants of the slave quarters where she lives have gone off to celebrate their liberation with "Mars Lincum's soldier boys." However, Sinda would not join in the festivities; she is waiting for some other kind of liberation:

... those  
Buckras with their ornery  
funning, cussed commands, oh they were not were  
not  
the hosts the dream had promised her.  
(*Angle 36; Collected Poems 66*)

One critic has accused Sinda of being afraid to face liberation when she is confronted with it (Davis, "Robert Hayden's" 107–8). However, it might be more accurate to say that Sinda has, in fact, a broader vision of freedom and liberation than her neighbors, a vision similar to Hayden's that sustained him through his struggles with the Black Power poets and critics in the 1960s when he was ridiculed for his more universal view of poetry.<sup>7</sup> Certainly Sinda has the strength of conviction that these soldiers, who are not particularly sensitive, do not present the kind of freedom she has envisioned. Now, after waiting alone all day, the old woman moves with difficulty across the yard: "Sinda thought she heard the drums" (line 1). Finally "the hosts the dream had promised her" are going to arrive. However, anticipation and doubt prevail because the sound of the drums is not definite.

Having anticipated the arrival of the long-expected "hosts," clearly not members of the Union army, Hayden dramatically switches to the narrative voice of Cal, a Union soldier. His letter is full of clichés: "I seen some akshun but that is what i listed for not to see the sights ha ha" (lines 14–15). Set off

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7. See Hatcher, *From the Auroral* 75–90 for more details on this controversy.



from the rest of the poem in prose and riddled with spelling, grammatical, and punctuation errors, the language of the letter sections emphasizes the different state of Cal's world. However, there are important parallel links between Sinda's and Cal's worlds, too. For example, it is evening in both sections.

Cal's statement that "More of our peeples coming every day" also relates to Sinda's dream, which is more fully developed in the following section of the poem. First, she amends her characterization of it to more of a "vision" than a dream. Hayden's word choice is significant. It is the same choice he makes to describe part of his dream in "From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes," and the word *vision* is also found in the final section of "Words in the Mourning Time," where it refers to one of the "bestowals" visited by God upon Bahá'u'lláh. Because of the recurrence of the word throughout Hayden's poetry, always given divine significance, there is good reason to suspect that the same may be true in "The Dream (1863)." An echo of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech may also be present.

The description of her vision, with "the great 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" (lines 22–25) places her dream in a perspective that transcends time and space. While Cal is serving in the Union army, Joe, judging from the final excerpt of Cal's letter ("Tell Joe I hav shure / seen me some ficety gals down here in Dixieland" [lines 53–54]) must be living at home with Sinda and her family. To see those two accompanied by Charlie, another family member sold off to a different owner to work in the rice fields many years before, makes Sinda's vision highly improbable if not impossible in the earthly realm.

In the second part of her narrative, Sinda is still listening for the sound of the drums, knowing that "this was the ending of her dream" and aware that she is close to death. She prays that she will live long enough to see those "great big soldiers" with the faces of Cal, Joe, and Charlie, come marching into her yard.

Hayden switches dramatically to the voice of Cal, leaving the reader to wonder whether Sinda will live to see her vision. In this section another link: is forged between Sinda's and Cal's worlds through use of the word *dream*. Cal writes, "the judas trees is blossomed out / so pretty same as if this hurt and trouble wasnt going on. / Almos like somthing you mite dream about i take it for / a sign The Lord remembers Us ..." (lines 34–37). The mention of the Bible in this section and the image of the blooming Judas tree remind us of a spiritual world in the midst of war, but, like Sinda's dream, it is as yet beyond reach.

In the third section of Sinda's narrative, she continues her struggle to see "the hosts the dream has promised her." She crosses the "wavering yard" and reaches a redbud (Judas) tree which is in blossom (another connection between the two worlds of the poem). The blooming of the tree also indicates the timeframe of spring, when Bahá'u'lláh made his declaration. At the tree, Sinda stops, falls to

her knees, and can go no farther, the sound of the drums still elusive. She “tried to hold / the bannering sounds, heard only the whipoorwills / in tenuous moonlight ...” (lines 44–46). Here, even the moonlight is unsubstantial. However, she expends her “brittle strength,” attempting to achieve the reality of her vision, and our final image is of Sinda fighting to get back on her feet and leave the yard, engaged in her own kind of battle.

Cal’s final section speaks on the parallel theme of death: “... no need in Dying till you die I all / ways figger,” he says (lines 51–52), then mentions marriage, and finally ends “hope to see you soon” (line 57). We leave Cal, as we leave Sinda, in the process, in the battle.

The fact that there is no clear end to either story is typical of Hayden’s work.

As a religious poet, Hayden is not so much interested in the conclusion as he is in the process. We see this emphasis over and over in his poetry—in his analysis of current events as “process, major means whereby, / oh dreadfully, our humanness must be achieved” in “Words in the Mourning Time”; in the process of the unfolding of the flower in “Night-Blooming Cereus”; in the struggle of the “naked old man / with bloodstained wings” to achieve “the angle of ascent” in the poem “For a Young Artist”; in his black history poems such as “Middle Passage” and “Runagate, Runagate.” Other images, such as Richard Hunt’s “Arachne,” also indicate Hayden’s fascination with the process of becoming, of change from one state into another.

Thus, in “The Dream (1863),” the characters are engaged in a process in many ways parallel, but Cal’s process occurs largely on the human plane, while Sinda’s process lies largely on the spiritual. Cal’s process involves the historical struggle of the Civil War to achieve the emancipation of the blacks, while Sinda’s vision indicates a process larger than this particular emancipation, since her vision does not recognize the soldiers of Lincoln’s army. Her soldiers are bigger than life and take the shapes of loved ones living near and far, or who may be dead. The details concerning the arrival of her army, the fact that its sounds are indistinct and perhaps even inaudible, suggest that she is awaiting a more distant event. If one considers the clues in the poem—the use of the loaded word *vision*, references to the army she is expecting—and ties these details in with the date so carefully noted in the title, one may well consider that there are spiritual significances in addition to the obvious references to historical events in America.

In “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)” (*Angle* 55–58; *Collected Poems* 86–89), Hayden chooses a contemporary, well-known historical figure and composes a kind of spiritual biography of his life and death, but more importantly, a chart of his spiritual development. As more than one critic has noted, the details of the poem are based accurately on details from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, but Hayden’s concern is the unfolding spiritual vision and spiritual identity forged through the life story. The subtitle “O masks

and metamorphoses of Ahab, *Native Son*” provides forceful allusions to Malcolm as an outcast in both biblical and literary terms, and indicates the process by which Malcolm’s spiritual identity is achieved. The “masks” are hinted at through the nicknames “Home Boy” and “Dee-troit Red” of section I, where “he fled his name, became the quarry of / his own obsessed pursuit” (lines 6–7). His “disguises” such as the names, the “conking” or straightening of his hair, and his role as “zoot-suited jiver” do not enable him to escape, however. “His injured childhood bullied him,” and his “skirmishes” with the “enemy” have no effect on that “icy evil” that haunted him since childhood.

The first section of the poem traces Malcolm’s early attempts to achieve identity by adopting various disguises, only “skirmishing” at this point with the “cannibal flowers of the American Dream.” The first metamorphosis occurs in section II, where first Malcolm is pictured as “‘Satan’ in The Hole,” another episode from the autobiography. Here, he has become evil itself. Yet, he is aware that “the dark that gave his life / its cold satanic sheen” is not the ultimate answer; he sees himself “floodlit and eloquent” (lines 1–2). As always, Hayden plays on images of light and darkness throughout the poem, and in this section there is even a “false dawn of vision,” when Malcolm embraces the Black Muslim faith. Malcolm, in *The Hole*, was unable to imagine what his vision of himself as “floodlit and eloquent” meant—“what the waking dream foretold”—but this metamorphosis is traced in the following section of the poem. This “racist Allah” seems to promise salvation from the white man’s God, part of that “icy evil.” Christ here is not a saviour but a creation of Calvin, who can only push Malcolm “hellward.” Malcolm’s saviour must free the blacks from “Yakub’s white-faced treachery,” recalling Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad’s history of creation, where a mad scientist named Yakub began experimentation with the pure black race and betrayed his trust by eliminating all color pigmentation, thus producing in his laboratory the abomination of the white race. While this fable is fanciful and simplistic, to Black Muslims it is a means of propagating pride in their race and of inciting hatred against whites. Having embraced this doctrine, Malcolm emerges from *The Hole* “redeemed from all but prideful anger” (line 13). At first, this emergence seems like a positive metamorphosis, but pride is the first deadly sin, and Hayden characterizes these Black Muslim beliefs as “adulterous attars” that “could not cleanse / him of the odors of the pit” (lines 14–15). “The pit” here holds the double reference to Malcolm’s solitary confinement cell and to hell, but the two images converge, since Malcolm was known as “Satan” to his fellow prisoners. In any case, the metamorphosis is not complete, as the aura of evil still suffuses the air around him.

The third section of the poem begins with “*Asalam alaikum*,” the greeting used by Black Muslims, and traces Malcolm through the period when “He X’d his name, became his people’s anger” (line 1). Here again he changes identity—from “Home Boy,” “Dee-troit Red,” and “Satan” to “X,” becoming nothing

except his people's anger. He is their rebuker, admonisher, scourger, and their shame, with the only goal being to "drive them from / the lush ice gardens of their servitude" (lines 6–7). The recurrence of the ice image here suggests the original "icy evil that struck his father down" and contrasts with the heated images of anger that characterize Malcolm. Again the Arabic greeting recurs in an ironic sense. The section ends with the statement "Rejecting Ahab, he was of Ahab's tribe," followed by the exhortation to "' Strike through the mask!'" a quotation from Melville's *Moby Dick* (167).<sup>8</sup> In the passage from which Hayden quotes, Captain Ahab is exhorting his crew to pierce the external masks of surface reality to see the deeper reality underneath. Ahab says:

"All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing put forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?" (*Moby Dick* 167)

Like Melville's Ahab, Malcolm is obsessed with the annihilation of an evil that is white. Aside from the literary allusion, however, a return to the biblical figure of Ahab may also be helpful in our discussion of the poem.

Ahab, a king of Israel, married Jezebel, who led him to worship Baal instead of the God of Abraham. By implication, though Malcolm "rejects" Ahab, seeming to embrace true religion, he is nevertheless "of Ahab's tribe," worshipping some sort of false God as represented by the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad, who claimed to be a divine prophet, did not adhere to Islamic teachings when he made his statements on black supremacy, since the Qur'án asserts that all races are equal. As another aspect of the biblical reference to Ahab, Elijah the Tishbite, a prophet of God, was sent to tell Ahab, "In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine" (I Kings 21:19). Hearing this prophecy, Ahab humbled himself: "And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly" (I Kings 21:27). And finally, because of this penance, God delivered a message to Elijah, saying, "Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? Because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house" (I Kings 21:29). Thus, the fact that Malcolm is "of Ahab's tribe" indicates that evil will come upon him.

Section IV begins with the single word *Time*, an obsession for both Malcolm and Hayden. Many times throughout the *Autobiography* Malcolm records how he knew he would die an early, violent death, evoked in this poem through the

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8. For further discussion on Hayden's use of *Moby Dick* in this poem, see Williams, "Covenant" 732, and Hansell, "The Spiritual" 26.

phrase” ‘The martyr’s time’.” Throughout the *Autobiography*, Malcolm is certain that he will be a martyr to the white man, but ironically, he was the chief trainer of “the karate killer, / knifer, gunman” (4.2–3) who eventually used this training against him. Malcolm became disenchanted with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam only after having raised it to a position of some force among black people, in America and other parts of the world.

Malcolm’s ultimate metamorphosis is brought about by his hejira to Mecca, where he discovers the true essence of Islam and sees for the first time the aberrations of Elijah Muhammad’s Black Muslim faith. For the second time, he falls upon his face before Allah—a powerful repetitive technique—this time “Allah the raceless,” who recognizes only “Oneness.” Again he is renamed, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, but he is unable to achieve everything of which he is now capable. In this sense, he is now a true martyr.

The ending of the poem exemplifies Hayden’s concern with the process of achieving religious belief, a process that is often painful; yet pain is a means of growth. That Hayden sees Malcolm becoming “much more than there was time for him to be” (4.15) indicates, first, that he was unable to spread widely his new perception and, second, hints that, had Malcolm had more time, his spiritual beliefs might have evolved even further. Perhaps this might lead logically toward Hayden’s own Bahá’í Faith, since the Bahá’í Faith sprang out of Islam in the same manner that Christianity sprang out of Judaism. Still, this is not stated directly, and the ending is not closed but open.

Finally, the poem’s division into four parts leads us through Malcolm’s metamorphoses, and the use of terms from the *Autobiography*, as well as Arabic phrases, aids us in entering Malcolm’s world. The final effect of the poem is positive, a recognition of Malcolm’s spiritual achievement rather than a lament for his death or an account of his assassination.

As we have seen, many of Hayden’s poems are what one might call “poems of process.” “Words in the Mourning Time,” “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz,” “Middle Passage,” and “Runagate, Runagate,” already discussed, fall into this broad category, and they all focus on human processes of spiritual awakening. However, at times Hayden employs symbolic objects to develop this same theme.

“The Night-Blooming Cereus” (*Angle* 24–26; *Collected Poems* 114–16), for example, uses the symbolic image of an exotic, rarely blossoming plant to develop its essentially religious theme. The poem begins with an exact, detailed description of the exotic cactus and sets the scene for the breaking of the bud into flower. Moving gradually from straight factual information to a more impressionistic and mystical view, Hayden writes:

the bud packed  
tight with its miracle swayed  
stiffly on breaths  
of air, moved

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The poet attributes more than mere vegetable powers to the plant. First, the bud contains a “miracle,” alerting the reader that its blossoming will be fraught with significance. Second, this bud seems to be “impelled / by stirrings within itself,” indicating some sort of intelligence beyond the force of nature.

Next, the poet gives his personal reactions—a mixture of repulsion and fascination—to the imminent blossoming. This dual perception is common in Hayden and is seen, notably, in the vision/nightmare of “From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes,” in the depiction of suffering and salvation in poems such as “The Broken Dark,” and in the dualism of the “deathbed childbed age” in “Words in the Mourning Time.”

The comparisons made between the cereus and other life forms move the plant towards the animal kingdom. It becomes

... snake,  
eyeless bird head,  
beak that would gape  
with grotesque life-squawk.  
(*Angle 24; Collected Poems* 114)

The transition from vegetable to animal is not complete, however, because the images suggested by the speaker in the poem are repulsive, though visually accurate. Snakes have had negative connotations since Genesis, while an “eyeless bird head” is not much more soothing. Even the sound made by such a creature would be “grotesque.”

Following these repulsive images, the speaker immediately addresses the “you” of the poem, his companion, who holds a somewhat different view of the cactus. Not overly concerned with elements of the “bizarre” seen by the speaker, the “you” is more interested in “the imminence / of bloom” (lines 23–24). Time is central here.

The two approaches, one preoccupied with the appearance of the flower and the other with its nearness, synthesize in an agreement to “celebrate the blossom” in dance, a kind of primitive ritual in honor of “archaic mysteries,” evoking the prehistoric nature of the plant, in a sense its “eternalness” or existence long before human life. Still, the two observers wait, “aware / of rigorous design,” the “miracle” of the poem’s early stanzas, which is “impelled / by stirrings within itself.” The word *rigorous* suggests the strength of the force that impells the plant.

The speaker then speculates that modern scientific instruments, effective in recording “emotions” of vegetable life, would back up his own feelings about the cereus, proving its “tribal sentience” and its “focused / energy of will.” The “tribal

sentience” builds upon the earlier references to the observers’ painting themselves and performing some sort of ritualistic dance in honor of the blossoming and combines with that association the reference to Backster’s polygraph.

The “focused / energy of will” is detailed more fully in the following stanzas, where the speaker refers to the “signalling” and “belling” of the plant’s scent. Though the watchers are not the objects of the plant’s efforts of unfolding and attraction, they are affected greatly by it and by the air “cloyed with summoning / fragrance.” The use of “cloyed,” with its implications of overabundance, and the imperative nature of “summoning fragrance” correspond to the speaker’s earlier dual reaction.

Finally, the process reaches literal fruition. All thoughts of dancing now having disappeared, the observers drop their “trivial tasks” to see the culmination, the “achieved flower,” a result of the plant’s “focused / energy of will.” In this as well as other Hayden poems, “achieve” is a prevalent and powerful expression of culmination. The process toward the achievement of “our humanness” is the subject of Hayden’s “Words in the Mourning Time,” and so “achieved” occurring as the final word in the poem’s first section is both figuratively and literally its culmination. Again, in the poem “For a Young Artist” (Angle 8–10), the old man, a mysterious figure captured briefly by humans, struggles and strains until there is “silken rustling in the air, / the angle of ascent / achieved” (lines 45–47). The achievement of flight is the culminating point, again, both figuratively and literally. Throughout his poetry, Hayden sees achievement as impossible without a “focused / energy of will.”

Indeed, in “The Night-Blooming Cereus” the achievement is finally spiritual; this is no ordinary flower. First, it has “moonlight / petals” and is a “lunar presence.” Though the flower actually does bloom at night, the wording suggests that it *is* the moonlight, a mystical presence from another sphere. Hayden combines a precise scientifically correct description of the plant, not shying away from words such as *perianth*, while he obviously intends much more than mere physical exactitude.

The reader sees the “achieved flower” only in a state of change,

still unfold-  
ing, the spike fringe of the outer  
perianth recessing  
as we watched.

(Angle 25; *Collected Poems* 115)

In the next stanza, it is already “foredoomed, already dying.” The achievement, it seems, is not primarily in the brief flowering, but in the more lasting awareness that it brings to its observers. Paradoxically, this “foredoomed, already dying” blossom makes them aware of eternity, and inspires a reverence far beyond rituals. The bloom “charged the room / with plangency,” a sound vibration

older than human  
cries, ancient as prayers  
invoking Osiris, Krishna,  
Tezcátlipóca.  
(*Angle 26; Collected Poems 116*)

The plant takes the speaker beyond human history and the earliest manifestations of religion in the world, whether Egyptian, Indian, or Incan. In the presence of the Infinite, the flower embodying the eternal, the watchers are awestruck:

We spoke  
in whispers when  
we spoke  
at all ...  
(*Angle 26; Collected Poems 116*)

The flower has become a symbol for the incarnation of the infinite in the finite, for the manifestation of God who is also the representation of the infinite in the finite world. Though its presence is brief, the rare and precious flower evokes eternity. The choice of the Egyptian, Hindu, and Incan religions from different parts of the world suggests Hayden's view of them proceeding from one source. Yet, the flower also suggests a presence "older than human / cries," earlier than the prayers or religions or rituals—the presence of God.

As a symbol of the Manifestation of God, the night-blooming cereus works well. Like rare flowers that bloom only occasionally, Manifestations of God appear in the world only at great intervals. As the blossom is eagerly anticipated, so religious prophecies have always excited believers. However, the planned response to the actual blossom is abandoned as inappropriate; in religions, the appearance of a Manifestation has never resulted in the anticipated reaction of the faithful of previous revelations. The flower blooms only according to "focused energy of will"; Manifestations of God deliver their message to humanity through their own powers, though the process is set in motion by God. Finally, the brief presence of the flower, which evokes an eternal presence, corresponds to the dual nature of the Manifestation, who inhabits a body susceptible to human agony and mortality but also manifests the Holy Spirit, which transcends the mortal realm. Thus, the flower is "foredoomed" on one plane and is also a supernatural force, a "lunar presence."

In an interview with John O'Brien, Hayden indicated that "The Night-Blooming Cereus" was a "breakthrough poem" for him (O'Brien, *Interviews 113*), probably because of his subtle yet powerful use of the flower as symbol, with consequent reconciling of the temporal and the eternal. It is also the ultimate "poem of process," expressing the evolution in the attitudes of the watchers to a state of hushed awe where they are profoundly affected by the



presence of something older than time. In this process, too, the poet is finally rendered speechless.

The poem is a symbolic and elliptical history of humankind's spiritual development, an element reflected in the form. The "focused energy of will" is echoed in the meter of the poem, where most stanzas work toward a strong syllable end of the final line. And, as John Hatcher has noted, the use of the past tense reflects "the lasting impact this epiphany has had" on the lives of the watchers (*From the Auroral* 185).

In "The Night-Blooming Cereus," Hayden coalesced the images and moved beyond limited contexts to deal with his themes on a more symbolic and universal basis. Exclusive reliance on black history would have restricted his audience and labelled him a "black poet," a title he rejected, so it was necessary for him to move beyond that limitation, in much the same way that the figures in his poems strive to move beyond their particular limitations. Hayden's poetry is, in essence, about spiritual evolution—a changed state of religious being. Perhaps this is the reason that "The Night-Blooming Cereus" is such an important poem to the poet himself. It is, at the core, concerned not merely with the changed state of the plant as it flowers; the conclusion centers upon the changed state of the watchers. This same changed state appears at the end of "Words in the Mourning Time." It is the true victory, the true vision dimly perceived by Sinda in "The Dream (1863)."

A somewhat abstract human/divine/mythical figure performs a function similar to that of the cereus in the poem "For a Young Artist" (*Angle* 8–10; *Collected Poems* 132–33). Based on the story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by Gabriel García Márquez, Hayden's version remains largely faithful to its model in fact and sequence, but its spiritual content is somewhat different. The first verse paragraph tells us that "a naked old man / with bloodstained wings" (lines 3–4) is being kept in a pigsty. The nakedness, mentioned twice by Hayden in the poem, is a change from the story, but in both the story and the poem the old man has fallen from the sky. Soon he has an audience of people poking him with a cattle prod, and he stirs, "regarding all / with searching eyes" (lines 10–11) unlike the Márquez story where the angel seems indifferent to his spectators.

The old man is, in fact, an insoluble mystery which "Neither smiles nor threats, / dumbshow nor lingua franca" (lines 12–13) can penetrate. The people's attempts to domesticate him result in failure as well: "They could not make him hide / his nakedness / in their faded hand-me-downs" (lines 16–18). They feed him leftovers, but in Hayden's poem, he eats only sunflowers and lice from his own wings, sustaining himself rather than taking in human sustenance, reinforcing his supernatural character. The sunflowers operate symbolically, suggesting power from the sun or from God.

In both story and poem, the old man is turned into a sideshow, and his "clever hosts" charge admission, while the spectators are not certain whether

this is an angel or a freak. Some cross themselves and pray for his blessing, and others catcall and “chunk” at him. At night, an important time for Hayden, the man makes ready to fly, while in the story the attempt at flight occurs in the morning. After many clumsy attempts, he is finally no more than “silken rustling in the air,” his board wings transformed, and the “angle of ascent” “achieved.” The effort that has gone into the stranger’s flight, the many failed attempts, give great impact to the choice of the word *achieved* at the very end of the poem. The achievement of the “angle of ascent,” bought through strain and effort, brings about a transformation, a metamorphosis from a heavy, awkward earthbound creature to one feather-light and soaring. Significantly, Hayden omits the final observation made by Márquez in the story, which has one of the old man’s hosts, Elisenda, observe that once he takes flight, “he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea” (Márquez, “An Old Man” 210). Hayden prefers to leave the reader with the soaring image rather than the earthbound perception.

Mythologically, the figure in this poem is the inverse of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun, melted his wings, and plummeted to earth. Instead, the poem portrays the figure’s rise rather than his fall. Symbolically, the poem also serves as an allegory for the story of Bahá’u’lláh. Just as the old man with wings appears mysteriously, suggesting a supernatural or divine origin, so Bahá’u’lláh as a Manifestation of God appeared from a spiritual origin. In the poem the old man’s wings set him apart, as does the fact that he is naked. The wings compare to the visible differences found in the Manifestations of God when they appear in the world—their actions, teachings, and innate knowledge which set them apart. In the poem, the old man’s wings are “bloodstained,” perhaps suggesting suffering, while his nakedness may suggest innocence.

As the old man is “imprisoned,” so Bahá’u’lláh was imprisoned for over forty years by Persian and Turkish authorities, who either believed him to be the promised Qa’ím of Islamic prophecies and imprisoned him to protect their own temporal positions, or who believed that he was merely a madman uttering heresy. Like the people in the poem, they were “Humane, if hostile and afraid” (line 19), in that they did not have him put to death, but exiled him farther and farther away.

In the cage, the old man watches all “with searching eyes” while he himself remains inscrutable to his spectators. Finally, he flies away, as mysterious as when he arrived. Similarly, to most people who are alive during the life of a Manifestation of God, the Manifestation’s true nature and mission remain inscrutable. They are too close to the actual event to perceive its significance. Few people recognized the station of Christ during his lifetime, though many were attracted to him (as many are attracted to the old man in the poem). Even Muhammad’s own family turned away from him. Similarly, Bahá’u’lláh’s station remained unknown to the majority of the Muslim divines of his day. Eventually the earthly mission of these Manifestations ends, and they return to the heavenly realm.

The poem can also serve as a personal spiritual or artistic allegory, tracing the struggle of any individual to attain spiritual ascent or freedom or artistic inspiration in this world. Perhaps the old man is, in a sense, the soul that is caged by the body and that may remain unrecognized. This spiritual nobility can only “take flight” again from this material world by dint of repeated and often failed attempts to become airborne. Again, it is an *achievement*, or something for which one must work.

To conclude, while Hayden, in his poetry, effectively used numerous stories, symbols, and images taken from a variety of sources, including black history, Baha’i history, contemporary American culture, slave accounts, and so on, perhaps his greatest achievement lies in his “universal” voice, which seeks “to affirm the humane, the universal, the potentially divine in the human creature.” In the following comment, also taken from the O’Brien interview, Hayden elaborates further on how the artist makes this affirmation:

And I’m sure the artist does this best by being true to his or her own vision and to the demands of the art. This is my view; it’s the conviction out of which I write. I do not set it up as an imperative for others. Poetry, all art, it seems to me is ultimately religious in the broadest sense of the term. It grows out of, reflects, illuminates our inmost selves, and so on. It doesn’t have to be sectarian or denominational. (Quoted in O’Brien, *Interviews* 115)

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