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Circus Aesthetics, Travel, History, and Mourning in the Poetry of Robert Hayden

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of African and African American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of African American Studies

Harvard University

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Werner Sollors Giovanna Micconi

Circus Aesthetics, Travel, History, and Mourning

in the Poetry of Robert Hayden

ABSTRACT

Circus Aesthetics examines the work of the African American poet Robert Hayden and engages with the problem of identifying different frameworks with which to think about Hayden's poetry and African American literature more broadly. In 1978, two years before his death, Hayden, the first African American poet to be nominated Poetry Consultant at the Library of Congress, was still struggling and fighting with the idea of being considered a "black poet" and with the socio-political implications and expectations that accompanied that label. During his address to the Library of Congress on May 8, 1978, he reiterated his discomfort at discussions of whether he was or was not a black poet and claimed that "poets too are keepers of a nation's conscience, the partisans of freedom and justice, even when they eschew political involvement." Hayden has often been analyzed and read in the context of his racial, religious, or stylistic affiliations (as an African American, a Bahá'í, or a modernist poet). His poetics, however, are inclusive and engage with the exploration of a universal ethos where alterity is examined and celebrated. *Circus Aesthetics* argues that Hayden's formal and thematic features are grounded in the African American literary tradition as well as in cosmopolitan and Universalist principles, thus making of him a rooted "transpolitan," who defies notions of national borders as well as western understandings of cosmopolitanism. Looking at Hayden's poetry through careful and sustained close readings,

this dissertation adds a new dimension to Hayden’s work by thinking of new, hemispheric ways in which to think of literature and the intersection of time, space, and history.

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To Alice, Margherita, and Sofia

In loving memory of Stiven

Introduction

Sank through easeful
azure. Flower
creatures flashed and
shimmered there—
lost images
fadingly remembered. (1-6)

"The Diver,"[1] by Robert Hayden, starts with a peaceful image of the sea, the "easeful azure." Yet, the very first word of the poem is "sank." The subject who is sinking is not initially specified. With the exception of the guidance provided by the title, who or what is sinking is unclear. The verb "to sink" can both identify the slow act of immersing oneself in a liquid, but also the act of sinking, in the way a ship sinks. It also means to disappear, to cause to fail, to decrease in value, to be "swallowed up by." It can be used metaphorically to signify the act of approaching death ("sinking").

The initially positive image provided by the azure waters in "The Diver," is, therefore, immediately marred by the potentially negative connotation of the word sinking. For at least thirteen lines "The Diver" thrives on the ambiguity of its opening word. The reader wonders whether this is a metaphorical poem about death, if the diver of the title is a real diver or an allegorical figure. In the second sentence, the marine environment already changes and becomes one of a "canyon of nightgreen emptiness" where the descent, from a slow sinking

[1] "The Diver" was first published in 1962 but, as Edward Pavlić writes, it was not inserted in the first edition of *A Ballad of Remembrance;* instead, it was published in Rosey Pool's *Beyond the Blues.* It then became a canonical piece in Hayden's oeuvre after it was published as initial piece of the collection in *Selected Poems* (1966), *Angle of Ascent* (1975), and in the posthumously published *Collected Poems* (1985)

becomes a swift one ("swiftly descended"). Already in the third sentence, the ambiguity of who is the subject of the initial sinking is cleared, as the diver encounters the relic of a "dead ship."

> Swiftly descended
> into canyon of cold
> nightgreen emptiness.
> Freefalling, weightless
> as in dreams of
> wingless flight,
> plunged through infra-
> space and came to
> the dead ship,
> carcass that swarmed with
> voracious life. (7-17)

Yet, the first three initial sentences, with their unspecified subject, generate an association between ship and diver, who become, therefore, inextricably linked by a grammatical choice. The submarine environment is from the very beginning described in a dual way. There are "flower creatures" shimmering and flashing, but, at the same time, this image of dazzling beauty is accompanied by one of "lost images fadingly remembered." Because of the lack of a clear subject in the first sentences, it is the environment that becomes the main subject. The submarine space conveys a sensorial experience that allows the reader to feel the subject of the poem and experience it.

> Freefalling, weightless
> as in dreams of
> wingless flight,
> plunged through infra-
> space and came to
> the dead ship,
> carcass that swarmed with
> voracious life. (18-25)

The exploitation of words' polyvalence is a common feature of poetry, and Hayden, in this respect, is no different from most poets. One of his main poetic strategies is precisely the use of polyvalent words to open up "vistas" of possibilities, to use one of Hayden's choice-words. This widening of our exegetical horizons is accompanied by many other broadening gestures that characterize Hayden's poetics, particularly by the expansion of time and space. The poem lacks a geographical or national referent. Space is described in its physical aspect. This could be any sea, and the sunken ship could have come from or be directed anywhere. It could have sunk in a recent past or in a distant one. Dimensions of time and space are, therefore, dilated in "The Diver."

These temporal and spatial expansions are another typical characteristic of Hayden's poetry. Wai Chee Dimock calls this "deep time." Dimock looks at the face of American literature when we remove linear chronologies and standard periodization. She advocates for a use of a "different scale, a different temporal taxonomy" ("Deep Time" 758) so that we no longer assume that units of time and space necessarily coincide, that "chronology coincid[es] with territory. Such coincidence is surely a fiction" (ibid). Deep time "produces a map that, thanks to its receding horizons, its backward extension into far-flung temporal and spatial coordinates, must depart significantly from a map predicated on the short life of the US." (759). This ultimately changes the frame within which we seek and see literary influences and connections as well as the ways in which we think in terms of "national" literatures. Dimoch challenges ideas of territorial sovereignty and national borders in many different ways. One of them, for instance, is through the dead, who have "no citizenship in any territorial nation" (*Through* 58). For Dimock looking at the "grave" provides a new timeframe within which we can think of human relations, broadening, therefore, the time

span we normally think about when thinking about life, as "unended" and "uncommenced" (ibid). Hayden, too, challenges national boundaries, for instance by giving voice to the dead, and, in the case of "Middle Passage" (1945), he pushes one step further, because the stories he brings to our contemporary moment are of enslaved people who not only have no citizenship because they are now dead, but also because they ended up with no citizenship when alive, as the status of being enslaved warranted. In this sense, Hayden's understanding of history encompasses both Dimock's as well as Foucault's questioning of monolithic historical narratives.

In "A Conversation During the Bicentennial," an interview that Hayden had with Glenford Mitchell in 1976, he explained that "I am not interested in any form of cultural nationalism, clearly. American life is a point of departure for me into an awareness of the universal." (87) In "The Diver," references to "infraspace" and words "freefalling," "weightless," and "wingless" point to a spatial dimension that seems to go beyond the earthly one and into a cosmic one. This interest in canceling national barriers is a common thread in Hayden's work. Not only this is seen trough poems that have to do with space proper, such as "Astronauts" (1978), "[American Journal]" (1978), or "Unidentified Flying Object" (1970), but it can also be seen more in general in many of his poem who often treat space as geographical and physical entities as opposed to political ones. Even poems like the series "An Inference of Mexico" (1962), examined in Chapter Two, which seems to locate itself within a national framework, still manages to transcend it by way of questioning who is the observer and who the observed, who is "entitled" to a specific space, and who is an "outsider."

Angelfish, their
lively blue and
yellow prised form
darkness by the
flashlight's beam,
thronged her portholes.
Moss of bryozoans
blurred, obscured her
metal. Snappers,
gold groupers explored her,
fearless of bubbling
manfish. I entered
the wreck, awed by her silence,
feeling more keenly
the iron cold. (26-40)

In "The Diver" the inhabitants of the physical space are "angelfish," "bryozoans,"[2] "snappers," "gold groupers," and "bubbling manfish." They are a mixture or real and imagined, human and non human creatures, painted in a landscape that is also real and imagined, human and non human. In this respect, Hayden's poetry *does not* cross borders; it is not *transnational*, because it strives to do away with concepts like nations and borders altogether, even if not always completely successfully. A better alternative that could encompass Hayden's poetics, as well as his ethos, is *cosmopolitan* because he is invested in multiple worlds, cosmoi. Dimock's notion of deep time is, therefore, to be coupled with Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo's elaboration on the concept of "black cosmopolitanism." Nwankwo works with ideas of traditional western cosmopolitanism, as well as with ideas such as "rooted cosmopolitanism" or "vernacular cosmopolitanism," but that significantly departs from them in an attempt to provide a representation of a *black* cosmopolitanism that

[2] Bryozoans are mossy, aquatic invertebrates.

engages with broader frameworks while being anchored in the specificity of denationalization and deterritorialization.

The problem with the word "cosmopolitan," even when preceded by "black" is that it unavoidably retains its western elitist aspect; people of color from around the globe have been systematically excluded from a western understanding of cosmopolitan identity.[3] While I do argue that Hayden's poetry presents a Universalist ethos, grounded in the Universalist beliefs of Hayden as a Bahá'í, I also believe that his universalism is tied to his roots. Hayden is not a citizen of many cosmoi, he is a citizen of many "poleis."[4] In this sense, perhaps, a term like "transpolitan" is better suited to talk about Hayden and to talk about black

---

[3] The term cosmopolitan has always been one based on the interplay between exclusion and inclusion. Already for Cynic Diogenes, fourth Century BC, being a cosmopolite was a negative claim because, by being a citizen of the world he was not a citizen of a specific place, and therefore not subject to its rules. Augustine, instead, believed in cosmopolitanism, but he saw a cosmopolis as a community *only* for those who loved God. Erasmus thought along the same lines, so that only people who shared his vision of national and religious tolerance could be seen as his compatriots. During the Enlightenment, many philosophers, including Hume, Voltaire, and Kant, expressed thesis in regards to the idea of cosmopolitanism. Immanuel Kant's vision of cosmopolitanism is, possibly, the one more cited and, at the same time, criticized. Kant advocated for the extension of the rights of man beyond a national framework, for a moral community as well as for a creation of a *League of Nations* and of "cosmopolitan law" where "individuals have rights as citizens of the earth, rather than as citizens of political states" (Kleingeld 1.2). However, what is problematic in Kant's and other Enlightenment's thinkers view on cosmopolitanism is their understanding of *who* these cosmopolitan human beings are. Notions of race and racial hierarchies ultimately leave out peoples of color from the enjoyment not only of "global" citizenship, but often also from their local one, especially Western one. As Cheryl Sterling argues, in the "cosmopolitan ideals of Enlightenment thinkers […] suppressed is the affective range of their myopia, their distillation of reason, and their complicity in their exploitation of darker peoples" (123). Ultimately, the question at the heart of the idea of cosmopolitanism is what Tzvetan Todorov formulates as "the relation between 'us' (my own cultural and social group) and 'them' (those who do not belong to it), the relation between the diversity of human populations and the unity of the human race" (xi). This distinction is what lies at the base of the complexity of cosmopolitanism as well as of the ideas of "rooted," "vernacular," or "black" cosmopolitanisms (see Homi Bhabha, Anthony Appiah, and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo) and represents the essence of Hayden's transpolitan poetics, which focus on humanity as well as on multiple, local cultural and geographical realities.

[4] In Greek, "polis" meant "city-state." It was, therefore, a political and spatial construct. In the space of this dissertation, I would like to use the term "polis" as, therefore, representing a local geopolitical reality, as opposed to a more anonymous, global one, such as the construct of nation can be.

cosmopolitanism. Transpolitan does away with the negative connotations of cosmopolitanism as well as with the negative connections that the term "transnational" has with the concept of "nation," which it literally embodies in the word, presupposing the "nation" as the only type of construct that needs to be "trans-ed." Even in Hayden's poems that deal with outer space, such as "[American Journal]" (1978) or "The Astronauts" (1978), we are strategically linked to earth and the human dimension and space is used as a trope to reflect on human nature. The term transpolitan also wants to embody Dimock's notion of deep time, so that the transpolitan not only transcends nations, but is also transcends certain temporal categorizations that connect western historical frameworks to the lives of people of the diaspora.

Hayden's oeuvre is also local, "microcosmic," rooted in American and African American literary and cultural traditions and history. In particular, his use of circus aesthetics, his concern with the role of the ancestor, his investment in poetics of alterity, his focus on giving voice to otherwise silent historical actors, his aestheticizing horrific experiences such as lynching, his use of folk material, all concur to make him part of a longstanding African American poetic tradition that starts with Wheatley and Dunbar, passes through Hayden, and gives us contemporary poets like Terrance Hayes, Rita Dove, Elizabeth Alexander, Harryette Mullen, Yusef Komunyakaa, Carl Phillips, or Natasha Trethewey, to name only some of the most well known contemporary African American poets.

Perhaps, we could define Hayden as a "rooted" transpolitan whose poetics embrace the local as well as the global and the universal. Kwame Anthony Appiah theorized the "rooted cosmopolitan" or "cosmopolitan patriot." His, is an attempt to bring together the idea of

cosmopolitanism with the idea of roots, arguing that one does not exclude the other. He writes that "there [is] no point in roots if you [can't] take them with you" (618). The rooted cosmopolitan is attached to her cultural tradition while "taking pleasure from the presence of the other" (ibid). If cosmopolitanism celebrates diversity as opposed to "global homogeneity" (621), Hayden's poetry is to be considered cosmopolitan as well as anchored to certain poetic traditions. Nwankwo refines Appiah's idea and departs from it by emphasizing the idea that Black cosmopolitans are not simply citizens of a world, but "a Black world more specifically, while also acknowledging and maintaining a connection to one's 'native place'" (163). Hayden's investment in the narrative of the lives of African Americans and of other "Other" characters, speaks to his belonging to a "Black world." But blackness is not Hayden's only concern, and several of his poems are also invested in exploring global themes through the exploration of often-microcosmic realities.

To return to "The Diver," as the poem, with its vertical and narrow shape, and the poetic voice proceed in their descent towards the wreck, there is a switch to the pronoun "I." The more we "sink" and the more personal the poem becomes, moving from its cosmic aspect to a microcosmic one, the personal. The sensations the diver experiences are conveyed in a direct way, causing the reader to distance herself slightly from the experience: "awed by her silence," "I yearned to find those hidden ones," "strove against the cancelling arms," "fled the numbing kisses that I craved." The reader is now participating specifically in the diver's own particular experience. This experience is dictated by the elements surrounding the diver, by the marine environment and by the "carcass" of the ship, but also by the imagination of the poetic voice, which fills the physical space of the wreck with fantastic imagines.

With flashlight probing
fogs of water
saw the sad slow
dance of gilded
chairs, the ectoplasmic
swirl of garments,
drowned instruments
of buoyancy,
drunken shoes. Then
livid gesturings,
eldritch hide and
seek of laughing
faces. I yearned to
find those hidden
ones, to fling aside
the mask and call to them,
yield to rapturous
whisperings, have
done with self and
every dinning
vain complexity. (41-61)

The use of polyvalent, rich images, as for his use of polyvalent words before-mentioned, should be considered another typical trait in Hayden's poetry, one that connects to his use of symbols and allegories. Images like the "mask" are perhaps quite common, but it is the ways they are connected to the text and what they symbolize that in Hayden is often striking. As literary scholar John Hatcher argued, in his full-length monograph on Hayden, it is the "uncommon and powerful associations" that Hayden creates that give his symbolism strength and brilliance (270). The mask, in this case, is not flung aside for the living, but for the dead, in order to "yield to rapturous / whisperings" so that the image of a conference of dead people whispering and enticing the diver adds a different association to what is commonly expected when we think of the symbolic meaning of lifting the mask, of unveiling one's true identity in order to confront the living, not the dead.

The use of symbols and symbolic meaning are the main characteristics of Hayden's poetry. Using literal and figurative images, "imaginative adjectives" and "imaginative nouns," universal and particular symbols (Hatcher 268-71), Hayden's poems are expansive because they reach not only beyond the literal meaning of the words used, which is a characteristic of poetry, but also beyond common and given associations and paradigms. A mask, therefore, does not only connect us to ideas of identity construction and honesty, for instance, but it also connects us to another geography, underwater, in communion with the dead. We could even think of the mask as a symbol of life, which must be cast off when encountering death.

Symbols like "the peacock" (in the "Peacock Room" (1971) and "The Islands" (1978) or "raw-head-and-bloody-bones" (in "Night, Death, Mississippi" (1966) and "The Peacock Room"), show us the extent to which Hayden uses original imagery as well as traditional one in interesting ways. In "The Peacock Room," for instance, the peacock is associated not only with life, vanity, or Christian faith, its common symbolic meanings, but it is also associated with death. "Raw-head-and-bloody-bones" is certainly associated with childhood memories in "The Peacock Room" but it is associated with sheer horror in "Night, Death, Mississippi." Hence, not only we are destabilized by the connection these images create, but we are also denied a clear catalogue of what these symbols mean. We don't have a clear taxonomy; we cannot easily make out meaning, not even within the oeuvre itself, because their meaning is ever changing.

Hayden's vivid images are not only expressed through symbols, but also, as I have already mentioned, through imaginative adjectives and nouns, and figurative images that "transcend perception and imply attributes beyond the senses" (Hatcher 271). The adjective

“drunken” in “drunken shoes,” for example, asks for a sensorial response to the poem, as the referent is hard to grasp. What are “drunken shoes?” Drowned shoes? Or drowned shoes that move around without following a clear path? If we cease searching for meaning, however, we are left with the image, which even if unexplainable, I am sure is as vivid in the mind of any reader as it is in mine. Other images such as “the barbarous multifoliate sea” (“Veracruz” (1962)), “turkeys like feather- / duster flowers” (“Market” (1962)), “the gun-metal priestess” (“A Ballad of Remembrance” (1948)), “My jungle arms” (“The Tattooed Man” (1982)), “Flame trees” and “peacock-flower mantel” (“The Islands” (1978)), or “the calcined stillness” (“Astronauts” (1978)) illustrate Hayden’s researched and imaginative vocabulary and style.

Hatcher notes that not only objects and nouns are symbolic in Hayden, but also settings: “they connote stories, but each is also pointedly geared to serve as a symbol of human attitude or condition” (274). This is true, for instance, for Paradise Valley, the settings of “Elegies for Paradise Valley” (1978), where space is used to evoke people’s lives and to mourn them. “The Peacock Room” is another example of a poem where setting speaks of the nature of man as well as to the relationship between life, death, and art. In “Night, Death, Mississippi,” setting is also symbolically mirroring the horrifying and non-redemptive attitude of the protagonist’s family.

It is, therefore, in these complex symbolic images that the meaning of “The Diver” should be sought, as it is often the context that ultimately dictates interpretation. If, for instance, one reads “The Diver” through a psychoanalytical lens, as literary scholar Maurice J. O’Sullivan suggests it has been done in many readings of the poem, one can interpret it in terms of a descent into the inner self, a journey into the diver’s ego, which concludes itself

with an act of voluntary ascent that could be read either as the achievement of one's self-knowledge, or the re-emersion from that introspective journey towards reality. If one, however, reads the poem in light of either Hayden's racial identity, or in light of some of his works, such as "Middle Passage," one can have a completely different reading experience. For example, references to "bubbling manfish," coupled with references to "iron" and "metal," with the sentence "I yearned to find those hidden/ones, to fling aside/the mask and call to them," as well as with the desire to seek an embrace "numbing kisses," and the overall ghastly feeling caused by the images described by the poetic voice, can make the reader visualize the "carcass" of a slave ship and the diver searching for his ancestors among those "cancelling arms" that surround him. While the ship described is a modern, metal ship, where people had a social life, wore shoes and garments, and sat in "gilded chairs," the subtle references to darker images cause the reader to overlap the relic of a cruise ship with a more "hidden one." Hence, while the ship may not be the actual relic of a slave ship, it seems as if the diver mixes and conflates images, reminding us that all the sunken ships could potentially be sunken slave ships, and all the dead "manfish" could be dead enslaved people. In and of themselves, therefore, these images are not necessarily related to the middle passage, yet it is precisely the reader's historical knowledge coupled with the above-mentioned fact that that the reader is initially drawn into the poem by the absence of a narrative subject and by a multiplicity of symbols and images, which connects this poem to the middle passage.

However, if, for instance, we take a brief look at Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" (1973) we can see how many of the images used by Hayden are echoed by Rich, so much so that one could posit a line of influence from Hayden to Rich. As is the case with

Hayden, also in this case the standard reading of the poem is guided by the reader's knowledge of the author and by the reader's expectations of what Rich, as a woman and a radical feminist, is trying to convey. Both poems have as a subject the figure of the diver (which in both poems is un-gendered) and in both there are obvious references to depth, to the colors blue and green, to rotting, to the ship's instruments, to the ghastliness of the situation. Both also visually convey the sense of a vertical descent and express the idea that the diver is diving for a specific reason, to search for something that is in both cases not clearly identified. More significantly, both poems talk about the sensations that inhaling oxygen from the oxygen tanks give—a sensation causing numbness, and causing to have ghastly perceptions while in the hold of the ship. "Diving into the Wreck," just like "The Diver," if read by a reader who does not know Rich, could be interpreted in a variety of ways. The symbolisms of the "diver," the "ladder," the "body-armor," or, more in general of air and water, as well as the ideas of "power" and of fighting against the power of the sea alone, can have multiple meanings and interpretations, and it is only because we know who Rich is that we read the poem in light of her feminist work and we interpret those symbols and assign specific meanings to certain particular signifiers. This is, however, not simply a matter of "the author" and "authorial intent," but, rather, it is due to the use of symbolic imagery, which always requires to be interpreted. Depending on context and the knowledge of a specific reader, the images will tell different stories to different readers. In Hayden's poetry, this is required most of the times as the majority of his works can be considered symbolist. As Hayden said: "I suppose I think of myself as a symbolist of a kind, and symbolism is a form of romanticism by definition. I've often considered myself a realist who distrusts so-called reality" (121).

“Sleep desiring sleep.” Repetition is probably the most prominent formal feature of Hayden’s poetry. Almost every poem includes at least one repetition, if not more. Hayden uses repetition of various types in order to create inter- and intra-textual connecting threads among and within his work. It is a formal device that structures and provides cohesiveness to his oeuvre. At the same time, however, repetition also unsettles our expectations as readers, particularly when it comes to “meaning.” From poem titles such as “Rungate Rungate” (1966), or “From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes” (1966), to the repetition of words, articles, and prepositions, such as “No More. No More” (“The Peacock Room”) or the adnominatio “Zingaros: Tzigeune: Gitanos: Gypsies” (“Elegies For Paradise Valley”), repetition usually carries within itself emphasis as well, formally, the lengthening of the line and, consequently, the lengthening of what is being repeated. It forces the reader to stop, pause, and think about the meaning of what is being repeated, at the very least for the lengthened duration of time it takes to repeat the words, if not, hopefully, longer.

Repetition, however, also extends to repetition of key metaphors and motifs, which, together with formal repetitions, thickens the underlying web of connections between poems. In his use of repetition as a structuring element, Hayden falls in line with high modernists such as Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot. We have already seen the repetition of the use of the image of the peacock or of “raw-head-and-bloody-bones.” But even the repetition of a word, such as “inference,” in the title of “An Inference of Mexico” and in the text of “Invisible Circus” (1948), creates a connection between Hayden’s travel poems and his circus ones, so that we can think of the act of inferring as the act that the poet does when dealing, for example, with a spectacle, be it a touristic one, or a circus performance.

Repetition and variation are also the constituents of rhythm. The repetition of a certain sound or letter provides rhythm to the line and to the poem. For instance, if we look at the first two lines of "eine kleine nachtmusik" (1948):

> The siren cries that ran like mad and naked screaming women
> with hair ablaze all over Europe, that like ventriloquists

we can see how consonance and alliteration, the sounds /s/, in "siren," "cries,' and "screaming," /r/ in "siren," "cries," "screaming," "hair," "Europe," and "ventriloquists," or /k/ in "cries," "like" and "naked," provide rhythm to the lines so that, as we will see in Chapter Three, they "sound" like Mozart's eponymous serenade. Most importantly, perhaps, repetition provides an oral quality to Hayden's poems, a characteristic that leads to a sense of the theatrical and the performative, which I consider formal characteristics of African American Literature.

The poetry of Hayden locates itself firmly within the African American literary tradition, a tradition that seems to be grounded in formal the aspects of drama and literary performance. The poems analyzed in this dissertation all have in common a certain aspect of theatricality. Through the use of polyphony and antiphony, through the way in which setting is evoked and poems are structured, the poems often seem to be representing and enacting a spectacle. This feeling is usually strengthened by elements in the various poems that recall art and performance itself, whether it is the ekphrastic reading of a visual source, the performance of a local festivity, or one in a circus, or even in the comings and goings of daily lives. In many instances, in Hayden's work as well as in many other texts by African Americans, these tropes could be considered under the label of "circus aesthetics".

If we briefly browse an anthology of African American literature, from its very beginning we find the need to "stage" history, to re-tell it from the African American point of view, coupled with the need to speak one's own voice. Often, African American literature speaks, it gives voice, often literally in the shape or form of a text, to people who were, by law, voiceless. From the idea of the slave narrative and the autobiographical I, to techniques of call and response, or jazz, just to name a few, the texts of African American authors seem to perform, and are often theatrical. When, for instance, we think of Phillis Wheatley, and her letters, or her constant salutation and dialogue with the reader and/or with her muses, we see how the phatic functions of language are often present and make the writings of African Americans alive. If we consider the oratory tradition from Frederick Douglass to Marcus Garvey, Nat Turner, and David Walker, to name only a few, the problem of the need of a voice for and from African Americans is one that continues to our day. Works like Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) or James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) make of performance, once again, one of their main subjects, as well as exhibiting forms that are theatrical in and of themselves, as in "Bona and Paul." By no means am I trying to argue that performance in literature is something exclusive to African American literature, nor that it is something that cannot be found outside of African American literature. What I am arguing is that these are, however, *consistently* found in African American texts, so much so as to represent one of the main characteristics of African American literature itself.

Hayden's poetry situates itself within this tradition by exhibiting a theatrical quality coupled with an interest in alterity and in history. Chapter Three, for example, examines the poems "Figure" (1955) and "Night, Death, Mississippi." They are both poems about

lynching. Eugene Redmond, in *Drumvoices* (1976), writes that "much of the subject matter of black poetry is unpleasant, since it is pervaded with the weighty memory and impact of slavery […] Practically every black poet since the end of the Civil War has written a poem about lynching" (8). I suggest that Hayden's lynching poems are characteristically African American because of their refusal of sentimentalism, their depiction in the most naked of ways, hard, lucid insight into the lynching, and, in some case, for their aestheticization of the lynching. "Figure," for instance, anticipates Elizabeth Alexander's "Narrative: Ali. *Round 7. Dressing Room Visitor*" and echoes Ralph Ellison 1940's "The Birthmark," for its naked depiction of the brutality of a lynching. "Night, Death, Mississippi," instead, can be compared to Jean Toomer's "Portrait in Georgia" in *Cane* for the aestheticization of the lynching. "Night" is also characterized by its theatricality; the polyphony, the lack of a visualization of the lynching itself, and the oral quality of the poem, built around direct and indirect speech, make of it a theatrical piece. I am citing these poems as examples of a line of influences that goes from Dunbar to Hayden to Alexander, and that places Hayden within the African American literary tradition.

Hayden's poetry is also characterized by a modernist style and by the use of tropes of modernity. It represents a refusal of stasis and is about movement. Transpolitanism, as embodying transhistoricity as well as transnationalism, characterize Hayden's stanzas. Whether within the U.S., to Mexico, to the coasts of Africa three centuries ago, or to another planet, the idea of going "beyond" is omnipresent in Hayden's poetry. Together with the refusal of portraying his poetic personas and/or his poetic voice as static and immobile, Hayden's poetry also denies America itself some solidity and roots. This sense of movement seems to stem from a sense of discomfort, from the inability of finding stability and

rootedness and is, in this sense, a trope of modernity. As a result, the poetic voice seems to be constantly and "shiftingly" trying to find and conquer the "once Absolute Otherwhere." As literary scholar Vera Kutzinski posits,

> Hayden's best poems are preoccupied with processes of *displacement*, both in historical and literary terms. For example, he displaces traditional concepts of order (unity) and of time (linearity) as they manifest themselves in the form of certain literary and historical (or historiographical) convention. (173 emphasis mine)

While Kutzinski looks at "displacement" from the point of view of a linguistic strategy adopted in order to "change the texture of history" and displace authority of a "controlling consciousness," in particular in "Middle Passage" (174), I find displacement a much broader theme in Hayden's work, so much so that it can be viewed as one of the contradistinguishing traits of his poetry. It is expressed both at its formal level, in the ways which Kutzinski argues, but also at a thematic level, where the displacements are both geographical but also psychological and emotional, and where they expand our sense of geography and time by destabilizing the historical connections we are accustomed to make. Delia Caparoso Konzett explains how "the combined question of dislocation and ethnicity [are] a key feature of modernism." Transnationalism becomes "a significant ingredient of a variety of local modernisms […] informed by experiences of dislocation and ethnicity" (12). It is in this way that we can think of Hayden's poetry as modernist and transpolitan, invested not only in destabilizing time and space, but also in the psychological and emotional elements of dislocation.

Hayden's poetry is not only modernist because of its investment in movement and dislocation. It also presents multiple traits of what we now refer to as "high modernism," so that, in it, we can see influences of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, H.D.

Auden, W. B. Yeats, or T. S. Eliot, particularly in Hayden's earlier and more "baroque" poems. It uses different registers and vocabulary, it is self-reflexive and self-referential, it focuses on words in and of themselves, it is literary, ironic, opaque, compact, and it presents syntactical difficulties. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the traits of modernist poetry, nor it is an exhaustive list of Hayden's modernist traits, which combine the new with the traditional. It is simply meant to give an idea of the ways in which Hayden's poetry can be considered traditionally modernist.

However, Hayden's is also a poetry that is *Afro*-Modernist. Its modernism is rooted in the African American literary tradition: it negotiates the tension between the personal and the collective, it is invested in the ancestors and in the folk tradition, it looks at history, society, and political realities, it gives voice to the voiceless. Redmond thinks that "the reader should think of the folk world as one that constantly hovers over the whole of Afro-American literary and cultural life—sometimes calling it to task, other times providing it with just the needed *lift* and magic" (16). In "Richard Wright's Blues," Ralph Ellison talks about how in Wright "two worlds have fused, two cultures merged" asserting how Wright's literature is the product of Western and modernist aesthetic influences, but that these are accompanied by "folk-art" ("Richard Wright's Blues"). The same could be argued for Hayden, who, mixes Western and African American aesthetics and themes. For Craig H. Werner and Sandra G. Shannon, who provide an overview of the "Foundations of African American Modernism," in *The Cambridge History of African American Literature,* African American modernism is defined by double-consciousness, seen as "a central theme and a structural principle for many African American modernist texts" (243). In Hayden's case, this can be seen, for instance, in his travel poems or in his circus poetry, where there is a

constant interplay and tension between being "other" and being "othered," between beauty and horror, between "high" and "low" forms of art.

Werner and Shannon also identify as one of the founding elements of African American modernism the fact that "black modernists certainly shared the general sense of psychic and social alienation [of white mordernists]. Their sense of the origins, meaning, and possible responses to the malaise, however, grew directly out of the specific circumstances of African American history" (242). While this may be true, it also flattens the artistic experience of African American authors and undermines their role in the world and in American society as fully functional human beings with an interest in politics, society, and national and international events. Hayden's poetry is invested in the global as well as in the local. To be more precise, it talks about the global by looking at different local realities, different "poleis," in various moments in time. Its modernist aesthetics are used to discussing the history of African American key figures, of men and women at the margins of society, of performers and of common people, of works of art. We have poems like "Words in the Mourning Time" (1970), which deals with the war in Vietnam, or poems like "The Islands," which looks at the story of a single Jamaican woman dislocated to another Caribbean island, or ones like "Astronauts" which looks at outer space, the "once absolute Otherwhere," and so on. We ultimately need to think outside of the paradigmatic traits of white or black modernisms, as Hayden and most African American poets reside precisely in "between" these definitions, and their poetics cannot be contained by an either/or approach.

A quick word should be spent in thinking about the trajectory of Hayden's poetics, particularly given the length of his career, which started in 1940 with the publication of

Heart Shape in the Dust and finished in 1982, with the posthumous publication of the second edition of *American Journal*.

> I want form and content—technique and subject-matter—to be interactive and re-enforcing and enhancing the other in my poems. I value design, pattern, definite, though not necessarily conventional, forms and [?] with the limits of a form. Whether I write free or "regular" verse, I try for strong rhythms that emphasize theme, hearing the words, the lines, as I compose. Each poem is for me, in Whitman's phrase, "a language experiment" and a discovery of new possibilities. (Robert Hayden, Hayden Papers Box 29, Folder 24).

During these forty-two years, Hayden published ten volumes of poetry. While his style invariably changed with the years, his foundational beliefs, what he wrote in his diary in 1946, remained unchanged. Hi first volume of poetry, *Heart Shape in the Dust*, is described by almost every critic as the work of an apprentice whose poems are "pointedly imitative" (Hatcher 95). Pontheolla Williams—one of the three scholars to write a monograph on Hayden, together with John Hatcher and Fred Fetrow—describes the poems as "proletariat protest poems" (15), which reflected an early Marxist leaning. Hayden himself says about it that "it was the work of a younger poet, and there are echoes of other poets in it. It was full of, you know, protest poems, and it was full of poems that were primarily concerned with racial themes" ("A Certain Vision" 98). It is Hayden who, ultimately, drops the poems in the volume altogether never republishing them in any other collection. However, in spite of their being "dated and repetitious," as Arthur Davis writes (qtd. in Hatcher 95), Hatcher warns us that in *Heart Shape in the Dust* "one can discern the themes, and even some of the stylistic features of Hayden's later verse" (95). James E. Smethurst is probably the scholar who spends the most time on the volume, and examines Hayden in relation to the Communist Left, which he renounced early in his career, and looks at these early poems as examples of

a poetics that descends directly from Countée Cullen, Sterling Brown, and Langston Hughes (191).

It is with *The Lion and the Archer* (1948) that we are able to trace a consistent and cohesive formal and thematic trajectory in Hayden's work. Within every chapter of this dissertation, which explores Hayden's poetry thematically, the poems are analyzed in chronological order in order to give a sense of this stylistic change over time. In rough, bold terms, we could say that Hayden moved from a "baroque" aesthetics towards what poetry scholar Marjorie Perloff defines as poetics of "indeterminacy."

Hayden defines his baroque period as a period in the forties "in which my poems were rather heavily ornamented […] The kind of imagery and the kind of texture that I tried to create was […] more involved, for one thing, more heavily symbolic" (106). Hayden's poetics will never reach a level of full indeterminacy, as we always find some form of coherence even within his most complicated symbolic structures, yet, the more the poet matures, and the more this immediate identification with the symbolic structures starts slipping away, the poems become more "indeterminate." This might seem counterintuitive because his baroque poetry was much more heavily symbolic than his later poems. However, as Perloff writes about T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922), it has, "despite its temporal and spatial dislocation and its collage form, a perfectly coherent symbolic structure" (13). The same can be said for Hayden's early baroque period where, even if at times convoluted and "obscure," his poems did indeed follow a cohesive symbolic structure. For example, we will see in Chapter One that poems like "The Lion" (1948) produce a clear symbolic and allegorical play and the symbolism remains cohesive and identifiable. When we move to "The Tattooed Man," at the end of the chapter, the symbols used are more

indeterminate and leave open multiple avenues of interpretation. Eventually, the reader believes that *an* understanding of the poem has been achieved, but I would argue that, given the multiple layers present in Hayden's later poem (more than in his earlier ones), perhaps only *one* meaning has been achieved, although we are denied a conclusive "revelation" (Perloff 11). If we return to "The Diver" for a moment, which represents one of Hayden's mid-career poems, we can see how the poem gestures towards indeterminacy:

> Yet in languid
> frenzy stove, as
> one freezing fights off
> sleep desiring sleep;
> strove against the
> cancelling arms that
> suddenly surrounded
> me, fled the numbing
> kisses that I craved.
> Reflex of life-wish?
> Respirator's brittle
> belling? Swam from
> the ship somehow;
> somehow begun the
> measured rise. (62-76)

The deeper we go into the reading of the poem, and go underwater, the more we are confused as to what the meaning of the poem is. We look for an answer and, to quote Perloff, "as readers, we are thus left in a state of expectancy; just at the point where revelation might occur, the curtain suddenly comes down" (11). The moment in which the narrator is hoping to get the kisses he craves, the respirator informs him that he needs to resurface, and so he begins his "measured rise" leaving us with questions and with no answers.

This type of indeterminacy can be seen in most of Hayden's more personal poems, such as "'Mystery Boy' Looks for Kin in Nashville" (1970) or "The Peacock Room" where

symbols like the "doll" or the "peacock" provide multiple possibilities of meaning, but no real answer. In a poem like *"42nd Street Times Square and All* (1955), inspired by Williams Carlos Williams's type of imagism, we can see the beginning of Hayden's dissolution of images, and just like in "Spring and All," "it becomes impossible to decide which of the associations are relevant and which are not" (18). Later on, the indeterminacy of Hayden's poems becomes more subtle, less obvious, and for this reason perhaps more indeterminate. In a work like "The Performers" (1970), for instance, we believe we are given a complete understanding of the symbolic structure of the poem, yet, we encounter the lines "and iron paper apple of iron I fall / through plateglass wind onto stalagmites below" (7-8). While it may seem clear to the reader that the poem is trying to represent the narrator's metaphorical act of "falling," we are left to wonder, where is he falling? What is this fall a metaphor for? The poem provides no answer.

American Journal (1978, 1982), the last of Hayden's volumes, seem to contradict this trend towards indeterminacy and to privilege a more historically grounded type of narrative and celebration of not only the human and the universal, but also of historical figures such as Paul Robeson, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and many more. However, even when historically and thematically grounded, many of the poems, as well as the overall volume, gesture towards indeterminacy thematically through their blurring of our temporal and geographical lines but also, in Perloff's sense, through a form that is invested in saying as much as it in invested in *not* saying anything. The dissolution of language is, for instance, represented by the alien's speech in "[American Journal]" or by the mute, invisible faces of the astronauts in "Astronatus:" "faceless in visors— / mirrormasks reflecting / the mineral glare and / shadow of moonscape" (2-5).

At the same time, Hayden's poetics of indeterminacy are coupled with his insistent interest in history, so that we often seem to have a clear historical referent to guide our reading process. Yet, even the historical referents, while providing us with an apparently cohesive symbolic and referential structure, often denies us cohesive and stable meaning by questioning traditional historiography, as we will see in particular in Chapters Three and Four.

In May 2013, Amiri Baraka wrote a review of *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of African American Poetry* (2013), edited by Charles Henri Rowell. Rowell positions Hayden, together with Gwendolyn Brooks and Melvin B. Tolson as "precursors" to today's African American poets, arguing that it is these three poets who ultimately provided today's poets with their aesthetics and with the freedom to write the poetry that they want to write.

Baraka argues that Rowell is creating a line of descent that privileges one taste over another, and that he is living out "precursors" like Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, or Margaret Walker. One must acknowledge this point and, perhaps, agree with him. However, what Baraka's review ultimately highlights is how African American literature, and poetry in particular, is still subject to "race" politics and debates. With regards to Hayden specifically, Baraka writes:

> To get a closer view of where Rowell comes in, look at the quote that he gives from the poet he constantly cites as poetic mentor and as an example of what great poetry should be. The quote is where Rowell got the title of the book, *Angles of Ascent*:
>
> He strains, an awk-
ward patsy, sweating strains
      leaping falling. Then —
>
>   silken rustling in the air,
the angle of ascent

achieved.

— From *For a Young Artist,* by Robert Hayden

> Rowell says this is an image for the poet's struggle and transcendence. But Lord, I never did see myself or the poets I admired and learned from as awkward patsies! In 1985, Rowell had Larry Neal on the cover of his literary magazine *Callaloo*, after Larry's death from a heart attack at forty-three. You can look in the magazine and see that Larry Neal was no "awkward patsy." Or that after leaping / falling we would not be glorified by some unidentified "silken rustling in the air, / the angle of ascent / achieved." Actually it sounds like some kind of social climbing. Ascent to where, a tenured faculty position?

Thirty-one years after Hayden's death, Baraka's review still holds the same raucous anger his comments on Hayden had during the Black Arts era. Luckily, commentaries like these on Hayden are now, hopefully, only a memory, and should be read as a remnant of a past period. Long gone are the times in which Hayden was criticized for wanting to be simply a "poet" and not necessarily a "black poet." Thanks to his stand on this question, many contemporary African American poets can today be the poets they want to be. Michael Harper and Anthony Walton edited an anthology of African American poetry, *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans since 1945,* and they pose the following driving question in their introduction: "How many worthwhile black artists "fell in the cracks" of mainstream recognition" (3)? They argued that had it not been for poets like Hayden, who took a stand and refused to subsume his poetics to the requirements of what a black poet should sound like, today's poets would not be able to write what they write in relative freedom. This is why, "the anthology uses the work and career of Robert Hayden as a kind of signpost in sensibility—call it modern, call it contemporary" (3).

Long gone are also the times in which the criticism on Hayden was either centered on proving that his poetry *was* about race or *was not* about race (positions which led to a construction of a Hayden canon that is almost double. On the one hand you have anthologies

that privileged poems rooted in African American culture and history, while on the other, there are selections of poems that try to avoid race when possible[5]). Contemporary scholarship on Hayden is finally managing to focus on both aspects of Hayden's poetry and is careful to define in what ways the African American identity of Hayden shaped and influenced his modernist poetics.

Some of the contemporary studies that engage with Hayden as a modernist poet are Eben Wood's and Brian Conniff's. Woods proposes that "Hayden directly engaged the vexed relationship between modernity and race, grappling with the big problem—the problem and meaning of Western civilization as a whole and the relation of Negroes and other minority groups to it" (204), ultimately arguing that Hayden's modernism is rooted in history and in his articulation "of race as a historical form." (208). Brian Conniff, instead, looks at Hayden from the point of view of his literary "ancestors" and examines the influence of T. S. Eliot's poetics in Hayden's oeuvre, arguing that, while Eliot's influence is visible in many of Hayden's very early works, "Middle Passage" represents a breakthrough because it shows how Hayden tried (and succeeded) to re-elaborate Eliot's influence in order to use him both as inspiration but also as someone to write against or challenge. Conniff argues that Hayden played "a major role in the emergence and development of […] 'post-traditional' poetry

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[5] For instance, *I am the Darker Brother* (1997) includes a wide variety of Hayden's works, including 'The Whipping" and "Those Winter Sundays," "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home," " A Ballad of Remembrance," "Middle Passage," "Frederick Douglass," and "Rungate Rungate." Dudley Randal''s *The Black Poets* (1985), however, includes mostly "race" themed poems, like "Middle Passage," "Rungate Rungate," "A Ballad of Remembrance," "The Ballad of Nat Turner," "Full Moon," "The Diver," "The Wheel," and "In the Mourning Time." Notable is the anthology *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep* (1994), edited by Michael Harper and Anthony Walton, which includes twenty poems by Hayden, from the "classics" to titles like "The Astronauts" and "The Islands." Rita Dove's *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, includes "Middle Passage," "Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday," "Frederick Douglass," and "Those Winter Sundays." Helen Vendler's *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, only includes "Those Winter Sundays."

[which] is largely informed by its author's paradoxical stance towards literary tradition" (489). Ultimately, like Wood, Conniff also argues that Hayden's poetry is rooted in Hayden's treatment of history and race, which, in very modernist fashion, he explores through a variety "of contending voices" (490).

Miriam Kuroszczyk, in her 2012 *Poetic Brokers*, compares the poetry of Robert Hayden and Melvin Tolson, and argues that both poets "have developed oeuvres that are truly modern in the sense of 'making it new' in form and content as they generate cosmopolitan truths from their cultural roots" (1). Ultimately, Kuroszczyk argues that Hayden's transnational modernist aesthetic is informed by "a religious universalism (Bahá'i faith)" (7). She suggests that Hayden's poetry should be considered "in the context of a universal aesthetic that transcends the boundaries of race in order to illuminate the human experience" without forgetting, however, that Hayden does not reject his African American identity, rather, "in his poetry he creates references that value blackness as *one part* of an organic whole" (37). While Kuroszczyk argues that Hayden's modernist aesthetics are based on his idea of universalism, and that race seems to be a thematic element, I argue that, together with cosmopolitanism, Hayden's aesthetics *are* rooted in the African American *literary* tradition as well as in the appropriation of "cultural content and literary form from Europe, Africa, and America" (10). As Jahan Ramazani posits,

> Central modernist strategies — transnational collage, polyglossia, syncretic allusiveness — are 'practices of displacement' that instance this cross-cultural generation of meanings. Interstitial concepts of culture — hybridization and creolization, contact ones and diaspora identities — are well suited to modern and contemporary poetry's translocal conjunctures and intercultural circuits. (28)

Hayden's poetry presents all the characteristics Ramazani define as "central modernist strategies" spread around his oeuvre, in poems such as "Day of the Dead" or "A Ballad of Remembrance," "Middle Passage," etc. where polyglossia and syncretic allusiveness are core parts of the poems. For instance, in "The Islands" Hayden combines a traditional Western form, such as the aubade, with the imagery of the Caribbean Islands and the allusion to the theme of slavery, as well as other allusions to Western mythology and culture such as "the furies," or the symbol of the peacock.

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A quick word should be spent on my use of the terms "other," "alien," "alterity," or "difference." I use these terms, often interchangeably, to refer to the practices of creating inferior, marginal, and subordinate subjects in order to justify positions of power and domination over them. In some instances, these are the direct result of imperial and colonial practices, particularly when the other is connected to questions of race. In other instances, the other is simply non-conforming to society's norms. This is often the case with the category of the "freak" or of the literal "alien." In either case, the discourse that the textual presence of the other generates is one of "othering" practices, which are exclusionary practices.

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When Hayden won the Grand Prix at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in 1966 with *A Ballad of Remembrance*, he was praised by the judging committee with the following words:

> a remarkable craftsman, an outstanding singer of words, a striking thinker, a *poète pur-sang.* He gives glory and dignity to America through deep

> attachment to the past, present and future of his race. Africa is in his soul, the world at large in his mind and heart. (q.td in Hatcher 35)

I believe these words sum up Hayden's poetry to the letter. *Circus Aesthetics, Travel, History, and Mourning in the Poetry of Robert Hayden* begins with Hayden's circus poems, a set of poems that has never been considered as connected to one another. The analysis of poems such as "Invisible Circus," "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves" (1970), or "The Tattooed Man" show Hayden's intentional focus on circus tropes and aesthetics. The chapter is meant to be an introduction to Hayden's poetics, characterized by their investment in art and the relationship between art and life and between art and its performance, as well as in alterity and othering practices.

The second chapter traces the connections between other poems that have never been considered in connection to each other. I define these poems as "travel poetry." When taken together the poems highlight Hayden's transpolitan ethos and his interest in expanding geographical and historical boundaries. The poems in this chapter, like "An Inference of Mexico," "A Ballad of Remembrance" or "Astronauts," not only place the "traveller" in touch with the locals, but they also place the traveller in touch with its inner self, and the journeys that are chronicled are both interior as well as geographical, in the past, present, and in the future. The chapter highlights how Hayden's travel poetry is one that fits the paradigm of African American travel literature through the constant interplay between practices of othering and being othered as well as through the thematic and stylistic tension existing between horror and beauty. This leads to both an aestheticization and exoticization of horror in line with western paradigmatic travel literature practices as well as a departure from them, where beauty is, instead, used to highlight and critique horror.

History and its temporal and spatial repercussions is the subject of the third chapter, which investigates the relationship between history and poetry. Hayden's poems not only become a sort of time travelling mechanism, but they also become the locus where past and present intersect and where the past *becomes* the present. Hayden's historical poems span in time and space to highlight micro and macro aspects of history in order to present stories that narrate personal as well as collective dimensions of life and culture. From investigating the effects of war in Europe to celebrating important African American historical figures, Hayden uses language to shape a history often narrated from the point of view of the voiceless, such as children, enslaved people, or the dead. The chapter divides Hayden's historical poems into three larger categories: World War II and European history, the South of the United States, and African American people.

The last chapter focuses on Hayden's poetry of mourning and highlights how Hayden's elegiac poetry, with its focus on the community as well as on the personal, departs from the traditional American elegy, often solipsistic, and represents, instead, the African American elegy, interested in the past, in the ancestors, and in the collective history. The chapter briefly explores various understandings of mourning and melancholia and focuses on three of Hayden's major poems: "Middle Passage," "Elegies for Paradise Valley," and "The Peacock Room."

Overall, *Circus Aesthetics* reads Hayden's poetry in a fresh light by examining his oeuvre thematically rather than chronologically. Looking at themes illuminates Hayden's interest and commitment to particular themes and particular formal strategies which firmly place him as both an African American poet and a modernist one, whose aesthetics are grounded in his peculiar brand of rooted cosmopolitanism and universalism, which I call

“rooted Transpolitanism,” as well as being formally based in the “theatrical.” In turn, these characteristics offer us new lenses with which to examine and define African American literature more broadly.

Chapter One

"Enacting someone's notion of themselves / and me":

Circus Aesthetics.

We wear the mask that grins and lies
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
("We Wear the Mask," Paul Laurence Dunbar)

I yearn I yearn
And if I dared
the agonies of metamorphosis,
would I not find you altered then?
I do not want
you other than you are.
And I—I cannot
(will not?) change.
It is too late
for any change
but death.
I am I. ("The Tattooed Man" 63-76)

The protagonist of "The Tattooed Man" yearns. He does not yearn for change; he yearns for acceptance. "The Tattooed Man" ends like this, with an unapologetic reassertion of individuality, and of love. The lines "I do not want / you other than you are" and "I am I," speak of the love of oneself and one another. They embody Hayden's Universalist and cosmopolitan ethos and they introduce us to the topic of his circus poems and circus aesthetics.

The tattooed man is only one of the many circus and alien characters that populate Hayden's poetry. In this chapter, we will also encounter a lion tamer, window cleaners, Aunt Jemima, a drunken/dying man, and various other marginal sideshow characters like "Kokimo, the Dixie Dancing Fool." Hayden describes them in different ways: in Petrarchan sketches, such as in "The Tattooed Man," in detailed narratives, as in "Aunt Jemima," or through what they do as the defining element of who they are, as with the lion tamer and the window cleaners. The tattooed man, for instance, is described through the description of his "jungle arms," or his legs, "you fear / the birds-of-paradise / perched on my thighs." Through the alliteration of "gawk" and "grotesque," in lines thirty and thirty-one, the poet reinforces the notion of "outsider," just like the polyptotons "natural" and "unnatural," or "strangeness strange" do. Hayden's earlier poems like "The Lion" describe the tamer and the lion in Hayden's more "baroque" style, so that the lion is a "vernal beast" and an "emperor of anger," the "gold shadow" of the tamer's desire; the tamer, on the other hand, is described in terms of what he wears, in terms of his appearance, so that he bows with "flourishing panache" and wears "this multifigure coat, this parakeet panache." The exact repetition of the word "panache," which the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines as "flamboyance confidence of style" as well as "headdress decoration" made of plumes or feathers ("panache"), highlights the difference between the lion—who represents the real and art—and the tamer—who represents the artist, and who is nothing but an attitude. As we will see, most of Hayden's alien characters are depicted in often-dual terms, and formal elements are used to put these dualities in conversation with each other.

In the circus poems, Hayden talks about art, illusion, and "freakishness." They can be read allegorically, and in particular as representations and commentaries on the relationship

between art, artist, and performance, between "low" and "highbrow" forms of art, and as an investigation of the marginalized. They expand our temporal and geographical references while, at the same time, zoom in onto individual and private perspectives.

Hayden's interest and commitment to the theme of the circus are testified by the presence of circus poems virtually from the beginning of his poetic career. While already in *Heart Shape in the Dust* (1940), with poems like "Poem for a Negro Dancer" the reader can have a glimpse of Hayden's interest in the trope of the circus, it is with *The Lion and the Archer* (1948) that this becomes a well defined and a clear stylistic trait. *The Lion and the Archer* figures two poems (out of the six poems that comprise Hayden's part of the volume), which directly address the circus: "Invisible Circus," and the poem that gives the name to Hayden's part of the volume, "The Lion." In *Figure of Time* (1955), Hayden writes "from The Coney Island Suite," while in *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970), he writes "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves," as well as a rewriting of "The Lion," which becomes "The Lions." In *The Night Blooming Cereus* (1973), we encounter "The Performers," and in the 1982 version of *American Journal* we find "The Tattooed Man" (absent in the 1978 version). These are only some of the most overt poems on the theme of the circus and sideshows. The presence of circus themes and tropes extends to many more poems, including "For a Young Artist," "[American Journal]," "Unidentified Flying Object," and "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," to name only a few.

Quite a few scholars, including John Hatcher, Fred Fetrow, and Pontheolla Williams, have explored the allegorical reading of these poems that look at the relation between art and artist. However, these poems have never been analyzed as a corpus and the theme of the circus as one of Hayden's major poetic focuses has been barely noted. What has also not

been noted before in relation to Hayden's works that deal with art and the artist is that these are often the result of mediated visual sources. While, on the one hand, one must take into account the fact that Hayden's real mother worked in a circus,[6] on the other hand one must also put these works in their context and co-texts, which show that the poems are often the result of working with images. This is the case for some images that he cites directly in the poems, as for instance "The Sable Venus" or "The Last Supper," but it is also the case for poems that simply emerge from a visual cue, such as "Invisible Circus," inspired by Karl Priebe's painting "The Piebald Giraffe."

In his circus poems, Hayden evokes the figure of the other through explicit as well as oblique references. We encounter words like "freak," "strange," "alien," "outsider," and "grotesque," as well as more subtle representations and reflections on the topic of alterity, in lines such as "enacting someone's notion of themselves / (and me)" ("Aunt Jemima"). In Hayden's circus poetry, the other, the freak, is a highly skilled individual, endowed with deep emotions and a high level of self-reflexivity. This figure finds its best representation in the characters of Aunt Jemima and of the Tattooed Man, characters that fully embody the extent of depth and width of analysis that Hayden gives to the topic of difference.

"Invisible Circus"

"Invisible Circus" represents an almost purposeful poetic introduction to the topic of the circus. It is the first of the two circus-themed poems in *The Lion and the Archer.* It is constituted of five stanzas, four quatrains and one tercet. The last word of the first line of

[6] Hayden's natural mother, Gladys Finn, run away from home in Pennsylvania and joined the circus when a teenager. Once in Detroit, she met Asa Sheffey and they married. They divorced shortly thereafter and she had a son, Robert. She shortly entrusted him to her friends, the Hayden family, who raised him.

each stanza rhymes with the last word of the last line of the stanza that preceded it. The rhymes are either regular or slant. The poem is one of Hayden's most cryptic, in line with his earlier, obscure, and "baroque"[7] poems, such as "eine kleine nachtmusik"[8] or "A Ballad of Remembrance."[9]

In Petrarchan fashion, the poem sketches the various elements that constitute the Circus providing a fragmented, yet holistic picture of its essence: "peacock's feather of a boy," "piebald giraffe," "jingling marvels," "comiques and flying devils," "Maximo the Merry and his filament floor," all convey images of what the circus is about, its glittering, magical, flamboyant, and exotic facade.

Yet, in similar fashion, the poem also hints at the darker side of the circus. Signifiers of difference, like the term "piebald" as well as "living statuary" hint at the multiple dimensions of the circus, just like the initial reference to the "piebald giraffe (obscurantist creature)" does, where the adjective "obscurantist" provides a key through which to read the

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[7] Robert Hayden characterized his early style, particular the style in *The Lion and the Archer* as "baroque." In an interview with Richard Layman, he said: "I did go through a period in the forties that I call my baroque period, a period in which the poems were rather heavily ornamented. But I shouldn't say ornamented, because ornamentation sort of connotes the idea that you don't really need it, you know, that it's something that you can do without. But I'll tell you, the kind of imagery and the kind of texture that I tried to create in my poems was different and was what I call baroque. It was more involved, for one thing, more heavily symbolic, I think too. I lean towards symbolism anyway. I guess I was trying to work toward something more or less metaphysical, and I was trying to get away from the straight-forward … well, I guess I was trying to get away from protest and from poems that were pretty much restricted in theme to racial matters" (106). Robert Chrisman explains that the main characteristics of Hayden's baroque are "to isolate and emphasize the image as the essence of the poem" (139) as well as privileging metaphor over exposition (140). Another important element is the presence of "artifice," so that the poems in *The Lion and the Archer* "are predicated upon artifice and popular artifacts: a Mardi Gras parade, a blues performance, tropes of the circus or a night serenade, a mosaic of flowers and snow" (141).

[8] For a discussion of "eine kleine nachtmusik, see Chapter 3.

[9] For a discussion of "A Ballad of Remembrance," see Chapter 2.

rest of the poem. The title itself, "Invisible Circus," provides a counter commentary to the images of brilliance and glitter, alerting the reader and asking her to look for the *invisible* in the poem, to search for what is not spelled out.

The poem is narrated in a stream of consciousness by an unidentified poetic voice that gives us unfiltered access to its experience of the spectacle[10]. Already in the second stanza, the poetic voice complicates its position with respect to who or what the spectacle is, and who is observing:

> Oh they could show us jingling marvels
> but pelting us with subtleties
> make us create our own
> comiques and flying devils. (5-8)

The pronoun "us" positions the speaker in the midst of the performance and the reader is finally able to catch a glimpse of the *invisible* spectacle happening in the poem; the narrator becomes part of the circus and the circus becomes the society who keeps its citizens enchanted by "pelting them with subtleties," In the poem "subtleties" probably stands for

[10] According to Robert Chrisman, "Invisible Circus" is a pictorial poem inspired by the observation of a Circus poster (144). Chrisman provides this exegesis of the poem based on his study of Hayden's journals where, indeed, this seems to be the case. Initially, the poem seems to have been inspired by Karl Priebe's "The Piebald Giraffe" as well as a circus poster of Maximo the Merry (145-6). However, if one reads the poem in isolation, without considering the creative process that went behind the creation of the poem, it is not clear that what is described is a child's fantasy resulting from looking at a circus poster. Of course, one might argue that the title itself, with the word "invisible" and words such as "displays" "infer" "makes us create" could point in the direction of a pictorial poem. However, while the poem has indeed been inspired by Priebe's painting, it still moves beyond its ekphrastic and descriptive nature and opens to multiple interpretations, especially when considering that in its printed version the reference to Priebe in the title disappears and we are simply left with the "piebald giraffe." It should also be noted that Chrisman believes this not to be a successful poem. He argues that "the figure of the circus child is not clearly delineated. The premise of the poem, that the impoverished child, stimulated by posters of circus gaiety, is compelled to "create our own / comiques and flying devils" suddenly becomes something more sinister, changing from a "Peacock's feather of a boy" to the 'Reefer whimsy of a conniving / beast: nocturnal oddment of / a boy,' in which the child becomes an object of unspecified cupidity. The two visions of the child are not reconciled" (146). However, it is unclear from the text of the poem that "the premise of the poem" is the child looking at posters. When we read the poem in and of itself, Chrisman's argument is less convincing.

artifices or tricks[11] that ultimately distract the viewer's (and the citizen's) attention from the spectacle of the circus and of life. In stanza three, the narrator moves back to what again seems to be a straightforward description of his or her spectator's experience. At the same time, this also references the process of artistic creation in and of itself, commenting on how the spectacle of the circus feeds the artist's imagination.

After the second stanza, the reader is left to question every successive stanza and search for their "invisible" meaning.

> From their gemglitter stance we must infer
> the clocked and tilting frivols
> of Maximo the Merry
> on his filament floor. (9-12)

The "we" on the first line brings the speaker back to the role of the audience, who must, however, "infer" what is happening, thus becoming part, once again, of the performance but also leaving the reader to ask what is it that we are not seeing, what is invisible and inferable?[12]

In this first circus poem we encounter in Hayden's oeuvre we can see how, through his play between visible and invisible, Hayden is using the trope of the circus to talk about society as well as a platform to discuss alterity and the invisibility of the other. The idea of

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[11] *OED* defines "subtlety" in many ways. Among the different definitions, there is "a cunning or crafty scheme; an artifice; a trick; a clever stratagem" and "craftiness, cunning, esp. of a treacherous or underhand nature; slyness, guile" ("subtlety").

[12] Hayden will use the word "inference" in the tile of a series of eight poems, "An Inference of Mexico," which will be examined in the next chapter. As will be discussed then, the word "infer/inference" is significant because it is a word that implies effort and active learning and understanding. It requires the reader or the viewer to ponder and then to formulate thoughts and ideas.

the double identity of circus entertainers is highlighted in the last two stanzas of "Invisible Circus", where they are both "themselves" as well as "living statuary:"

> Reefer whimsey[13] of a conniving
> beast; nocturnal oddment of
> a boy—so nothing but
> themselves: jewel in setting,
>
> Eye in socket. Yet a part
> of the living statuary
> of the three-ring heart. (13-19)

The tension existing between being an object and being free and doing what you were meant to be doing—"Jewel in setting, Eye in socket"—is extended to other members of society of which the narrator is part. This tension also underlines a broader discussion involving the relationship existing between power and alterity, questioning when and if power is found and exercised in the performance of otherness and of transgression. According to literary scholar Rachel Adams in *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (2001), "to characterize *freak* as a performance restores agency to the actors in the sideshow" (6). If, instead, we look at the poem as the allegory for the role of the artist, here the artist is depicted as someone who, just like a circus performer, has to *perform* his art as well as having to navigate the relationship between art and power/society. In this sense, the artist is not different from the freak.

[13] I interpret "reefer whimsy" as a playful behavior that has the characteristic of having been induced by smoking marijuana, a "reefer." The stanza is, however quite confusing as it is difficult to understand *what* is the "reefer whimsy of a conniving beast" or *who* is the "boy." The stanza could be interpreted as Chrisman does, as being the "nocturnal oddment of a boy," the dream of a boy. In this sense, the poem extends even further the idea of visual mediation, as we now have a boy who is dreaming of a circus spectacle that he might or may not have see live. Because the poem is narrated in stream of consciousness, however, it is hard to pinpoint what is actually happening and who is actually speaking. Hatcher notes that "the poem focuses on the daring that the poet must have to follow the boy, or in the context of this poem's symbols, to enter the 'gilt and vermillion cage' and make the lion perform" (112). He therefore assigns a more literal role to the "boy," who he probably considers being the boy riding the piebald giraffe in Priebe's painting.

How does the *performance* of otherness relate to being involuntarily othered and made to perform otherness? How does the trope of the circus advance this discussion?

"The Lion" and "The Lions"

While "Invisible Circus" only hints at these questions, "The Lion," which immediately follows "Invisible Circus" and closes Hayden's section of *The Lion and The Archer,* spells out more explicitly the allegorical and metaphorical meanings of the circus. In the poem, as will be discussed later, the lion is used as an allegorical figure for the enslaved and for art.[14] The lion tamer is the artist, as well as the enslaver. In *The Lion and The Archer*, the titles of the poems are placed in cursive italics at the end of each poem, as if they were a signature. The lion of the poem, thus, is also the author of the poem, hence making of the lion not only an allegory of art and of the enslaved, but also one for the figure of the artist. The artist becomes both lion and tamer, both enslaved and enslaver, creating a bidirectional connection between art and artist, so that one influences the other in a reciprocal way.

"The Lion" consists of five irregular sestets where the last line almost doubles the length of the previous five lines, giving time and occasion to the reader to pause and linger at the end of each stanza. The poem also presents a regular formal aspect: the last word of the last line of each stanza is also the last word of the first line of the following stanza. This is an example of formal repetition that provides cohesiveness to the lines and represents a way to connect the various stanzas semantically. This includes the very last word of the

[14] Hatcher notes that "'The Invisible Circus' and 'The Lion' […] deal importantly with the duty of the poet to probe courageously his innermost being, and the obligation of the reader to infer meaning through the algebraic process of working through poetic images" (22).

poem, which is the same of the last word of the first stanza, providing formal circularity. The last/first word, "said," also stresses the narrative aspect of "The Lion." The other words that are repeated are significant because they associate circus elements like "panache" and "cage" to words like "anger" and "fire," thus showing the contradictory nature of the circus which places together captivity and "panache," "anger" and flamboyance and highlighting the relationship between imprisonment and entertainment. If we read this symbolically, in light of the author's race and oeuvre, we could posit that this connection symbolizes slavery. If, however, we read this in light of the allegory of art and artist, we can think of it as the artist's enslavement to art and to its whimsical nature.

As with "Invisible Circus," "The Lion" also gives us the seemingly unfiltered thoughts of the speaker who, in the first stanza, is "the archer" but who then becomes a lion tamer, thus conflating the archer who captured the lion with the circus tamer in one single voice and in one single metaphorical image. As anthropologist and circus expert Yoram Carmeli argues in his discussion of lions and the representation of nature and culture in the spectacle of the circus,

> the wilderness where these particular wild animals 'belong,' the audience knows, is Africa. Metonymically, the lions thus represent the empire's remote territories, their taming (as the 'wilderness' is being caged and despoiled) represents the empire's domination. The 'hero' […] is a white man single-handedly facing the animals […]. Not just the ruler, the imperial race, but a whole nineteenth-century code of masculinity and virility is in a sense reenacted in his presence. ("Lion" 75)

While Carmeli's argument may ring true for a white audience, the question "The Lion" raises is who do the poetic voice, the audience, and the reader identify with?

The first stanza, giving voice to the archer's thoughts, sets up the lion as young, royal, and enraged, and the archer as clever and cunning:

I aimed, the archer said,
but did not have the heart
to kill the vernal beast,
and set a trap instead,
so cunningly rigged, so clever,
and took him alive, the very emperor of anger: (1-6)

The second stanza establishes the parallels tamer/lion and master/enslaved:

The emperor of anger,
whom you see sleeping there
in the gilt and vermillion cage,
for whose exacting sake
I carry a whip, I wear
this multifigure coat, this parakeet panache. (7-12)

The parallel is set up in particular by the presence of the cage and by the lines "for whose exacting sake / I carry a whip." "Exacting" means "that demands excessive payment, extortionate," and, therefore, reminiscent of the paternalistic rhetoric of slaveholders, who told themselves and the rest of society that they were acting in the interest and for the ultimate benefit of the enslaved[15]. However, it also means: "that requires or is disposed to require too great advantages, exertions, or sacrifices" (*OED* "exacting"), thus, once again, calling attention to the sacrifices that art and being an artist demand. The cage is "gilt and vermillion;" the beauty and exoticism of it all is fake, it is not gold, it is just the color of gold, and a cage is still a cage. The tamer, too, is *wearing* the panache of a parakeet, an animal that would be found in the wilderness like the lion, and who, in and of itself, signifies mimicking. The aspect of the circus' glitter and veneer is further enhanced by the already-mentioned fact that the figure of the archer slowly turns into the one of a circus tamer, thus

[15] For a discussion of paternalism during slavery, see, for instance, Eugene Genovese's seminal work *Roll Jordan Roll* (1974).

passing from being a noble, almost sacred and iconic image, to being the circus-version of it, a tamer in a "multifigure coat". A further connection between a circus and the system of American slavery can be found in the third and fourth lines of the fifth stanza, where the lion is portrayed as "dire beauty that creates / and tethers my desire," lines that speak to the sexual exploitation of enslaved peoples of color as well as to their exoticization and subsequent blaming, so that they are held responsible for the reactions and desires they elicit.

In the fourth stanza, the poem returns to the royal qualities of the lion, who now assumes also a religious and spiritual dimension, becoming a "beast of Revelation" and a "prophet-king:"[16]

> I see when I enter the cage
> a beast of Revelation,
> a captive prophet-king
> in byzantine disguise;
> my soul in exultation
> Holy Holy cries, as he leaps through turning fire: (19-24)

[16] These lines reference the biblical "Book of Revelation," also known as "The Apocalypse of John." John narrates: "and I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. **2** And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority. **3** And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast. **4** And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him? **5** And there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty and two months. **6** And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme his name, and his tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven. **7** And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations" (*KJV Bible*. Rev. 13:1-7). Religion scholar Elaine Pagels, among others, argues that John is revising Daniel's vision, the intent of which was to depict Rome as the worst possible empire. In this light, the seven heads of the beast are "seven kings." "John probably means the Roman emperors who ruled from the time of August until his own time." In this sense, therefore, Revelation can be interpreted as indictment of power's oppression.

The adjective “captive” stresses the contrast and tension between being a king and being enslaved. So does the word “disguise.” The human nature of the lion is further highlighted by the use of the pronoun “he” as opposed to “it.” The conduplication of “Holy Holy” in the last line of the stanza and the anastrophe in the last two lines of the last stanza together with the repetition of “and Holy cries. And Holy cries,” highlight the spiritual experience of the archer/tamer. The repetition, in particular, turns this into a moment of religious ecstasy as well as of communion and union with the lion, “the gold shadow of my will.”

To return to the question of whom the poetic voice (or the reader) identifies with, the answer seems to be the lion. Even the archer/tamer end up identifying with it through the ecstatic religious experience, when lion and archer/tamer for a moment become one.

> As he leaps through circles of fire
> gold shadow of my will,
> dire beauty that creates
> and tethers my desire,
> my soul, the archer said,
> exults and Holy cries. And Holy cries, the archer said. (25-30)

The last stanza presents a series of striking images. In particular, it should be noted how the lion is the “*gold* shadow of my will” (emphasis mine). The use of “gold” is to be contrasted to the previous use of “gilt and vermillion cage” and “parakeet panache.” While the circus, the cage, the tamer, and the overall performance are a veneer, fake, the lion is real. The relationship between art and the artist is not one based on glitter. Rather, it is based on solid gold, and on a “shadow.” It is not a performance for the sake of illusion and distraction, but it is real force that pushes the artist. Hayden, therefore, provides us with the two aspects of circus performance that, on the one hand, is considered “lowbrow” and frivolous, but on the

other actually involves real artists and is a real art form. In an allegorical sense, this can be read as the relationship of the poet with his poems.

In *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970), "The Lion" becomes "The Lions." The poem shrinks in size and loses its more formal and fixed structure. It becomes one single stanza of sixteen lines. Interestingly, the one formal feature the poem retains is its circularity, provided by the verb "said" at the end of the first and last lines, which attests to the narrative and oral quality of the poems as well as distancing "the poet from the poem itself," as Hatcher argues (261).

> With what panache, he said,
> I bow to the applause,
> I open danger's door
> while brasses hold their Ahs
> and set the mood
> for courage leonine.
> And in the kingdom-cage
> as I make my lions leap,
> through nimbus-fire leap,
> oh, as I see them leap—
> unsparing beauty that
> creates and serves my will,
> the savage real that clues
> my vision of the real—
> my soul exults and Holy cries
> and Holy Holy cries, he said.

In "The Lions" the capturing of the lion as well as the presence of the archer disappear. We are now left with the tamer, thus losing that ancestral connection between hunter and hunted. In spite of their multiplying in the title, the lions almost disappear in the poem, barely described and simply made to serve the function of making the tamer become an emperor-like figure. While in the 1948 version the lion is an "emperor of anger," now it is the cage that is being connected to royal qualities, "in the kingdom cage / as I make my lions leap." It

is the tamer who becomes the king and the cage his kingdom. What in the old version were "desire" and "tethers,", now are "unsparing beauty that / creates and serves my will." The difference between "tethers" and "serves" as well as "desire" and "will" narrows the focus of the lines on their relationship of servitude and loses its romanticization. The religious references are also reduced to a minimum and the lion is no longer "a beast of Revelation, / a captive prophet-king / in byzantine disguise," but he is "the savage real that clues / my vision of the real—."

The 1970s version is more compressed and makes a better and more focused use of symbolic images, losing the "baroque" touch typical of *The Lion and the Archer*. The lines are more linear and straightforward, the images are much clearer, the vocabulary is effective but less obscure; words like "vernal" and "exacting," images like "byzantine disguise," and the convoluted anastrophe of the last stanza have disappeared to make room for more straightforward lines like "I bow to the applause." Even the final anastrophe has become more linear and less confusing, "my soul exults and Holy cries / and Holy Holy cries, he said." This linearity gives the poem a more narrative structure and reduces the amount of deciphering required from the reader. However, the poem also loses part of its edge and part of its dual and complex nature. The newer version indeed seems closer to its commonly held allegorical interpretation of the relationship between art and artist, as was previously discussed. Yet, while the humanization of the lion and its imprisonment experience seem to have disappeared, now under scrutiny is the figure of the tamer who, while a king when within his kingdom-cage, by virtue of being a king in a circus is also automatically "other" and peripheral, becoming one of those alien characters of which Hayden's oeuvre is so rich.

Hayden's critics who commented on "Invisible Circus," "The Lion," and "The Performers" attributed to the poems the function of being Hayden's way of reflecting on art and on the process of artistic creation. This is certainly true, as it is true for many of Hayden's poems, and this is also, possibly, the primary interpretation that the author himself had intended. However, what the critics have ignored is the pattern that emerges when looking at Hayden's "circus poems" when taken all together. While the poems do indeed talk about artistic performances, they also talk about performance of otherness and they question the gaze of the viewer and the reader. The aliens and freaks who inhabit Hayden's "invisible circus," are not only a way for the artist to reflect on his artistic endeavors, but they question in deeper ways the relations existing between art, performance, and otherness. In a 1965 draft of "Invisible Circus" that Hayden never published, he subtitles the poem with "(after a painting by Karl Priebe)" (Hayden Papers), thus further stressing not only the relation of the poem to art making, but, most importantly, its relation to themes of alterity, strangeness, and otherness. In fact, many of Priebe's paintings depict creatures in between the ordinary and the extraordinary, which would certainly have been suitable in a circus or sideshow, examining and depicting a fascination for alterity.

To return to Hayden' s use of mediated visual sources, in "Summertime and the Living" (1955), for example*,* we encounter the lines:

> Nobody planted roses, he recalls,
> but sunflowers gangled there sometimes,
> tough-stalked and bold
> and like the vivid children there unplanned.
> There circus-poster horses curveted
> in trees of heaven
> above the quarrels and shattered glass,
> and he was bareback rider of them all. (1-8)

The poem, which seems to anticipate "Elegies for Paradise Valley," to be examined in Chapter 4, is about memories of childhood in Detroit. Not only does this stanza connect to "Invisible Circus," or, perhaps, even re-elaborate it, but it also speaks of the use of images as part of Hayden's poetic processes of memory construction in general, and circus fantasy in particular. In "Invisible Circus" the image the poetic voice refers to, as we have previously seen, is Karl Priebe's "Piebald Giraffe." At the time when Priebe painted it, together with his many other circus-based works of art, Max Beckmann was also painting circus subjects, so much so that Priebe and Beckmann appeared next to each other on the November 25th, 1946 issue of LIFE Magazine, two years before *The Lion and the Archer* was published. It is likely, even if not certain, that Hayden was inspired by the paintings of both artists, at least in his early circus poems. This underlines another important characteristic of Hayden's poetry, which we will encounter in the following chapters, which is the use of ekphrasis as a tool for poetic representation. More on Hayden and ekphrasis will follow in the rest of this chapter and in Chapter Four. For now, it is perhaps important to highlight how, in the circus poems, the level of ekphrasis can even become double. We have poems written as a result of engaging with visual sources, such as posters, but we cannot exclude that the poems are also depicting real or imagined circus and sideshow performances, and therefore representing ekphrastically the circus as form of art.

Figure 1: Karl Priebe's "The Piebald Giraffe" and Max Beckmann "Carnival." Page 78, LIFE Magazine, November 25, 1946.[17]

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[17] The paintings were reproduced in "Ten Years of American Art: Life Reviews the Record of a Lively, Important Decade," and, in particular, in the subsection "Iowa Cornbelt Fosters New Trend in U. S. Art." Priebe is described as a surrealist and Beckmann as an expressionist (77).

"from The Coney Island Suite" and "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves"

Conflating the ideas of life as a circus and the circus as life is "from The Coney Island Suite," published in 1955 in *Figure of Time.* The poem is divided in two separate sections, *42nd Street Times Square and All* and *Congress of Freaks*. Both sections are made of three unrhymed, irregular tercets. The first section takes the reader into the heart of New York City, described metonymically by its "mechanical rainbows," and it shows the human spectacle of a lost life "asleep or maybe drunk or merely / Dead," which goes purposefully unnoticed by the passersby but is stared at by the embodiment of the veneer of civilization, "Satan with a trick cigar."

i
42nd Street Times Square and All
Under the big mechanical rainbows
he lies, someone anyone,
asleep or maybe drunk or merely

Dead—a slack ungainly form,
wry memento night
shoves peevishly aside.

Satan with a trick cigar
stares at him gaily from
a window lush with brummagems.

People look away, keep moving
and keep moving. For who dares risk
the possibility of clues?

This first part functions as an introduction to the theme of human spectacle in order to complicate our understanding of what is a spectacle. The reader is made to wonder *who* the spectacle is, the person lying on the street unconsciously, or the passersby avoiding to look

at that person? The use of the words “trick” and “brummagems,” coupled with “mechanical rainbows” point, once again, as in “The Lion,” to the idea of fakeness, of a veneer. What is fake here is the so-called civilization, contrasted with the tragedy of human lives, a “wry memento” that “night shoves peevishly aside.” The memento the person on the floor is offering is a memento of truth, of “clues” into what it is to be human, that people, “gaily” choose to not see, enchanted by the “lush” of the veneer.

The title of this section could be an allusion to William Carlos Williams’ poem and collection *Spring and All* (1923). With its stylistic innovations, Williams celebrates the simple in life, in the positive and in the negative, and focuses mostly on the countryside, celebrating nature through the use of striking images, such as:

> All along the road the reddish
> purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
> stuff of bushes and small trees
> with dead, brown leaves under them
> leafless vines—
>
> Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
> dazed spring approaches—
>
> They enter the new world naked,
> cold, uncertain of all
> save the date they enter… (“Spring and All” 9-18)

Williams, one of the fathers of Imagism, creates a poem that is characterized by extreme attention to the single word, which generates an image that emerges in front of the reader’s eyes without it having been “narrated;” it simply is. Hayden, who substitutes “Spring” with *42nd Street Times Square*, shifts Williams’ focus on nature to the city and evokes it in the same manner in which Williams evokes the vines growing in spring. The sleeping/dying man on the street could, initially, be compared to William’s “dead, brown leaves” or

“leafless vines.” Yet, while in “Spring” life is eventually celebrated, — “Now the grass, tomorrow / the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf” (21-22)—in “*42nd Street*” we are denied this sense of reawakening and are left with a pessimism connected to life in the city as well as to human nature: “People look away, and keep moving / For who dares risk / the possibility of clues?” Partial hope is restored only in the second section of “from The Coney Island Suite.”

“*Congress of Freaks*” functions as a counterpart to “*42nd Street.*” From the idea of a sad spectacle of humanity we are taken to the spectacle of the freak show. It opens with the lines “enacting someone’s notions of themselves / and me,” thus addressing questions of identity and performance as well as issues related to the idea of other and othering. Stuart Hall argues that

> the ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation. Not only, in Said’s ‘Orientalist’ sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as ‘Other’. (225-6)

Hayden’s lines anticipate Hall’s argument:

> ii
> *Congress of Freaks*
> Enacting someone’s notion of themselves
> and me, Unique Original Jemima
> and Kokimo the Dixie Dancing Fool
>
> With labored zest that feigns the typical,
> do bally on a block at Coney Island.
> I watch them for a moment, drawn as always
>
> By sideshow garishness, then turn away,
> weary of this stale American joke.
> And pondering
>
> By what perverted logic they
> are made confederates of the snake-skinned man,

the boy with elephant face.

The choice of the word "enacting" emphasizes the idea that "someone's notion of themselves / and me" is a thwarted one. At the same time, "enacting," in its gerund form, is actually happening, in spite of the realization that those lives turned into a spectacle are human ones. The process that the sideshow performers undergo is both voluntary and involuntary, one that gives them agency while, at the same time, makes of them an object of consumption.

The second tercet further emphasizes the idea of the falsity of the spectacle: the adjective "labored" and the verb "feigns" in the same line guarantee that the reader understands that this is only a spectacle. Given the previous section, where the spectacle is provided by daily life, the spectacle talked about in this section is consequently seen not only as a sideshow, but as life. The freaks are us, the readers, the viewers. Adams argues that "in the context of the sideshow, labeling a person a *freak* evacuates her humanity, authorizing the paying customer to approach her as an object of curiosity and entertainment" (10). At the same time, though, while the freak show allows this "positive identification of the self" (175), freaks are also "the bodily projections of our most profound individual and collective traumas. It is impossible to see a freak unmediated by the desires and anxieties that filter our perception of extreme alterity" (182). Freaks, thus, embody those characteristics that we find repelling yet fascinating and they represent a living mirror of our more obscure desires; in this respect they seem to fulfill the same role that blackness has held in the American imagination since slavery times.

By 1970, with the publication of "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves" in *Words in the Mourning Time,* Hayden had matured his style and moved from his earlier, more convoluted

and less accessible "baroque" period into his more "indeterminate" period.. Freaks and aliens are his privileged subjects, which he works with awareness and with a clear vision of his rhetoric on this subject. "Aunt Jemima" is divided into two sections. Section One is a rewriting of "The Congress of Freaks":

> Enacting someone's notion of themselves
> (and me), The One And Only Aunt Jemima
> and Kokimo The Dixie Dancing Fool
> do a bally for the freak show.
>
> I watch a moment, then move on,
> pondering the logic that makes of them
> (and me) confederates
> of The Spider Girl, The Snake-skinned Man…
>
> Poor devils have to live somehow.
>
> I cross the boardwalk to the beach,
> lie in the sand and gaze beyond
> the clutter at the sea. (1-12)

The major change in this section is the addition of a last tercet that functions as a connector to the second part of the poem, which is set on a beach next to the sideshow. It is by the beach that the narrator meets Aunt Jemima.

The poem is a very complex one and speaks to various themes and dimensions that are a part of Hayden's oeuvre, in particular the theme of otherness. Otherness, here, is made complex by the intersection of gender, race, and nationality. Jonathan Cedric Smith argues that the sideshow

> is a carnival on American (domestic) shore, and as a black American woman, [Jemima] is allowed only the possibility of being Aunt Jemima. In European (foreign) space, she is allowed to be Mysteria, who obviously appears to be much more sensual. The very names that attach to this one black woman variously situate her according to race, gender, and sex. (176)

The second section of the poem is made of sixteen semi-regular iambic stanzas that give us the voice of Jemima speaking in first person, interrupted only by some initial and final comments of the narrator. As with the poems on Nat Turner and Phillis Wheatley,[18] this is another portrait-poem that examines both the psychology as well as the life of the character narrated. Yet, if Turner, Wheatley, Brown, Tubman, or Malcolm X are historical figures, Jemima functions as an archetype of the African American woman. For Hatcher, Jemima is "Hayden's own mythological figure of resilience" (168); the resilience embodied by Jemima is the resilience of all African Americans who, therefore, are represented not only as archetypes of difference, but also as archetypes of humanity. Once again, however, Aunt Jemima could have also been inspired by a visual source, such as an advertisement of the very famous "Aunt Jemima" baking products, who used to portray a mammy-like figure in their boxes, wearing a red bandanna.

[18] More on these two poems in Chapter II

Figure 2: Advertisement for Aunt Jemima's pancakes' flour. Image taken from LIFE Magazine, March 8th, 1954.

Aunt Jemima's signifiers of difference, aside from her very own name, are also her accent and speech pattern, "I wore me plenty diamonds then" (line 37), her comparison to "The Sable Venus," another visual source, as well as her red bandanna, or the absence thereof:

I turn as Aunt Jemima settles down
beside me, her blue-rinsed hair
without the red bandanna now. (lines 14-16)

Yet, Hayden complicates these stereotypical signifiers of difference: her speech pattern, for instance, continuously shifts from being dialect-inflected to being standard English:

I wore me plenty diamonds then,
and counts or dukes or whatever they were
would fill my dressing room
with the costliest flowers. (25-28)

Here we can see how the stanza seems to almost change register, line after line, so that in the last line we find the very refined word "costliest," rather than, for instance, "most expensive."

Jemima's red bandanna, while being mentioned, is, however, not present. She is presented as having "blue-rinsed hair" instead, thus highlighting her African Americanness through the mentioning of the bandanna and, at the same time, destabilizing the reader's imaginary of what *is* African American by denying the presence of such bandanna on the woman who should be wearing it.

In the same way, the choice of referencing "The Sable Venus,"[19] not only exemplifies blackness and African descent but, through its conflation with Botticelli's painting of "The Birth of Venus," it connects the two cultures and problematizes their distinct statuses.

Scream of children in the surf,
adagios of sun and flashing foam,
the sexual glitter, oppressive fun. …

---

[19] "The Sable Venus" is an etching by Thomas Stothard who illustrated the 1801 edition of *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies.* It is subtitled, "The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies." It is clearly inspired by Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus.* In a central shell we find an African woman surrounded by cherubs. The half shell is dragged by dolphins and on the left of the image there is Triton, holding a British flag.

An antique etching comes to mind:

"The Sable Venus" naked on
a baroque Cellini shell—voluptuous
imago floating in the wake
of slave-ships on fantastic seas. (lines 65-72)

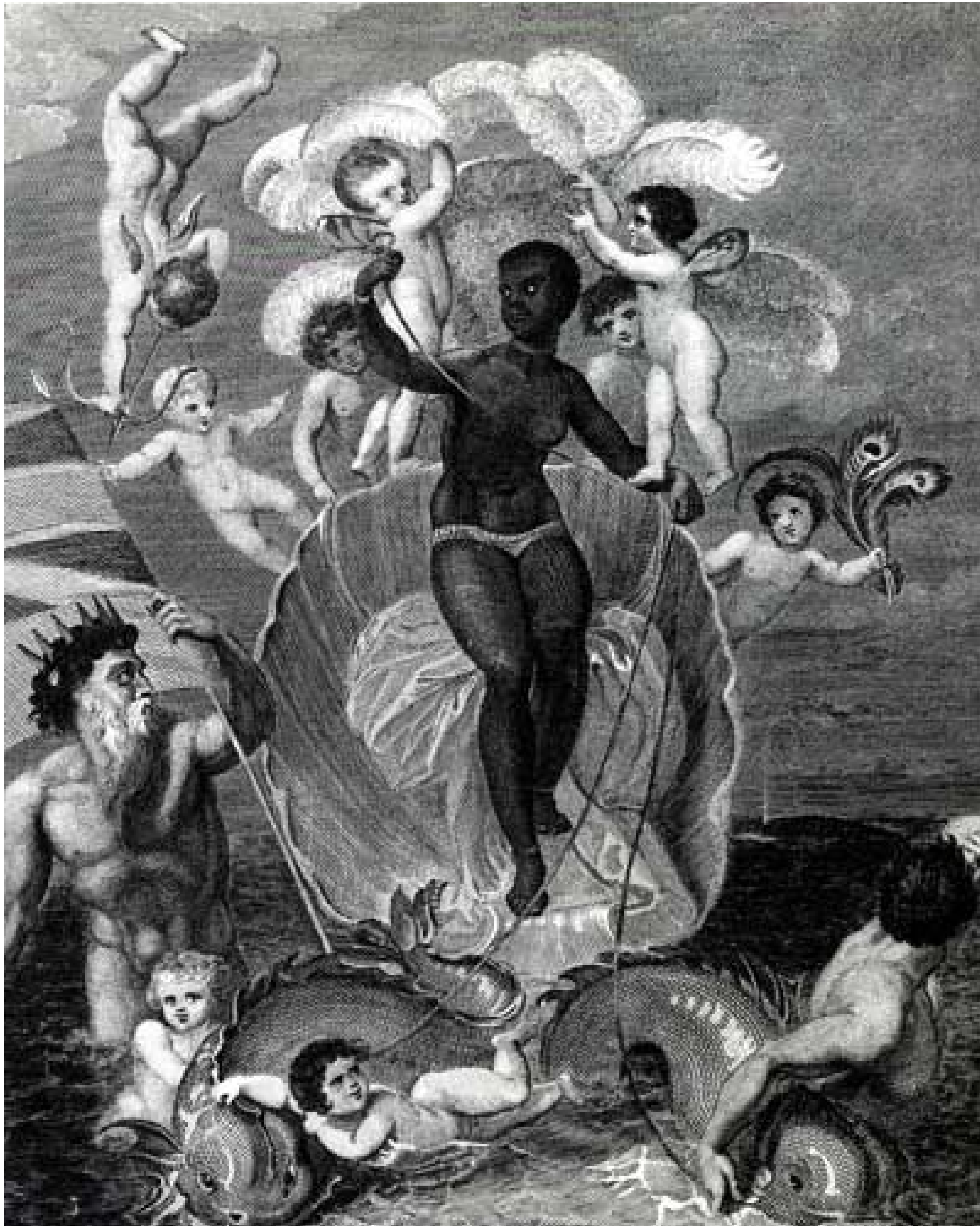

Figure 3: *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, From Angola to the West Indies*. Image taken from Bryan Edwards' *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. Volume 1.

Ultimately, the poem positions Aunt Jemima as transnational and transhistorical. The text references her trips to Europe and her life in the U.S.. What is interesting is that this is framed by the theme of the sideshow. Not only, therefore, Aunt Jemima talks about her life *in* spectacle as well *as* spectacle, but her overall identity is informed by the notion of the sideshow, by the lines "enacting someone's notion of themselves / (and me)" (1).

Carnival reduces characters to their typical representations of themselves, as John F. Callahan argues (167). Yet, this approach ignores the empowerment deriving from defining one's role, from making a living and from willingly playing part in the "act" of the carnival. While this may not be the case with the character of the homeless man in the first section of "from *The Coney Island Suite,*" it is definitely the case with Aunt Jemima who, throughout the poem, increasingly shows herself as the artifice of her current identity (as well as showing the fluidity of that identity). This, of course, does not discount the problem that this is the identity that she is *expected* to perform when on American soil, as Smith argues (176), but at least it complicates it.

Literary critic and poet Reginald Gibbons explains that Aunt Jemima's life is presented "through *her* speech, in those characteristically Haydenesque stanzas that give the impression of formality while capturing the vital breath of speech rhythms. Aunt Jemima is the full image for the malaise the onlooker feels, and she is also the cure" (183). Gibbons captures the importance of Jemima's speech as well as the mechanisms governing a freak show, which are replicated formally as well as thematically in the poem. According to Adams, side shows "may serve as a powerful symbol for social criticism but also as a powerful reminder of the injustices once made visible on the sideshow platform, many of which resist in more veiled forms into the present day" (16). "Aunt Jemima" takes us

through the motions of Jemima's life; Jemima gives us her moments of glory, but these are accompanied by a recounting of her downfall. She tells us about her lover and about his death, criticizing the war as well as poignantly pointing to her present situation, where she is a "fake mammy to God's mistakes" (58), thus both commenting on her role within the freak show, where freaks are considered God's mistakes, but also subtly comparing white slave owners' of the past to God's mistakes, to whom, as a mammy, she would have had to tend. The narrator further stresses this critique of past and contemporary injustices:

> She laughs, but I do not, knowing what
> her laughter shields. And mocks.
> I light another cigarette for her.
> She smokes, not saying any more. (61-64)

The enjambment in lines sixty-one and sixty-two calls attention to the power of her laughter, which, if the line was read in isolation, would "shield" as well as "mock." This stanza provides an assessment of the strength of human relations and of community, topics that are omni-present in Hayden's work and that, in this instance, connect circus and sideshow to art and community.

From the point of view of art and, in particular, the art of circuses and sideshows, "Aunt Jemima" is a powerful commentary on the status and relevance of performance art for African Americans and on the too often typecast roles that African Americans end up having to play. On the one hand we have the comment of the narrator, who, while at first includes himself amongst the freaks, then distances himself from that category in a matter of four lines:

> I watch a moment, then move on,
> pondering the logic that makes of them
> (and me) confederates
> of the Spider Girl, the Snake-skinned Man.. .

Poor devils have to live somehow. (lines 5-9)

This last line constitutes a stanza on its own, thus highlighting the detachment of the narrator from the freaks of the sideshow whom he previously considered "confederates," allies. It is also interesting to think about the choice of the word "confederate," a word so pregnant with historical meaning and still so relevant nowadays in debates on race, racism, and social justice, that it would seem like an odd choice to describe a group of artists and "others" working in a sideshow. At the same time, precisely the use of that word connects past and present, expanding Hayden's time frame from the contemporary to the past, and connecting the poem to the history of the United States.

On the other hand, we have the story of the life of Aunt Jemima, who passes from being "the Sepia High Stepper / Crowned heads applauded me" (lines 34-35), to becoming the mind reader "Mysteria From / the Mystic East," to finally becoming part of the sideshow, a "fake mammy to God's mistakes" (line 58). While, initially, this might sound like a catalogue of typecast roles for African American women, as well as a descent to the lowest forms of art, Jemima displaces the reader by continuing her narration with "and that's the beauty part, / I mean, aint that the beauty part" (lines 59-60).

Situated in a poem that, as we have already seen, evokes beauty through a black version of a western canon of beauty ("The Sable Venus"), as well as through the beauty of poetic form, such as in the alliterations of /s/ and /f/ in the lines:

> Scream of children in the surf,
> adagios of sun and flashing foam,
> the sexual glitter, oppressive fun. …(65-67),

Jemima's line reflects not only the poet's aesthetic concerns, but also the poem's overall concern with questions such as what is art as well as what is beauty, both in life and in art. These questions, which constitute an integral part of Hayden's oeuvre, will be explored at length in Chapter Four, in connection with the poem "The Peacock Room."

"The Performes"

First published in 1970 and then republished in 1973 in the collection *The Night Blooming Cereus*, "The Performers" explores in even more depth the theme of life as performance. In this unrhymed sonnet, two window cleaners are compared to acrobats. This is done directly, through their comparison to *The Great Wallendas,*[20] as well as indirectly, through the description of their tasks, which highlights their skills and the artistic and performative aspects of their motions.

> Easily, almost matter-of-factly they step,
> two minor Wallendas, with pail and squeegee along
> the wintry ledge, hook their harness to the wall
> and leaning back into a seven-story angle of space
> begin washing the office windows. I
> am up there too until straps break
> and iron paper apple of iron I fall
> through plateglass wind onto stalagmites below.
>
> But am safely at my desk again by the time
> the hairline walkers, high-edge
> balancers end their center-ring routine
> and crawl inside. A rough day, I remark,

[20] The poem refers to *The Great Wallendas,* also knows as *The Flying Wallendas*, a German acrobatic group of the first half of the Twentieth century that performed aerial acrobatics without a safety net. The name of the group in German was *Die Fliegenden Wallendas.*

for such a risky business. Many thanks.
Thank *you*, sir, one of the men replies.

As with Aunt Jemima, the poetic voice includes himself in this spectacle. In line five, the "I" is the last word of the line, which then continues on line six where the speaker gives voice to his imagination, so that his daydream becomes intertwined with the account of the window cleaners' performance.

The question the poem raises is why does the poetic voice need to evoke a circus-like image in order to discuss the theme of life as art as well as to give dignity and visibility to two workers who would otherwise be invisible? Significantly, "The Performers" is part of a volume of poetry that has numerous references to art, so much so that it could be hypothesized that the poem is an ekphrastic one, representing a circus performance. The first poem in *The Night Blooming Cereus* is "Richard Hunt's Arachne," an ekphrastic poem that looks at the 1956 steel statue in exhibit at the MOMA. "The Performers" is also directly followed by "The Peacock Room," another ekphrastic-like poem that also looks at the relationship between life and art. The collection ends with "Traveling through fog," which references "Plato's Cave" in its very last words and, hence, concludes the volume with a reflection on the meaning of reality and, as a consequence, its relation to art and to life.

The type of ekphrasis "The Performers" is producing is a notional one, which, according to Peter Barry has as its object a fictional work of art created by poetic language itself (156). As Michael Benton posits, " it is through the […] narrative impulse to generate in words a virtual space in which the story of the spectator-poet's reading can be told that ekphrasis makes its aesthetic appeal" (375). In "The Performers," however, this is further complicated because we have two layers of performance and the speaker, rather than simply describing a

performance, at some point becomes part of one, or both, performances (circus and window-cleaning). In this way, he provides a commentary on both the thin line that divides artistic performance and life (by describing the work of the two window-cleaners as art), and also, by blurring the line between spectator and artist, makes of art the product of the interaction between artwork and the viewer.

The fact that the art form chosen by Hayden in this instance is the circus, while perhaps obvious given the type of performance the window cleaners are providing, is also a significant and unusual choice. In an undated, earlier draft of the poem (Appendix I), the poetic voice identifies even more clearly with the character of a "freak" and portrays the performers as artists and unsung heroes:

> am out there too until straps break and I fall.
> iron paper, apple of iron, fall and land
> on the fakir's bed of my crystal my spiking bones.
>
> I am busy at my desk, thank God, by the time
> these unscarred hairline walkers, these high-edge
> balancers and their death-defying routine
> and crawl inside. A rough day for such
> a risky business, I remark. Many thanks.
> Thank *you*, Professor, one of the men replies. (Hayden Papers, Box 45,
> Folder 7)

It is the speaker's bones that are a fakir's bed, while the window cleaners are "unstarred" and perform a "death-defying routine." The removal of "unstarred" and the substitution of "death-defying" with "center-ring" to talk about their routine in the published version speaks of a voluntary focus on the idea of circus aesthetics, which heightens the performative aspect of the window cleaners' job. The choice of using circus aesthetics to talk about the window cleaners' job is not only the obvious result of the spectacular aspects of their profession—

hanging at great heights—, but it is also a commentary on their social status since, as we have seen, circus is associated with the alien as well as with a second-tier form of art.

As in "Aunt Jemima," the poetic voice also wants to highlight its difference from the performers as well as its union with them, be it a universalistic type of union, or one in which its subtext is otherness. This union is achieved by moving away from a description of what "they" are doing, to the use of "I" in live five. The difference is reestablished in the second stanza, "but am safely at my desk again," and in particular, in the last line, "Thank *you,* sir; one of the men replies." The italicized "you" highlights the emphasis on it, and it is followed by "sir," an appellative of respect that, in the earlier archival draft was, instead, "Professor," thus showing the intent of wanting to make clear that there is, indeed, a difference in the roles of the window cleaners and of the professor or the poet, even though they are all *performers.*

It is important to stress that "The Performers" is an unrhymed Italian sonnet. The choice of a sonnet highlights Hayden's "double bind": on the one hand it positions him as a poet invested in classic poetic traditions and a formalist. On the other, however, given the subject of the poem, it attests to Hayden's cross-cultural and cosmopolitan poetic identity. As Jahan Ramazani posits, "a cross cultural poetics depends on the identitarian paradigms it complicates—depends on them to trace the literary cultures that are being fused, ironized, and recast" (44). In "The Performers," therefore, a prototypically European form like the sonnet, is used not only to address questions of art and performance, but also as an exploration of social roles and their limitations in the United States.

"The Tattooed Man"

All of Hayden's circus poems are also poems about the relationship between art and life and about the task of being an artist. In this way Hayden connects, quite understandably, the art of poetry to performance and theatricality. This connection, however, is complicated by the relationship between circus and poetry used to discuss difference and otherness, thus talking about the beautiful and the sublime in connection to a lowbrow form of art, the circus. This overall stance is also reflected and encompassed in the poem "The Tattooed Man."

'The Tattooed Man" is perhaps the best example of Hayden's circus poetry. Published only in the 1982 version of *American Journal*, it is a touching reflection on being an alien, the grotesque, art, love, and heroes. The poem is narrated in first person by the tattooed man. It is divided into five stanzas,[21] and is characterized by repetition, researched vocabulary, and spare use of imperfect rhymes complemented by alliteration and short, mostly iambic lines. Its high lyricism gives voice to the most noble and romantic emotions and it associates them with a figure that is generally considered grotesque and unromantic. The first stanza immediately highlights this contrast:

> I gaze at you,
> longing longing,
> as from a gilt
> and scarlet cage;
> silent, speak
> your name, cry—
> Love me.

[21] In *American Journal* the poem is only divided into two stanzas. In *Collected Poems,* however, it is divided in five stanzas. Frederick Glaysher, editor of the *Collected Poems*, writes in the introduction that the poems are reprinted following original book manuscripts. The drafts of the poems that I found in Hayden's papers seem to confirm that the poem was envisioned as divided in multiple stanzas. This division in stanzas seems to make sense also from a thematic point of view, as explained later in the chapter, and therefore I decided to use the version of the poem in the *Collected Poems* for discussion.

To touch you, once
to hold you close—
My jungle arms,
their prized chimeras,
appall. Your fear
the birds of paradise
perched on my thighs. (1-14)

The words "gaze," "scarlet," "chimeras"[22] and "perched," all researched words, are contrasted with the idea of "my jungle arms" and the verb "fear." This contrast, coupled with the repetition of "longing longing" highlights that the relationship between the lover and the loved one is one of unequal terms and unequal feelings, unreciprocated.

"The Tattooed Man" closes the second section of *American Journal* (1982), preceded by "Paul Laurence Dunbar," "Homage to Paul Robeson," "The Rag Man," and "The Prisoners." Section two, therefore, constitutes a catalogue of others, of strangers and aliens. The signifiers of otherness, in the poem, are multiple: from nouns like "cage" (4), "jungle" (10), "bizarrity" (23), and "gargoyle" (44), verbs like "to gawk" (30), and adjectives like "strange" (22), "grotesque" (31), and "unnaturalness" (32), which point to the monstrous yet exotic nature of the freak, to nouns like "homeless" (25), "alien" (24), "outsider" (31), and a verb like "belong" (35), which highlight feelings of exclusion and belonging.

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[22] A Chimera is a monster part of Greek mythology made of parts of a serpent, a lion, and a goat that breathed fire. According to the *OED,* the term has evolved to indicate a "grotesque monster, formed of the parts of various animals" as well as a "horrible and fear-inspiring phantasm" or an "unreal creature of the imagination, a mere wild fancy, an unfounded conception," which seems to be its more modern use. Chimera is a recurring word in Hayden's work. According to Hatcher, Hayden "fell in love with some particular words which he would use repeatedly because they had such a profound tonal quality […]. The word *chimera(s)* Hayden used in 'from *The Snow Lamp*,' "The Tattooed Man," and "October,' again because it has an inherently poetic sound, but also because it bridges the senses, connoting at once imaginative and various color, and, from the mythological monster it names, becoming a symbol of the seasonal nature of the year" (286).

“The Tattooed Man” encapsulates many of the themes present in Hayden’s circus poetry but also characteristic of his overall oeuvre: the contrasting of high- and lowbrow art, the quest for the understanding of what it means to be an artist, the exploration of power relations, and the investigation of the concepts of change and metamorphosis. What is relatively unusual in the poem is the overwhelming presence of the theme of love. This is a poem about love and longing. While it is not the only one in Hayden’s work, it is, however, one of very few, and it is, possibly, one of the most directly and specifically about love. While all the above-mentioned themes are present in one way or another in every stanza, structurally the poem addresses each theme in a different stanza, so that stanza two addresses alterity, stanza three focuses on power relations, stanza four looks at art and life, and the last stanza ponders on metamorphosis and change. All stanzas talk about love.

> Oh to break through,
> to free myself—
> lifer in The Hole—
> from servitude
> I willed. Or was
> it evil circumstance
> that drove me to seek
> in strangeness strange
> abiding-place?
> Born alien,
> homeless everywhere,
> did I, then, choose
> bizarrity,
> having no other choice? (15-28)

The second stanza opens with the wish to be free from servitude. While it references “lifer in The Hole,”[23] this stanza seems to indicate that the captivity of the speaker is psychological

[23] This is a reference to the imprisonment in the city-prison of ‘Akká of the Bahá'u'lláh. He was exiled from Baghdad in 1863 and after going to Constantinople and Adrianople, was finally sent with this followers to

and emotional as well as being imposed by the nature of the sideshow itself, the "strange abiding-place." The polyptoton "strangeness strange" further highlights, yet questions, the adjective or the noun "abiding" by suggesting that not even strangeness is eternal, and its meaning shifts and changes with time. As a noun, in fact, abiding means "the action of awaiting, expecting, or lying in wait" ("abiding, n."), while as an adjective, it means something that endures, lasts, permanent, or eternal ("abiding, adj.").

The first seven lines of the third stanza spell out the relationship between looker and looked-on in a sideshow and describes its complicated power dynamics.

> Hundreds have paid
> to gawk at me—
> grotesque outsider whose
> unnaturalness
> assures them they
> are natural, they indeed
> belong. (29-35)

While in "Aunt Jemima," "The Performers," or "from The Coney Island Suite," the narrator is both spectator as well as spectacle, here, the tattooed man, by describing the othering gaze of the spectators and by showing clear consciousness of what the power dynamics at play are, is also othering the spectator and subjecting it to *his* theoretically disempowered and objectified gaze. With this subtle twist , the tattooed man gives voice to American history of performance as one grounded in cakewalks and minstrel shows. As Eric Lott argues, one should see "blackface minstrelsy as less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure" ("Introduction"). In the same way, one should also see

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'Akká (at the time Ottoman Palestine, now Israel) in 1868, where he remained until his death, enjoying various degrees of freedom. As a member of the Baha'i faith, Hayden included multiple references to it throughout its ouvre. John Hatcher's monograph, *From the Auroral Darkness* (1984) is an excellent study of the influences of the Baha'i faith in the work and life of Hayden.

the freak show in American culture. As literary scholar Linda Frost argues in *Never One Nation: Freak, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture* (2005),

> the ability to assign primitiveness to other people affirmed the sense of belonging and entitlement that American national membership promised. […] Freak presentation, because of its emphasis on and exploitation of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, reaffirmed white audience members' notions of who belonged to the civilized community of the United States by putting on stage those who did not. (4-5)

As readers we don't know whether the tattooed man is black or white. His ethnicity is not marked. Hayden, unlike some African American writers,[24] does not usually mark the whiteness of his characters. However, the tattooed man's ethnicity is almost irrelevant in our scenario because American culture, as both Lott and Frost articulated, historically assigns otherness to blackness and considers whiteness the default category of normalcy.

These first seven lines of the third stanza are counterbalanced by the remainder of the stanza:

> But you but you,
> for whom I would
> endure caustic acids,
> keenest knives—
> you look at me with pain,
> avert your face,
> love's own,
> ineffable and pure
> and not for gargoyle
> kisses such as mine. (36-45)

The break between the two parts is indicated by the repetition "but you but you" as to emphasize that now the speaker is directing his thoughts to the loved one, a sort of apostrophe to her/him, and also, through the use of "but" to emphasize difference,

[24] Among these, we find Frank Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), William Demby, *Beetlecreek* (1950), James Baldwin, Richard Wright, *Savage Holiday* (1954), and *Giovanni's Room,* (1956).

detachment. The /b/ in but, however, also alliterates with the /b/ in "belonging," thus coupling detachment with attachment and integration. The remaining lines recall a medieval courtly love type of romance, where the lover, willing to endure numerous sacrifices, does not consider himself deign to be looked at and kissed by the loved one, whose face is "love's own / ineffable and pure." The use of gargoyle to describe one's own "monstrosity" contributes to this feeling of medievalism.

The first line of the fourth stanza is "Da Vinci's Last Supper—." Just like in "Aunt Jemima" and "The Performers," Hayden decides to juxtapose "high" art to "lower" forms of art, in this case, tattoo making.

> Da Vinci's Last Supper—
> a masterpiece
> in jewel colors
> on my breast
> (I clenched my teeth in pain;
> all art is pain
> suffered and outlived);
> gryphons, naked Adam
> embracing naked Eve,
> a gaiety of imps
> in cinnabar;
> the Black Widow
> peering from the web
> she spun, belly to groin—
> These that were my pride
> repel the union of
> your flesh with mine. (46-62)

Da Vinci's Last Supper is reproduced on the same canvas, the same body, in which there are also drawn gryphons, Adam and Eve, imps, and a black widow, thus not only mixing high and low art, but also the sacred and the profane. As Fred Fetrow duly noted, "the speaker's tattoo pattern recurrently commingle Christian mythology and morality with sensual joys" (127). The stanza makes a clear statement on the nature of art: "art is pain/suffered and

outlived," thus hinting at the theme that Hayden fully explored in "The Peacock Room," where the driving question of the poem is the relationship between art and life, the longevity of art as opposed to the ephemeral nature of life. The description of pain coupled with the willingness to "endure caustic acids / keenest knives" (38-9), positions the speaker in the role of a hero, and in this way extends the attribute of hero to the artist.[25]

An early, unpublished draft of this poem, titled "The Confessions of the Tattooed Man" (Appendix I), sees the genesis of the poem as almost a kunstlerroman, where the origins of the tattooed man are explained almost as the myth of origin of a superhero. The early draft narrates the story of a boy whose body was marked in an unclear way, "born blemished" (9) with

> zodiacal blotches, cabalistic signs,
> lion and butterfly. Strange figurations.
> Upon my forehead semblance of a cross
> a mark of the beast? (13-16)

One day the boy was attacked by "the so-called normal" (22) "to see if 'it' was blemished too" (25). Exhausted, he decides to kill himself jumping off a bridge, when a stranger rescues him:

> God will not welcome an intruder, son,
> the Stranger gently chided. God
> mocks me, I cried, amuses himself with me.
> Then be his harlequin, his jester,
> his grotesque. Come, I'll take you home.
> I have no home, I wept. Then come with me…

[25] I consider the tattooed man an artist because he performs in a sideshow. It does not escape me that he did not, probably, tattooed himself (even though we don't really know).

These lines described the genesis of the tattooed man, who, indeed, becomes “his harlequin, his jester, his grotesque,” by joining the sideshow. It is quite common in fiction about sideshows to have the “freak” rescued by a compassionate soul who, incidentally, also runs a sideshow. This is the case, for instance, in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) or even in the latest novel by Nigerian author Chris Abani, *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014).[26]

Few things remain of the earlier draft in the final version of the poem, and they mostly have to do with ideas of grotesqueness. However, the early draft did infuse the final version with the feeling of a painful genesis of the speaker (expressed in the second stanza), and with the idea that art is life as well as pain:

> the needles? the pain? But I desired
> pain, endured it in stinging sweat
> of ecstasy

When we consider that two of the five poems of the section in which “The Tattooed Man” is inserted in *American Journal*, “Paul Laurence Dunbar” and “Homage to Paul Robeson,” are dedicated to the celebration of artists, and that the other three poems, “The Rag Man,” “The Prisoners,” and “The Tattooed Man,” have art as the subject of their stories, we can see that Hayden, in his very last collection, is trying to make a final assessment on the role of art. Hatcher suggests that “each of the five poems in group two […] implies that art, or an artistic point of view, suggests a creative response to some crucial societal issue” (222). However, while Hatcher’s interpretation is certainly correct, it ignores the fact that Hayden is not only discussing the role of art in relation to social change, but, more profoundly, he is

[26] I will briefly discuss Abani’s novel and its relevance to my project in the Coda of this dissertation.

also pondering on the essence of art itself and asking, as well attempting to answer, the question "what is art?" By failing to notice the relevance of the theme of the circus and sideshow throughout Hayden's oeuvre, Hatcher is not connecting Hayden's concern with otherness to the status of being an artist. While Hatcher writes that Fetrow "fails to note [...] the central issue of the artist as alien among aliens" (222), Hatcher himself fails to note that Hayden is also saying that not all artists are aliens in the same way. Characters like the tattooed man or Aunt Jemima are coupled to Paul Robeson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, thus not only destabilizing our understanding of what an artist is but also what an "alien" is. For the tattooed man, being an alien implies not finding love; for the lion tamer in "The Lion," being an artist is accompanied by euphoria and religious exaltation, even when by virtue of being a tamer in a circus, he is a "peripheral artist"; Aunt Jemima is an alien because she is a black woman who has to make a living in the United States and Europe, and is therefore typecast and forced into the role of the exotic black woman. By examining these characters in depth, we learn that alterity is not a monolithic quality, not in life, nor in Hayden's oeuvre.

"The Tattooed Man" ends on the notes of metamorphoses and change.

> I year I yearn
> And if I dared
> the agonies of metamorphosis,
> would I not find
> you altered then?
> I do not want
> you other than you are.
> And I—I cannot
> (will not?) change.
> It is too late
> for any change
> but death.
> I am I. (63-75)

The stanza begins with another repetition, “I yearn I yearn” which, like “longing longing” on line two, heightens the sense of yearning by lengthening, doubling, the time the reader stops on the word “to yearn.” In this stanza, the speaker questions the benefits of change. He wonders whether his perception of the loved one would be the same if he changed. He concludes that he would not want the loved one to change and so he will not change either, cannot change either. The poem ends with a reaffirmation of the self, “I am I.” Given that the only possible change for the speaker would be death, he embraces his difference and realizes that the world is the way he sees it because *he* is who he is.

The theme of metamorphosis is a familiar one in Hayden’s work. *The Night Blooming Cereus* (1972), for instance, opens, as we have previously seen, with “Richard Hunt’s Arachne,” yet another ekphrastic poem describing Richard Hunt’s 1956 sculpture representing the myth of Arachne. The poem captures, also visually, the process of metamorphosis, the tortuous process of becoming something other, and the agonies it entails.

Figure 4: Richard Hunt's *Arachne*, (1956). Welded steel. Currently at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

That agony is the same agony that the tattooed man does not want to endure. Incidentally, he has a spider, the Black Widow, "peering from the web / she spun, belly to groin—" as if to symbolize he has already put himself through a metamorphosis once. The lines that follow the description of the Black Widow,

> These that were my pride
> repel the union of
> your flesh with mine, (60-62)

also seem to connect to the myth of Arachne, who was turned into a spider by Athena because she was very proud, too proud, of her weaving abilities and decided to dare the

goddess into a weaving competition, which she won. Pride caused Arachne to be turned into a spider in the same way in which it causes the tattooed man to live his life without the love of a loved one. Richard Hunt's sculpture reproduces the vortex of change, a metamorphosis on a solid and unchangeable material like steel, thus commenting on the nature of change and on its paradoxical immutability. The metamorphosis is caught in *medias res*, in a sculpture that shows the fixedness of human and animal natures. Hayden uses the myth of Arachne, and transposes it to another immutable art form, the tattoo. Yet, this time, the combination between the animal and the human nature of the myth is provided not in the artistic representation itself but by the union of the tattooed spider with the tattooed man. The two together embody transformation. Hayden, therefore, uses myth as a way to explore the past as well as the present and as a way to expand our geographical and temporal frames.

The combination of the theme of love and the formal feature of repetition in the poem also recalls Søren Kierkegaard *Repetition* (1843-4). *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines "repetition" as lying at "the core of any definition of poetry" and as a "basic unifying device in all poetry" (1035). However, while structurally repetition may often be unifying, and in Hayden it often is, it is also true that it can also be destabilizing and unsettling. As poetry and American studies scholar Krystyna Mazur writes in *Poetry and Repetition: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, John Ashberry* (2005), "repetition may produce friction" and it can be at the same time "structuring and unhinging, [forcing] us to recognize parallels, but at the same time [exposing] the difference within the elements it brings together" (xii). Constantine, the protagonist of Kierkegaard's *Repetition,* writes that if the way to knowledge for Plato is through remembering and recollection, prompted by a teacher, since we already know everything we need to know inside of us, repetition, instead,

consists of an unexpected gift of knowledge, and epiphany. Through the letter exchange between Constantine and a man who is lovesick, the reader gets a glimpse into the workings of repetition, that, differently from recollection, which looks at the past, looks instead at the unknown and therefore allows for an end to lovesickness and the beginning of new loves and a new life. In "The Tattooed Man," repetition works in the same way, particularly when we encounter repetition with difference, a polyptoton, as in "strangeness strange," or when the repetition of words such as "change" seem to embody and yet resist the very idea of change. Ultimately, repetition ends the poem, "I am I," with a reaffirmation not only of the self, but also of future possibilities.

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Yoram Carmeli associates the circus with the idea of the periphery and argues that, "for the dominant groups, periphery is at one and the same time fearful, a potent contamination, yet attractive, an object of voyeurism—me contested and cast by that which is not me" ("Lion" 66). Yet, what happens when the "contested me" is, instead, also part of "that which is not me?" How does the other relate to the circus? How is the trope of the circus deployed by African American writers?

William Demby, for instance, uses the circus to talk about a white outcast living in a black community and accused of being a pedophile in his novel *Beetlecreek* (1950). Paul Laurence Dunbar, in "We Wear the Mask," already gestures towards the idea of the jester and towards the relationship between African American identity and the spectacularization of their "otherness." Langston Hughes picks up where Dunbar left off and both in "The Black Clown" and "The Jester" directly and unequivocally spells out the connection between African Americanness, alterity, and the circus as trope that epitomizes both the

spectacle of otherness as well as the periphery and the marginalization of African Americans. June Jordan, in "What Happens" (1971), instead, seems to make a more subtle connection along the lines of Hayden's "Invisible Circus," so that "the greatest show on earth" is life itself, and the circus only a distraction from it:

> What happens when a boy sits on a chair
> and watches all the action on the ground and in the air
> or when the children leave the greatest show on earth
> and see the circus? ("What Happens" lines 9-12)

In "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), Zora Neale Hurston writes that "every phase of negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out" (61). Similarly, in "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (1953), Ralph Ellison proposes that "on the moral level […] we view the whole of African American life as drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which the action unfolds" (1.2). Both artists are expressing something that has been true from the arrival of enslaved Africans to the United States up until our days, when the black body is still very much spectacularized. Yet, African American writers have also always expressed the need to resist this view that essentializes black identity. This resistance has been performed textually since the very beginning of the African American literary tradition, and it continues to our day, through the investigation of the relationship between black body and spectacle.

Robert Hayden embraces and resists this paradigm. Through the trope of the circus and the archetype of the "freak," Hayden confronts themes of alterity and alienation. The freak is metaphor and metonymy for the marginalized and the circus is used as a jumping board to

discuss and represent the various dimensions of alterity in ways that are universal but that also recall and refer to the history of oppression and marginalization of peoples of color in the United States. “The other,” in Hayden’s poetry, is both an outsider as well as a reflection of the self-same poetic voice, speaker, narrator, or persona. At the same time, this paradigm is resisted because the “freak” is also used to talk about art. In this way Hayden resists essentializing difference and, instead, uses it to explore the world at large and the process of artistic creation in particular, thus providing it with dignity and making of difference an essential element in his poetry as well as in the worldview reflected in his poems.

Chapter Two

"The Once Absolute Otherwhere": Travel Poetry.

Shape the lips to an *o,* say *a.*
That's *island.*
One word of Swedish has changed the
whole neighbourhood.

(Rita Dove. "Ö." 1-3)

Who am I now?
An American? No, a New Yorker,
who opens his *Times* at the obit page,

whose dream images date him already,
awake among lasers, electric brains,
do-it-yourself sex manuals,
bugged phones, sophisticated
weapon-systems and sick jokes.

Already a helpless orbited dog
has blinked at our sorry conceited O,
where many are famished, few look good,
and my day turned out torturers
who read *Rilke* in their rest periods.
(W. H. Auden. "Prologue at Sixty." 83-95)

On November 26, 1954, a forty-one year old Robert Hayden, traveling through Mexico on a Rosenwald fellowship, wrote in his journal:

> I feel very bitter and hostile towards the U. S. for the first time in my life. Mexicans, who are 'backward' by our standards, have too much respect for individual rights to segregate. I may very well be suffering with "the vapors" this morning, but I don't love my country. I could cheerfully, completely turn my back on the U.S. for good when I think of the energy, time, money—not to mention lives, talents—lost on account of the race "problem." I now

> appreciate in a sharply painful way who is the backward nation, despite its ingenuity in creating death. (Hayden Papers, Box 30, Folder 6, Nov. 26, 1954)

Reading travel poems by an African American author, this is precisely the type of critique of the American racial and segregationist policies that one would expect to find embedded in the texts of his poems. Especially in the poems composed right after such a journey in 1954, on the eve of the big tumults of the 1950s, right after *Brown v. Board of Education* and many other exciting and also frightening events happening all over the United States. Yet, Hayden's travel poetry might *initially* surprise the reader either for its lack of direct references to what in his journal he termed "the race problem," or, better said, for his unusual treatment of this theme.

In spite of an apparent lack of, or limited, commentary on the racial situation in the U.S., Hayden's travel poetry *does* insert itself into the broader discourse of African American travel writing, which literary scholar Farah Griffin and poet and fiction writer Cheryl Fish, in *A Stranger in the Village* (1999), identify as a travel literature that testifies to the "mobility" of African Americans and that "reveals a complex range of racial and national identities, unfixing and relocating narrow or set notions of black subjectivity" (xv). While constantly made aware of being the "other" on American soil, once abroad and confronting "otherness/alterity," African Americans are "made to feel their sense of being American on foreign soil" (xvi). They could adopt (willingly or unconsciously) the same objectifying gaze reflective of the objectifying and exoticizing gaze they were used to receiving at home, thus displaying "a tendency to reproduce at least some of the values of Western superiority despite a desire to challenge white supremacy and classist, nationalist, or gender barriers" (ibid). As Robert Cole argues in *Black Writers Abroad* (1999), African Americans were

writing from the perspective of being "marginalized, isolated, and disconnected from American society" while, at the same time, they were sharing, at least in part, its cultural framework (80).

Hayden's travel poems, and "An Inference of Mexico" in particular, share this same "double consciousness" with regards to the journaling and memorializing of travel; the poems use the interplay between the beautiful and the horrific, the aestheticizing and de-aestheticizing of horror, and the tension existing between adopting the othering gaze and being othered, as a way to portray it and exemplify it. With this play of dichotomies, they enact this state of being both one and "the other," so that the reader, instead of being *told* how this feels, is, instead, made to *experience* this dual perspective.

"An Inference of Mexico"

"An Inference of Mexico" is a series of eight poems that Hayden wrote as a result of his one-year stay in Mexico in 1954. First published in *A Ballad of Remembrance* in 1962, they were then republished in *Selected Poems* (1966) and in *Angle of Ascent* (1975), re-publications that testify to their continuous relevance to Hayden. The poems offer a hard, lucid insight into Mexico accompanied by a reflection on the role of the tourist and on practices of othering. Both Pontheolla Williams and Fred Fetrow argue that this set of poems is basically the reportage of an outsider. For Fetrow, the narrator is an outsider who reports what he sees in the role of an observer (85), for Williams, this outsider is providing a portrait of the Mexican peons, the poverty of the place, and the "morally stultifying tentacles that [...] have sprung from the peon's economic plight" (96). These readings, however, while convincing, ignore the poems' much more complex investigation of the tension existing

between the themes of African American identity and travel, as well as ignoring the poems *qua* modernist poetry.

This investigation is reflected from the very beginning in the title of the series of poems; "inference" means both a conclusion reached on the basis of evidence and reasoning, and it also describes the process involved in reaching such a conclusion. Its use implies the idea of an individual perspective, the perspective of a narrator who places himself in the position of the outsider-observer, who is drawing a conclusion on a foreign land based on his observations (and objectifications) of that land. At the same time, the process of inferring is also mimetic of the geographical search and psychological processes of the traveler-narrator. The word implies effort and a search to understand and explain the foreign, as we have already seen in the previous chapter with "The Lion."

The series of poems opens with "Day of the Dead" and closes with "La Corrida." Both poems are the representations of folkloristic aspects of Mexico. It is significant that this series is framed by two folkloristic events, as this suggests an initial and overt objectification of the travel experience and the portrayal of Mexico in an exoticized way. Read in this light, the poems are, to all effects, looking at Mexico through the "tourist gaze"[27] and responding to classic principles of travel writing. As Chloe Chard explains in *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830* (1999), travel writing should present its readers with an attempt at satisfying the demands and expectations that the

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[27] As conceptualized by John Urry, the tourist gaze is a gaze that is "socially organized and systematized" (1), "constructed through difference, in relation to its opposite, to non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness" (1), and "based on anticipation" (3) which ultimately "consumes" alterity, otherness, as a good and which is informed by a set of expectations to find "authenticity." Urry also claims that the populations which are "gazed" upon reflect back the gaze, providing the tourist with what the tourist expects, in order to gain economically from it (10, 59-74).

foreign “should be different from the familiar” (3), but, at the same time, not so different as to “resist all attempts at understanding and assimilation” (20) while “restoring to the reader the sense of otherness” (1). Yet, this straightforward understanding is complicated by the much more elaborate interplay in the poem between who is gazing and who is gazed upon.

Most of the eight poems are constructed either around different points of view or around different voices that, at least in appearance, are providing the reader with a holistic experience of Mexico. We get, for instance, to experience the Corrida from the points of view of the bullfighter, of the bull, and of the audience, in “Day of the Dead” we hear the voice of our poetic speaker, as well as the one of a local pimp, in “Market” the voice of a “barefoot cripple,” etc. Yet, if we listen carefully, especially in “Day of the Dead,” but also in “Veracruz” and other poems, we can hear the presence of a further, unidentified choral and antiphonal voice, which is ominous and dark, and which provides a contrast to the objectifying voice of the tourist. In “Day of the Dead,” this choral voice appears for the first time in the third, two-lines stanza: “savage the light upon us, / savage the light.” The way the poem is constructed makes it unclear whether “savage” is an adjective or whether it is a verb. When considered as a verb, these lines assume this choral quality and “us” becomes the collective choral voice speaking in what sounds like a quasi-religious fashion, thanks to the repetition of “savage the light” and the omission of “upon us” in the second line. This provides a sense of truncation that amplifies the feeling of uncertainty with regard to the voice’s provenance, sounding like an “echo,” similar to the answering call of church members, as part of a prayer. This same choral voice appears in the last stanza of the poem, where it says,

> flee amigo, for the dead are angry;

> flee, lest the hands of the dead men strike us down,
> and the vultures pick our bones. (lines 26-28)

Once again, the presence of the pronoun "us" takes the reader back to a choral dimension and, once again, the voice we hear is an ominous one, in profound contrast to the tourist's objectifying voice.

"An Inference of Mexico" presents the reader with a mixture of awe, interest, and admiration for the place described, coupled with feelings and images that can be defined "horrific," thus displacing the reader and drawing attention not only to the theme of the poem itself—the festivity of the day of the dead—but also to this destabilizing interplay. "Day of the Dead," for instance, opens and closes with images of a death that is "real" (the vultures, the dead men), and that are placed in opposition to the death that is evoked in the central part of the poem, which is only a representation of death made of marzipan skulls that the tourist is consuming as a spectacle. This play between images of "real" and aestheticized death parallels the play between the ominous collective voice and the voices of the other characters in the poem, who are speaking of a societal death caused by prostitution, misery, and exploitation by and of the tourist. The play also intertwines the voices of the observer and those of the observed and thus turns the observer (the tourist) into the observed.

This type of inversion is also present, for instance, in "Market," where we encounter an accusatory local and collective voice that observes the tourist and describes her/him as having walked "on seas of money for all your foreign lives!"

> Por caridad, por caridad.
> Lord, how they stride
> on the hard good legs
> money has made them.

> Ay! you creatures
> who have walked
> on seas of money all
> your foreign lives!
> Por caridad. (24-32)

In "Veracruz," the reader can see how, once again, there is the presence of an ominous voice, this time highlighted by the use of italics, which functions as a counterpart to the speaker's voice and invites it to leave the place, to escape:

> Here only the sea is real—
> the barbarous multifoliate sea
> with its rustling of leaves,
> fire, garments, wind;
> its clashing of phantasmal jewels,
> its lunar thunder,
> animal and human sighing.
>
> *Leap now*
> *and cease from error.*
> *Escape. Or shoreward turn,*
>
> *accepting all—*
> *the losses and farewells,*
> *the long warfare with self,*
> *with God.*
>
> The waves roar in and break
> roar in and break
> with granite spreeing hiss
> on bronzegreen rocks below
> and glistering uplifting of spray. (23-41)

Here too, just like in "Day of the Dead," the voice speaks in imperatives. It commands. It speaks in the middle of the poem and interrupts what is the description of a natural setting in Veracruz. It functions almost as the voice of nature itself, which makes the observer turn

into the observed, whether it is by the Gods, by the locals, or by nature.[28]

In the entire series of poems, the poetic voice does not shun away from the portrayal of the exotic. On the contrary, it embraces it. For instance, the lines

> Barefoot Tehuanas in rhythmic jewels of gold
> bear pails of marigolds upon their heads
> to the returning dead. ("Day," lines 23-24)

fall in line with the expectations of a more traditional and colonial travel literature where the speaker wants to take in the beauty of these faraway and exotic places. This exoticizing is balanced out by the portrayal of the "real." The various voices present in the poems depict an often dry and raw spectacle, un-romanticized in its essence. This spectacle is, however, exoticized through the use of formal craft and beauty. Returning to "Day of the Dead," for instance, it opens with "the vultures hover wheel and hover / in skies intense as voyeur's gazing" (1-2). Vultures are an ominous presence throughout the poem and they are symbolic of death. At the same time, their presence is what provides the overall rhythm to the poem—they are, in fact, present in stanzas one, four, seven, and eleven. Not only do they provide rhythm and structure, but their image is also connected to images of flight. The flight is one performed in "skies intense as voyeur's gazing," where the alliteration of /s/ and /z/ sounds, coupled with the repetition of "hover wheel and hover," give to these opening lines the overwhelming feeling of something beautiful in spite of the image presented. The voyeuristic gaze is, instead, shown through the interplay of beauty and horror described above: the alliteration of "v" in "voyeuristic" and "vulture" connects the two terms, clearly

[28] It is worth noting briefly how the description of the sea in "Veracruz" is very similar to the one in "The Diver," explored in my "Introduction." Not only we are presented with similar images, particularly with regards to the ghostliness of the undersea, but Hayden also uses same and similar words, such as "garments," or "bronzegreen," which in "The Diver" was "nightgreen."

associating the tourist and his voracious gaze to a vulture consuming a spectacle of death.

What may initially seem a straightforward aestheticization of the experience of the poetic voice is, instead, a play of instability where the reader is continuously made to shift between the beautiful and the horrific, without really being able to define which is which. In the fourth stanza, the vultures are transformed by their very own act of flying, by how they fly and by the quality of the sky:

> the graveblack vultures encircle afternoon,
> transformed by steeps of flight
> into dark pure images of flight. (8-10)

They become signifiers for “flight” in this desolate landscape during a festivity that celebrates the dead. As a result, a symbol like the sky, which normally has a positive connotation, is given a dark, obscure quality by the presence of the flying vultures while, at the same time, the vultures absorb some of the positive quality of the sky. The imagery of the vultures is then further contrasted to the imagery related to flowers and light, but, once again, these images are of a dual nature. The flowers, for instance, are the ones printed on the shirt of the androgynous young man, probably a pimp, who proposes female and male prostitutes to the narrator, “sunlight,” instead, is associated to “knives,” the smile is “oblique,” and the conjunction used is “but:”

> In flowered shirt, androgynous,
> the young man under palm leaf knives of sunlight
> invites, awaits, obliquely smiles.
> Such pretty girls, señor,
> but if instead— (“Day,” lines 18-22)

All of these elements highlight the tension present within the poem between what seems and what is, between aestheticizing and exoticizing the travel experience, and de-aestheticizing it, exemplifying and mimicking what it feels to be in the position of the object

while at the same time being the objectifier, in line with the common understanding and theorizing of African American travel literature. The young man in "Day of the Dead" is being objectified by the poetic voice and, with the exception of his oblique smile, is turned into a faceless representation of what is ugly and corrupted in the relationship between tourists and locals. At the same time, the pimp is the one who literally objectifies, both in the act of actually "offering" the "services" of other human beings to the narrator, but also by making clear that the narrator is the "other" in that place, identifying him as the tourist, the one who is being seen as an "object of consumption" by the locals as well as being the one who "consumes" both population and landscape.

When we look at other poems of the series, such as "Market," we notice how the tension between the beautiful and the horrific is brought to the reader by the formal aspects of the poem. The poetic voice, for example, talks about "acid green and bloody gelatins" (3-4) or

> papaya too ripe
> and pyramids
> of rotting oranges
> turkeys like feather duster flowers. (8-12)

In "Market," the barefoot are not the beautiful Tehuanas, but, instead, a crippled man, and we learn that in the market there is an

> odor of a dripping
> carcass moans
> beneath the hot
> fragrance of carnations,
> cool scent of lilies. (33-37)

The contrast between beauty and horror is, in these verses, at its starkest because it is also accompanied by a formal structure of the poem that, on the one hand, helps to aestheticize the horror, thus making it feel less "horrid" (for instance by providing an interesting

synesthesia with “odor” and “moans”) while, on the other hand, precisely because the poem is so complex, it enhances it. Horror is thus de-aestheticized through the power of aesthetics, by calling attention to the words themselves, such as “rotting,” “dripping,” “carcass,” juxtaposed to words such as “lilies,” “fragrance,” and “feather duster flowers.”

Reading this set of poems, and all of Hayden’s travel poetry, simply as a straightforward narration about some far away place, entails ignoring the interactions passing between observer and observed and their value in destabilizing given notions of other/otherer. Because in “Day of the Dead” and in the other poems of the series, the setting— that far away, exotic place to which the narrator traveled to—is evoked mostly through the contrast between images of horror and beauty, and described through the use of artful poetic form, the reader is displaced, left in a perceptual limbo where it is difficult to pinpoint who is really objectifying and othering whom, experiencing that dual feeling that so often characterizes travel writing by African Americans. In reporting these “inferences” of Mexico, the poems put multiple voices in conversation with one another so that the poetic voice itself becomes de-centered, hence allowing room for a variety of perspectives and points of view. This decentering and this polyphony also help undo ideas of national boundaries, in favor of a broader idea of space and time in spite of the fact that space, in this series, is often identifiable through geographical and linguistic references.

“A Ballad of Remembrance”[29]

[29] Unless otherwise specified, I refer to the latest published version of the poem that appeared in *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962), which differs in some parts from the first version of the poem published in 1948 in *The Lion and the Archer.*

> Quadroon mermaids, Afro angels, black saints
> balanced upon the switchblades of that air
> and sang. Tight streets unfolding to the eye
> like fans of corrosion and elegiac lace
> crackled with their singing: Shadow of time. Shadow of blood.
> ("A Ballad of Remembrance" 1-5)

"A Ballad of Remembrance" (1948), opens with a circus-like image: black characters singing and performing a balancing act. Their blackness is not monolithic, and neither is their essence. They sing *to* the streets and *in* the streets, which are transformed by the poetic voice into negative images of corrosion and death. They sing about the passing of time, about blood, and about their ineffable essence. The use of the word "elegiac" in "elegiac lace" used to describe the unfolding of the streets, already alerts the reader to the topic of the poem, which is, in many respects, an elegy, even if not in the traditional sense. It is a poem of mourning for the situation of African Americans in the United States, for their segregation and discrimination.[30] It is also a poem of mourning for the South, perceived as arcane and nightmarish, and it is a poem of mourning for the speaker himself, who feels he has lost his voice, until the arrival of his friend, Mark Van Doren, allows him to find his "true voice again."

Until now "A Ballad" has been read consistently as a poem about the representation of the possible and common answers to the racial injustice perpetrated in the U.S. The indeed correct argument often made by many scholars, including Hatcher, Fetrow, P. Williams, and Wilburn Williams Jr., is that each of the three contending voices in the poem—the one of

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[30] As we will see in Chapter 4, Hayden's elegies are very often focused on a community as opposed to an individual.

the “Quadroon Mermaids, Afro Angels, and black saints,” the one of the “Zulu King,” and the one of the “gun-metal priestess”—“ represent a traditional response to racial injustice acted out in the gaudy symbols of *Mardi Gras* costumes in New Orleans” (Hatcher 53). Wilburn Williams highlights also how the poem is a reflection on the situation of an African American artist trying to make art, and explains that “these simplistic formulations are death to the integrity of any artist, and the poet is saved only when Mark Van Doren helps him to find his own “true voice” again” (742). The three voices suggest as possibilities either accommodation, hate, or love. Michael Novak, arguing that the poem is one of “striking and effective language and sound” (282), also adds that the poem contrasts north and south, since the speaker “is a Northern black who has been suddenly plunged into the unnerving world of the Deep South city of New Orleans” (280-1), where the South is not only represented by the city of New Orleans, but it is also symbolized throughout the poem with images like the “sallow vendeuse” and “its oldrose graces.” Not reading the poem in the light of these interpretations would be a mistake. However, the focus on these readings of the poem has left other topics treated in the poem unexplored, such as Hayden’s exploration of the carnival, the idea of travel, the exploration of another geographical space which, by virtue of it being explored during the carnival, becomes a liminal space in which real and surreal encounter, and the way in which such a space is evoked.

The setting of the poem, New Orleans, is evoked through a series of metaphors and similes that are often “lacey,” baroque, and ghostly. They are in tone with the carnival itself, dressed up to mask meaning and yet to be very visible at the same time. They are also in tone with the feeling of the speaker whom, we learn at the end of the poem, feels like a prisoner in the jaws of the city until the arrival of his friend. The streets of New Orleans

unfold in front of the eyes of the speaker "like fans of corrosion and elegiac lace;" they are then described as a threatening river filled with masked black people in which "illuminations"[31] are taking a boat ride:

> Contrived illuminations riding a threat
> of river, masked Negroes wearing chamaleon
> satins gaudy now as a fortuneteller's
> dream of disaster, lighted the crazy flopping
> dance of love and hate among joys, rejections. (15-19)

The carnivalesque atmosphere is rendered also by the description of sounds, like when the streets "crackled with their singing," where the word "crackled" in itself contains a crackling sound. The hard /k/ sound is then repeated in many other stanzas and provides a sense of sonorous cohesiveness to the whole poem. For instance, in the third stanza we have "contrived ghosts / rapped to metronome clack of lavalieres."[32]

The final evocation of the setting comes in stanza seven, where the madness of the carnival is relentlessly evoked in a whirlwind of sounds and random images, which the speaker defines as "metaphorical." The evocation of the setting, through its metaphors and conceits, is what mostly conveys in this poem the feelings the poetic persona has with regards to the city, the festivity, and the racial situation at large in the United States:

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[31] The *OED* defines "illuminations" as "the lighting up of a building or town," usually during festivities. Yet, the word is nothing but the plural of "illumination," which can also mean spiritual or intellectual "enlightenment," or "inspiration or revelation." The word, hence, if read in the poem's context, can simply be read as decorations. Yet, if we were to attempt a symbolic reading of the stanza, one could interpret these illuminations as "revelations," especially when put in connection to the "fortuneteller's / dream of disaster."

[32] The meaning of "lavalier," which can also be spelt "Lavalière" and "Lavallière" is a little imprecise, as there seem to be slightly different definitions of it. The *OED* defines "Lavallière" as a word used to "designate certain styles in clothing and jewelry." The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, instead, defines it as "a pendant on a fine chain that is worn as a necklace," which seems to match the use that Hayden makes of it in the poem. It may also be relevant to know that the etymology of the word, according to the *OED*, comes from "the name of Louise de *la Vallière* (1644–1710), French courtesan."

> But the dance continued—now among metaphorical doors,
> coffee cups floating poised
> hysterias, decors of illusion; now among
> mazurka dolls offering death's-heads
> of cocaine roses and real violets. (29-33)

"A Ballad" is a journey into the racial psychosis of the United States, as well as an exploration of the role of poetry and the search for one's voice. It also depicts a geographical trip to another city during a special event, something that is specifically evoked in the last line, where the poem itself is described as "a poem of remembrance, a gift, a souvenir for you." A line, this, which underlines the function of travel poetry as not only introspective or representational, but also as a memento, a tool for one's memory, specifically linked to the practice of exploration.

Just like "The Diver," the poetic persona here embarks on a journey of self-reflection and self-discovery that is characterized by his immersion in a setting that is not the everyday, the mundane, but rather a spectacular one. New Orleans during *Mardi Gras* becomes a tumultuous sea, a surreal space in which everything can and *is* happening, a space in which ghosts of the present and the ast intermingle with people in a "dance" of "hoodoo" that grips the speaker into its claws; a space in which the speaker gets lost in an almost unwanted abandonment, as if he were drowning. This journey into this semi-real, semi-surreal space only ends with the arrival of the poet Mark Van Doren,[33] who is described as the

[33] Mark Van Doren (1894 1972) was an influential American poet,novelist, and critic, as well as a Professor at Columbia University, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940 for his *Collected Poems.* John Hatcher writes that "the occasion which instigated the poem ["A Ballad of Remembrance"] was a trip Hayden made in 1946 to read his poems at a War Bond rally on the same platform with the noted poet Mark Van Doren." Hatcher then quotes Hayden, who, in *How I Write,* writes about his meeting with Van Doren: "We wanted to have coffee together in one of the interesting restaurants in the French Quarter, but the segregation laws made it just about

shore where I rested
released from the hoodoo of that dance, where I spoke
with my true voice again.

Van Doren becomes an island in the sea, the lighthouse in the midst of the tempest.

The similarities between “A Ballad” and “The Diver” are quite striking and significant as they show how Hayden’s travel poetry effectively represents a thought out process on the part of the poet who had indeed certain themes and topics in mind, and who did use a specific set of formal and thematic elements to express them. Both poems seem to be representations of carnival, both share the use of the same material elements as part of their setting, both are about the connection between past and present, between ghostly presences and the speaker, and both challenge the speaker to take an external as well as an internal journey in order to find his own self and his voice within his historical moment. For example, where in “A Ballad” we have streets like “fans of corrosion and elegiac lace,” in “The Diver” you have “canyons of nightgreen emptiness;” the speaker of both poems dives into these “streets” and reports what he sees during his searching. What the speaker encounters is a carnival. In “The Diver” the carnival is constituted of flashing and shimmering “flower / creatures,” blue and yellow “angelfish,” “bubbling / manfish.” The poem describes life in the relic of the ship as “voracious” and the ship as a “carcass swarming” with it. The “contrived ghosts” who dance during the *Mardi Gras* and “rapped to metronome clack of lavalieres” of “A Ballad” are matched (and surpassed in ghastliness) by the

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impossible for us to do so. We did manage, by a ruse, to have coffee together the following day, however, and then we spent a couple of hours walking around and talking about poetry” (Hatcher 109).

sad slow
dance of gilded
chairs, the ectoplasmic
swirl of garments,
drowned instruments
of buoyancy,
drunken shoes. Then
livid gesturings,
eldritch hide and
seek of laughing
faces.

For Mikhail Bakhtin the power of the carnival stems from its liberating force that becomes a way of challenging religious and societal impositions in order to be free and liberate the people's consciousness (Morris 207). In "A Ballad" the celebration of *Mardi Gras* functions in precisely this same way, as a moment to face and voice the contradictions inherent in the practice of racial segregation. For the poetic voice this is also the moment in which he can assert his "true" poetic voice, rebelling against the aesthetics invoked by the city of New Orleans and its people who are his "generous friends" but who, alas, are "held in the fist of that schizoid city like flowers." In "The Diver," instead, it is the underwater carnival populated by ghosts and nature that allows the diver to search for himself and to re-emerge, hopefully, a changed man. Both poems are ultimately about a journey towards the liberation from oppressive forces, be they the ones of the American society at large (for instance, racism and segregation), of the literary society (for instance of the poets and critics who criticized Hayden), or the self-imposed oppression which is generated by living within such societies and which requires the poetic voice to journey within and without himself in order to find answers and ask questions.

"A Ballad" is also a travel poem in the more traditional sense of the word. It shares with all the other poems in this chapter that travel aesthetic that places in opposition the other

with the otherer, the observer and consumer of an event with its creator or the participants to it. Just like in the Mexico poems, here the speaker has the ability of eschewing the event he is witnessing and of finding his safe "shore" that will allow him to return to life. Just like the speaker in "Day of the Dead," Hayden's poetic persona in "A Ballad" keeps a distance from what is happening during the festivities. His is the gaze of the observer, sucked in the whirlwind of the feast, but resisting being absorbed by it. In "Day of the Dead," this effect is mostly achieved through the presence of other voices who single out the speaker as an outsider; in "A Ballad," while we also have a multiplicity of voices—a characteristic that one finds in much of Hayden's poetry as well as being a characteristic of African American poetry—these voices are not directed at the speaker. They are just voices hanging in the carnival air. The only exception to this is the "sallow vendeuse" who addresses the speaker directly, asking him "what will you have?" thus highlighting that, as a tourist there, he is the one who is buying, purchasing his right to witness the spectacle of the carnival.

In "A Ballad" the sense of the speaker being the other is given to us also by the fact that the depiction of what the *Mardi Gras* consists of is narrated in an impersonal voice, who adopts an almost anthropological gaze. It is only in stanza eight that the speaker turns to the "I" and claims that now, finally released from the "hoodoo of that dance," he can speak with his "true voice again." By assigning to Mark Van Doren the role of his rescuer and by arguing that only when away from that carnival he can speak with his "true voice again," Hayden's poetic voice is positioning itself as other from the world he is describing. This, however, should not be interpreted as an alignment of Hayden, the poet, with the white literary establishment of his time, nor as a rejection on the part of Hayden of black poetry and black aesthetics. On the contrary, this poem ultimately epitomizes Hayden's search for

an independent and individual voice in the world of American poetry, a "true voice" that is his own.[34] The poetic voice does not reject black poetics and black culture; what he seeks is shelter from what the South symbolizes for him and for his poetry, a place of oppression that keeps its people still prisoners in its fist and in his archaic ways:

> And therefore this is not only a ballad of remembrance
> for the down-South arcane city with death
> in its jaws like gold teeth and archaic cusswords;
> not only a token for the troubled generous friends
> held in the fists of that schizoid city like flowers,
> but also, Mark Van Doren,
> a poem of remembrance, a gift, a souvenir for you. (38-44)

In order to fully understand how to position this poem and its multilayered messages, it is also important to examine the co-text and context around the poem. When the poem was originally published in *The Lion and the Archer* (1948), it was the second poem in the series of six by Robert Hayden, which was then followed by six more poems by Myron O'Higgins. The poem was preceded by "Magnolias in Snow," another piercing reflection on the South, and followed by "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," a further elaboration on the themes of carnival and spectacle present in "A Ballad." The other three poems in the Hayden's part of the collection are "Eine Kleine Nacht Musik," a further exploration of the theme of

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[34] To be sure, the use of the word "souvenir" can be read as a sign of Hayden's alignment with the "white world" for two reason. The first one is that one could read Hayden as commodifying black people and their cultural manifestations, turning the experience of witnessing this cultural manifestation into a poem that is a "souvenir." The second reason is that the souvenir is given to Mark Van Doren, who could also be read as a white "tourist" consuming black culture and "rescuing" the poetic persona of Hayden from its "talons." However, it is precisely within black culture that one finds the answer to these doubts. As Hatcher posits, the "three contending voices vying for the allegiance of the Afro-American" to which the speaker gives voice in the first seven stanzas (out of nine) of the poem, "represent a *traditional response* to racial injustice" as well as a "*tradition in Afro-American letters* of contending points of view about how to respond to the existential dilemma of injustice, as well as to the history of grief etched in the collective unconscious of the Black race" (53 emphasis mine). Hayden is therefore using black aesthetics and black literary traditions in order to articulate his wish of being allowed to use his "true voice," one which ultimately encapsulates good modernist aesthetics, as opposed to black or white ones.

journey in another space and another time, and “Invisible Circus” and “The Lion,” which, as we have already seen, are part of Hayden’s circus poetry and deal with art as well as alterity.

The context for the publication of this little volume of poetry was the creation of,[35] which Robert Chrisman defined as an “editing, publishing, and ideological group committed to new, nonsectarian explorations and expressions in art and culture” (130). Chrisman goes on to explain how “the key motif in the Counterpoise statement is the insistence upon freedom from dogmatism, from the ‘minotaurs of edict’ […] that Hayden would delineate in […] the 1948 version of ‘A Ballad of Remembrance’”(ibid). The “meta” language present in the poem, therefore, from the use of the verb “contrive” to the reference to “metaphors,” “elegiac,” “singing,” “rapped,” and “decors of illusion,” reinforces the reading of this poem as a declaration of poetic intent, marking a moment of departure, from Hayden’s very early verse in *Heart Shape in the Dust,* as Chrisman noted, but it also identifies this poem as a *journey* into poetry itself, into black culture, into the South, and into the consciousness of Hayden’s poetic persona.

“The Islands”

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[35] The group was founded thanks to a Creative Writing Fellowship form the Julius Rosenwald Foundation that Hayden received in 1947. The three members of the group were Robert Hayden, William Demby, and Myron O’Higgins (Chrisman 130). The Counterpoise group had its own manifesto. These are some of its most significant parts: “we are unalterably opposed to the chauvinistic, the cultish, to special pleading, to all that seeks to limit and restrict creative expression; we believe experimentation to be an absolute necessity in keeping the arts vital and significant in contemporary life […]; as writers who belong to a so-called minority we are violently opposed to having our work viewed, as the custom is, entirely in the light of sociology and politics; […] we believe in the oneness of mankind and the importance of the arts in the struggle for peace and unity (*Collected* 41-2).

Hayden's last two volumes of poetry, both titled *American Journal,* were published in 1978 and 1982.[36] The last three sections of this chapter will examine three travel poems that are part of this collection: "The Islands," "Astronauts," and "[American Journal]." "The Islands" was first published in 1978, in the first edition of *American Journal.* It is therefore a poem of Hayden's mature age, for he was sixty-five years old. This is a period in which, as John Hatcher points out, Hayden returns to a higher insistence on symbolism (272). At the same time, however, in "The Islands" in particular, we can see how Hayden also moves towards indeterminacy. Harold Bloom writes that this is the poem that best shows Auden's legacy in Hayden's poems[37] and that it is in lines like "we look for ease upon islands we / have never known and yet recall" that "[Bloom] hear[s] Auden at his most persuasive" (1).[38] The poem encapsulates many of the aspects of Hayden's travel poetry as well as giving us a new perspective on the issue of universalism and cosmopolitanism. It is, after all, inserted in a collection of poems that is titled *American Journal*—title that in itself embodies both the ideas of traveling and of narrating, hence expanding spatial and cultural horizons.[39] Both the '78 and '82 editions position "The Islands" near other poems that frame it in unexpected and

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[36] Even if published posthumously, the 1982 version of *American Journal* was actually put together by Hayden himself, who, according to Hatcher, had brought the finished version of it to the publisher as it is now.

[37] Auden had been Hayden's professor and mentor at University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Meeting and studying with Auden from 1941 helped Hayden find his new poetic voice and depart from the poems of *Heart Shape in the Dust*. Hatcher writes that it is Auden's influence that allowed Hayden to develop his distinctive "imagery, sound and phrasing" (16).

[38] Bloom also writes that the poet he sees closer to Hayden is Hart Crane. Bloom, Pontheolla Williams , and Brian Conniff all discuss of the influence of Crane on Hayden especially in connection with "Middle Passage." I will therefore address their comments and such connection in Chapter Four.

[39] Both words share the same etymological root that derives from the Latin word for day, "dies," (which then becomes the root for "journey," "diurnus," and for "journal," "diurnales")

interesting ways. In the '78 edition, for instance, the poem is preceded by "Zinnias" which, aside from being set up as "the symbol of the American character—persistent, brightly colored, enthusiastic, but hardly elegant" (Hatcher 215), also evokes the colors and the heavy presence of nature which we will find in "The Islands." The poem is then followed by "from THE SNOW LAMP," a partial narration of Matthew Henson's travels to the Arctic.[40] In the '82 version, the poem is still framed by the same two poems. However, since Hayden divided the '82 collection into sections, "The Islands" functions as the last poem of the fourth section of the book, one that includes some of the more introspective and solipsistic poems of Hayden, in which the poet's reflections on his imminent death—he had been diagnosed with cancer—permeate his search for peace and his search for roots. The section, as well as the overall volume, feels like a moment in which Hayden is tying up loose ends, a moment in which the he takes a long journey from primordial islands all the way to the moon passing from the pillars of Hercules, thus allowing us (and himself) to expand our understanding of his poetry and of the world, using the *apparent* solipsism to create a poetry that ultimately breaks that solitude and opens up new spaces, clears new horizons, yet is not deprived of an eschatological vision.

"The Islands" is an aubade in ten unrhymed three-lines stanzas that at the formal and thematic level express the idea of movement. The poem moves in various ways, from a

[40] Henson was the first African American to explore the Artic in the first half of the nineteenth century. In a footnote to the poem, Hayden writes that "The Snow Lamp is a poem in progress, it's subject Peary's expedition to the North Pole in 1909. Its focal character is Matthew A. Henson, co-discoverer of the Pole, who became a legend among the Greenland Eskimos (or Innuit, as they call themselves). The title of the poem comes from an Innuit folktale. The opening section attempts to suggest the spirit and mode of an Eskimo song-poem" (*American*, "Acknowledgements, Notes"). Hayden's footnote highlights not only the focus on travel and exploration of the entire volume, but also his interest in folk material as well as his interest in the broadening cultural knowledge.

collective voice to an individual one, from a generic experience to a particular historical one and then on to a personal one; from an exotic vision to an eschatological one; from an unnamed and timeless island to a real and tangible landscape made so by its historicization and by the insertion of a speaking character aside from the poetic voice. From the point of view of form, movement is expressed in the poem by moving away from the initial anaphora "always,"—word which in and of itself epitomizes endless repetition and therefore stasis—and by transitioning form the use the past tense to the use of the present tense in stanza three. By the time we arrive at stanza nine, the present tense has become a present with the function of a gerund. The poetic voice moves from "always" to "today," giving us a sense of the ephemeral nature of things and showing us that those qualities of the island that seem immutable and eternal have a way of interacting and affecting time, history, and the present.

The first four stanzas in the poem are timeless and are set in an unidentified location.

> Always this waking dream of palmtrees,
> magic flowers—of sensual joys
> like treasures brought up from the sea.
>
> Always this longing, this nostalgia
> for tropic islands we
> have never known and yet recall.
>
> We look for ease upon these islands named
> to honor holiness; in their chromatic
> torpor catch our breath.
>
> Scorn greets us with promises of rum,
> hostility welcomes us to bargain sales.
> We make friends with Flamboyant trees. (1-12)

The setting evoked is one that sketches an almost misty, dream-like island. The sense of mistiness and surreality is conveyed through expressions and words such as "waking dream of palm trees," "chromatic torpor," "opalescent waves," and by the ruins of the sugar mill.

The second stanza makes tropical islands the object of an unreal, imagined, collective memory, which construes islands which "we/ have never known and yet recall." The title in itself, by using the plural "islands" seems to stress the idea that we are not talking about one particular island. The islands described could be any of a number of islands.[41] The time could be any time. At the same time, *this* island is being anchored to a specific place already in the first four stanzas through the detailed descriptions of natural elements, such as "Flamboyant trees," "Flame trees," "spider lilies," and "scarlet hibiscus." And while the title may point to rather generic islands, it also contains the seed of a specificity that is revealed only in the central part of the poem. The use of the determinative article "the," is also indicative of a specific set of islands which we can only assume are the Caribbean Islands, since we have the presence of a sugar mill and the character of Jamaican Cynthie speaks in English.[42]

Stanzas five and six, which constitute the central part of the poem, zoom into the story of one person and one history.

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[41] John Hacher reports that in an interview in May 1981 Erma Hayden told him that the Islands Hayden is writing about here are the Virgin Islands. Therefore, the lines "these islands named/ to honor holiness" refer to the 10.000 Virgins of Saint Ursula, in honor of whom Columbus named the Virgin Islands.

[42] The islands of Hayden's imaginary, as is the case for many African American and Caribbean writers, are probably the Caribbean Islands, which, as Eduard Glissant postulated, are a rhizome of culture and experiences that places the Western side of the hemisphere in connection to the continent of Africa, its history and its people. It is, therefore, through the travel poetry and in particular, through the concept of the island, that Hayden's work becomes cosmopolitan as well as rooted in African American aesthetic traditions. African American writers often seem to have a dual relationship to island. For many, islands, and the Caribbean in particular, are either home, or an ancestral home (for instance, we can think of Claude McKay and his *Songs of Jamaica*), portrayed with a sort of pastoral nostalgia that exalts the sense of beauty and the sense of home. For many other African American writers, however, islands are also seen as the representation of the legacy of slavery, plantations, deaths, unbearable working environments, disrupted families, auction blocks, horror. In most cases, islands stand for a mixture of the two, paradoxical spaces that become a good framework in which to display and enact paradoxes. Hayden's travel poetry displays this ambivalence towards islands as well as towards the idea of travel itself, which becomes something fraught with historical and contemporary danger as well as filled with wonderful discoveries, beautiful landscapes, and interesting encounters.

> Jamaican Cynthie, called alien by dese lazy
> Islanders—wo'k hahd, treated bad,
> oh, mahn, I tellin you. She's full
>
> of raucous anger. Nevertheless brings gifts of
> scarlet hibiscus when she comes to clean,
> white fragrant spider-lilies too sometimes.

The poetic voice tells us the name of the character, where she comes from, what people think of her, what she does for a living, what she thinks. The voice of the narrator and the voice of Cynthie are intertwined in the first of these two stanzas, where the poetic voice that narrates the event assumes what seems to be a Jamaican accent until, in line two, effectively becomes the voice of Cynthie. Like a laser beam illuminating a dark corner, the poetic voice shines briefly but effectively upon Cynthie, so that we can see her emerge from the darkness in a three-dimensional way. We visually see her working angrily, and we perceive her anger even sonorously especially through the repetition of the sound /r/, present in almost every word of the sixth stanza. The story of Cynthie introduces the reader to the last four stanzas, which are a very personal response to what the poetic voice is experiencing and feeling while in the island.

In stanzas six and eight to ten, the poetic voice speaks in the first person singular, completely moving away from the first person plural of stanzas two to four. As a result, the reader becomes intimate with the voice's vision and understanding of history, of the island, and of itself.

> The roofless walls, the tidy ruins
> of a sugar mill. More than cane
> was crushed. But I am tired today
>
> of history, its patina'd cliches
> of endless evil. Flame trees.
> The intricate sheen of waters flowing into sun.

> I wake and see
> the morning like a god
> in peacock-flower mantle dancing
>
> on opalescent waves—
> and can believe my furies have
> abandoned for a time their long pursuit. (19-30)

This vision ends up being an eschatological one—peace is what appears to be left with the arrival of the first morning sun, once the furies have abandoned the voice. Yet, these last stanzas are informed by the preceding ones and it is therefore in this sense that these last stanzas assume an eschatological quality; it is not peace that the poetic voice is looking for, but rather oblivion—rest after much traveling through space and through time, a traveling that seems to have been propelled by the relentless furies of the last stanza. Moreover, the first person plural "we" voice that we encounter in stanzas two to four adds another dimension to this ending and allows us to read the last two stanzas not only as a personal commentary but also as a collective one. It is in this way, then, that the last two stanzas evoke an eschatological vision, in which it is humanity's soul (and not the single soul of an individual) that is slowly dying and/or surrendering precisely at the moment in which the new day should instead begin.

The eschatological is a theme often present in Hayden's poetry, particularly in his later poetry. It involves either a private view of an ending which extends to the end of all times, as seems to happen in "The Islands" (the understanding of an upcoming personal ending which is explained through and which brings about the idea of the end of all times) or, as we will see in the next section with the poem "Astronauts," a sense of potential ending of all times which is conveyed through the use of the sublime to bring about an understanding of

the smallness, insignificance, and ephemeral nature of men. In other poems, the eschatological seems to be anchored to a more earthly and immediate dimension, and Hayden gives us representations of the end of all things and of all times in the here and now, as for instance in "Words in the Mourning Time" where we have "villages mistakenly burning," "schoolrooms devouring their children" and where the poetic voice thinks of those

> brutalized killing
> wasted by horror
> in ultimate loneliness
> dying Vietnam Vietnam. (IV, 9-13)

In "Monet's Waterlilies", instead, the eschatological vision, like in "The Islands," comes from a sense of acceptance and resignation, from a sense of abandonment and search for oblivion, which in the case of this poem, is sought and found by escaping reality through looking at Monet's painting:

> O light beheld as through refracting tears.
> Here is the aura of that world
> each of us has lost.
> Here is the shadow of its joy. (11-14)

To return to the last stanza and its reference to the "furies," this is only one of the numerous references to mythology that the reader will find in Hayden's poetry, including the references to Arachne that we have encountered in the previous chapter. The use of mythological references implies a conversation with other cultures as well as creating the sense of rootedness in the midst of the universal, a rootedness that is based on time, culture, and tradition rather than on place. In the last stanza, the resigned and tired poetic voice, who is tired of history's "patina'd clichés" comes to "believe my furies have/abandoned for a time their long pursuit." Referencing the furies in a poem that is about the understanding of history while, at the same time, shunning and refusing that understanding, recalls Dante

Alighieri's use of the furies in the *Divine Comedy.* The poetic persona, upon encountering the furies at the entrance of the city of Dis, in Canto IX of the "Inferno," connects the presence of the furies to the practice of poetry and exegesis inviting his readers to think about the allegorical meaning of the episode narrated:

> O voi ch'avete l'intelletti sani,
> mirate la dottrina che s'asconde
> sotto'l velame de li versi strain"[43]

"The Islands," also has many allegorical meanings. It can, in fact, be easily read almost as a swan song of the poet who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. The last two stanzas can also be read as a gentle goodbye to poetic life intended as the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and justice. The poetic voice abandons itself to the simple act of perception and masterfully paints that perception for the reader. The personification of "morning" which is likened to a "god" dressed "in a peacock-flower mantle dancing/on opalescent waves" is a great example of how the speaker is able to paint on a written canvas his perceptions by using images as symbols. For instance, the mantle of peacock[44] flowers provides the palette of the darker hues of dawn while the use of "opalescent" recalls the mistiness of mornings by the sea, and the personification of morning as "god" provides the aureate tones of dawn. The idea of a mantle (and a person) dancing on the waves also communicates the reader a sense of joy (as well as movement), the type of positivity associated to the beginning of a new day. Yet, at the same time, this new day could well be

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[43] "You readers who have a healthy mind, understand the teaching that is hidden behind the veil of these mysterious verses."

[44] The peacock is another of Hayden's favorite symbols. Its use will be discussed in detail in Chapter —, when the poem "The Peacock Room" will be extensively discussed.

the last for the poetic voice; the fact that the furies have abandoned their pursuit turn the scene into a melancholic one and one of self-surrender. Also, these symbols, while providing concrete visual images, do not really provide *specific* images, bur rather help to make the "disclosure of meaning seem perpetually imminent" (Perloff 11).

While the treatment of the travel to islands and the description of a lush and paradisal natural setting may involve a degree of exoticization of the travel experience, the poetic voice consciously inserts in the poem some jarring elements to contrast the exotic nature of the setting. These elements —the sugar mill and the dramatic role played by "alien" Cynthie— firmly anchor the poem to the history of the island and the history of slavery. This mixture of utopian and dystopian elements is present also in other Hayden's travel poems, such as, as we have seen, in some of the poems part of *An Inference of Mexico*, as well as in "Kodachromes of the Island" where the "gold brooms" which sweep the mist away are contrasted with "a young beggar" with "fingerless hands."[45] Just like in "The Market," "The Day of the Dead," or "Veracruz," Hayden labored to give his reader, through his travel poetry, a version of the far away place which presents the idealized perfection of

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[45] Halfnaked children
met us singing for coins
at the swaybacked jetty.

Gold brooms had swept
the mist away, and
the island air was clear.

Parrot and zinnia
colors teemed
in thronging sunlight.

A young beggar greeted us
Dios se lo pague
with fingerless hands
(from "Kodachromes of the Island")

nature coupled with the reminder that the presence of the human in nature anchors us back to a reality far from perfect and holistically desirable.

The poetic voice, thus, does not shun away from the exotic. In the case of "The Islands" it actually seems to want to abandon itself to it. The exotic, however, is balanced out by the "real," by history. What makes "The Islands" special, however, is that unlike in the other poems examined in this chapter, where the exotic is forcefully and willingly contrasted to minor and major horrors, here the poetic voice tries willingly and forcefully to embrace it. It is, as previously mentioned, a poem of oblivion and of self-imposed effort to ignore history, of apophasis. By using paralipsis, "The Islands" actually tells history precisely when it claims it wants to abandon its clichés. History is told through hinting without telling, through the recording of the relationship between man and nature, through the acknowledging of the fragility of the will of man, and through the relationship between a geographical space and "alien" characters—Cynthie and the speaker—who are inhabiting it.

"Astronauts"

The poem "Astronauts" appears in both editions of *American Journal* right before "[American Journal]." Just as "The Diver" takes the reader vertically down into the abyss of the sea, "Astronauts" takes the reader on a vertical journey into space. Through the exploration of space, the poetic voice in the poem asks the reader to be willing to question and explore the boundaries of human existence, as well as what is "human" within the human being. At the same time, as Christopher Buck rightly noticed, the poem, "positionally as well as substantively […] prepares the reader to suspend disbelief when the next and final poem, '[American Journal]', introduces the unlikely figure of an alien observer from outer space" (3-4). The poem, thus, is not only a fundamental piece of travel poetry in and of

itself, but is also necessary to the overall effect of the collection, showing how Hayden's poems are always connected to each other.

To return to "Astronauts," the images and themes of the moon and of aliens seem to be particularly dear to Hayden, who uses moon-related and alien-related words and images in various other poems. Aliens, in fact, are most of Hayden's characters, from Aunt Jemima and the other circus characters, to Cynthie, John Brown, and other historical and literary figures. As Vera Kutzinski pointed out: "stranger and alien […] embody […] the poetic posture Hayden assumes both before history as well as before and within language" (172). From the use of the words "moon" to "moonlight," "moonscape," "moonless," and "moonstruck" to the frequent use of the adjective "lunar," the moon also seems to be a fantasy, a desire, something sought for, and a constant presence in Hayden's poetry. Yet, Hayden's is not the romantic moon. It is not the moon that accompanies lovers during their long and secret night walks. Even when romance is involved, as in "Southern Moonlight," the moon is asked to "hide your light—/ that he is black/ and I/ am white" (10-13), where "he" is the lover of the poetic voice. Hayden's is the moon of solitary landscapes, of snow-filled lands, of "vistas of lunar solitude" ("Snow" 5). It is a moon that invites awe and reflection. It is also a moon to be conquered. And it is in Hayden's last collection of poems where the moon *is* finally conquered and finally "made human." Yet, even on this occasion, the conquest is ultimately an ephemeral one. We cannot grasp the moon. All that we can get is a glimpse of the astronauts on the moon, whose expressions are obscured, thus denying us any insight on what it means to experience the moon. They are "faceless in visors—/ mirrormasks reflecting / the mineral glare and / shadow of moonscape—"

The moment in which the moon becomes a possibility is also the moment in which the moon escapes us because the poetic voice refuses (or is unable) to provide us with any description of it. In"Astronauts," the setting is evoked through a couple of small strokes of a modern painter's brush—stylized, synthetic, symbolic. It is mostly given to us through absence of detail. Absence, just like the absence of the atmosphere, becomes the signifier for this strange "place" that is the moon, which we cannot really see. Setting, and the absence thereof, is transmitted in a few lines: it is "mineral glare and/ shadow of moonscape—," "the lifeless/ dust of Taurus/ Littrow," "the calcined stillness/ of once Absolute Otherwhere."[46] Hence, setting is defined by absence and invisibility, "shadow," "lifeless," "dust," "stillness." We are also reminded that the moon, before man set foot on it, was considered "Absolute Otherwhere." These descriptions ignite in the reader the longing for a more concrete moon, one that we can visualize, touch. But concreteness is precisely what is absent in this poem.

"Astronauts'" focus is on the faceless astronauts, on guessing what their emotions are, on trying to catch a glimpse of this newly added perspective, thus giving us an insight into the thought-process of the poetic voice and the reasons behind the questions we find in the last stanza:

> What is it we wish them
> to find for us, as

[46] According to the *OED*, "otherwhere" originally meant "elsewhere," "another place." Today, however, it normally means an "unreal or imaginary place." In the context of the poem, thus, it seems as if Hayden is choosing the contemporary meaning of the word to indicate the moon as a place in which, up until 1969, no man had never set foot upon, and which continues to be an imaginary place in some sense, as the poetic voice can only experience it through a television screen. On the other hand, "otherwhere" is significant in the overall oeuvre, because it embodies Hayden's poetics, which we could also call the poetics of "otherwhere," given their engagement with broad geographical, cultural, and temporal horizons.

we watch them on our
screens? They loom there
heroic antiheroes,
smaller than myth and
poignantly human
Why are we troubled?
What do we ask of these men?
What do we ask of ourselves? (27-36)

In the end, the poetic voice reverses the focus on us, on the "we" of the speaker and the reader. The last strophe introduces us to this "we" voice, thus bringing back the poem to an earthly dimension. That is the moment when we understand that this poem has always been about "us." The poem starts with a description of the astronauts and of the setting given by the poetic voice who witnesses the journey to the moon (and *on* the moon) from far away, from a television screen that is filtering the experience. When the poetic voice becomes "honest" in the last stanza, it becomes clear that the poem is really about us "earthlings" who are still walking the earth. We are the ones who are troubled, who have questions; we are the ones in need of heroes.

The ultimate tension in the poem is the one between the will of the poetic voice to understand the astronauts, to get a glimpse of what they are thinking, and the fact that this is not possible. This is evidenced through the use of the word "earthlings" to describe them. "Earthlings" is a word commonly used in science fiction to describe the inhabitants of the earth, when described by another alien species. In this case, the use of "earthlings" points to the distance, both physical and metaphorical, between the astronauts and the men watching them from the earth. At the same time, the word is also another way through which the poetic voice highlights the alien nature of his characters, the astronauts; they do not belong to the environment in which they are, just like all the other "alien" characters in Hayden's

poetry. The use of “earthlings” also connects this poem to the one that will follow it, “[American Journal],” where we hear the voice of an alien describing humans as “earthlings.”

As with “The Islands,” this is another poem of Hayden’s old age. And as with “The Islands,” the presence of the eschatological is visible in the last stanza. The realization that the astronauts are there, as “heroic antiheroes, / smaller than myth and / poignantly human,” leads the reader to ponder on how “small” we, human beings, are, how ephemeral and short-lived. The choice of the verb “to loom” to describe the way the astronauts are perceived by the voice, brings back, in fact, that almost ominous element present in other poems of Hayden’s travel poetry, such as “Day of the Dead.” The ending of the poem, with its unanswered questions, also provides a sense of doom. It asks questions that ultimately remain unanswered admitting that the human experience cannot be grasped from our position as “earthlings.” We are too small and perishable to be able to answer these questions. In spite of all our travels, perhaps it is only the astronauts, who look at humanity from space, that might hold the answers. But, all we hear them say is “Wow” (9), “oh boy, this is it” (10).

It is interesting to note that this is the only poem by Hayden that is not set on earth. Yet neither is it set in a completely imaginary space. Setting the poem on the moon, then, perhaps provides a commentary in and of itself on the universal nature of the questions the poetic voice asks. The moon becomes a neutral geographical space, theoretically nationless and boundary-less, which shines thanks to the sun’s light and that reflects that light back to earth. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests that we should think in planetary terms, rather than in global ones (72), as “globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange

everywhere" (ibid). The planet, instead, refers to the people that inhabit it, its various species, and is therefore better suited as a framework to think of *all* its inhabitants: "planet-thought opens up to embrace an inexhaustible taxonomy" of what she calls the "names of alterity," and is therefore more inclusive. Thinking along planetary terms is, perhaps, also what Hayden does in his transpolitan approach. And while the moon is technically *not* a planet, it can still function like one in this poem and in its ideological message. It is chosen as a setting precisely because, just as it reflects light back to earth, it will also reflect back to earth the questions the poetic voice asks, which are ultimately universal and timeless.

At the same time, the questions are also not "original," they are nothing new, just like the mission the poetic voice is witnessing is not "original," it is not a "first." We are no longer witnessing an exceptional circumstance; we are *not* witnessing the first manned landing on the moon. As the poem itself tells us by referencing "Taurus Littrow," we are witnessing the mission of Apollo 17, of December 1972. The first manned landing on the moon was already undertaken in July 1969 by Apollo 11. Hence, the poetic voice is describing something that is both extraordinary and already without surprise, reinforcing the notion that the questions the witnessing of this event raise are timeless, and they repeat themselves. "Astronauts," then, highlights how travel (even interplanetary one) becomes important as a means to reflect upon our lives and as a poetic "tool" that allows the poet to pose universal questions.

"[American Journal]"

"[American Journal]" is the titular piece in *American Journal,* as well as being the poem that concludes the volume. It can be considered Hayden's "last words" as it is both the last

poem in the two editions of *American Journal* (his latest collection of poems) as well as being the last, concluding poem, in Hayden's *Collected Poems,* published posthumously in 1985. Poet Yusef Komunyakaa considers it the "perfect summation and coda to [Hayden's] career as a poet. He always saw himself and his work as totally *American.* Yet I believe he identifies with the displaced speaker in '[American Journal]'—the outsider" (334).

'[American Journal]' is a persona poem. The narrator, an alien,[47] writes journal entries chronicling his long journey to the earth, in particular to the United States. Christopher Buck has duly noted that while the poem does aim at treating "the human race from a universal perspective, […] humanity is seen through a nationalistic portal, namely that of 'the americans'" (1). In this sense, the poem seems to contradict Hayden's poetics of the "otherwhere," its cosmopolitan and universalist approach. Yet, as we have seen, Hayden's transpolitanism does *not* relinquish roots or origins, or cultural differences, but explores them and celebrates them. The poem, thus, can be considered a travelogue, structured around fourteen very irregular (length-wise) strophes, shaped like journal entries, in free unrhymed verse which, however, are pretty regular in terms of the length of each line (in this way providing rhythm and structure to the poem). Together with "Middle Passage" and "Rungate, Rungate," "[American Journal]" is one of Hayden's long poems, as well as being

[47] Calling the narrator of the poem an alien is ironic. In the poem, it is the inhabitants of the earth who are called "aliens" by the narrator, thus creating a form of dissonance between the narrator and the readers of the poem, for whom it is the narrator who is an alien. Even in the use of this term, hence, Hayden is questioning what an "alien" is. For the purpose of this analysis, and in order to avoid confusion as to who is who, I will call the narrator "alien" and the inhabitants of the earth "earth men" (to use the language used in the poem).

the poem in which, according to Hatcher, Hayden best makes use of the device of the dramatic monologue (258).[48]

This poem has received relatively more critical attention than most of the other poems by Hayden (with the exclusion of “Middle Passage”). Buck, for instance, in his excellent analysis of the poem, looks at it as an example of Hayden’s function as a “social” poet, arguing that “the theme of ‘[American Journal]’ is one of *social maturity* based on *human solidarity*” (6). John S. Wright, briefly looks at it as the perfect and final representation of Hayden’s own divided feelings about America as well as the final proof of how, for Hayden’s,

> detachment from the American conundrum […] remains only a tenuous device of art, his Alien's bafflement and the veiled preachments of the Counselors light years away too transparent a contrivance to hide the galling human mystery whose "essence quiddity," for all the opulence of his imagination, all the power and precision of his craft, the artist/Alien at the end ‘cannot penetrate or name.’(910-11)

Hatcher is another critic who argues that the poem represents “Hayden’s assessment of America” (47). Fetrow, after a thorough analysis of some aspects of the poem, concludes that in this poem and in “Elegies for a Paradise Valley” Hayden manages to achieve a full integration of “his life and his art” after that “for a long time [he had chosen] to keep his personal psychology out of his poetry […] carefully objectif[ying] his personal feelings in

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[48] Hatcher argues that: “certainly the most dramatic distance between the poet and the poem with first-person narratives occurs when Hayden creates complete and complex characters who tell their stories […] Hayden’s most powerful use of this narrative technique in *American Journal*, and perhaps in his career, are the monologue of the speaker in ‘The Tattooed Man’ and the journal of the alien visitor in ‘[American Journal]’. The emphatic use of the dramatic monologue in this last volume caused Fred Fetrow in his review of the work to observe that Hayden’s ‘narrative versatility’ is one of his most distinguishing qualities as a poet: ‘In retrospect, Hayden’s final poems appropriately exhibit his deft talent for creating diversified voices. Indeed, as partially indicated in *American Journal*, a significant element of his unique voice derives from his narrative versatility, a range in modality perhaps unmatched among contemporary poets’” (258-9)

all but the most biographically intense poems" (141). While most critics noted how the poem is indeed the chronicling of a journey, one of the many things that still remains to be explored and discussed about the poem is how it should be considered part of Hayden's travel poetry.

"[American Journal]" is an account of the travels of an alien to the United States, and it is also the account of the journey that the alien takes into his own "humanity," so that the poem shows the evolution of the thought of the alien, from being alien to becoming more and more human-like. Komunyakaa noted that "it seems as if the narrator is on a spiritual quest, that this voyage into the brutal frontier of the American experience is a confrontation with his own alienation. He is transported through the power of reflection (the mind as spacecraft) in order to arrive at the scary truth of his species" (332). Fetrow argues that

> the scientific scrutiny of the narrator-journal keeper in fact accommodates an 'insider's view', highlighted by innate ironies, and the increasingly evident emotional attachment of the speaker for those he would catalog, dissect, and analyze. […] The analyst concern for objectivity is belied by the emotional implications of that concern. (137-8)

The evolution of the alien's thought is mostly represented through the evolution of the language and syntax used in the poem. Its[49] language evolves from being almost robotic, like a telegraph communication—or, as Hatcher puts it, "the telegraphic prose rhythm of a journal" (284)—to being more fluid, more human, as the alien recounts his journey to the United States. This language embodies the journey of the alien, and represents, thus, the exploration of its humanity. The change of language can be noted by a change of syntax;

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[49] I use the pronoun "it" to refer to the narrator, because, by its own admission (in strophe eleven), the alien is genderless.

there are progressively less and less syntactical mistakes, the sentences become longer, and we no longer have the sense that we are hearing a machine reading a telegram. It is as if the syntax were reflecting the turmoil happening within the world of the alien, documenting the beginning of its[50] divided loyalties, the tension between liking the inhabitants of the earth and despising them.

Stanza six seems to be a turning point where we hear for the first time the reported speech from an "earth man". The stanza presents the alien's attempt at a very colloquial type of speech, where the alien reports the exchange of a few sentences between itself and the earth man. This is a very confusing stanza. It is hard, at first, to understand who is saying what. In the alien's attempts at reporting what the "earth man" is saying, there is the feeling that some confusion is being made, as if the narrator was trying to figure out the language itself, experimenting with it, trying to learn to speak differently, change its syntax. The way in which the alien reports the speech of the earth man shows, in fact, that some of the words used by the earth man are not clear to the alien, who reports them precisely as it hears them. This is deducible from the spelling of the words "night mare" which is spelt incorrectly. The same happens with the word "double talk,"[51] or with the misspelling of "whats," "its," "irregardless," or "every body."

> something the call the american dream   sure
> we still believe in it i guess   an earth man
> in the tavern said   irregardless of the some
> times night mare facts we always try to double
> talk our way around   and its okay the dreams
> okay and means whats good could be a damn sight

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[51] The choice of the word "double-talk" is also noteworthy in a stanza that is for many senses hardly intelligible, thus making of it a word which describes also the conversation reported in the stanza.

> better   means every body in the good old u s a
> should have the chance to get ahead or at least
> should have three squares a day   as for myself
> i do okay   not crying hunger with a loaf of
> bread tucked under my arm you understand   i
> fear one does not clearly follow i replied
> notice you got a funny accent pal   like where
> you from he asked   far from here i mumbled
> he stared hard   i left

Of course what is presented at the formal/syntactical level, is also shown thematically in this stanza; its theme is, in fact, the "american dream" and the tension between what it *should* be and what it *is*. As Buck rightly points out, "paradox and oxymoron are two of Hayden's ubiquitous poetic devices. The American Dream is one such oxymoron" (28). Here Buck shows perfectly how form and theme are fused in the poem, since the concept of "american dream" is not an oxymoron in linguistic terms, but, rather, in ideological ones. And the fact that, as a concept, "american dream" is oxymoronic is displayed at the formal level through the use of this almost unintelligible syntax, where the word "okay" is highlighted by its repetition, underlining the pathetic state of affairs with regards to what the "american dream" is supposed to be. As Buck explains, "'Okay' is a far cry from the ideal. The American Dream, so utterly unattainable for so many, has been reduced, for those Americans living below the poverty line, to mere survival rather than economic prosperity" (28).

The very short journal entry which constitutes strophe seven shows the attempt of the alien to actually speak more like an earth man, to consciously adopt idiosyncratic expressions that would make him sound as coming from earth: "must be more careful   item learn to use okay /their pass word   okay." It is, however, ironic, to see how the alien's attempt to conform to the earth men's linguistic idiosyncrasies is reported through a, once

again, very robotic and non-human form, as if to constantly remind the reader of the inherent tension existing in the poem between what it is to *be* human and what it is to *sound* human, which are not the same thing.[52] The alien, in fact, constantly struggles with its divided feelings about earth men, and constantly highlights their "inhumanity" as well as their appeal. The narrator/chronicler is "attracted to / the vigorous americans   disturbing sensuous / appeal of so many" while, at the same time, it criticizes their barbarity and the paradox consisting of the american idea of "the land of the free" in which you have people fighting in riots or living in ghettoes:

> The Counselors would never permit such barbarous
> confusion   they know what is best for our sereni
> ty   we are an ancient race and have outgrown
> illusions cherished here   item   their vaunted
> liberty   no body pushes me around i have heard
> them say   land of the free they sing   what do
> they fear mistrust betray more than the freedom
> they boast of in their ignorant pride   have seen
> the squalid ghettoes in their violent cities
> paradox on paradox   how have the americans
> managed to survive

The poem's main formal device is the catalogue. Impressions and thoughts of the alien are often conveyed through long lists of adjectives or nouns, which manage to portray a picture of the United States that is comprehensive, full circle, and made of many different

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[52] By human here I mean not only someone coming from earth but everything that the concept of "humanity" embodies. It is therefore interesting to notice how the alien never describes the inhabitants of the earth as humans. Instead, it uses a variety of epithets that, in and of themselves, call attention to the lack of the epithet which we would normally expect when in juxtaposition to the one of alien, which is precisely "human." Some of these epithets are "americans," "aliens," "savages," "primitives," "beings," "people," "earth man," and "earthlings." Incidentally, the only time that a word with the root "human" is used, this is done to describe the aliens themselves in the thirteenth journal entry: "exert greater caution   twice have aroused / suspicion returned to the ship until rumors / of *humanoids* from outer space   so their scoff / ing media voices termed us had been laughed / away   my crew and i laughed too of course" (emphasis mine).

points of view, many angles. One could argue that in its modernity, this poem really is a work of cubism. If we consider the fifth journal entry/stanza, which provides a description of the American setting, we can see how all the landscapes of America are condensed and presented at the same time, in the first four lines, to form a unique, multi-faceted image:

> oceans desert mountains grain fields canyons
> forests   variousness of landscapes weathers
> sun light moon light as at home   much here is
> beautiful   dream like vistas reminding me of
> home   item   have seen the rock place known
> as garden of the gods and sacred to the first
> indigenous   red monoliths of home   despite
> the tensions i breath in i am attracted to
> the vigorous americans   disturbing sensuous
> appeal of so many   never to be admitted

This image of the physical appearance of the whole of the United States is then expanded through the insertion of the personal feelings of the narrator, who compares the landscape of the Garden of the Gods to the landscape at home.[53] This is the point in the poem where the alien starts to articulate why it feels attracted to the Americans, through similarity. Their home is not too different from its home.

From the point of view of travel itself, the poem also re-proposes that duality on the part of the narrator that we have found in *Inference of Mexico* and in "The Islands*.*" Our chronicler, just like the poetic voice in "Day of the Dead," seems to propose a gaze that is

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[53] It is important to notice how Hayden here recalls again one of his favorite images, the moon, through the use of the word "vistas" which he uses also in the poem "Snow" where he talks about "vistas of lunar solitude" as well as through mentioning the Garden of the Gods, which presents a lunar landscape. Yusef Komunyakaa recalls having met with Hayden and visited with him the Garden of the Gods (Colorado Springs) in 1975, and also recalls how they "had talked about how the Garden of the Gods parallels a moonscape, something otherworldly. It was from here that Hayden began to orbit his imaginative tableau. Where many of us would have written a realistic narrative to recreate the day as we gazed out at the rocky formations called Kissing Camels and proximate an unknown that resonates with an almost-observed realism" (332).

both othering and admiring, while simultaneously writing about its experience of being othered. It others Americans in a caricaturist way, parodying elements of the typical colonial discourse, adopting an anthropological gaze which examines the earth men as inferior, underdeveloped creatures, such as when in stanza three our chronicler writes: "charming savages   enlightened primitives   brash / new comers lately sprung up in our galaxy   how / describe them." Indeed, Komunyakaa writes that

> the humanoid among us narrates as might an early Western anthropologist, descending into the wilds of his galaxy to do fieldwork. He uses outdated jargon—*charming savages* and *enlightened primitives*—to describe us. Of course, this is the same ethnocentric lingo used by early anthropologists to dehumanize various peoples throughout the world. The narrator, however, employs the oxymorons in a satirical, almost cynical way, to articulate the supreme contradiction of our culture, the American Dream. (333)

On the other hand of the spectrum, we also have the narrator recording how it feels to be othered, different. For instance, when it is having a chat with the "earth man" in a bar, and the man says: "notice you got a funny accent pal   like where / you from he asked   far from here i mumbled / he stared hard   i left," the alien realizes that it has been singled out for its linguistic abilities, so that in the next journal entry it makes a note-to-self to learn to use the word "okay" to sound more American. In strophe thirteen, instead, it reminds itself that it must

> exert greater caution   twice have aroused
> suspicion   returned to the ship until rumors
> of humanoids from outer space   so their scoff
> ing media voices termed us   had been laughed
> away   my crew and i laughed too of course

The alien's constant striving to "pass" for an American, described in stanza eleven[54] where our narrator tells us how its "skill in mimicry is impeccable," is in and of itself a commentary on being other and on othering, as the last lines convey the alien's preoccupation of not being able to fully grasp the essence of being American. The stanza ends asking "will I be judged / incompetent" which, while initially may seem as if referring to being judged by the Counselors, grammatically it actually leaves open the possibility of interpreting the question as if the judges were actually the Americans themselves.

The alien relates to America throughout the poem in terms of comparison, comparing the United States to its home, or comparing itself to Americans. These comparisons underlie what is ultimately every traveller's experience, one based on confrontation through difference. As mentioned previously, in '[American Journal]' the "meaning" of what it means to be American evolves throughout the poem together with the writing of the alien which, by the end of the poem, while still being fractured, fragmented, and grammatically imprecise (as well as maintaining some of its defining traits, such as the lack of punctuation or capitalization), is also more fluid, less robotic, and more introspective and lyrical. This change happens both in the vocabulary choice and in the more elegant turns of phrases, but also in the pathos that some of the sentences express, as for instance, the entry that

[54] though i have easily passed for an american in bankers grey afro and dashiki long hair and jeans hard hat yarmulka mini skirt describe in some detail for the amusement of The Counselors and though my skill in mimicry is impeccable as indeed The Counselors are aware some thing eludes me some constant amid the variables defies analysis and imitation will i be judged incompetent

corresponds to stanza twelve shows, or as can be seen in the alien's description of the fourth of July parade:

> parades fireworks displays video spectacles
> much grandiloquence much buying and selling
> they are celebrating their history   earth men
> in antique uniforms play at the carnage whereby
> the americans achieved identity   we too recall
> that struggle as enterprise of suffering and
> faith uniquely theirs   blonde miss teen age
> america waving from a red white and blue flower
> float as the goddess of liberty   a divided
> people seeking reassurance from a past few under
> stand and many scorn   why should we sanction
> old hypocrisies   thus dissenters   The Counse
> lors would silence them
> a decadent people The Counselors believe   i
> do not find them decadent   a refutation not
> permitted me   but for all their knowledge
> power and inventiveness not yet more than raw
> crude neophytes like earthlings everywhere

In this strophe it is easy to see how the syntax is much less in a staccato form; the single sentences are longer than in previous strophes, as for instance in the lines "we too recall / that struggle as enterprise of suffering and / faith uniquely theirs," or in the use of connectors like "whereby."

A further and very interesting aspect of this poem is the title itself. In particular the fact that the words "American Journal" are placed within square brackets. Normally, square brackets are used in writing to add extra information that helps to explain or clarify the text, to modify an original quote, to indicate an ellipsis, or to add an editorial comment. None of these options, however, seem to explain their use in the title. In mathematics, however, square brackets indicate that there is mathematical expression that needs to be considered as an individual unit to be solved by itself, and whose result will then be used to solve a larger

expression. If read in this mathematical light, thus, "[American Journal]" can indicate the will of our chronicler to treat America as a mathematical expression that needs to be solved; an expression that both stands on its own and needs to be solved as such, but also one that is part of a much larger expression (the universe). To solve the "universe-expression" the narrator then has to solve the "America-expression" first.

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In spite of what he wrote in his Mexican diary, Hayden will not turn his back on his country. What he will do, instead, is to produce a series of travel poems that engage, even if often in subtle and indirect ways, with the feelings he expressed in the diary entry. Hayden's travel poetry is, first of all, a poetry structured around the encounter with the Other, the alien, but it is also a poetry that simultaneously embraces practices of exoticization and the critique thereof, that looks at the *performance* of otherness, that explores and journals what it is to be human, and that ultimately provides an assessment of America *and* of what it is to be American, in this way questioning and destabilizing the reader's notions. It is also a poetry that engages with national and temporal barriers, and that tries to eliminate them. By bringing together aliens and astronauts, Mexicans and African Americans, the past and an eschatological vision of the future, the dead and the living, by using foreign words and textual references that bring us to different geographies, Hayden's travel poems decentralize our horizons and create a "rhizome" of experiences and textual references that makes us, the readers, travel beyond the world of the text.

Chapter Three

"One Disremembered Time": Historical Poetry.

> Today history not only occupies all territorial space—there are no longer virgin peoples or virgin islands—it also invades our thoughts, depopulates our secret dreams, pulls us from our homes, and hurls us into the public vacuum. Modern man has discovered that life in history is an errant life […] But what history separates, poetry unites.
> (Octavio Paz, "A Modern Hymn [Paris, 1961]")

Language is history. As Hayden White wrote, language is part of the real world "rather than simply a transparent instrument for representing it" (26). Not only is language *part* of history, it also *shapes* history and is the tool through which, whether orally or as a written text, facts and events are recorded and reported through time and space. Arnold Rampersad wrote that "history is of supreme importance to [Hayden] as a poet" ("Afterword"). History is, indeed, a force in Hayden's poetry, it is pervasive and all encompassing. Not one of Hayden's poems can be said to be free from a historical discourse, and Hayden scholars have therefore, in one way or another, defined him as a poet concerned with history and the passing of time.

Hayden's vision of history, however, is not one that necessarily looks at history as that long continuum of time in which "macro" events have historically developed. History, for Hayden, seems to be more of a Foucauldian type of history, one for which its exploration reveals "several pasts, several forms of connection, several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies" (5) so that one can examine and

bring to light "phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" (4). Hayden shuns away from traditional historical narratives and focuses on the intimate as opposed to the traditionally historical. Historical events are not monumentalized, but presented from an often private and inner perspective. As White further argues, the narration of history is not an independent endeavor from literature and, on the contrary, linguistic structures like metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony, predetermine historical consciousness as well as historical discourse. He suggests that the "latent content" of a text—the rhetorical tropes and figures of its elaboration—is "more important than the information […] contained in the text because it tells us not only 'what happened' […] but also 'what it felt like'." (27). Far from arguing that we should use literature only as a lens into history, I suggest that it is through the use of language that Hayden tells us histories that "deepen" our spatial and chronological references.

Because the history that Hayden narrates is not the canonical Western historical narrative, Hayden's historical poems take the reader on journeys not only through time and space, but also into the private lives of characters, or into the communal lives of various sections of society. While the main historical events are not absent in Hayden's poetry (on the contrary, from the slave trade to the two World Wars and the Vietnam War we get a distinct panorama of world's history), these are portrayed from a human standpoint so that we can see how a *macro* event affects individual lives. According to Wilburn Williams,

> Hayden's historical sensibility is also at work in poems that have no obvious connection with historical incidents […] his fascination with history is but one part of a more comprehensive entrancement in the mystery of time. Robert Hayden is clearly more intrigued by the process of change, the paradoxes of permanence and evanescence, than the particular substances that undergo change […] Throughout the poetry of Hayden we encounter a

> memory and an imagination pitted against the losses time's passage inevitably entails. (74)

Hayden's historical poems, thus, just like much of his oeuvre, are about memorializing and chronicling change. Both Wilburn Williams and literary scholar and critic Charles T. Davis, have argued that Hayden's later poetry, or at least the poetry following the decades of the 40s and 50s, "displays an attachment somewhat less strong to historical themes" (Davis 88) because Hayden had shifted his focus from the portrayal of major historical figures in African American history (like Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass) to portraits of more local or everyday characters, such as Tiger Flower or Sue Ellen Westerfield, among many others.[55] Yet, this can be perceived as a loss of interest in the historical only if we consider history as that traditional narrative that Foucault asks to change. And even if Foucault may not have had in mind a poem like "The Ballad of Nat Turner" as an example of history which focuses on "phenomena of rupture," by focusing on giving a new voice to Turner's thoughts, this is precisely what Hayden does.

As Kutzinski explains, "Hayden becomes a chronicler of change, of transformations, of metamorphoses." (119) She further adds how "for Hayden, identity or selfhood is a matter of history and of historicity, that is, of change" (ibid). What connects thematically Hayden's historical poems to the rest his oeuvre is the insistent interest, exploration, and confrontation with certain spaces, geographies, and characters, and, in particular, the character of the alien. Kutzinski further argues that Hayden is exploring also the "dimension of his otherness [,] frequently viewing himself from the double perspective of both native and stranger" (119).

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[55] Because of the time of their publication (Williams in 1977 and Davis in 1973), both articles do not deal with *American Journal* (1978, 1982) where, instead, there seem to be a return to strong interest in history.

If in “An Inference of Mexico” the alien is, for instance, an exotic local character, in the historical poems the alien is often a figure from the past, part of a collective or private identity that the poetic voice tries to reconcile himself with. This, for instance, is the case in a poem like “‘Mystery Boy’ Looks for Kin in Nashville.” Alternatively, the alien is some unknown character of the past who stands in for the poet’s own interpretation of a past event, which is shown through the eyes of the individual, as in the case of “eine kleine nachtmusik” or “Belsen, Day of Liberation.” The alien, however, can also be a famous historical figure, like Nat Turner, John Brown, or Phillis Wheatley, all portrayed as others, just like the non-heroic Gypsies in “Elegies for Paradise Valley” or the “Tattooed Man.” Ultimately, “both the stranger and the alien […] not only speak for Hayden [but] they embody in their own peculiar strangeness the poetic posture Hayden assumes both before history as well as before and within language” (Kutzinski 118).

The poems analyzed in this chapter encompass a variety of historical moments that are explored and narrated through different and diverse points of view. These underline Hayden’s fascination not only with the history of American and the world, but also with the history of individual historical figures, spaces, and cultures that transcend space and time while being anchored to them, since they provide the reader with broader horizons, without losing touch with the original referents.

“eine kleine nachtmusik” and “Belsen, Liberation Day”

“eine kleine nachtmusik”[56] is an ekphrastic poem published in 1948 in *The Lion and The*

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[56] I am here using the 1948 version of the poem. In that version, no letter in the title was capitalized.

Archer and represents one of the most cryptic and interesting poems of Hayden, in which not only we are faced with Hayden's interest and commitment to history and its rippling effects, but also where synesthesia becomes the protagonist The title itself, aside from providing a frame within which to read the poem, represents, *in primis*, a way of classifying the poem as a musical piece. It is therefore through music that Hayden takes us into the history of post World War II Austria.

The poem is divided into three sections, and each section is made of two regular four-line stanzas, unrhymed. The title of the poem provides an almost syncopated reading experience where the reader, expecting to face an "allegro" or a "minuet," finds herself unsettled by the subject matter of the poem, war's aftermath. The referent of the title is Mozart's Serenade 13 in G Major, K525, more famously known as "Eine kleine Nachtmusik." The serenade is a lively one, in four movements, which goes from an "allegro" to a "Romanze," a "minuet," and, finally, a "rondo." It is also probably one of the most famous serenades by Mozart, very popular both then and now.

Syncopation, however, is not the only effect achieved by the title. The very few critics who haveanalyzed this poem have overlooked the deeper relation that the title of the poem has with the rest of it and with the broader themes of history and of psychological and emotional displacement that the poem is exploring. Like the other poems in *The Lion and the Archer*, "eine kleine nachtmusik" is a poem that uses surrealist images.

> I.
> The siren cries that ran like mad and naked screaming women
> with hair ablaze all over Europe, that like ventriloquists
> made steel and stone speak out in the wild idiom of the damned—
> oh now they have ceased but have created a groaning after-silence.
>
> And the mended ferris wheel turns to a tune again

> in nevermore Alt Wien and poltergeists in imperials
> and eau de cologne go up and up on the ferries wheel la la
> in contagious dark where only the dead are relaxed and warm. (1-8)

The very first two lines of the poem, for instance, present the personification of the noise produced by war sirens, turning it in the image of women with their hair on fire running around Europe naked and screaming: "The siren cries that ran like mad and naked screaming women / with hair ablaze all over Europe." The conceit extends to the whole stanza, where the women (or the sirens) become ventriloquists who make steel and stone speak and who, with the end of the war, have ceased speaking and are producing a "groaning after-silence."

Hayden's recourse to surrealist images, to a modernist stance while evoking the "art of the past"—Mozart's Serenade—re-states and highlights the divide that exists between past and present and the rupture between modernist art and what preceded it. At the same time, in modernist fashion, by recovering that art through allusions and re-deployment, Hayden reassigns meaning to it and, as Ezra Pound would say, makes it new. When we connect the first stanza to the title of the poem, we can see how the poem comments on a historical shift in artistic terms. Mozart's serenade is representative of a type of art that after two world wars is not acceptable (and accepted) anymore. Mozart's music not only represents the past, but it represents a past that was re-evoked during Nazism as epitomizing art.

Hayden's poem is also a commentary on nostalgia[57] and its relation to history. By titling the poem "eine kleine nachtmusik," Hayden is turning the poem itself in a little serenade, thus assigning a new value to what a serenade looks like at the end of World War II. It is no

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[57] Chapter Four will discuss the roles of nostalgia and melancholia in Hayden's poems.

longer what it was in the 1770s, a light piece "suitable for open-air, evening performance[s]" ("serenade"), but has reacquired part of its original meaning as "a nocturnal song of courtship" where, however, what is courted is the past and, more specifically, a sense of nostalgia for a past that will never come back. This is made evident by the reference to "Alt Wien" which is an expression that specifically refers to the sense of nostalgia for the Vienna of the past, as well as an installation within the Prater, consisting of a reconstruction of a part of Vienna as it was before 1850, period in which the city underwent substantial change and modernization. The sense of nostalgia is also given by the figure of solitary Anton, who seems to represent a sense of solitary wistfulness, but who also embodies the future, when he "reads re-reads the dimming lines, / warms his fingers at the candleshine and turns the page." The out-of-tune part of the line, "and turns the page" stands out precisely because it sounds as an addendum (the line ideally would have ended at "shine") and the fact that the added action is the turning of the page indicates how the poem is stressing Anton's role in moving forward, in being ready to look at the future.

Both Hatcher and P. Williams, the only two scholars who have written at length about this poem, have overlooked how the title's reference to the serenade is not incidental, in the sense that it predisposes the reader to treat "eine kleine" musically. The poem itself contains many musical moments and musical references, thus paralleling (or at least imitating) the serenade. Instead of reading the title as creating a contrast between the liveliness of the musical piece and the sadness of the lines, the poem should be read as enacting with words the first three movements of Mozart's serenade, leaving out the fourth. Doing so, effectively allows for a sensorial type of historical exploration, where rhythm and musicality accompany the reader in this discovery, or rediscovery, of the past. Mozart's serenade

consists of four movements: I) Allegro, II) Romance: Andante, III) Minuet: Allegretto, and IV) Rondo: Allegro. If we read the first two quatrains of the poem, which constitute part I, we can see how they can be read at the same Allegro rhythm of the first movement of the serenade. The imagery represented conveys a sense of quickened and bright speed, which contradistinguishes the Allegro rhythm of the first movement. The first stanza opens with the image of naked women running fast ("like mad") all over Europe with "hair ablaze;" in the second stanza, the Ferris Wheel produces the musical sound "la la," a reference to the first movement of the serenade. Thus, in spite of the horrific and ghastly nature of the images presented in the first section, the sonic background that the first movement of the serenade provides helps read the two stanzas in an allegro rhythm that *enhances* the experience of chaos and horror produced by the war and that, as initially claimed, generates an almost syncopated reading experience.

> II.
> Anton the student hunches in a cold-starred room and reads and hears
> the clawfoot sarabande, the knucklebone passacaglia coming close:
> he has put on the requisite ancestral blue,
> and his hair would glister festive as opals if the girandole
>
> Had its way. A single prism is left to exclaim at the dear
> iota of warmth and light a burnt down candle salvages.
> Anton aching reads re-reads the dimming lines,
> warms his fingers at the candle shine and turns the page. (9-16)

When we move to the second part of the poem, we can see how stanzas three and four also seem to conform to the second movement of the serenade. There is a clear shift from an Allegro to a Romance: Andante. Even the musical genres mentioned in these two stanzas reflect and recall the musical rhythm of the second movement of Mozart's serenade. The Romance: Andante movement is a slow and lyrical movement that takes us into the room of

the character protagonist of the poem, Anton. These two quatrains start with a relatable and realistic image of young Anton reading and hearing the sounds of a "sarabande," which, according to the *OED* is a "slow and stately Spanish dance in triple time" or the music that accompanies such dance ("sarabande"), and of a "passacaglia," which is also "a slow musical composition written in triple time, usually consisting of continuous variations over a ground bass" ("passacaglia"). Anton then puts on "the ancestral blue," where "blue" stands for the blues.

Hayden's journey into the past with this poem is a dual journey. It is a commentary on a very recent past as well as a journey into the middle of eighteenth-century European culture. The serenade transports the reader back to the memory of a now gone Vienna and Europe. In the first quatrain of the second part of the poem, this is also evoked by the word "clawfoot," which is here surrealistically associated with the musical genres Anton hears and reads, but that is also a referent for pieces of furniture that originally date back to the middle of the eighteenth century.

> III.
> Now as the ferris wheel revolves to extrovert neomusic
> and soldiers pay with cigarettes and candybars
> for rides for rides with the famished girls whose colloquies
> with death have taught them how to play at being whores:
>
> Now as skin-and-bones Europe hurts all over from the swastika's
> hexentanz: oh think of Anton, Anton brittle, Anton crystalline;
> think what the winter moon, the leper beauty of a Gothic tale, must see:
> the ice-azure likeness of a young man reading, carved most craftily. (17-24)

The third and last part of the poem, the last two quatrains, can be viewed to represent either the Minuet: Allegretto of the third movement, or the fourth movement (Rondo: Allegro) of Mozart's serenade. Perhaps they are meant to conflate both. There is a return to

the image of the Ferris Wheel, as in the first part of the poem (and thus in the first movement of the serenade), which this time, however, "revolves to extrovert neomusic," where the word "extrovert" references both in meaning and in its explosive sound the Allegretto and Allegro tempos of the serenade, and where, now, soldiers and prostitutes are taking their rides in an atmosphere of squalid and forced happiness. The poetic voice associates this sad moment in history with the surrealist image of the "leper beauty of a Gothic tale," once again trying to place in contrast and in harmony the old and the new, the past and the present, through the reference to symbols of the past, such as "leper" and "gothic" accompanied by the noun "beauty."

References to eighteenth-century culture do not end with the musical references and the framing of the poem with Mozart's serenade. The journey into the nostalgia, yet critique, of the eighteenth century continues with the poetic voice's invocation of Goethe's *Faust* as well as with a more general invocation of German's eighteenth-century gothic literature, which is used to broaden the subject of Alt Wien and Modern Wien to include Germany and the rest of Europe. While being the subject and protagonist of the poem, (both eighteenth-century and post-war), Vienna is also turned into a stand-in for Germany and Europe, which is invoked in the last part of the poem. Thus, unlike what P. Williams argues, Hayden is *not* offering

> an unqualified picture of Vienna's suffering under German occupation, and by extension the human suffering caused by the war [without taking] into account Austria's historic sympathy for Germany or its role as fellow traveler under the Anschluss policy from 1938 to 1945, [thus negating] Lionel Trilling's view that the artwork partakes of history as it records historic fact. (62)

Hayden is doing precisely the opposite. The poem shows how *all* of Europe suffered,

including Germany and Austria, and how the cultural heritage of these two nations, as well as the rest of Europe, should not be shunned but used and re-adapted to this new postwar era, in order not to forget and to, instead, generate new art.

The most immediate example of the invocation of German eighteenth-century literature and culture, is the metaphor of the "swastika's hexentanz," which the poetic voice uses to describe the "dance" Europe went through during Nazism and during the war that has now left Europe all "skin-and-bones" and "hurting all over." The image of the hexentanz (literally "dance of the witches") immediately brings to the reader's mind the dance of the witches during the Walpurgis Night in the *Faust*. On that occasion, Mephistopheles and Faust go to the Harz Mountains where, as Faust says, the witches and wizards "are hurrying to the Evil One / There many a riddle will be undone," and where, Mephistopheles replies "and many another done up again" (145-6). Once Mephistopheles and Faust reach the top of the Brocken mountain, they encounter the Huckster-Witch who boasts that:

> There's no knife here that's not drawn blood,
> Nor cup from which somebody whole and hale
> Has not drunk hot corroding death, no jewel
> That has not tempted and misled
> Some lovable woman, nor sword that never stuck
> A conned opponent in the back. (147-8)

to which Mephistopheles answers:

> Sister, you're out of touch. Things have moved on.
> You trade in what has been and gone.
> Get into novelties instead,
> If it's not novel no one's interested. (148)

This passage anticipates the tension that is present in "eine kleine nachtmusik," especially in the third part, where the dance of the swastika that plagues Europe is contrasted to the present moment. Both historical times are, ultimately, witches' dances, earlier because of the

war and the Nazi's regime, now because of the post-war moment. What Mephistopheles calls for, however, is the acceptance and the understanding, but not the forgetting, of the past of war and violence; he invokes, like modernist poets did, a new vision with which one can conquer the future.

A quick word should be spent on Anton, who throughout the second and third parts is represented as a poor, post-war intellectual in search for knowledge, but who could also easily be interpreted as the counterpart to Mephistopheles, Faust himself, and who becomes the creation of the poetic voice who is conducting an intellectual search of its own. His search, however, just like the one of Faust, seem to elude him, as he "reads re-reads the dimming lines" (where the act of re-reading is portrayed formally through the repletion of the verb "read") and he becomes this ethereal, unreal character; he is "brittle" and "crystalline," the icy "likeness of a young man reading, carved most craftily."

Ultimately, the poem shows that the culture that was shunned after the war can actually be used to talk about the horrors of Hayden's contemporary moment. It indirectly answers Adorno's argument, for whom "the German fascists defamed the word and replaced it with the inane notion of 'art appreciation' […] led to do so by the rugged interests of the authoritarian state" (21), degrading "culture to the Official [and failing] to recognize the extent to which culture and criticism […] are intertwined" (22). Following World War II and the advent of cultural criticism, which Adorno critiques together with the "materialistic transparency of culture" (34), because it vulgarizes culture, making the writing of poetry "after Auschwitz barbaric" as it would lead only to the "absolute reification" of culture (ibid), Hayden shows that new culture, one that includes a critique of culture, and that does not simply reifies it (or reifies ideologies), is, instead, possible.

When the poem was republished in 1962, as part of *A Ballad of Remembrance*, Hayden altered it quite dramatically from its original version, which I have so far discussed. As Hannah Sullivan argues, "heavy and intensive revision has become an indicator of authorial integrity and of the difficulty and seriousness of the revised artwork" (2). Sullivan explains how an appreciation/evaluation of revision is a modernist feature, facilitated by the improvements in printing techniques, the advent of patronage (as opposed to writing books for profit), and the arrival of the typewriter as something available to all writers. Revision, after modernism, became a text and style-altering practice, which led to the creation of "new stylistic features" (3) and was used "not for stylistic tidying-up but to *make it new* through large-scale transformation of length, structure, perspective, and genre" (ibid). That Hayden was a constant reviser of his work there is no doubt. Basically every poem he republished in successive collections has been revised and re-revised. Hayden himself admitted that "with every poem I've written, I rewrote and revised for several years" (*How I Write* 146). Hayden's revision also conforms to Sullivan's theory. Yet, not all his revisions were equally successful. Hayden possibly revised the poem as a result of his changed poetic sensibilities and in response to some reviews and critiques of his cryptic imagery and overly high-brow references in the works of the time.[58] Far from me to think that revision is inherently a threat

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[58] Cedric Dover parodied Hayden's modernist style of *The Lion and the Archer* in a review published in the *Crisis*, which is a piece of art in and of itself and worth quoting at length. He writes: "yes really it is like that and like this so you can see it is original and l'art and worth a dollar because whenever something is printed in 12 point without capitals you know because it has been known for forty years that it is original and full of dazzle clustered trees and jokes of nacre and ormolu and poltergeists in imperials and of course worth a dollar for a swooned evening on the leopard skin exploring the navel with candybar joy

to “a work’s organic unity and freshness,” as was believed by nineteenth-century romantic writers (Sullivan 3), I do believe that Hayden’s revision of “eine kleine nachtmusik” worsened the poem.

The major changes in the new version have to do with the almost complete disappearance of the musical references. In the second stanza, for instance, the “mended Ferris wheel” simply “revolves again” as opposed to “turn to a tune again.” In the fourth line of the second stanza, Hayden also omits the onomatopoeic “la la” at the end of the line, as well as changing the “go up and up” into “swing up swing up” which respects the meter and the rhythm provided by the repetition, but loses the musical effect of “go” coupled with “up and up” and with “la la,” which are all two-letter monosyllables with sharp truncated endings that evoke the rhythm of Mozart’s serenade. The two major omissions in terms of musical references occur in stanza three and five. In stanza three, the old line, “he has put on

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indeed for a dollar you can join robert hayden’s heart when it escapes from the mended ferris wheel and the clawfoot sarabande in its dance among

> metaphorical doors, decors of illusion
> coffecups floating poised hysterias;
> now among mazurka dolls offering
> death-heads of peppermint roses and real violets

now ain’t that somepin and dont it prove that *counterpoise* is right in the ice-cream battle of azure awareness that experimentation is an ‘absolute necessity in keeping the arts vital and significant in contemporary life’ yes really it is like that and more like that than like this and maybe just maybe someday somewhen mr hayden will get right into selden rodman’s anthology instead of *the negro caravan* (dear mr editor don’t worry because you can minuscule the word when it’s art) which will prove the oneness of mankind and the vision of being ‘violently opposed’ to the wickedness of thinking that while there is sociology and politics the poet is the first sociologist and vanguard politician.
[…] and you can only find out by spending a dollar with no extra charge for the 2 autographs for which one way or the other you’ll surely have a dollar worth of fun” (52-3)

A review in the Chicago Defender by Gertrude Martin and another review by Selden Rodman in the New York Times Book Review, again re-state the positive aspects of the collection, yet not without some condescension. Martin, for instance, writes that “most of the poems included here rank with good poetry of any period” and that “Mr. Hayden’s poems use images […] and rhythms to good purpose.” Rodman, instead, writes that “may come to be regarded as the entering wedge in the ‘emancipation’ of Negro poetry in America. […] One feels instantly behind the work of both of these very gifted poets not a persecution complex or a nostalgia for the past or for a hot piano but the whole weight of modern poetry at the service of a tragic human situation. They have learned the value of restraint.”

the requisite ancestral blue" is completely removed and the stanza is made into four lines by redistributing the three remaining lines into four. In stanza five, the first line "now as the ferris wheel revolves to extrovert neomusic" is also removed and substituted with "in spring the Ferris wheel will bloom with lights" — substitution which seems important to Pontheolla Williams, who argues that Hayden had originally made a mistake by making the Ferris run in winter; a mistake which he would have corrected by changing this line (62).

Whether the introduction of "spring" was made to correct the mistake or not, what is relevant here is the purposeful deletion of all the specifically musical references present in the poem. Such removal shows how in the first version all these references were indeed created to make the reader purposefully read the poem within the musical context of its title. It also shows how the poet, later on, decided that he wanted that reading experience to change, and proceeded to remove all those references. As a result, because the title of the poem has not changed, one finds oneself disoriented and displaced when attempting to understand the poem in terms of the musical references suggested by the title.

Other changes made to the poem also contribute to its loss of a specific musical referentiality. For instance some of the changes in lines breaks and enjambments change the musicality of the lines. For example, the enjambment between stanza two and three, which in the original poem was "and his hair would glister festive as opals if the girandole / Had its way. A single prism is left to exclaim at the dear" becomes in the '62 version "His hair would glisten/like frosted amber if the girandole had its way. / A Single prism is left to exclaim at the dear" so that the two stanzas are completely separated but also so that the sense of staccato coming from ending the verse in the new stanza disappears. When the poet substitutes "taper" for "burnt down candle" we also have a change in the sonority of the

words. In the staccato sounds of the combinations of “burnt down candle,” the hard “t” clashes with the “d” and the “n” with the “c,” forcing the reader to pronounce all the words as separate, distinct sounds. This is substituted with the word “taper” which has a completely different, more gentle and elongated, sound effect. The same type of change happens in the first line of the last stanza, where “as skin-and-bones Europe,” becomes “shuddering Europe” once again substituting a staccato effect with a more gentle and elongated, one-word, sound.

The later version conveys the feeling that Hayden adapted to the pressures of a wave of rejection of his high modernist aesthetics as well as to a postwar wave of “institutionalized” revisions, where, as Sullivan argues, “as modernism was institutionalized and writers became college professors, passionate correction began to not seem abnormal and excessive, but instead a *necessary* precondition of good writing” (238), and changed the poem to reflect the more current expectations, as well as to reflect his own changed style, more refined, less forceful on allusions, hyper-researched vocabulary, and overly high-brow language. However, while in the majority of cases concerning Hayden’s own revisions, where successive revisions did indeed improve the piece, in this case the revision amounted to a flattening of the poem, to a stealing away from it its very own essence, thus rendering it unappealing and ultimately making it drop out of Hayden’s *own* choice of poems to be republished in the following collections.

Another poem in which Hayden takes us on a journey to Western Europe and to the horrors of World War II is a poem originally published in 1962 as “Belsen, Liberation Day” in Rosey Pool’s anthology *Beyond the Blues* and republished in 1966 as “Belsen, Day of

Liberation (for Rosey)," in Hayden's *Selected Poems*.[59] The poem is composed of four unrhymed and irregular quatrains, constructed around some well-defined images, and clearly symbolic in nature. With "Belsen," Hayden takes us back in time and makes us witness the liberation of the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen.[60] Overall, as Brian Conniff suggests, in "Belsen," as in many of his other historical poems, Hayden "explores, often in brutal detail, the psychology and consequences of racism and xenophobia" (491). As Hatcher argues, it is part of a series of poems which present "the persona's descent into darkness and his subsequent probing of images of a lost and destitute age" where "the universal symbols of light and dark" are emphasized (148).

"Belsen" represents a journey into the depths of horror and despair coupled with hope and familial love. While this is not unique in Hayden's oeuvre, what is unique about this poem is that we are experiencing all of this, as Hatcher points out, from the "enlightening clarity of the child's perspective" (151), whose thoughts we hear narrated in third person by the poetic voice. This, however, substantially complicates Hatcher's claim on the "clarity of the child's perspective" given that the simple and clear thoughts of the child are mixed with much more complex symbols and a sophisticated language, a product of the poetic voice's consciousness, and not the child's. As W. Williams writes, in the context of analyzing the

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[59] In an interview with A Poulin Jr., Hayden explained that "Belsen, Day of Liberation' is dedicated to Rosey Pool, a Dutch woman who died a couple of years ago. A marvelous person, she was interested in Afro-American poetry long before anybody else was […] She told me a story of a little girl who had been in a concentration camp, and I used this anecdote as the basis of the poem. The little girl looked out the window and said, 'they were so beautiful, and they were not afraid.' And you know there is so much that lies behind that statement—what the child must have endured to say that." (*Collected* 39)

[60] The concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen was liberated by British and Canadian troops on April 15, 1945.

role of history in Hayden's poetry, "the realities of imagination and actualities of history are bound together in an alliance that makes neither thinkable without the other" (68).

> Her parents and her dolls destroyed,
>   her childhood foreclosed,
> she watched the foreign soldiers from
>   the sunlit window whose black bars. (1-4)

The first quatrain provides us with the child's background and situates us in the contemporary moment of the child's story. In particular, the first two lines immediately face us with the child's emotional and personal history. The lines "her parents and her dolls destroyed,/her childhood foreclosed," double the emphasis on the end of the child's childhood. Not only her dolls, symbol of her childhood, are destroyed, but the message of the destroyed childhood is reinforced by the second line of the poem, where the poetic voice tells us that her childhood is "foreclosed." This double telling of the end of childhood parallels the double voice we are hearing in the poem where the thoughts of the child, her clear perspective, are made more shadowy, more complex, by the narrative voice that gives us her thoughts. In particular, the use of the word "foreclosed" to describe a childhood that is destroyed is indicative of a mature thought, a different perspective. Also, the use of "foreclosed," not only reinforces the idea presented by the word "destroyed" but also complicates it and, in a sense, contradicts it. "To destroy," in fact, is a verb that suggests a non-return. It implies the elimination of something or someone's existence. "To foreclose," on the other hand, indicates that something has been taken away from someone, but not necessarily that it has been destroyed. Her childhood was taken away from the child, but might still be recovered, perhaps through the act of remembering, or through the one of memorializing. This happens, for instance, when, on the second quatrain the child's memory

is brought to us "unmediated" by the poetic voice, so that we hear directly how she recalls someone telling her "Liebchen,/Liebchen, you should be in bed."

The use of the past tense throughout the poem indicates not only that this is an event past, but also that this is part of the memory, that this is a narration from a child's perspective given by someone who is no longer a child. Poetry, thus, through the mediation of the poetic voice that immerses itself into a foreign and geographically distant past and into someone else's memories, becomes the way in which we not only preserve memories and give voice to them, but also a way in which thoughts, past moments, history itself, is returned to its protagonists.

> Were crooked crosses inked upon
> her pallid face. "Liebchen,
> Liebchen, you should be in bed."
> But she felt ill no longer.
>
> And because that day was a holy day
> when even the dead, it seemed,
> must rise, she was allowed to stay
> and see the golden strangers who
>
> Were Father, Brother, and her dream
> of God. Afterwards
> she said, "They were so beautiful,
> and they were not afraid. (5-16)

The poem is infused with religious symbolism and religious feeling, yet its purpose is not the celebration of religion or of spirituality but rather the celebration of freedom coming at the hands of the soldiers, "golden strangers." Religious symbolism is used to highlight and celebrate the soldiers; they are the ones who, at the very end of the poem, "were so beautiful, / and they were not afraid." The image of the cross, which appears on the second stanza, is one of "crooked crosses inked upon/her pallid face." It is therefore an image that is

superimposed on the pallid face of the child by the poetic voice itself, thus giving the reader the poetic voice's own elaboration of the image. "Her pallid face" also works as a clear contrast to the faces of the "golden strangers" which will appear in the next stanza, as well as functioning as a stand-in for all the pallid faces in the concentration camps. The image of the "golden strangers" is associated with the image of the child's "Father, Brother, and her dream / of God." The enjambment between the third and fourth stanza is extremely effective in portraying the layering of images assigned to the soldiers, as it first portrays them as "golden strangers" and, only after the line breaks and we pass to the next stanza, we learn that the child sees in them also the father, the brother, and "her dream of God," thus turning the soldiers into angelic figures.

"Belsen" also presents a transition in the child perception of familial identity. The image of the family, presented to us in the first stanza, is substituted at the end of the poem by the angelic image of the soldiers. It is also interesting to note how the image of the doll is one that is used multiple times in Hayden's oeuvre, particularly in connection with ideas of family, of childhood, and of identity, as we will see in the next set of poems that this chapter will analyze.

Opposite to "eine kleine nachtmusik," the 1966 revised version of "Belsen" that appeared in *Selected Poems* shows how revision did, indeed, improve the poem, as it made it shorter, more compact, and, at the same time, more powerful. Its images acquired force and brilliance by being presented in a more synthetic and compressed language. The compression process also helped to produce a poem much more musical, due to the increase in alliterations and assonances, as well as internal rhymes.

The original poem had one less stanza (four stanzas which became five). The stanzas, however, kept more or less the same length of the lines, showing the extent to which Hayden modified the poem. For instance, the third and fourth line of the first stanza originally read "she stood that day and watched them from/the windows whose black bars". In the later version, those lines became: "she watched the foreign soldiers from/the sunlit window whose black bars". By eliminating "stood that day and" as well as the pronoun "them" from the third line, Hayden is able to insert the adjective "foreign" in front of "soldiers," thus maintaining the same number of stressed syllables while giving the sense of a much more compressed line, due to the loss of the staccato sense present in the '62 version. He also managed to introduce a relevant information, "foreign," which helps the reader better understand and locate this "golden strangers" that will appear in the third stanza. The major difference between the two versions lies in the original fourth stanza, which almost completely disappears and what remains of it is incorporated in the last stanza. These disappeared lines elaborated on the foreign soldiers, describing them as "grim and kindly/men from the outer space/that only prayer can reach." While the idea of "outer space" is one that represents a constant in Hayden's choices of symbols, as we have seen in Chapter Two, the later version of "Belsen" works much better without this description of the soldiers because it elevates them to the level of angelic and ephemeral figures, as opposed to real, corporeal one. Through word choice and structure, he really makes them the product of the outer space, rather than just describing them as such. This is also much more in line with the overall spiritual and religious symbolism and imagery of the poem.

Coupled together, "eine kleine nachtmusik" and "Belsen, Day of Liberation" provide us with an "insider perspective" on postwar Europe. "eine kleine" looks at the results of war

and liberation on society and on the individual from the perspective of an unnamed observer who attempts to articulate the feelings and the emotions that war and postwar generated. In "Belsen," Hayden's view is characterized by the analysis and recording of the perception and effects of the war from the point of view of a single child.

"Magnolias in Snow," "Night, Death, Mississippi," and "Mystery Boy Looks for Kin in Nashville."

Hayden's historical poems not only develop through different layers of time; they also develop spatially. Examining history, Hayden looks at the world as a global entity, but he also looks at specific historical events and their geographical locations. One of these geographical and historical spaces is the South. Geographical, because, whether through travel or through geographical description, "South" calls for a spatial type of discourse. Historical, however, because the geographical space of the South is never free from history, especially from the point of view of African American literature. Even when only spatially explored, historical events are an indelible part of the geography of the South. In the case of Hayden's poetry, this is ever so true, and the South is always described with or through history, even when the poem is only about a contemporary journey. Hayden addresses the history of the South in various poems, which go from the historical narration to the descriptions of a landscape, from the private dimensions of history, to the collective historical events and public figures that contradistinguish that particular space. Hayden also takes his reader into explorations of past childhood and adult memories, into the search for origins, ancestry, connections, and community. The "South" section of this chapter provides

an in-depth analysis of "'Mystery Boy' Looks for Kin in Nashville," contextualized by other historical poems about the South, such as "Magnolias in Snow" and "Night, Death, Mississippi."

"Magnolias in Snow" (1948), is one example of Hayden's historical poems that develops through the narration of an actual journey. The movement from North to South happens unbeknownst to the reader, behind the scenes, and the poem is the result of what that movement produced. The travel itself is a biographical element of the life of the author,[61] which is only hinted at in the poem through the comparison between South and North, between what was in the North and what is *now* in the South. In "Magnolias" Hayden represents the South culturally and spatially. Environment, geography, and history are evoked in these eighteen lines through juxtapositions and symbols. These provide the reader with an initial, immediate understanding and ability to decipher the poem. On a closer look, however, they also complicate the relationship between South and North and the understanding of what the "South" really means, by giving us a historical narration that highlights how the South *feels* like, rather than what the South is.

> Snow alters and elaborates perspectives,
> confuses South with North and would deceive
> me into what egregious error
> but for these trees that keep their summer-green
> and like a certain hue of speech mean South. (1-5)

The symbols in the poem introduce the reader to the intersection of personal and collective history, which the South and the North represent. The two main symbols are magnolias that symbolize the South, and snow, which symbolizes the North: "Magnolias

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[61] Hayden moved from Detroit to Nashville in late 1946 (Fetrow 45).

stand for South, as every copy- / reader knows, and snow means North to me" (lines 6-7).[62] What is interesting is that this dichotomy, while initially seeming an obvious and clear-cut one, is complicated by the poetic voice. Magnolias are symbolic of the South for everyone (where "everyone" is symbolized by the figure of the copy editor). The snow, instead, symbolizes North "for me." The association of north and snow, thus, while a common one is rendered personal. A natural event, snow falling in the South and covering up vegetation, including the magnolias, elicit in the poetic voice a journey into memory.

> Magnolias stand for South, as every copy-
> reader knows, and snow means North to me,
> means home and friends I walked with under boughs
> of hemlock when the cold of winter
> was a carilloneur that played on china bells. (6-10)

In the second stanza, the memories evoked by the snow are private ones, so that the snow "means home and friends I walked with under boughs / of hemlock when the cold of winter / was a carilloneur that played on china bells" (lines 8-10). The journey through the collective meaning of what the South represents happens in the fourth stanza where the poetic voice comments on the fact that the beauty of the snow-covered magnolias is a form of compensation "for things I must forego / if I would safely walk beneath these trees" (lines 14-15). As Fetrow argues, aligning the poet to the poetic voice, "Hayden finds natural beauty a compensation, a comfort to offset the emotional deprivation he, as a 'displaced' black poet, experienced in the South of an earlier era" (45).

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[62] Hayden uses "magnolias" and "snow" as symbols also in other poems. In "A Plague of Starlings," for instance, "magnolia leaves" are once again used to symbolize history and the South.

The history of the South is narrated through allusion and absence. History in itself, in the form of historical narration, is not really present. What is present is the glaring absence of historical detail, so that when the poetic voice uses the words “If I would safely walk” the word “safe,” connected to the conditional form of the sentence, calls attention to the historical lack of safety for people of color in the South, both in the past and in the present. What is absent in the South are also “home and friends” that can be found only in the North. The causes of this absence are not explicated in the poem, and the reader is left to infer them through the symbolic interplay between given notions of North and South and through the assumption that the readers would be familiar with the history of the South, particularly in relation to African Americans.

Absence as a marker of Hayden’s historical narration characterizes many of his other poems, including “Mystery Boy” and “Night, Death, Mississippi.” In the case of these Southern poems, but more in general in Hayden’s historical poetry, absence can be seen as the equivalent of Jacques Rancière’s concept of the “silent witness.” Rancière, talking about the “moaning of the mothers” as a moaning that poetry always wants to imitate, argues that

> She who alone would be able to speak the grief is absent, silent, the same distance from any imitation as the celestial constellation of Canis Major is from any barking animal. Placed under the sign of the inimitable, the content of the narration receives from her the mark of the true. The subject that one cannot imitate becomes the guarantor of the true, the witness to the occurrence of the spoken word, henceforth silent, to be made to speak anew in a discourse radically other than that of *mimesis.* The impossibility of imitation produces the silent witness who holds the truth of science, who holds this truth without herself having the power to deliver it. The figure of the one who would speak—the legitimating agency of the narration—becomes that of the silent witness—the legitimating agency of knowledge. (54-55)

In Hayden's case, oftentimes, it is not that the victims don't have a voice, but rather that the perpetrators are made to speak the horrors they are committing and in doing so are made to be held responsible for those horrors. These poems function like confessions. This happens, for instance, in "Middle Passage," examined in the next chapter, as well as in "Night, Death, Mississippi."

Hayden wrote two poems on lynching. The first was "Figure" published in *Figure of Time* in 1955. The second one is "Night Death Mississippi," published in 1966 in *Selected Poems*. The primary difference between the two poems is *absence* as opposed to detail. In "Figure" the lynched body is described in all its painful horror, in "Night" the lynched body is absent, and thus perhaps more powerful. In "Figure," the dead, lynched body is given a quasi-agency. The poem opens with:

> He would slump to his knees, now that his agonies
> are accomplished, would fall but for the chain that binds
>   him to the tall columnar tree. (1-3)

The details provided are gruesome, and the craft of the poem does not hide the gruesomeness, nor aestheticize it. There is nothing beautiful about this poem, as, perhaps, it should be. It is direct, brutal. Up until the last stanza, there is no researched word, no metaphor, no symbolism. The vision of the lynched man still chained to the tree is given to the reader in all its horror. The last tercet, however, returns to the reader that poetic voice we are so used to hearing, so that the bloody, tortured, body is finally taken away from the reader's sight:

> He is a scythe in daylight's clutch. Is gnomon.
> Is metaphor of a place, a time. Is our
>   time geometrized. (22-24)

When we look at “Night, Death, Mississippi,” we find that the presence of the lynched body is muted. The lynching itself is muted, and it is only heard through the imagination of an old man, who reminisces over lynchings he had been part of in the past. He lives vicariously the one that is happening at that moment, of which, however, he hears “a quavering cry” and therefore wonders whether it is a “Screech-owl? / Or one of them?”

“Night” achieves the effect that “Figure” does not, because it does away with the dangers of readers’ voyeurism and denies them that cathartic moment that would make them almost instantly forget what they just read. “Night” does not provide any sense of an ending, nor any sense of hope, and by being structured around the image of “family” and familiar relations, ending with the voice a mother that worries about the son being dirty with the blood of the lynched person, unsettles the reader. That lynchings were a “family” past-time is no novelty. Many are the testimonies of entire families organizing picnics and gatherings to watch the “spectacle” of a lynching. Yet, the poem makes the family element here very unsettling because of the matter-of-factness of the way in which the family’s involvement is presented, and for *their* matter-of-fact attitudes towards what is happening.

In contrast to other poems about the South, “Night” does not really have any natural or geographical reference in the poem. It is the name Mississippi in the title that speaks of the South, coupled with the subject matter of the poem—lynching—that is normally associated to the history of the South and the treatment of African Americans, particularly after emancipation.

The theme of lynching firmly places Hayden in the African American artistic tradition, not because of the subject matter itself, but because of the way in which the subject matter is

treated. For instance, it is enough to think about Toomer's "Portrait in Georgia" (in *Cane*), Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," or even the more contemporary works of Kara Walker, such as "Burning African Village Play Set with Big House and Lynching" (2006), where the lack of detail produced by the use of the silhouettes function also almost as "silent witnesse," leaving the horror only hinted at. The atmosphere evoked in "Night" is a dark one, almost gothic, and thus literarily in line with a Faulknerian gothic South made of violence, spelled out or otherwise, and a sinister nature that sees everything but cannot speak, the often silent witness in African American literature. In this respect, Hayden can be considered as a clear descendent of Paul Laurence Dunbar (it is enough to think at "The Haunted Oak"), as the analysis of "'Mystery Boy' Looks for Kin in Nashville" will show.

"'Mystery Boy' Looks for Kin in Nashville" is a short poem of four five-lines stanzas, which makes high use of symbolic images and very cryptic references. Published in 1970 in *Words in the Mourning Time* (even though the first copyright of the poem dates back to 1966), the poem has not been examined by many critics, even if it has been cited a few times as an example of Hayden's autobiographical poetry. The scholar who looked at the poem most closely is P. Williams, who examined it in its relationship to African American history and in relationship to Hayden's private life. In her first explanation, Williams argues that it represents Hayden's effort to "establish true identity" through the use of "Afro-American folk image and a setting reminiscent of the South [where] the central 'black doll' image suggests what the speaker conundrum is perhaps—what he wants to escape and who wants to keep him a prisoner" (122). She then compares the doll to the doll image in *Invisible Man* as well as to a character of the minstrel shows, arguing that, coupled with the mimosa tree,

this imagery is suggestive of “the tree-shaded lawns that marked the antebellum plantation where the black man was wedded to the Sambo alter ego” (ibid), an explanation that she reinforces by looking at the use of the word “boy” in “Mystery Boy,” which “evokes the traditional paternalistic dispensation of trivia to the adult black male, who was always assumed to be childish and never treated like a man” (ibid).

William’s second strand of the argument is based on the fact that Hayden said that this was a “private poem” (123) and therefore Williams interpreted it as Hayden’s cryptic exploration of his homoerotic desires and “a search for sexual identity,” which, due to the times, he could not express openly. In this interpretation, Williams focuses on what, according to her, are the phallic symbols—the elm and the magnolia trees— and argues that the figure of the doll and of the “dollbaby wife” are ultimately the representation of the figure of the “traditional wife” (ibid). Fred Fetrow, the only other scholar who dedicated some consistent attention to the poem, explains how Hayden is addressing his identity crisis through the use of a “‘real’ persona” by using the real story that he had read in the newspapers of a little girl who was found and who did not seem to know who or where she was or came from. For Fetrow, Hayden “reconstituted the news story to accommodate his own background and feelings, in effect allegorizing his own anxieties about identity,” explaining the imagery of the poem in terms of Hayden’s personal life, where the black doll ultimately represents his wife Erma (105-6).

“Mystery Boy” does indeed seem to represent the poetic’s voice search for an identity. Whether this search is also Hayden’s one, the poem itself, however, does not really say. There are no specific references to Hayden-the-poet in the poem. If we really wanted to look at this poem in terms of Hayden’s biography, it is true that in the 1950’s Hayden discovered

that Robert Earl Hayden was not his real given name. Hayden had been adopted as a child by a couple of friends of his mother (he was, however, able to create a relationship with the mother). Originally his name was Asa Bundy Sheffey, for his natural father's name was Asa Sheffey and the mother was Gladys Finn/Ruth Sheffey. The poem could thus be about Hayden's search and discovery of his real name and identity, especially when we read the last two lines of the poem "We'll go and find them, we'll go / and ask them for your name again." As poet, playwright, and essayist Jay Wright wrote, "his work's almost ritual preoccupation with identity, with names, and with ambiguous realities reflected the bruising fact that 'Robert Hayden' was his adoptive, not his legal name and that discovering what that 'real' name was served as part of his initiation into fuller manhood" (905). Nonetheless, I think it is more interesting to look at the poem *qua* poem, because if we leave aside the autobiographical interpretation, it can offer us more interesting elements and ideas to ponder on.

The first three stanzas are constructed around natural images, wherefore the central image of the black doll stands out.

> Puzzle faces in the dying elms
> promise him treats if he will stay.
> Sometimes they hiss and spit at him
> like varmints caught
> in a thicket of butterflies.
>
> A black doll,
> one disremembered time,
> came floating down to him
> through mimosa's fancywork leaves and blooms
> to be his hidden bride.
>
> From the road beyond the creepered walls
> they call to him now and then,
> and he'll take off in spite of the angry trees,

> hearing like the loudening of his heart
> the name he never can he never can repeat. (1-15)

Stanza one, in particular, develops along the contrast of negative and positive natural images—dying elms, varmints, and butterflies. Stanza two, instead, presents only positive natural images, and stanza three, again, presents a mix of positive and negative natural images—"angry trees" and "creepered walls." (However, it should also be noted that the word "creepered" is phonetically reminiscent of the word "creep", so that, at least phonetically, the word is linked to the image proposed in the first stanza of the hissing and spitting faces in the dying elms, suggesting the idea of a nature that is alive and personified). Because stanzas one, three and four are all narrated in the present tense (with the exception of "were" in the first line of stanza four), the event in stanza two that is narrated in the past stands out and can be interpreted as a memory of the narrator, which he is juxtaposing to what he is experiencing in the now. The black doll, thus, aside from acquiring significance from its position among natural imagery, becomes also closely connected to the past. The stanza could represent a happy childhood memory of role-play under the mimosa tree. There are no negative natural images there. It could also be the representation of an earlier sexual encounter or of the discovery of sexual desires. The fact that the bride that the doll represents is a "hidden bride" could, to concur with P. Williams' theory, be something that the child in the past wants to keep hidden about his sexual desires.

At the same time, however, the choice of the word "disremembered" is extremely peculiar and is very close to the word "dismembered." The association of "dismembered" with the black body, for which the black doll could be a stand in, especially if connected to the idea of a puzzle of faces in the branches of "dying elms," certainly brings to mind an

imagery related to the violence of lynched bodies. If this is the case, then we could read the poems as a search for a personal identity as well as a frightening confrontation with a collective identity, one where it is the ghosts from the narrator's past that are speaking to him and that are the key to his finding his real name. The "name he never can he never can repeat" (a line that presents a beautiful repetition to stress the impossibility of repetition), could either be the name of the ancestors or, since the poem does not provide us with a precise historical time or persona, it could also be the name the narrator had as a child, perhaps during slavery (thus a name that cannot be repeated now that he is a free man). The name to be found could also be the name of a loved one, the "black doll" who perhaps had been lynched on a tree but that the narrator cannot (or refuses to) remember as a lynched body, so that he remembers it as a black doll "floating" down a mimosa tree (as opposed to hanging from the dying elm).

> And when he gets to where the voices were—
> Don't cry, his dollbaby wife implores;
> I know where they are, don't cry.
> We'll go and find them, we'll go
> and ask them for your name again. (16-20)

In the last stanza we return to the image of the doll, this time in the present tense and personified in the wife of the narrator. Yet, while the doll is not "black" anymore, it is a "dollbaby" thus taking us back to the idea of childhood present at the beginning of the poem (as well as in "Belsen").

There is also the possibility that the image of the "disremembered" black doll, through its assonance with "dismembered," could be a subtle allusion to the dolls tests that Doctors Kenneth and Mamie Clark performed during the late 1930s, for whom black children were rejecting black dolls as a sign of rejection of their own identity. This rejection was

interpreted as a result of segregation, thus becoming quite influential in the 1954 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. If we reconnect this image of the doll to the one we have encountered in “Belsen, Day of Liberation” we can also start seeing a pattern emerging in Hayden where the image of the doll is connected to a sense of familial identity (as well as one of childhood) that is then replaced by the image of the soldiers or, in this case, of the ancestors. Hayden uses the image of the doll (and the derivates “babydoll” and “dollbaby”) in at least three other poems: “A Ballad of Remembrance,”

> But the dance continued— now among metaphorical
> doors, coffee cups floating poised
> hysterias, decors of illusion; now among mazurka dolls
> offering death’s-heads
> of cocaine roses and real violets, (29-33)

in “Homage to the Empress of the Blues,”

> Because grey laths began somewhere to show from underneath
> torn hurdygurdy lithographs of dollfaced heaven;
> and because there were those who feared alarming fists of snow
> on the door and those who feared the riot-squad of statistics,
> She came out on the stage in ostrich feathers, beaded satin,
> and shone that smile on us and sang, (1-6)

and as the last word of the last poem of the series “Elegies for Paradise Valley,”

> I knew myself (precocious
> in the ways of guilt
> and secret pain)
> the devil’s own rag babydoll. (VIII, 13-16)

Looking at how the symbol of the doll has been used in all these poems, one can argue that its use as a symbol has evolved, or has eventually manifested itself clearly with the later poems. In fact, while the doll has been connected to either childhood or femininity, ultimately it has always also been connected to discourses of identity-searching. And in fact, in the last poem in chronological order, “Elegies for Paradise Valley,” the doll is finally

identified with the poetic voice himself, he who is trying to discover or rediscover his roots, his ancestry, and his community, as we will see in the following chapter.

"'Mystery Boy'" is not only about the search for one's identity. As we have seen, the narrator is also searching for a collective identity. This exploration of a collective past is also expressed at a meta-level through referencing the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, as a collective history of black past brought to us through referencing the past of black poetry. The influence of Dunbar in Hayden is evident in various poems of his, both at the level of form (such as in musical poems like "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home) but also at the level of theme (both, for instance, wrote numerous elegies to great historical figures in African American history). Furthermore, both poets share a similar story of attempting to reject the label of "African American Poet" (which for Dunbar meant writing poetry not only in dialect, but also in standard English or even in Irish dialect). In the case of "'Mystery Boy'," the poem is reminiscent of Dunbar's "The Mystery" in the sense that they articulate this search for an identity that can be communicated to the narrator only by others and that is withheld from them, denied. To be sure, Hayden's poem presents surrealist and symbolic images that are absent in Dunbar's "The Mystery," but both poems share, for instance, the fact that the search for this identity is connected to the presence of nature and both seem to present a sense of ominousness connected to their search.[63] In terms of imagery, "'Mystery

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[63] "The Mystery"
I was not; now I am—a few days hence
I shall not be; I fain would look before
And after, but can neither do; some Power
Or lack of power says "no" to all I would.
I stand upon a wide and sunless plain,
Nor chart nor steel to guide my steps aright.
Whene'er, o'ercoming fear, I dare to move,

Boy'" is also reminiscent of Dunbar's more gothic poems, such as "The Deserted Plantation" or "The Haunted Oak," where nature, just like in Hayden's poem, becomes personified. Thus, with "'Mystery Boy'" Hayden extends our historical framework through the evocation of symbols and landscapes of the African American cultural past, as well as with the more direct evocation of that cultural past through the exploration of its artistic representatives.

"The Ballad of Nat Turner" and "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley."

The third way in which Hayden's poetry talks about history is through its memorialization of historical figures and deeds. These figures can be public as well as private, and their deeds can be part of history books or simply part of the narrator's memory and consciousness. One thing that is certain is that Hayden's historical narrators are always interested in giving voice to African American history, whether public or private. Michael Harper wrote that Hayden's "search for kinfolk is the permanent condition of his poetry and his personality." ("Angle" 35) This is certainly the case when we consider Hayden's poems

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I grope without direction and by chance.
Some feign to hear a voice and feel a hand
That draws them ever upward thro' the gloom.
But I—I hear no voice and touch no hand,
Tho' oft thro' silence infinite I list,
And strain my hearing to supernal sounds;
Tho' oft thro' fateful darkness do I reach,
And stretch my hand to find that other hand.
I question of th' eternal bending skies
That seem to neighbor with the novice earth;
But they roll on, and daily shut their eyes
On me, as I one day shall do on them,
And tell me not the secret that I ask.
(from *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, 1913)

about the South as well as his biographical poems. The search for kinfolk is one of the driving elements, whether these are personal figures or historical and collective ones. If in "Belsen" we hear the story of an "unknown" little girl and in "Mystery Boy" the one of a "mystery boy," in the biographical poems we hear the stories of the classical figures of African American history, thus contributing to the creation of an African American "mythology."

If the "silent" witness is one of Hayden's strategies to talk about historical events, as we have seen with his southern poems or as we will see in the next chapter with "Middle Passage," the witness is, instead, given full voice in the biographical ones. This is the case for poems like "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley" or "The Ballad of Nat Turner," where the reader hears a most intimate version of Nat Turner. Other poems, such as "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz" give Malcolm X voice only in very few lines, while the rest of the poem constitutes a critical narration of his life given from a point of view that seems near the one of the subject, but that comes from a narrator who is not always in agreement with the ideas of the subject narrated.

For the poems about his favorite historical figures, Hayden seems to privilege the form of the long poem. "Rungate, Rungate," "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," "The Ballad of Nat Turner," and "John Brown," to name perhaps the most famous ones, are all long poems structured in multiple parts, with the exception of "The Ballad of Nat Turner" which is one single semi-long ballad. These poems seem to represent Hayden's celebration of his historical heritage, as well as constituting the heritage *he* is leaving to posterity.

When reading Hayden's historical biographical poems, the question arises as to whether these are meant to be a celebration of those figures or, rather, a historical commentary that

gives the historical actors a voice. As Fetrow explains, in the case of "The Ballad of Nat Turner,"

> Hayden […] provides psychological insight into history, implicitly accounting for Nat Turner's motivation on the basis of religious fanaticism. The poet objectively withholds explicit moral judgment or endorsement, but leaves no doubt of Turner's genuine belief in ordained mission. (95)

None of the person poems Hayden wrote seem to *celebrate* their main characters. Yet, the fact that there is a poem for them and about them is a celebration in and of itself. Thus Hayden is perhaps not celebrating the person as such, but he is celebrating history.

"The Ballad of Nat Turner" is one of Hayden's most iconic person poems. Published for the first time in 1962 in *A Ballad of Remembrance* [64] and then republished in 1966 in *Selected Poems,* and in 1975 in *Angle of Ascent,* it represents a fictional investigation of the historic character of Nat Turner. The poem is a dramatic monologue in the form of a ballad, composed of seventeen quasi-regular ballad stanzas.[65] Hayden defined the poem a "psychogram:" a poem that, as Fetrow argues, provides a "psychological profile" of the controversial figure of Nat Turner (94). The way Hayden achieves the representation of Turner's psyche is through the use of stream of consciousness. "The Ballad" presents us with the apparently unfiltered thoughts of Turner,[66] giving us access to his revelation. It is interesting that Hayden chose to narrate Turner's experience of his revelations, while

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[64] It was, therefore, published five years before William Styron's fictionalization of Nat Turner's *Confessions*, which was published in 1967.

[65] A ballad stanza is a quatrain made of two iambic fourteener where the second and fourth lines present slant rhymes or assonances.

[66] As various critics pointed out, including Charles T. Davis, Pontheolla Williams, and Constance J. Post, this is a fictional representation of Turner's psyche. It is, however, a fictional representation grounded in Hayden's thorough research on African American history that he conducted in the forties, when he was planning to write *The Black Spear*, an early volume that was never published.

completely omitting the story of Turner's insurrection. Initially this may appear to be an attempt to remember the figure without the "taint" of the insurrection, yet the poem is not necessarily heroicizing Turner. On the contrary, it is showing a dark and confused side of his personality, perhaps darker and more confused than it appears when reading his *Confessions.*

In this long stream of consciousness, dialogue is represented in indirect form. As literary scholar Constance J. Post points out, dialogue is one of the strategies through which Hayden heightens the tension in the poem (12). The tension is achieved because the dialogue is not a dialogue with another person, but with God or a form of spiritual power. Also, it is not always a bi-directional dialogue. When in stanzas two and four Nat Turner asks questions, he does not receive any answer:

> In scary night I wandered, praying,
>   Lord God my harshener,
> speak to me now or let me die;
>   speak, Lord, to this mourner. (5-8)
>
> Their belltongue bodies dead, their eyes
>   alive with the anger deep
> in my own heart. Is this the sign,
>   the sign forepromised to me? (13-16)

The answer comes only in stanza five, and it is an unsettling one:

> The spirits vanished. Afraid and lonely
>   I wandered on in blackness.
> Speak to me now or let me die.
>   Die, whispered the blackness. (17-20)

The last piece of dialogue happens in stanza nine, where Turner speaks to nature, and nature answers him, but only to echo his requests in a quasi mocking, quasi terrifying fashion:

> The fearful splendor of that warring.
>   Hide me, I cried to rock and bramble.

> Hide me, the rock, the bramble cried. …
> How tell you of that holy battle? (33-36)

Post further explains how the tension in the poem is heightened also through the repetition of "and" which is used eight times in the first nine stanzas, and twenty times in the following eight stanzas, in this way achieving the effect of "heap[ing] image upon image, accelerating the action" (12). I would add that the repetition of "and" also highlights the sense of religious and mystical fervor that characterizes Turner.

Repetition, however, is not only present with the repetition of "and" but is a constant throughout the poem. Already in the second line of the poem we have "And wandered wandered far" where the repetition of "wandered" doubles syllabically also the time we spend thinking about the action of wandering as well as expanding the length of the space he wandered to, making it "further." The word is then repeated in the first line of the second stanza and in the second line of the fifth stanza, thus characterizing the first five stanzas of the poem as the stanzas where Turner "wanders" in search of a vision and of an answer. As Pontheolla Williams posits, the first five stanzas "delineates the conditions of stress in the slave sub-society to which Turner reacts." (82). What Williams is referring to here, are the visions of the Ibo warriors hanging from trees, in stanzas three and four, a macabre representation of the lives of African enslaved people in the United States. What Williams leaves out, however, is the active role of Turner in engaging with this historical reality, which in the poem is represented through the repetition of the verb "wander" as well as by the use of gerunds. These not only convey a sense of actively engaging with historical circumstances, but they also, formally, provide that rhythm that expresses the fervor and ecstasy that Turner is experiencing.

Repetition continues throughout the poem. Particularly significant is the pattern of repetitions in stanza seven because they crystallize the main underlying theme of the poem, the contrast between light and darkness, which, as Hatcher explains, is one of Hayden's favorite symbologies:

> Sudden brightness clove the preying
> darkness, brightness that was
> itself a golden darkness, brightness
> so bright that it was darkness. (25-28)

Here the interplay and interconnectedness between darkness and brightness, which is both visual as well as thematic, achieves the result of conflating the two. In their violent encounter, brightness and darkness become one, and, through this play, darkness becomes just as positive a force as brightness is. Furthermore, the word "golden" in this stanza can be connected to the idea of repetition, but in this case it is not a repetition within the poem, but rather within Hayden's overall oeuvre. Golden is an adjective often used by Hayden, who uses it, for instance, in "Belsen, Day of Liberation," to describe the appearance of the soldiers coming to the rescue and, therefore, associating them to angelic figures, or in "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," where the word refers Betsy Smith's "golden smile," and in "Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridwan" where, as in the case of "The Ballad," the adjective is used to refer to a godly presence. Compare the two:

> Half-roused by golden knocking at
> the doors of consciousness. Energies
> like angels dance ("Bahá'u'lláh" 16-18)

Through these intertextual repetitions, Hayden creates cohesiveness within his oeuvre. He generates not only rhythm within the individual poems, but also meaning, via the repetition of words, symbols, and imagery, from one poem to the next, so that words acquire a potency

that they otherwise would not have. "Golden," for instance, in Nat Turner is less "godly" and divine when considered in isolation. It is, however, a symbol of divine intervention when considered in connection to "Belsen" or "Bahá'u'lláh."

According to Hatcher, "The Ballad" and other historical poems adopt what he calls an "elliptical storyline" (262). It is unclear what, according to Hatcher, is being elided, whether it is the lack of a clear narrative or whether it is parts of the narrative that Turner is giving us that are missing. What is certain, however, is that it is precisely the stream of consciousness nature of the poem that must necessarily involve elision, since it represents the unfiltered thinking process of Turner, in turn gives us access to his psychology. As Fetrow explains, the poem is a "revelation within a revelation" (94), so that by being given access to Turner's thoughts, his own revelation is revealed to us. This happens within a poetic structure that revolves around opposites, such as the opposition of light versus darkness or, as Fetrow further argued, through the more generic emphasis on contrast, which, for instance, opposes solitude in the first part of the poem, to messianic purpose in the second part (95).

The form of the poem, with its pursue of slant rhymes, assonances, and consonances between the second and fourth line of every stanza, as per ballad tradition, together with a choice of words that clearly belong to the realm of both folklore and religion, further contribute to our understanding of Turner as a mythical and mystical figure. He is not so much a hero, but a human who entered myth and history through the realm of the divine. According to Davis, in his historical poems, Hayden is concerned with "the transformation of slave to man, a transformation frequently touched with mystical overtones" (93). Davis further argues that Hayden's historical poems use the "negro folk tradition" as material (ibid). Harper wrote that Hayden's "experimentations with the ballad form have produced

singular achievements—*ballads in spirit* in the language, with dramatic tension and economy that adapt to his personal view of history" ("Angle" 35). Hence, not only the folk tradition becomes a source for Hayden (see for instance, his use of other folk elements, such as Raw Head and Bloody Bones, or, even more clearly, the poem "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home"), but Hayden's ballad, by virtue of the genre of the ballad itself, becomes part of the folk tradition.

"The Ballad" starts in *medias res*; the very first two words are "then fled" followed by an apostrophe to Turner's "brethren." The whole of the first stanza is about movement, it indicates the beginning of a journey. What the narrator is fleeing from are, ironically, a "wicked juba" and "curfews joys." By starting in the midst of things, the reader is thrust into the midst of events; the pace is therefore set by the very first line of the poem, and specifically by the very first word. The adverb "then" immediately establishes a temporal dimension to Turner's thoughts and it also establishes the pattern of action-succeeding-action, event after event, carried on by the already discussed incessant repetition of the conjunction "and." After the first five stanzas that narrate Turner's reflections on the society he wants to run away from (the slave society that enslaved him and that lynched peoples of African descent, represented by the vision of the hanging Ibo warriors), the poem takes a turn in stanzas six and seven. Here, it initially seems that, after Turner's prayers, a divine light breaks the darkness and initiates the revelation that led to the insurrection of Southampton, VA, narrated "by" Turner and reported in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

(1831).[67] From stanza eight to fifteen we are given Turner's revelation, characterized by mystic language and symbolic imagery of battle. It is interesting to note that Hayden sets up a "battle" also within the poem and the revelation itself, where imagery of light and darkness seem to fight each other. This tension is presented through a series of oxymoronic images, like "fearful splendor" or "angels at war," relentless repetition, and parataxis, as in stanza thirteen,

> Waver and fall, go streaking down
> into swamp water, and the water
> hissed and streamed and bubbled and locked
> shuddering shuddering over, (49-52)

where the conduplicatio of "shuddering shuddering" enhances the sense of fear and, at the same time, physically makes you shudder by having to repeat the /ʃ/ sounds followed by /d/ and /r/. The diacope of the word "angels" in stanza eight, which enhances the horror that the connection of images of angels to violence and war generates in the reader:

> And there were angels, their faces hidden
> from me, angels at war
> with one another, angels in dazzling
> combat. And oh the splendor. (25-28)

Hayden's virtuosity in this poem, thus, not only has the function of rendering the poem a formal masterpiece, but it enhances the reader's experience of Turner's religious fervor through the power of language and form that mimic those states of mind.

Many of the figures Hayden celebrates in his biographical poems are authors, in one way or another. From Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar to Frederick Douglass and

[67] I put the word "by" within quotation marks because in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, the narration is actually reported by Thomas R. Grey, and is therefore not coming directly from Turner. As with most slave narratives and confessions, there is therefore the element of external mediation and one needs to read carefully to find the true voice of the confessant.

even Nat Turner, all these characters made of narration and/or writing their way of commenting on themselves and their historical moment, thus leaving their mark into this world. By re-elaborating on their testimonies, or by celebrating them as men and women of letters, Hayden is not only contributing to the creation of an African American mythology, but he is also contributing to the creation of a canon of African American literature. He is also inscribing himself squarely within that same canon.

While in "The Ballad of Nat Turner," Hayden takes inspiration from *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and gives voice to a Turner that is similar to what Thomas Grey wants us to believe Turner used, in "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley," Hayden gives Wheatley the voice that many of Hayden's contemporary critics complained she did not have. Wheatley's original irony had not been lost on Hayden, a good reader of in-between-the-lines; what Hayden does is not so much re-invent Wheatley, but rather opens up and makes those pockets of irony already present in her poems visible, allowing Wheatley to speak as she would probably have liked to, had she not been in need of the authentication and authorization of white men to publish her work. In this respect, it could be said that both in Wheatley and Turner's cases, Hayden is ultimately giving those characters the chance to speak without the mediation, authentication, and intrusion of white males in their narrative choices. This is in spite of the fact that, in this case, it is Hayden who is "literally" mediating.

In "A Letter" Hayden recovers one of Wheatley's favorite genres, the epistle, and uses it to practically rewrite "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773). He conflates it with some of Wheatley's other most famous poems, such as "To the Right Honorable

William, Earl of Dartmouth" (1773). Published in 1978 in the first edition of *American Journal*, "A Letter" is the opening poem of the collection. It remains the opening poem also for the 1982 version. This, in and of itself, is a declaration that Hayden makes, in the last years of his life and of his career, with regards to his debt to his ancestors, thus committing them and their relevance to his readers' memory.

The poem is structured around stanzas that recall paragraphs in a letter, where the first line of each paragraph is indented. The poem is dated "London, 1773" yet, because there is no precise day, but only the year, the date calls attention to its own fictionality, its not being a "real" letter.[68] It opens with "Dear Obour" and ends with the simple signature "Phillis," thus continuing the epistolary illusion. While the stanzas are irregular, the poem seems nonetheless to follow the scheme of an at times irregular iambic tetrameter, where some of the lines actually become a pentameter. Like "The Ballad of Nat Turner," "A Letter" is a first person narrator poem, (another "psychogram"),[69] and another dramatic monologue.

For John Hatcher, the poem and its placement in the second edition of *American Journal* (1982) as the opening piece and as the poem that precedes "John Brown," provide one of the "two direct responses to injustice" (222) and "established the idea that evil seems fundamental to human society, though we could react to it in a variety of ways—with noble restraint or by overt warfare against injustice" (244). However, once we look at the actual text of the poem, we can see that the role that irony plays in it *is* tantamount to indirect

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[68] All of Wheatley's letters to Obour were precisely dated, with day, month, and year.

[69] This has been noted almost by every Hayden scholar who wrote about the poem, including John Hatcher (134), Christina Accomando (43), and Fred Fetrow (25).

warfare. As Fetrow argues, the poem is constructed around a play with irony: "its drama grows out of disparities between those ironies Wheatley notes and those that are lost on her, but not the reader" (129). Here Fetrow is referring to moments such as when our fictional Wheatley explains how she: "dined apart / like captive Royalty," which Fetrow argues are in contrast to the moments of intended irony, such as her comparison of her last crossing to England with her "first" one, as an enslaved little girl:

> Our crossing was without
> event. I could not help, at times,
> reflecting on that first—my Destined—
> voyage long ago (I yet
> have some remembrance of its Horrors)
> and marveling at God's ways. (2-7)

While Fetrow is right in highlighting the intentional irony of this stanza as well as the play between intentional and unintentional irony throughout the whole poem, what he fails to notice is how Hayden is, even in this respect, replicating Wheatley's own play with irony. Albeit more subtle, it was nonetheless there. Just like Hayden crafts her naiveté, so did she. As literary scholar Christina Accomando writes in *The Regulations of Robbers* (2001), "Wheatley probably was quite aware of the performance required in the documents and rhetoric that formed her poems" (38). Hayden, thus, replicates that awareness, making her irony not unintentional, but rather hidden, or covert. In Phillis Wheatley's poem "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth," for instance, the play between overt and hidden irony can be seen between Wheatley's overt comparison between Americans not longer having to "dread the iron chain" and the explanation of why she loves freedom, having been herself enslaved and "snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat." Yet, this is not the only level of irony Wheatley worked with. For instance, in the first stanza of the

poem, after describing Americans as “her race” she moves to the use of the “we” pronoun, thus inscribing herself at all effects into Americanness, and thus making her following ironic remarks even more pungent and layered. Not only had Wheatley suffered the “same” fate Americans had under British rule, but as an American herself, she is now made to suffer that fate from her fellow compatriots. Hayden parodies this aspect of Wheatley trying to write herself as American—she does so in numerous other poems, in the way just described as well as by appropriating western canonical poetic structures and references that she uses to express herself:

> Indeed, they were most kind, and spoke,
> moreover, of presenting me
> at Court (I thought of Pocahontas)—
> an Honor, to be sure, but one,
> I should, no doubts, as Patriot decline. (24-28)

While Hayden’s version of Wheatley sounds, at times, witty and humorous, the poem does not leave out the more dreary parts of Wheatley’s life and her status as a black enslaved. This, again, is achieved skillfully through the use of irony, where, for instance, she defines herself as “Captive Royalty” or as a “Cannibal Mockingbird,” or where she compares her unusual situation to the story of Pocahontas.

Many more are, of course, the references that Hayden adopts that take us on a historical journey into the life of Wheatley and into the history of the making of African American letters. For instance, his use of “O Sable Muse” connects his poem to Wheatley’s description of her race in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as “sable race.” Hayden’s use of borrowed language extends also to the letters that Wheatley had originally written to Obur

Tanner,[70] whom she calls her "sister" in many instances, word reported by Hayden in line 38 ("Sister, forgive th'intrusion of / my Sombreness—Nocturnal Mood"). In particular, Wheatley writes to Tanner a letter on October 30th, 1773, after her return from London, which echoes many of the things our fictional Wheatley writes in her letter. In particular, in the original letter, Wheatley describes the people she met in London in the following way: "the Friends I found there among Nobility and Gentry. Their Benevolent conduct towards me, the unexpected, and unmerited civility and Complaisance with which I was treated by all, fills me with astonishment, I can scarcely Realize it" (198). Hayden's letter echoes this passage in the stanza above mentioned as well as in the lines:

> Idyllic England! Alas, there is
> no Eden without its Serpent. Under
> the chiming Complaisance I hear him Hiss. (32-34)

Here we can see how Hayden literally borrows the word "Complaisance" from Wheatley's letter, but gives it a twist and uses it to describe the falsity of Wheatley's friends, calling out Wheatley's real or faked naïveté. One should also not forget Hayden's use of Wheatley's ironic and non ironic use of religious language and, overall, a use of eighteenth-century vocabulary and expressions, including the capitalization of certain nouns, that very well convey to the reader Wheatley's "original" voice.

The language of religion is used, as Wheatley did, in part because of Wheatley's own religiosity (she was very devout), but also, overtly, to highlight the hypocrisy behind Christianity through the juxtaposition of religious speech to elements connected to slavery.

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[70] In her first two letters to Tanner, Wheatley calls her "Arbour." From the third letter to the seventh (and last) she instead calls her "Obour."

For instance, the “Destined” voyage which leads the poetic voice to “marveling at God’s ways,” is also associating the voyage to her “remembrance of its Horrors,” line that is placed within parenthesis to further emphasize the contrast between the two: “—my Destined— / voyage long ago (I yet / have some remembrance of its Horrors).” In the following stanza, we can once again see the irony that emerges with the contrast between her indoctrination on Christian faith, connected to her life in Boston, and her inability to speak of her homeland, from where she was abducted when she was little and of which, therefore, she has no memory:

> Last evening, her Ladyship presented me
> to her illustrious Friends.
> I scarce could tell them anything
> of Africa, though much of Boston
> and my hope of Heaven. I read
> my latest Elegies to them. (8-13)

This set of oppositions continues from stanza to stanza through references to Christian imaginary, as with the references to Eden and the Serpent that, again, are juxtaposed to the image of the “Cannibal Mockingbird.” The poem ends with what our fictional Wheatley describes as a “droll” incident, where a young chimney sweeper, seeing the color of her skin, asks her whether she, too, swept chimneys. The episode is immediately followed by her departing words to her friend, which, while on the one hand mimic Wheatley’s religious references in her letters, also seem hyperbolic in the context of this letter: “I pray the Blessing of our Lord / and Saviour Jesus Christ be yours / Abundantly. In His Name, / Phillis.” The use of a capitalized “Abundantly” further calls attention to the hyperbolic nature of the stanza.

With these poems, Hayden is also deciding to re-write history, not only to reinterpret it. In "The Ballad" and in "A Letter," he is giving us the voices of Turner and Wheatley as unmediated. Their original "texts" were the product of white mediation and white authentication. As we have already seen, Turner's confessions were written, and therefore authenticated, by his lawyer, Thomas R. Gray; Wheatley's work, in order to be published, had to be examined (and she had to be examined too) by "the most respectable characters in Boston" (48), who had to decide whether or not she could have been the author of those poems. Their attestation became part of Wheatley's poetry book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), and it was printed right after her preface and after the attestation of her own master. Hence, by giving Turner and Wheatley a voice that is not prefaced, mediated, or authenticated by anyone, Hayden is rewriting history and filling those silences and gaps in the voices of these characters that were there because of the restrictions under which black writers had to work.

At the same time, however, Hayden is also making a commentary on his contemporary situation where black writers, as himself, also needed to be "authenticated" by his peers and colleagues. As Raymond Patterson writes in his homage to Hayden, "'A Letter from Phillis Wheatley' tempts us to see parallels between it and certain events in Hayden's own career, for example his role as the first [...] Black poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, and Phillis Wheatley's unique acceptance and celebrity in 18th century England and America" (96). What Patterson does not notice, or decides to not point out, is how the poem also tempts us to see how both Hayden and Wheatley were not considered "black enough" by some of Hayden's contemporaries, in particular from the Black Arts Movement. Famous are, for instance, Amiri Baraka's dismissal of Wheatley, comparing her to the Frankenstein's

monster (313), or Stephen Henderson's equal dismissal of her because her poems showed "self-hatred" (84). Many more are the people who dismissed Wheatley in the sixties, from the above cited to Addison Gayle, Dudley Randall, or Seymour Gross, who compared her to Uncle Tom. These dismissals continue to inform the understanding of Wheatley among much of the lay, non academic, black audience today. The same Henderson, among many others, also subtly criticized Hayden, saying that "some older writers, like Robert Hayden, felt that a writer's chief concern should be with the truth of all people everywhere" (25), when, instead, black writers should direct their work to black audiences.

If in "The Ballad" and "A Letter" Hayden uses the first person to rewrite history and to give voice to characters of African American history, in other poems, such as "John Brown," "Rungate, Rungate," or ""El-Hajj Malik El-Shabbazz," we can see how Hayden decides to narrate history from a third person, apparently neutral, narrative perspective. In this way he achieves what I believe to be a sense of solidity and reliability of the historical narration, maintaining a good balance between what are apparent personal voices and perspectives and more historicized and factual aspects of history. This allows him to move with much more freedom along the temporal historical axis and speak from the past ultimately providing his own, researched, studied, yet personal interpretation of African American history.

The fact that "A Letter" is set during a journey that Wheatley takes to England, perfectly situates the poem within *American Journal*, which culminates with "[American Journal]" and that is primarily concerned with ideas of movement, exploration, and memorialization. Just like "[American Journal]" memorializes the journey of an alien to the United States in a diary fashion, "A Letter" shows the same concerns and memorializes Wheatley's fictional, "unfiltered" voice, thoughts, and impressions. Other poems in the collection, such as

"Letter," "Ice Storm," and "from THE SNOW LAMP," seem to share this same concern with history, memorialization, and the various ways in which one can chronicle history.

Hayden makes the reader travel into history, but he also makes history itself travel and move and shift, disrupting traditional historical narratives by providing unfiltered voices to historical characters who in the past had their voices constrained. He makes these characters, and history itself, travel forward in time, to our day, both formally, for instance by mixing past and modern poetic dictions, as well as "physically," by bringing past voices and events into the twenty-first-century.

Chapter Four

"Voyage Through Death to Life Upon These Shores":

Poetry of Mourning.

> Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.[71]
> [Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien*, "Die erste Elegie" 7]
>
> It is the dead
> Not the living, who make the longest demands:
> We die for ever …
> [*Antigone* 59-61]

"Middle Passage"

"*Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy*": the first line of Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" is a promise. It promises a poem about human beings, different cultures, different languages, about hope and mercy. The promise is also one of irony: these are names of slave ships. The reader does not know that yet. The reader still hopes. The ending of the poem will return some of that hope. But to get there, the reader has to take a painful, excruciating journey into and through this poem, into and through the makings of American and Atlantic history.

"Middle Passage" is, possibly, Hayden's most famous poem. [72] It certainly has received the most scholarly and critical attention. Together with "Those Winter Sundays," it is the

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[71] Every angel is terrifying.

[72] The poem, in its initial version, was finished in 1943 and first published in *Phylon* in 1945. It was reprinted and revised in 1962 in *A Ballad of Remembrance,* in 1966 in *Selected Poems,* and in 1975 in *Angle of Ascent.*

most anthologized of his poems and, probably, one of the most anthologized African American poems altogether. This is, in part, due to the fact that "Middle Passage" situates Hayden as an African American poet. It is also a great poem. Jon Woodson argues that "Middle Passage" represents Hayden's experimentation with high modernism but that it too quickly recalls Eliot, Pound, and Crane without achieving that level of "superhistorical stance expressive of spiritual wholeness and a transcendence of the dualities and tautologies within which Hayden's poem remains marooned" (160).[73] Yet, it is precisely this lack of historical transcendence, this anchorage to history, which makes "Middle Passage" a very important poem within Hayden's canon and for African American literature altogether. This is true especially when we consider that it has become the springboard for many other poetic treatments of the theme, from Edward Kamau Brathwaite to Elizabeth Alexander and Clarence Major, as well as for the flurry of self-published poems on the internet on the same subject. From the end of the Civil War, up until 1944, when "Middle Passage" was first published, there are no substantial attempts by African American poets and prose writers to provide a portrayal of the Middle Passage, as the general literary trend was to focus on forgetting the past and dealing with the harsh historical realities of the time, as well as proving the inherent value of African American art.

[73] Brian Conniff, in "Answering the Waste Land: Robert Hayden and the Rise of the African American Poetic Sequence" gives a compelling analysis of how Hayden's take on Eliot and "The Waste Land" is only a point of departure and inspiration. Hayden challenges Eliot's western high modernism by "giving voice to his personal doubts about modernism's moral limitations" (490), by not monumentalizing Eliot's work, and "by drawing upon historical sources alien to Eliot's social world" the horror of which, when compared to "The Waste Land" "seem[s] timid and self indulgent" (493, 497). Conniff also credits Hayden with strongly contributing to the rise of what he calls the "African American poetic sequence."

According to Hayden himself, and as reported by numerous scholars,[74] Hayden wrote "Middle Passage" in an attempt to answer the call for a "poet [who] will rise to sing of the black spear" that Stephen Vincent Benét makes in *John Brown's Body* (1928), where he laments that he has "too white a heart" to do so himself (*Collected* 162).[75] "Middle Passage" is a poem about African American history. It is also a poem about mourning, displacement, narration, art, and irony and it seems to encompass all common understandings of mourning, melancholia, and nostalgia. As Brian Conniff argues, the historical research Hayden carried out on the Middle Passage as well as on "cultural schizophrenia" gave him the opportunity to "abandon the kind of psychological posturing—the inevitable blending of dreams and consciousness, self and other, world war and private neurosis Eliot's poetry had helped make fashionable" (496). This allowed him to face the physical and mental consequences of the slave trade from a historical and human standpoint. However, because sailors and traders are the ones reporting the feelings of the enslaved people, one needs to read in between the lines and against the grain. For instance, in the first journal entry, a sailor writes:

> 10 April 1800—
> Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
> their moaning is a prayer for death,
> ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.
> Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
> to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under. (Section I, 8-13)

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[74] Among these scholars, there are: Marcellus Blount in "A Dialogue of Poets: the Syndesis of W.B. Yeats and Robert Hayden" (28); Fred Fetrow in ""Middle Passage": Robert Hayden's Anti-Epic" (35); Pontheolla T. Williams in "A Ballad of Rememberance" (135).

[75] Among the scholar who cite this same passage and note this connection, there is Fred Fetrow in "'Middle Passage': Robert Hayden's Anti-Epic."

The unwilling "passengers" are moaning, starving themselves and committing suicide. Their behavior reaches the reader through two different levels of interpretation. The first one is the translator, the "linguist," who provides the meaning of the prayer. The second level of interpretation is the one of the sailor, who connects, even if indirectly, the meaning of the prayers to their suicidal behavior. The list of actions as well as psychological states ascribed to the "blacks rebellious," while reported in the same way in which the loss of cargo would be reported, acknowledges, however, their humanity. "Middle Passage" works with cultural references, intertextuality, and heteroglossia and it builds on the genre of the elegy while expanding our understanding of mourning, in order to show that not only Hayden works *within* the African American literary tradition, but that he also works transnationally, across time and space, in order to expand our historical and spatial horizons.

Today we are used to thinking of mourning and melancholia in psychoanalytical terms and, in particular, in the terms explained by Sigmund Freud in his famous treatise "Mourning and Melancholia."[76] However, it is important to remember that the terms

[76] Freud separates mourning into "normal mourning" and "melancholic mourning:" "mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, and ideal, and so on" (243). With the exception of the feature of the "disturbance of self regard," the mental features that distinguish melancholia are the same ones typical of mourning: "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interests in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity" (244).

The difference between melancholia and mourning for Freud seems to be that while melancholia "is related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness" (245) in the sense that the person may not be aware of who or what has been lost, mourning, instead, presupposes that the mourner is conscious of what has been lost (245). What Freud ultimately argues is that the melancholic has suffered "a loss in regard to his ego" as opposed to the loss of an object, as the mourner has (247). Jahan Ramazani contrasts Freud's conception of "normal" mourning with the idea of mourning expressed by modern elegists who "refuse the psychoanalytic ideal of therapeutic art" (*Poetry* 29). He further argues that Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia is too rigid and reduces it to a "matter of emphasis within mourning—while still allowing for the

melancholia, nostalgia, and mourning had a widespread usage and a medical meaning way before Freud's intervention in the early twentieth century. To be sure, Freud's differentiation between melancholia and mourning was and still is influential, especially in literary studies, but it cannot represent the only framework through which to understand these phenomena.

At the time of the slave trade, the use of the terms melancholia, or "fixed melancholia," was spread among abolitionists as well as among a few physicians involved in the trade. In her unpublished work, Carolyn Roberts mentions that melancholia, as understood in the eighteenth century covered the range of many potentially deadly "nervous diseases" and, therefore, it lacked a specific and set definition, such as the narrow one provided by Freud (7).[77] Within the slave trade, melancholia was often understood as being one of the main causes of death on board slave ships. In the legal deposition given to the British Parliament on occasion of the abolitionist debates of the second half of the eighteenth century, a surgeon named Isaac Wilson, who had operated on board the slave ship Elizabeth, clearly connected melancholia to half of the deaths of the enslaved people during the journey. Wilson pointed out that the cause of said melancholia was the forced displacement of these persons.[78] Describing the appearance of the prisoners upon their arrival on board the slave ship, Wilson testifies that "a gloomy pensiveness seemed to overcast their countenance"

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kind of 'melancholia' or 'depression' not occasioned by death" (ibid). Ramazani also argues that African American poets produce a "distinctly African American genre of melancholic mourning," which is what Langston Hughes describes as "'despondency' and 'hopeless weariness'" (135).

[77] Adrian López Denis explains that melancholia was originally considered as "the pathological result of an excess of black bile" (183). In the eighteenth century this explanation of melancholia was substituted by "mechanical and pneumatic" explanations of the disease (193).

[78] I would like to thank Carolyn Roberts for entrusting me with her unpublished work and for suggesting me to read the testimony of Isaac Wilson, among many other things.

(274). To this description, the questioning committee replied by asking "did this appearance of *melancholia* continue?" (ibid, emphasis mine), thus already naming as "melancholia" what was described as "gloomy pensiveness" and thus clearly establishing "melancholia" as a usable medical and legal term connected to the capture, imprisonment, and displacement of human beings.

During the course of his testimony, Wilson argues multiple times that melancholia was, in fact, the real cause of death, "in the proportion of two to one" of some of the prisoners (ibid). Among the symptoms of melancholia that Wilson lists are: "their endeavoring to make away with themselves" (286), and "lowness of spirit and despondency" which caused them to refuse nourishment. The result of this is that, "at length the stomach gets weak, and incapable of digesting their food: Fluxes and dysenteries ensue; and, from the weak and debilitated state of the patient, it soon carries him off" (287). Even the captain of the ship, Captain Smith, had told Wilson that "the mortality of the Slaves was owing to their thinking so much of their situation" (275). To the question whether it was the prospect of being put to work in the mines in Peru that affected the mind of the prisoners, Isaac Wilson, significantly, replied that the enslaved did not know what was their destination, and they would learn of it only after arriving first in Buenos Aires and then being moved to Lima (284).

Through answers like this one, Wilson is ultimately (even if perhaps unawares) claiming that melancholia, a sickness that could cause death, was in fact due to no other reason than captivity itself, and the forced removal of the prisoners from their homeland. Isaac Wilson's testimony is not only relevant because it establishes melancholia as a real sickness caused by captivity and displacement, but also, as Roberts argues, because his "diagnosis of

melancholia enunciated an ambivalent confirmation of African humanity, which refracted shared physiological capacities between Africans and Europeans" (3) thus exemplifying "a critical disruption to the medicalization of racial ideologies and biological explanations of racial inferiority" (ibid). Ultimately, the seventeenth and eighteenth-century understanding of nostalgia[79] and melancholia was enhanced by the slave medicine, which ascribed forced displacement as the cause of both pathologies, which were in themselves seen as closely interconnected.

What "Middle Passage" portrays is precisely what Doctor Isaac Wilson described as melancholia: "their endeavoring to make away with themselves," "lowness of spirit and

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[79] López Denis, in a fascinating examination of melancholia in relation to slavery, connects melancholia to nostalgia. The link of nostalgia to displacement is quite evident from the very onset of the use of the term itself, which was coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss doctor who wrote a dissertation titled: *Dissertatio Medica de Nostalgia, oder Heimwehe*. The etymology of the term derives from the modern/post-classical Latin translation of the German term "heimweh" (homesickness) and is composed by the word *nostos* (return home) and *algos* (pain). López Denis explains how Hofer medicalized the condition of nostalgia, and ascribed specific symptoms to it, such as "fever, anxiety […] loss of appetite, aversion to foreign customs, and a low tolerance from cruel jokes or even the slightest form of injustice" (182). All of these symptoms were caused by the loss of one's home or one's *patria.* As a nosological category, nostalgia is therefore connected to melancholia and other forms of "insanity" or "nervous diseases." López Denis, who looks at a treaty on slave medicine in the Caribbean, written by Francisco Barrera, a Spanish Surgeon who spent eighteen years practicing in the region, explains how Barrera documented the effects of nostalgia on the newly or recently arrived enslaved people from Africa (thus, like Roberts also argues, endowing them with a European sensibility and humanity, since nostalgia was a "European" disease, originally applied only to Swiss soldiers and then extended to Scottish and French ones (López Denis 182-3)). As López Denis writes: "a diagnosis of nostalgia involved an exploration of the clinical meanings of freedom, justice, and fraternal love" (183)). For Barrera, what he termed "nostalgia of the Negroes" was "a melancholic sadness that attacks them suddenly without delirium, furor or fever, born out of a strong aversion to anything that could distract them from their fantasies, unless it is the return to their beloved patria" (qtd. in López Denis 183). He considers the change of weather as well as the horrors of the Middle Passage the main causes of this nostalgia-induced melancholia which led to either suicide or death due to physical complications resulting from this mental condition (184). From this perspective, thus, melancholia is the physical and medical manifestation of nostalgia, the cause of which is, primarily, displacement and what accompanies its forced execution. It is interesting to note how Barrera, however, identifies also another type of melancholia that does not relate to nostalgia: nervous hypochondria, or Catalonian hypochondria, a second type of melancholia felt by Catalonian sailors and merchants, which "transformed unfulfilled dreams into physical pain." Basically it is the reverse side of the medal, since "slave nostalgia was the consequence of translating real suffering into chronic forms of patriotic love" (López Denis 193). In both cases, however, it is the slave trade that originates this form of mental and physical illness, a theory that reinforces abolitionist rhetoric for which slavery is an evil for both the enslaved and the enslaver.

despondency which caused them to refuse nourishment" etc. More importantly, precisely because the poem is reporting not the words of the prisoners but the ones of the sailor, the accounts of the suffering of the prisoners indirectly acknowledge their humanity. The fact that the linguist reports their prayers and that their prayers have a meaning grants that they are sentient beings. The fact that they "leaped with crazy laughter" also recognizes their humanity because it gives agency to their actions; they didn't just fall in the water, they "leaped," and they did so willingly. At the same time, however, their laughter was "crazy." The link between melancholia and mental illness, or "nervous diseases" is created through descriptions of madness.[80] For instance, this can be seen in the sailor's narration of how the prisoners were stowed on board the ship: "that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh / and sucked the blood" (Section I, 54-5).[81] The use of "mad" and "crazy" underlies the view that the traders had on the enslaved attempts at agency, often perceived as insanity.

In "Middle Passage," melancholia and nostalgia are transmitted through memory, which ultimately becomes the main driving force of the poem as well as being one of its main subjects. On the one hand, one of the functions of the poem is to memorialize and commit to

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[80] Interestingly, Hayden uses the keyword "mad" or "madness" in multiple poems: "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," "The Peacock Room," "Elegies for Paradise Valley," "Two Egyptian Portrait Masks," "John Brown," "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," "Ole Jim Crowe," and "Leaves in the Wind." Furthermore, one of his first poems was titled "Schizophrenia." This shows how the subjects of the brain and of mental illness (real or supposed) is something that Hayden's poetry confronts itself with, intentionally and periodically.

[81] The sentiment of nostalgia understood as longing for something that is now gone is also addressed by this poem from the point of view of the trader rather than the "passengers" who are, as already mentioned, voiceless and for whom the manifestation of nostalgia resides in the description of their suffering from melancholia. In the final quatrain of Part II, the trader, in fact, laments that:

> Twenty years a trader, twenty years,
> for there was wealth aplenty to be harvested
> from those black fields, and I'd be trading still
> but for the fevers melting down my bones.

literary history the story of the Middle Passage. In this light, the poems is considered historical; it reports the story of the slave trade and of the Middle Passage as well as the rebellion of the Amistad through the perspectives of some of the participants in those events. On the other hand, many of the various speakers of the poem are literally leaving a testimony, memorializing their lives and their roles in such events. The poem presents the journals of two sailors, the narration of a trader, and a legal deposition as ways of committing events to paper and to memory. To these "objective" sources, one must add the poetic voice itself and the various citations and re-elaboration of citations present in this long poem.

Memorialization, thus, is enacted in the poem in ways that mimic how people and societies remember and transmit culture. The first form of memorialization we encounter is the act of journaling. Journal entries appear in Section I, 8-13, 26-41. The journal entries have the ability to draw the reader in, eliciting a mixture of disdain and pity for the writers. The voice of the journalers is that of two different crewmembers, who are scared for their life. They report what happens in the slave ship from the position of observers. The fear for their lives makes them almost sympathetic to the reader. The first entry, however, does not elicit sympathy at all. On the contrary, it serves the function of throwing the reader into the horrors of the Middle Passage described from a perspective that seems merely indifferent to these horrors. It is only with the second entry that the reader perceives the fear that the sailor is experiencing. This confuses the reader who feels a sense of sympathy toward the sailor in spite of what is being narrated. Ultimately, thanks to the deferral of information, the reader lacks a clear moral compass.

> "8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick

> with fear, but writing eases fear a little
> since still my eyes can see these words take shape
> upon the page & so I write, as one
> would turn to exorcism. 4 days scudding,[82]
> but now the sea is calm again. Misfortune
> follows in our wake like sharks (our grinning
> tutelary gods). Which one of us
> has killed an albatross? A plague
> among our blacks—Ophthalmia: blindness—& we
> have jettisoned the blind to no avail.
> It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.
> Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes
> & there is blindness in the fo'c'sle
> & we must sail 3 weeks before we come
> to port." (Section I, 26-41)

By having a sailor write these words, the poem is, once again, underlying the concept of "humanity" of all the participants in the slave trade. Just like the enslaved people are assigned agency and humanity, so are the others, in spite of the reader's deepest wish to consider them as inhuman monsters. However, far from doing this in the hope of presenting the participants in the slave trade as potentially forgivable and not completely guilty, the poem, through this constant reminder that everybody involved in the trade is human, ultimately achieves the overall effect of depicting the slave trade as the most inhuman and monstrous of things. Because the voices of the speakers highlight their humanity, what they actually narrate highlight their inhuman *behaviors*. By juxtaposing their humanity to the horror of their actions, the poem reminds us how the monstrosity of the slave trade is man-made, and of how everyone has the potential to perpetrate this horror.

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[82] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED),* to scud is to "to sail or move swiftly on the water."

A close analysis of time and space shows how the poem, by talking about the slave ship, the Amistad case, the slave trade itself, and by throwing into question enlightenment ideas, is building a temporal bridge between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. This bridge, however, is also a spatial one, between the two sides of the Atlantic, thus making the history of African Americans relevant to a contemporary and global readership. This dilation of time and space, this reframing the temporal and geographical narratives, amounts to what Dimock's notion of "deep time," which allows Hayden the exploration of multiple narratives from different points of view.

> *Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:*
>
> Sails flashing to the winds like weapons,
> sharks following the moans the fever and the dying
> horror the corposant and the compass rose. (Section I, 1-4)

After the first line of invocation of the ships (at this point the reader still does not know these are the ironic names of slave ships),[83] the poem opens with "sails flashing."[84] The first tense the reader is introduced to is a present continuous. The first stanza[85] ends with a past

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[83] Christina Accomando argues that the names of the ships are ironic, just as ironic are the voices in the poem. She writes, "Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy [are] hopeful and religious words [which], followed by a colon, fail to prepare us for the horrific details that follow" (26). Fred Fetrow also argued that these names are purposefully chosen "to initiate the tone of cosmic irony which permeates the entire poem" because the names of the ships are real and historical names, and not a creation of the poet, who, instead uses them to "emphasize a situational irony" ("Middle Passage" 307).

[84] Both Vera Kutzinski and Eben Wood agree that the change from having Spanish ship names in the first line and English names twelve lines later imply an "increasing secularization of the language of slavery" (Kutzinski 124). Wood further argues that this shift also reflects "the displacement of Spanish by English as the dominant language of an imperialist world system" (213). It should be noted, however, that in the first line, only three out of the four names are in Spanish, while the fourth, "Mercy," is actually in English.

[85] I am here using the word stanza to identify the first clear block of text. I consider part of the first stanza also the catalogue of ships' names. I am aware that a division in stanzas is problematic with this poem, precisely because the poem seems structured to resist this type of construction. For this reason, whenever possible, I use line numbers instead.

tense, thus locating the events described in the past. Yet, because the first two verbs are in the present continuous tense, the stanza achieves the result of bringing the past to the present. The poem actualizes the past and comments on how the past keeps repeating itself.

> Middle Passage:
> voyage through death
> to life upon these shores.

Lines five to seven, which constitute the first of the three irregular refrains[86] of the poem, omit the verb altogether, so that we can read these lines as if the Middle Passage "was" a "voyage through death/to life upon these shores" or as if it still "is" so. Up until the third stanza, which opens with "'10 April 1800—", the reader is not provided with any temporal information. The only thing that up to that point anchors the reader to the past is the title of the poem itself. This tension between present and past is sustained throughout the first sixty-nine lines of the poem (the entire first section), where numerous voices and genres alternate.[87]

The second section, of only twenty-four lines, is presented to the reader as the unframed and, theoretically, unfiltered narration of a "retired" slave trader, who considered Africans as crops to be harvested from "those black fields" (Section II, 23). Hayden explains that this section is inspired by Theophilus Conneau's *Adventures of an African Slaver; being a true account of the life of Captain Theodore Canot, trader in gold, ivory & slaves on the coast of*

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[86] I call these irregular refrains because only line six, "voyage through death," represents a constant element of the refrain, while the other lines vary. Yet, because of the way they are visually structured and because of the moments in the poem in which they are placed—beginning, middle, and end—they still fulfill the function of a refrain, providing a sense of cohesiveness and rhythm to the overall poem.

[87] "Middle Passage" is highly characterized by heteroglossia as it employs in poetic form the genres of the journal, the hymn, drama, and the legal deposition.

Guinea, an 1854 journal reprinted in 1928 (*Collected* 168). The trader opens with: "Aye, lad, and I have seen those factories, / Gambia, Rio Pongo, Calabar" (Section II, 1-2). Here the apostrophe-like "Aye, lad," provides an oral quality to the section as well as an extemporaneous one. And while the events narrated by the trader are in the past, we hear his voice as if he was talking to us in the present, thus expanding historical time to our days.

The third and last section, which is also the longest with its eighty-four lines, brings on board, once more, various voices to narrate the history of the mutiny of the Amistad[88] and the emergence of Cinquez[89] as a heroic image within African American culture.

> Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,
> the dark ships move, the dark ships move,
> their bright ironical names
> like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;
> plough though thrashing glister toward
> fata morgana's lucent melting shore,

[88] "La Amistad" was a schooner sailing from Havana to Puerto Principe, Cuba, transporting 53 enslaved people just arrived in Cuba on a slave ship from Sierra Leone. Led by Joseph Cinqué, the enslaved revolted against the crew, killing captain and cook but sparing the Spanish navigator. They demanded to be brought back to Sierra Leone. The ship drifted along the coasts of America for two months, when it was finally seized by a U.S. Navy ship off the coast of Long Island, N.Y. The navy towed the ship to New London, CT and the mutineers were sent to jail in New Haven. The Spanish Embassy formally requested the prisoners to be returned to Cuba where they would undergo trial for the mutiny and murder of the ship's crew. U.S. President, Martin Van Buren, took the proslavery stance and was ready to agree to the Spanish demands. However, Lewis Tappan, a New England abolitionist, started a campaign to elicit public sympathy for the Africans, so that a first trial was held in Hartford's Federal Court in 1840. The federal judge ruled that while slavery might have been legal in Cuba, the slave trade was not. Thus, the Africans were to be considered kidnapped and therefore having the right to escape their captors in whichever way they could. One year later, the case was taken in front of the Supreme Court, and former U.S. President John Quincy Adam eloquently argued for the prisoners' freedom. The Supreme Court upheld the decision of the Hartford's federal court and the Africans were freed and returned to Sierra Leone in January 1842 thanks to the efforts of various donors. Given the history of slavery in the U.S. it is unsurprising that the Spanish considered this decision unfair and hypocritical (and tried to appeal it until the onset of the Civil War). For further reading on the rebellion of the Amistad, see Marcus Rediker's *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (2013), or Maggie Montesinos Sale's *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (1997), among others. For a fictional adaptation of the rebellion, Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave* (1852).

[89] Hayden adopts the same spelling that Rukeyser uses for the name of the leader of the mutiny, whose real name was Sengbe Pieh. Other commonly found spellings include Cinque and Cinqué.

weave toward new littorals that are
mirage and myth and actual shore. (Section III, 1-8)

As in Section I, the first stanza of this section also appears in the present tense and is spoken by what I identify as the poetic voice.[90] It is followed by the second irregular refrain ("voyage through death / voyage whose chartings are unloved"), and by a further intervention of the poetic voice, which is again communicating in the present tense.

A charnel stench, effluvium of living death
spreads outward from the hold,
where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,
lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement. (Section III, 11-14)

These first three stanzas are followed by three more stanzas, in italics, referencing Shakespeare's *The Tempest.*[91] These are, once again, in the present tense, and are followed by a very long stanza (51 lines) that represents the narration by a member of the crew, in direct quotes, of what happened during the mutiny. As in the first section, this part of the poem also uses the past tense, but is presented to us as unfiltered and unmediated, spoken in

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[90] The poetic voice is a descriptive and at the same time opinionated voice who seems to feel as if it has the authority of providing us with the description of the Middle Passage. It is what I identify as the poetic voice because it is the only voice in the poem that is not speaking through intertextual references or as in direct quotations either from a journal or from reported speech during trial/depositions. In the first section of the poem this voice appears immediately after the first line where the names of the ships are spoken, and it describes the Middle Passage. The language used by the poetic voice is lyrical and, in this way, it further differentiates itself from the other voices. It is the voice of art to be used to describe something horrific as the Middle Passage. According to Michael Paul Novak, this voice, which he defines only as the "fourth voice" in the poem, after the ones of the "three historical speakers" (the sailor, the slaver, and the crew member of the Amistad), is a voice that is "out of time, who through a series of refrain-like passages gives us the meaning of the poem" and controls it (283).

[91] Hayden writes that his revision of Shakespeare's passage is about "the change from human beings into things—objects, suffered by the enslaved African—the idea that slavery was a kind of death" (qtd. in Leonard 193). Leonard further explains that "the second version of the sea-change refrain reveals that the traders' vision emphasizes death while Hayden transforms the 'living' Africans into the nameless agents of a historical change. He also reveals how the transformation of the Africans is predicated on their interior lives, their resistance to being absorbed into a racist culture, a mysterious motivation analogous to the 'angle of ascent' of the artist figure and the transformation of Akhenaten" (193).

the now of the speaker. The poem concludes with two two-lines stanza spoken by the poetic voice, and the last two-lines stanza of the refrain, "Voyage through death / to life upon these shores."

The tension between past and present is, therefore, given to us by making the different voices speak in their present tense while, at the same time, the poem locates the reader in the past through the direct references the text makes to specific dates and specific historical events (10 April 1800, or the rebellion of the Amistad, which happened in July 1839). These two specifically timed events, together with other small references to other historical events, such as the narration of what happened on board the ship *Bella J*, ground the reader to a past that has been historicized. At the same time, it calls into question the way the past has been recorded as well as the validity of that narration itself and of its timeframe. In this sense, the poem deepens time, encapsulating multiple and diverse narratives.

The narration is provided to us by various voices and derives from different combined events, thus building a new narrative made of the sum of multiple narratives. All the voices we hear are the voices of the persons involved in (and benefiting from) the slave trade, and not from the enslaved people themselves, thus disrupting the expectations of the reader, who might expect to hear the voices of the enslaved in the work of an African American poet who writes about the Middle Passage. Yet, these voices still manage to make us sympathetic to the enslaved and not to the enslaver, showing how Hayden is working historical sources and narratives in order to highlight their "invisible" history, making of them, as for the witnesses explored in Chapter 2, "silent witnesses." In "Middle Passage," the silence of the witnesses gives voice to the perpetrators, who are made to speak about the horrors they are

committing. In doing so, they are held accountable for those horrors. The poem functions like a series of confessions.

John Hatcher argues that "we do not hear the voice of the African captives or their leader Cinquez; any indictment of the slavers comes from our own reaction to the powerful irony of the accusations of the slavers themselves" (139). It is, therefore, within these official voices that the reader finds a lucid depiction and a critique of the slave trade. For instance, in the speech of one of the two survivors of the Amistad, we can find the echo of the irony used by the poetic voice when discussing the Christian names of the ships. The witness describes his fellow crewmembers as "true Christian all" (Section III, 52), and highlights the hypocrisy of America's action with regards to the Amistad's case:

> We find it paradoxical indeed
> that you whose wealth, whose tree of liberty
> are rooted in the labor of your slaves
> should suffer the august John Quincy Adams
> to speak with so much passion of the right
> of chattel slaves to kill their lawful masters
> and with his Roman rhetoric weave a hero's
> garland for Cinquez. (Section III, 68-75)

Not only is the paradox highlighted in a straightforward fashion by the speaker, but it is also formally embedded in the verses, where, for instance, enjambment separates "tree of liberty" from the following line ending with "slaves," so that the paradox is visible to the eye. This is the case for almost every other line, where, for example, the enjambment on "right" brings attention to the opening of the next line, "of chattel slaves." Poetic fiction ultimately allows the reader to read against the grain of these historical events even when unintentionally doing so because, as Keith D. Leonard explains, "Hayden juxtaposes revised quotations from official historical documents, primarily those of slave traders, with each other in order

to articulate the third term of humane values that most critics ignore or treat only as cultural assimilation" (191). This happens through the way the poem is structured and thanks to what the poem chooses to report in terms of these "sources," which are given the status of representing "official" memory, either because they are "written" sources (the journal) or because they are "legal" sources (a deposition from the Amistad trial).

While it is unclear whether Hayden had access to the transcripts of the trial as all of his notes on the poem have been lost,[92] the fact that he does not give voice to the enslaved cannot simply be explained by this potential lack of sources that provided the "real" voices. If this were the case, the other witnesses should not have spoken either, nor should many of his other poems exist. As Accomando argues, the voices of the enslaved are provided to us precisely through the silences and the absences of the narration, which are glaring. For instance, she argues that in the second section, made of "six uninterrupted stanzas of equal length sandwiched between the typographical and moral chaos of the other sections [,] the very lack of interruption seems to be Hayden's method of questioning the slave trader's unquestioning stance" (30). Silence and omission, therefore, weigh just as much as the words on the page of "Middle Passage" and they actively contribute to the creation of the narrative.

Another way in which temporality is displaced and time is made fluid, is via intertextuality. In *A Ballad of Remembrance*, Hayden acknowledges with an endnote that his main historical source for "Middle Passage" has been Muriel Rukeyser's *Willard Gibbs*

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[92] Hayden mentions this in his 1972 interview with Paul McCluskey in *How I Write/1*(*Collected* 169). In the Hayden papers those records are indeed missing and there are only a couple of folders with some galley proofs of the latest versions of the poem.

(1942). The first chapter of the biography on Gibbs, titled “The ‘Amistad’ Mutiny,” provides a detailed account of the events involved in the mutiny of the Amistad and the trials that followed. Hayden acknowledges the book as his main source and he borrows some of the language and imagery that Rukeyser uses to describe the events. For example, he uses the word “rocking” to describe the ships (*Willard* 13); the lines “deponent further sayeth The Bella J / left the Guinea Coast / with a cargo of five hundred blacks and odd / for the barracoons of Florida,” parallel the very beginning of the chapter, which starts with “in the spring of 1839 a long, low, black schooner set sail from Havana with a cargo of assorted merchandise and fifty-three kidnapped Africans …” (16). Further borrowed language and parallels are lines such as “that there was hardly any room ‘tween decks’ (52) which resonates with “they had scarcely room to sit or lie down” in Willard (17), the use of the name “Cinquez” spelled with the final “z” present in both texts, or words like “forecastle,” which in the poem becomes “fo’c’sle” (39).

The comparison of the two texts highlights how Hayden made specific linguistic and stylistic choices in order to remain faithful to the text. At the same time he preserved his artistic prerogative, so that “the decks were covered with blood” (20) becomes “the decks were slippery” (141). Most importantly, one should also notice the change of perspective in the narration of events. In Rukeyser’s case this is overtly sympathetic towards the mutineers: “none of the Spaniards ever knew how the thing began; but the *freed Africans* were among them, swinging their machetes” (20 emphasis mine). Hayden, on the other hand, uses “murderous Africans” (134) to represent the point of view of the Spanish witnesses and survivors of the mutiny, and therefore marking them as unsympathetic voices.

In addition to *Willard Gibbs* and *Adventures of an African Slaver*, there are more texts from which Hayden borrows language and where he looks for poetic influences, which make this poem a primary locus of intertextuality within his corpus. Examples of these influences include the visual aspect of the three irregular refrains, with the cascading, indented lines, inspired by the ending of Hart Crane's "Ave Maria." Compare the two:

Hayden:

> Middle Passage:
>   voyage through death
>   to life upon these shores

Crane:

> And kingdoms
>   naked in the
>   trembling heart—
>   Te Deum laudamus
>   O Thou Hand of Fire

Crane also uses the words "compass" in "At Melville's Tomb" and "corposant" in "Ave Maria." Melville, too, uses "corposant" in chapter one hundred and nineteen of *Moby Dick; or, The Whale*, "'Look Aloft!' cried Starbuck. 'The corpusants! the corpusants!'" (379). From T.S. Eliot, aside from the obvious influence of "The Waste Land" in the overall form, structure, and spirit of "Middle Passage," Hayden also literally borrows words and images. From the "drifting wreckage" of "Four Quartets," we have "the slavers drifting, drifting" (43) of "Middle Passage;" from the lines "Vacant shuttles / Weave the wind" in "Gerontion" (30-1), Hayden borrows possibly the most striking poetic image of "Middle Passage," where ships are describes as "shuttles in the rocking loom of history," so that not only the word "shuttle" is used but also where the idea of weaving is adopted. Indeed, the whole sentence

seems to be a jigsaw puzzle of Eliot's words and images, since the use of "weave," as well as the use of "loom," also recalls the play "Murder in the Cathedral," where the Chorus says that "what is woven on the loom of fate / What is woven in the councils of princes / Is woven also in our veins, our brains" (208).

To these subtle borrowings, we can also add the more overt references, in modernist, puzzle-like style to "The Waste Land," Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and Samuel T. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," as well as to the hymn "Jesus Savior Pilot Me," the Sailor's Hymn.[93] These references cause the reader to go back and forth in time so that, once again, we do not have a definitive interpretative time frame, but we have the Atlantic Ocean as a chronotope of space and time in which Europe, Africa, and the Americas meet.[94]

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[93] References to *The Tempest* and to the hymn "Jesus Savior Pilot Me" are discussed by Fred Fetrow's *Robert Hayden* (310,315). The reference to Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" is discussed by Christina Accomando in her excellent book *The Regulations of Robbers: Legal Fictions of Slavery and Resistance*, (215, fn 1).

[94] One cannot talk about slave ships, time, space, and the Atlantic Ocean without first mentioning the idea of the ship as a chronotope, as postulated by Paul Gilroy, for whom the ship becomes the fulcrum of a space-time inseparable connection (or, as Bakhtin argues, the embodiment of "time as the fourth dimension of space" (84)). Gilroy describes the ship as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" which navigated "the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation [he] call[s] the black Atlantic" (4). Because ships "were the living means by which the points within [the] Atlantic world were joined," Gilroy argues that "they need to be thought of as cultural and political units" that ultimately were conducive to the creation of "political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production" (16). In and of itself the ship, in Gilroy's view, becomes the means to articulate the narratives of what is been left unsaid in the official narratives of the countries involved in the trade and a locus within which to investigate the relationship existing between modernization, industrialization, and the slave trade, providing "a different sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin" (17).

As well as being a chronotpe, the ship is also described by Foucault as one of the heterotopic spaces *par excellence*. Heterotopia, for Foucault, is a "counter-site, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted." It is a place "outside of all places" which "formulat[es] a break in time that becomes strangely permanent" (79), "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" becoming a microcosm, "smallest parcel of the world and then the totality of the world." Heterotopia also breaks with traditional time and creates "a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory." Foucault exemplifies heterotopia with, among other things, the "ship of fools" arguing that "not only [ships] visit different spaces, [they] reflects and incorporates them" and, with regards to the ship of fools in particular, argues that "the space

Time-wise, thus, "Middle Passage" displaces us because it presents us an event that in the reader's mind is located in the past as something that, instead, is still happening, something in the present tense. This implies that the poem either transports the reader into the past, or that the past has travelled to the present of the reader, or that the present is *still* like the past. There is a fluid and constant interchange between past and present that de-centers given historiography and history-as-past, hence disrupting the commonly accepted narrative of the Middle Passage, narrated mostly as an experience endured by enslaved Africans, who had no agency nor power once on board the ships. In particular, Hayden seems to insert himself in the Frazier-Herskovitz debate,[95] which was raging in the forties, deciding to depict enslaved Africans not only as victims but also as actors, endowed with intelligence and agency. Through intertextuality, the poem also becomes a repository for different *understandings* of culture. By juxtaposing the "high" culture of Shakespeare and Coleridge to the history of the slave trade, "Middle Passage" assigns a special and equal place of prominence to African-American history and culture.

Time is strongly connected to the notion of space. In the poem, time is often treated metonymically. The main space of the poem, its main setting, is, strictly speaking, the ship. The interaction between time and space in the poem can be seen clearly at the beginning of section III, lines one to eight. As Accomando explains, "slave ships weave the fabric of

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is a prison and an entrance." Ultimately, heterotopias can be seen as "liminal spaces" and as "sites for resistance to the dominant culture."

[95] In *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) Franklin Frazier argued, among many other things, that African Americans are, culturally speaking, Americans and that they lost traces of their African cultural past when bought to the Americans through the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage. Melville J. Herskovitz, in 1941, published *The Myth of the Negro Past,* where he substantially rejected Frazier's ideas and argued, instead, that African Americans retained traces of their African culture and traditions.

history" in a motion that imitates the shuttle threading cloth in a loom, going back and forth (26). This weaving of history generates a map of the slave trade as well as generating, within the ship itself, both a new construction of race as well as, as Gilroy argues, modernity itself, woven in the "new littorals" of the Americas, which, to be sure, are "mirage and myth," but which are also "actual shore," thus real, just like slavery and the slave trade.

In the poem the physicality of the ship is given to us in an almost Petrarchan fashion, through the use of metonymy. In the first stanza we are given the elements "Sails," "corposant," and "compass." Other words like "voyage," "shores," and "crew," not to mention the title of the poem and its repetition on the refrain, also provide additional elements for the identification of the ship as the physical setting of the poem in the first thirteen lines.[96] Corollary to the physical space of the ship are the "sharks" who appear in lines 3 and 13, and who are then described in lines 32 and 33 of Section I of the poem as "our grinning / tutelary gods." From line 14 there are a series of indirect references to the space of the ship, such as the "festering hold" in the stanza that alludes to Shakespeare's "Ariel song," from *The Tempest* (17-19) as well as the quoting for two lines of "Jesus Savior Pilot Me" (20-21). It is only on line 23, that we get the first real mentioning of a ship, through the use of the synonym "vessels," which, however, also leaves the notion of ship open to interpretation, since the word "vessel" can also be interpreted as a container as well

[96] It is, of course, to be noted, as previously done, that the very first line of the poem, "Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:" is also a catalogue of the names of slave ships, which is then repeated with four different names on line 14, "Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann." At this stage, however, the reader does not realize that these names indicate slave ships, and that it is the purpose of these two lines, which as Accomando indicates, to point out/underline the irony of the names in relation to the purpose of the ships. The poem clarifies this at the beginning of Part III, when the poetic voice comments that "their bright ironical names / like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth" (Part III, 3-4).

as a person “regarded as holding or embodying a particular quality” (“Vessel”). This is true especially when we consider that the stanza in which the word “vessel” is inserted is the one representing a prayer to the Lord that one of the sailors writes in a journal, so that vessel also acquires a religious metaphorical meaning.

The intersection of time and space in the chronotope of the ship is further indicated by the use of the jargon “8 bells” (Section I, 26), so that, through a temporal cue the narrator as well as the poet are locating us spatially on board a ship.[97] From this point onwards, references to the ship become clearer and clearer, especially since we are now hearing direct testimonies from sailors and a trader. Their words create a rich, detailed depiction of the slave ship, which emerges from the piecing together of the various direct and indirect references to it as well as through the different voices, which, according to Hatcher, are “combined […] in a symphonic structure of theme and variation” which produces “ immediacy, dramatic credibility, and a quality of objectivity” (262), and thus provides a variable point of view from which to understand and express time and space.

At the beginning of this section, I argued that the space of the poem is “strictly speaking” the ship. This is because space in the poem goes beyond the ship itself. It is deep and expansive; it extends to all the geographical markers of the Middle Passage. The other spaces in this poem are the two shores, of Africa and of the United States, the courthouse, and the ocean. These spaces are indicated through the use of some obvious words like “sea” (Section I, 21, 31, and Section III, 56), “shore/s” (Section I, 7, Section III, 6, 8, 60, 84)

[97] “Bells” are a nautical term to indicate the passing of time during a watch. The bell of the ship is struck eight times, every half hour, during a single watch.

(which is also an important word because it is present in the refrain), and “ship” (Section I, 65, Section III, 2, 55), as well as through some real geographical references, such as “America” (Section I, 15, Section III, 61), “Guinea Coast” (Section I, 45), “Florida” (Section I, 51), “Gambia, Rio Pongo,[98] Calabar”[99] (Section II, 2), “port of Príncipe”[100] (Section III, 29), “Africa” (Section III, 55), “La Havana” (Section III, 64-5), and “Cuba” (Section III, 76). These names provide a detailed map of the Middle Passage and of the slave trade. These spaces are not really described. We just know they are there, part of the setting, and the poem floats between one and the other without any apparent direction (almost as if to mimic the Amistad floating aimlessly in the ocean). In this way, they not only embody movement and the act of trading, but they also displace the reader so that the reading process consists of a series of attempts to orient and re-orient oneself in order to find one’s north. This coupling of spatial and extra-spatial references provides a full portrait of the slave trade that goes beyond its strict geographical existence and renders space and setting in the poem as complex entities.

In his endeavor to show the inextricable link existing between elegy and modern poetry, Jahan Ramazani argues that mourning is an essential part of modern poetry; after the gradual loss of traditional mourning rituals, an increased tabooization of death, and the mass deaths

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[98] The Rio Pongo is a river located in today’s Republic of Guinea. At the time of the slave trade, many slave factories were built in its estuary.

[99] Calabar is a coastal city in Nigeria. During the slave trade it was a major port for the purchasing of enslaved people.

[100] Puerto Príncipe, a locality in central Cuba today known as Camagüey, that once was the administrative and juridical capital of Central Cuba.

caused by the two World Wars and the industrialization of war, "poetry increasingly became an important cultural space for mourning the dead" (*Poetry* 1). The most consistent characteristic of Hayden's poetry is, possibly, its elegiac tone.[101]

Peter Sacks describes the elegy as a "dramatic relation between loss and figuration" (4). It combines the "mourning self" with "words of grief and fictions of consolation" (2) that are the result of a loss. Elegies, as Karen Weisman argues, are "at the heart of poetic mourning" (6). Diane Fuss suggests that the "poetic elegy [deploys] the powers of figurative language, like prosopopoeia, not merely to recognize the dead but also to bring them back to life. By speaking of love from the place of loss, elegists offer consolatory fictions that are no less powerful for being fictions" (7). Sacks argues that the modern elegy breaks with past conventions (303),[102] and uses the American elegy as an example of the modern elegy while, at the same time, a self-standing tradition. He formulates that American elegists, due to their "unfamiliar placement, or rather displacement," are excluded from the more traditional "settings of grief" as well as from the support that derives from a community; "If American poets have a greater tendency than other poets to write about the unique and isolated self, this isolation is particularly troubling in the case of the elegist." (313)

[101] Gary Zebrun places Hayden's poetry firmly within the American tradition of soul-searching thanks precisely to its elegiac tone and argues that Hayden belongs to a long line of American writers that starts with Hawthorn, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson, passes through Frost and Crane, and arrives at Lowell and Hayden: "they have sought the spiritual in the land and in the heart, they have insisted in keeping up the highest order of technical brilliance (the craft of writing), and they have not balked at the difficulty and darkness which threaten their searches" (26).

[102] According to Sacks, the elegy "has its roots in a dense matrix of rites and ceremonies, in light of which many elegiac conventions should be recognized as being not only aesthetically interesting forms but also the literary version of specific social and psychological practices" (2). Among these conventions, he lists, pastoral contextualization, the myth of vegetation deity, use of repetition and refrains, reiterated questions, outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, procession of mourners, movement from grief to consolation, and the use of traditional images of resurrection (ibid).

Sacks' interpretation of the American elegy, however, fails to take into account African American elegists. In Hayden's particular case, it is often not a single individual but a community to be mourned. In this way, he gives historical voice and representation to deaths that are not always considered "grievable." As Judith Butler argues,

> some lives are grievable, others are not. The differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (xiv-xv)

Here Butler discusses post 9/11 American strategies to obtain intelligence to fight or prevent terrorism, annihilating the "grievability" of the lives of the "enemy," who is then either killed in war or tortured to obtain information. The question she poses is, however, a very old one. It is, for instance, the underlying question of the plot of the *Antigone*, or, to bring it closer to the United States, it is the ignored question underlying the expansionist policies of the American colonies, which led to the unmourned death of many Native Americans, or it is, again, the ignored question underlying slavery and segregationist practices, in which the black body was not considered a "livable life" nor a "grievable death."

To underline the question of the "grievability" and "ungrievability" of the black body, the accounts by one of the sailors on board the *Bella J,* in the first section of the poem, provide the readers with a full insight into the horrors of the Middle Passage:

> That there was hardly any room 'tween-decks for half
> the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there;
> that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh
> and sucked the blood: (Section I, 52-55).

To complement the horror of this portrayal, it continues with:

> That when the Bo's'n[103] piped all hands, the flames
> spreading from starboard already were beyond
> control, the negroes howling and their chains
> entangled with the flames:
>
> That the burning blacks could not be reached,
> that the crew abandoned ship,
> leaving their shrieking negresses behind,
> that the Captain perished drunken with the wenches. (Section I, 60-67)

In the last section, the poetic voice further enhances the horror of the previous descriptions:

> A charnel stench, effluvium of living death
> spreads outward from the hold,
> where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,
> lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement. (Section III, 11-14)

The image provided in these lines is one of bodies piled together, entangled in chains, which, in turn, are "entangled with the flames." Because these words are spoken by a crewmember and not by one of the enslaved persons, one must wonder what has been left out of this horrific portrayal. The image of the "burning blacks" whom "could not be reached" thus becomes even more telling. The human becomes animal. The use of "burning blacks" underlines the objectification of the black body. The crewmember is not speaking about burning persons but "blacks" which, in this instance, seems to dehumanize the person and present it only as a random black body. The aspect of dehumanization is reinforced by the use of the words "sweltering cattle" and the verbs "howling" and "shrieking"; they describe sounds that on the one hand perfectly convey the horror of the situation, but that, on the other hand, convey the dehumanization and zoomorphization of the human being who is inhabiting that burning black body. This dehumanization is further re-stated in Section II of

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the poem, when the slave trader talks about harvesting "black fields." In this case, the enslaved people stolen from their lands are compared to a crop. In Section III, instead, the simile "swift as the puma's leap it came" (32) once again, even when creating a likeness to a majestic animal, serves as a reminder to the reader of the process of zoomorphization to which the enslaved on board the ship undergo in the eyes and minds of their captors.

However, there are also moments in which the text seems to subtly resist this process of dehumanization. One example of this is when in Section III, the witness speaking at the Amistad trial, as reported by Rukeyser (20), recounts how "Our men went down / before the murderous Africans" (40-1). Here, in the face of the act of rebellion and murder, the displaced black body is given again the dignity of being an actual person and is "re-placed" by reclaiming its Africanness. This subtle moment of resistance by the poem is again counterbalanced by the depiction of rebels as "apes" (50), contrasted to a slaughtered crew of "true Christians" (52), treated like "jetsam." It is telling that the poem uses the same word in the first section of the poem to describe the enslaved thrown overboard: "we have *jettisoned* the blind to no avail" (emphasis mine) thus, once again, showing how subtly the poem tries to align captors and captives in order to show the humanity of the captives in the face of their dehumanizing by their captors.

In this respect, we can say that Hayden's elegies call into question notions of whose lives are grievable and whose are not. The vast majority of his elegies are, in fact, written for African Americans, either famous or unknown, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frederick Douglass, Tiger Flower, Uncle Crip and the inhabitants of Paradise Valley. In and of itself, this may not come across as surprising; however, when considered within a body of poetry that is not only focused on African-American history or culture but that, rather, seems to

aspire to a more universal dimension, in line with Hayden's own beliefs as a Baha'i',[104] such a large body of elegies dedicated to African Americans make a clear statement as to the grievability of African American lives. "Middle Passage" should be considered not only as a historical poem, but also as an elegy where the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives is represented. Because, as Weisman argues, "the elegy throws into relief the inefficacy of language precisely when we need it most" (1), these deaths are not lamented in a traditional way, but it is the overall effect of the poem itself, and the affect it generates, that constitutes that lament, taking the reader on a journey into mourning not for a specific person but for a whole people.

Elegies are often connected to ideas of nationalism. They help create and cement those "imagined communities" that Benedict Anderson writes about. In this respect, "Middle Passage" as well as "Elegies for Paradise Valley," can be considered national elegies, representing a moment "of collective mourning that is often fundamental in the formation of group identity," showing "the recursive or echoic quality of poetic language that can foster the sense of simultaneous community" (Ramazani "Nationalism" 605). At the same time, however, Hayden's elegies defy ideas of nation, not only because mourning and grief can be considered universal (even though the processes through which we grieve are not), but especially because poetry, as a medium used to express grief, with its circulation and sets of reciprocal borrowings and influences, makes the poetic representation of mourning transpolitan. As Ramazani further argues, elegies "contracting transnational cultural spaces

[104] The Baha'i' faith believes in the spiritual unity of mankind. In this sense, it is a universalist religion; all religions ultimately come from the same God, and all humans are equal. Death is only a passage from one world to the next. In each world, the soul spiritually develops further. Mourning is seen as a phase in one's life.

of mourning, spilling grief across boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation, […] build structures of feeling that represent alternatives to modern nationalist efforts to bind mourning within the imagined community of compatriots" ("Nationalism" 612). From the national and transpolitan elegy of "Middle Passage," which marks the beginning of Hayden's career, we move to "Elegies for Paradise Valley," a series of elegies where the elements of mourning and nostalgia are closely linked in the re-evocation of a past local community and in the lamenting for the death of Uncle Crip as well as for a more private and more personal loss,.

"Elegies for Paradise Valley"

John Wright wrote that Hayden's "absorption with the past, especially with the black past, provided one axis of subject and theme for him—an absorption that brooked no lost Edens, no nostalgia, but which transformed archetype and artifact into a poetry of revelation" (905). "Elegies for Paradise Valley," a series of eight poems published in *American Journal* (1978), epitomizes Hayden's absorption with the past as described by Wright. Yet while the past is not romanticized, it does inspire a melancholic sense of mourning, provided to us by a narrator who explores his now gone community through the eyes of childhood memories. He provides a fragmented, personal, and biased narration of that past. Scholarly work done on the series of poems unanimously describes them as autobiographical. With "Elegies" Hayden explores the memories of his childhood spent in the neighborhood of Paradise Valley, in Detroit. They also represent the culmination of Hayden's process of memorialization of the place, a process which, according to Frank Rashid, he had already started in the 1930s (181).

Gary Zebrun argues that “Elegies” is a series of “ballad-like poems” where there are many voices speaking and remembering, and it represents “one of Hayden’s poems [that provides] a rich example of the numerous tonal variations present in his work, including humor, anger, uncertainty, and love” (25). As Wilburn Williams had previously done for “The Diver,” Zebrun, too, compares the Robert Hayden of “Elegies” to Melville arguing that “his characters seem at once real and mythic. His ability to shift into voices quickly and effortlessly might remind a reader of some of the dramatic scenes in Moby Dick, in which Melville has created a flurry of believable voices: Ishmael, Queequeg, Pip, Starbuck, and Ahab, all about to speak on the deck of the Pequod” (25). For most of the other critics, however, the narrator in “Elegies” is only one, a persona who speaks from the intimate perspective of the first person. Robert Stepto writes that Hayden represents a post-modernist voice which answers the call for a new order, the “post-apprenticeship/post-hibernation condition” (471) advocated by Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. According to Stepto, “Elegies” “provides a splendid example of a mature […] voice re-embracing both bloodline and adopted kin” (476), as well as illuminating “the ties between kinfolk who are bound as well to place. In this way, Hayden’s ‘Paradise Valley’ is a historical field—a culture’s magic circle” (ibid). Stepto is therefore highlighting how even a “private” moment in Hayden’s poetry contributes to our understanding of the history of a community, peopled with “the voices that inhabit the poet’s memory” but that there are also the voices of “neighbors and other adopted kin” (477). A portrait of American urban life in the ghetto of the thirties, Hayden’s Paradise Valley “is a landscape outside of those definitions of history—and, hence, of historical fields—created by others” (480) and therefore represents Hayden’s own way of making history. According to Hatcher, “Elegies” together with all the other poems

which explore Hayden's recollections of Paradise Valley, such as "Free Fantasia: Tiger Flowers," "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," "The Rabbi," "Summertime and the Living . . . ," "The Whipping," and "Those Winter Sundays," among others, "portray a purposeful contemplation of the past aimed at resolving major questions: what was so vital about that era? What is the origin of the persona's emotional outlook, his sense of guilt, his quest for a meaningful identity?" (265) Pontheolla Williams seems to provide an indirect response to Hatcher's questions by arguing, in line with what she argues in other parts of her analysis of Hayden's poetry, that "Elegies" represents another locus in which the poet, through the use of a persona and of symbolic and cryptic lines, explores his sexuality and, in particular, his homoerotic desires (167).

What has been left unexplored in the exegesis of "Elegies," is the role of the poems in exemplifying how the aesthetics of Hayden's poetry revolve around the concept of the "alien." Most importantly, the elegiac nature of the poem has also been often overlooked. "Elegies" address grief and mourning in both classical and modern ways. Just like in many of the other poems in *American Journal*, and in all of Hayden's travel poetry, "Elegies" reflects on the question what it is to be or to feel an alien. "An Inference of Mexico," "The Islands" or "[American Journal]," for instance, accomplished this exploration through the means of a direct confrontation with the other and through the means of physical travel itself. "Elegies," on the other hand, (like "'Mystery Boy'"), does so through a confrontation with the past, with the memories of childhood, anchored to the specific geographical location of Detroit's Paradise Valley. Even within the past, then, geography has a meaning and is relevant to the reconstruction of history and of the persona's identity because it embodies a history. As Hatcher points out, "though a character study, [the poems] rely

heavily on setting" (255). Yet, in spite of the fact that the title grounds us in some spatially defined location, the text remains quite vague as to the actual description of this specific location.

What, instead, we do get is a good sense of its *social* landscape. "Elegies" is clearly set in a northern ghetto-type environment, as the first two lines of the first poem show. Here, the urban landscape is illustrated synesthetically through a synecdoche: "My shared bedroom's window / opened on alley stench," where the stench stands in for the visual representation of the alley. At the same time, this synesthesia is also a metonymy because the poem does not look at place *qua* place, but at place *qua* people. What a place represents is, ultimately, people and their stories.

As in "Middle Passage," "Elegies" is concerned with remembering and mourning a community that has now disappeared. The people part of this past community are presented to the reader in more or less depth; some of them are given a voice; others are represented in traditional elegiac fashion, with an *ubi sunt* in the fifth poem of the series. As Rashid explains in his detailed study of Hayden's poems set in Detroit and Paradise Valley, Hayden conjointly uses the traditions of the elegy and of the blues to "resurrect" the characters that populated that neighborhood and Hayden's past. By using these traditions, he is able to portray Paradise Valley as lost or a "vanished place" that is to be mourned through the elegy, as well as a vibrant community. The "richness and humor" (184) of this community is given to us through the resurrection of the characters that populated Paradise Valley, in line with the tradition of the blues, which contains in themselves the element of potential hope, or at least "a way to […] mollify the sadness" (181).

The characters resurrected in “Elegies” are very diverse, ranging from Uncle Crip, the connecting thread of the poems, Madame Artelia, the clairvoyant who gives voice to dead Uncle Crip, the sixteen inhabitants of the valley evoked in the fifth section, to the Gypsies, represented as a counterpart to the black community. All of these characters, together with many of the protagonists of the other poems in *American Journal*, such as “The Ragman,” “The Prisoners,” “The Tattooed Man,” Jamaica Cynthie, “John Brown,” and the unnamed alien of “[American Journal],”share the trait of being alien. Frank Rashid writes, all the characters in “Elegies” “have strategies for dealing with dissatisfaction and defeat. Laughter, sex, dance, music, alcohol and drugs figure in the battle against poverty, madness, alienation. All have ways of being or attempting to be ‘other’” (209). Uncle Crip—whose nickname already contains within itself the seed of difference, since his real name was Uncle Henry— appears for the first time in the third poem. The first two poems, instead, function as introductions to the environment of Paradise Valley and, by proxy, to its inhabitants.

> I
> My shared bedroom’s window
> opened on alley stench.
> A Junkie died in maggots there.
> I saw his body shoved into a van.
> I saw the hatred for our kind
> glistening like tears
> in the policemen’s eyes.
>
> II
> No place for Pestalozzi’s
> fiorelli. No time of starched
> and ironed innocence. Godfearing
> elders, even Godless drifters, tried
> as best they could to shelter
> us. Rats fighting in their walls.

The idea of difference can be seen in the fifth line of the first poem, where the speaker specifically identifies himself and the inhabitants of the neighborhood as "our kind" and already connects the concept of otherness to one of hatred, through the wonderful simile that makes the feeling of hatred glisten "like tears." Moreover, he further establishes that this hatred for the "other," which in this case is represented by the African American community, is perpetrated not only at a personal level but at institutional and structural levels too, through the use of the figure of the policemen.

The second poem reinforces the image of desolation and desperation presented in the first as well as strengthening the idea that the inhabitants of the neighborhood are aliens within the larger society. This is done by invoking the early Nineteenth-Century Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi,[105] whose philosophy revolved around the idea of inclusion; all children deserved the same educational opportunities. These should be provided through the "whole-child" approach, which meant that every aspect of a child needed to be developed through education, from the hands to the head. The poems claim that the children of Paradise Valley will not receive the rich and balanced education that other American children are receiving. The education the children receive is, instead, in the hands

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[105] The meaning of Hayden's reference to Pestalozzi might be undermined by Hayden's association of it with the word "fiorelli." No critic, to my knowledge, has addressed the meaning of the word. Pontheolla Williams limits herself to explaining who Pestalozzi was, and gives an exegesis to the line similar to mine, but she also leaves out "fiorelli." Because it is in lowercase, it may not be a person's name. Michael Harper, in an interview simply says "as Hayden says in his 'Elegies for Paradise Valley,' 'no time for Pestalozzi's fiorelli.' So who was Pestalozzi, and what is fiorelli? Dictionaries and Google will begin the search," but he does not give us any further explanation. As Professor Sollors suggested, it is possible that "fiorelli" is a reference to Tiberio Fiorillo, a Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan actor who created the character of Scaramouche in the commedia dell'arte. Scaramouche is defined as an "unscrupulous and unreliable servant. His affinity for intrigue often landed him in difficult situations, yet he always managed to extricate himself, usually leaving an innocent bystander as his victim" ("scaramouche"). If Hayden was referring to the figure of Scaramouche, it would mean that the phrase stands for "Pestalozzi's clown" and would, therefore, imply also a critique of superimposed educational methods for the poor, such as the ones tried by Pestalozzi.

of the elders who "tried / as best they could to shelter / us" but who, in spite of their efforts, remain "rats fighting in their walls," powerless. It is after this last line of the second poem that Uncle Crip is introduced, and thus associated to one of those elders who protected and educated the children.

Sections IV and VII introduce in the already chaotic atmosphere of the poem characters and environments at the juncture of nomadism, periphery, rootedness, and tradition.

> Whom now do you guide, Madam Artelia?
> Who nowadays can summon you to speak
> from the spirit place your ghostly home
> of the oh-riental wonders there—
> of the fate, luck, surprises, gifts
>
> awaiting us out here? Oh, Madam,
> part Seminole and confidante
> (" Born with a veil over my face")
> of all our dead, how clearly you
> materialize before the eye
>
> of memory— your AfroIndian features,
> Gypsy dress, your silver crucifix
> and manycolored beads. I see
> again your waitingroom, with its wax
> bouquets, its plaster Jesus of the Sacred Heart.
>
> I watch blue smoke of incense curl
> from a Buddha's lap as I wait with Ma
> and Auntie among your nervous clients.
> You greet us, smiling, lay your hand
> in blessing on my head, then lead (Section IV, 1-20)

Madam Artelia is an extension of Aunt Jemima, who is the series' most developed female character and who seems to function as an archetype for all the "alien" females in his oeuvre. She is a composite of ethnicities and cultures, "part Seminole" with "AfroIndian features, / Gypsy dresses," a "silver crucifix," "manycolored beads," "Jesus of the Sacred Heart," and a "Buddha." Madame Artelia was "born with a veil over my face," a caul, a sign

of future psychic abilities. The reference to the veil, however, cannot but remind the reader also of W.E.B Du Bois concept of the "veil." Being born with a veil ultimately is like being born "behind the veil." The abilities of a psychic are not that different from the ones Du Bois ascribes to African Americans: both have access to and can see two worlds.

Her being dressed like a gypsy connects her to the gypsies of Section VII. But she is also connected to the various circus and sideshow characters present in Hayden's work through the fact that she is a performer. Her performance lies in her psychic abilities, and in this sense she is not different from Mysteria, one of Aunt Jemima's roles. This connection is further strengthened by the use of "oh-riental wonders" in line four, which can be compared to Mysteria's "Mystic East." As we will explore later, Artelia performs, and in so doing provides a connection between the living and the dead. This connection is not only performed inside her tent, for the speaker's mom and aunt, but also on the page. Her role is one of a character in the poem, who is connecting the reader of the page to the deads of Paradise Valley.

The use of the word "wax" in this section and of "waxwork" in Section III is a call to notice the ephemerality of life as well as its veneer. Waxwork is not the real Uncle Crip. At the same time, wax melts in addition to changing shape and can be molded. In this sense, it is similar to the relation between life, death, and mourning which "Elegies" explore.

Section VII provides another portrait of "aliens;" what the poetic voice defines as "aliens among aliens." These aliens are the "gypsies:"

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

> Their queen was dark as Cleopatra
> in the Negro History Book. Their king's
> sinister arrogance flashed fire
> like the diamonds on his dirty hands.
>
> Quite suddenly he was dead,
> his tribe clamoring in grief.
> They take on bad as Colored Folks,
> Uncle Crip allowed. Die like us too.
>
> Zingaros: Tzigeune: Gitanos: Gypsies:
> pornographers of gaudy otherness:
> aliens among the alien: thieves,
> carriers of sickness: like us like us.

The four quatrains present us with a series of common stereotypes of gypsies coupled with some of the poetic voice's personal memories of them. The section also gives a sense of a community within a community. The gypsies are defined as a "tribe clamoring in grief" at the death of their king. They, too, mourn for their loss in the way in which the poetic voice mourns for the loss of his community, of which, however, they were part.

The connection between gypsies and the other inhabitants of Paradise Valley is initially brought to us by the words of Uncle Crip who realizes that "they take on bad as Colored Folls" and "die like us too." This is not a universalist claim. Crip is not saying the whole world dies in the same way and that we all suffer in the same way. He is saying that "aliens" die and grieve in the same way. The idea of this connection is also what concludes the section: "like us like us" where the repetition, as it is often the case in Hayden, strengthens the meaning of what is being repeated. In this particular case, the meaning is of likeness. Repeating the same words twice in identical fashion enhances the idea of likeness because the two sets of words are identical too, just like the gypsies are the same as the "Colored Folks." At the same time, also repeated is the term gypsy: "Zingaros: Tzigeune: Gitanos:

Gypsies:" (13). This adnominatio serves the purpose of calling attention to the multiple faces and, at the same time, the immutability of identity politics. However the gypsies may or might have been called historically, whether in Hungarian, Spanish, French, or English, they have remained aliens. At the same time, the repetition of their name also highlights the repeated and long lasting historical fascination with them.

Section VII, and the last quatrain in particular, also highlight Hayden's investment in questions of otherness. Like Madame Artelia, the gypsies in these lines can also be considered part of Hayden's "circus" characters, whose lives are lived at the intersection of history and spectacle. In this case, the gypsies are defined as "pornographers of gaudy otherness." The adjective "gaudy," in particular, with its meaning of "brilliantly fine or gay, highly ornate, showy" as well as, "excessively or glaringly showy, tastelessly gay or fine" ("gaudy"), recalls the "lowbrow" aspect of circus spectacles. Also interesting is the use of the word "pornographers," which, again, highlights the elements of the spectacularization of otherness. Furthermore, "pornography" is defined as the "explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activities in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate *erotic rather than aesthetic feelings*" ("pornography" emphasis mine). The use of the word pornography, thus, talks about the "consumption" of otherness, a connecting thread in Hayden's poetry, concerned with the spectacularization of alterity through the use of "freak" figures, black bodies, and, now, the gypsies, another minority.

In one of the early drafts of the poem, Hayden refers to silent film actress Pola Negri:[106] "Once a Gypsy woman peered out / at us from those floral curtains – Pola Negri / spying from the mystery mummy-case—" (Appendix III).

Figure 5: "spying from the mystery mummy-case": scene from *Die Augen der Mumie Ma*, 1918. Taken from Youtube, September 20, 2015.

Once again, this reference shows how Hayden works visually and how his poetry is ultimately often ekphrastic. While Pola Negri's image disappears from the final, published draft, its essence remains because the essence of "peering" remains through the use of the word "pornographers." Gypsies are a pornographic spectacle, one that is peered at because, like pornography, otherness is both exoticized and eroticized. Through the interplay between

[106] Pola Negri (1897-1987), was a Polish-born silent movie actress very famous in the United States, especially after she signed up with Paramount in the early 1920s. In this poem, Hayden is referencing the silent movie *The Eyes of the Mummy Ma* (*Die Augen der Mumie Ma*) produced in 1918. However, because of the topic of this section of the poem, he might have conflated into his imaginary also the movie *Gypsy Blood* (*Carmen*), also produced in 1918 but released in the United States only in 1921, where Negri plays the role of Carmen, a gypsy.

form and content, therefore, Hayden is representing the Other from an insider’s as well as an outsider's point of view, reproducing, in this way, the mechanics of othering and being othered at play in both his travel poetry and his circus poetry.

As their title suggests, the eight poems represent a series of elegies that elegizes different people with different strategies. Through the *Ubi Sunt* of the fifth section, for instance, Hayden elegizes the death and disappearance of specific inhabitants of Paradise Valley, who, however, in their specificity are also types, and therefore represent both their own death, as well as the demise of the entire Paradise Valley community. You have Christopher, who is the “sad queen of night,” or Ray, “who cursing crossed the color line.” You also have “Belle the classy dresser,” or “stagestruck” Nora. There are also specific anecdotes that put individual lives in high relief, such as “Iola, who so loved to dance / she left her sickbed one last time to whirl / in silver at The Palace till she fell,” or Jim, “Watusi prince and Good Old Boy / who with a joke went off to fight in France.” Thanks to this mix of typecasting and high-relieving, Hayden is bringing back to life and, at the same time, elegizing an entire community. The communal elegiac nature of the *Ubi Sunt* is given, in particular, by the last line of the two stanzas of eleven lines each, “let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell,” which makes clear that what we are elegizing is not only the death of one person, but of an entire world, vanished and dead.

The sense of death and vanishing is accompanied by the need for remembering. This recalling and reliving makes it so that the narrator, while clearly being always the same, changes his voice once in a while, as he seems to return to the moments of his youth. These changes in voice coincide with the more personal memories, when the narrator is sharing not

only events but also his feelings. And this happens when the sections have Uncle Crip as a subject.

III
Waxwork Uncle Henry
(murdered Uncle Crip)
lay among floral pieces
in the front room where
the Christmas tree had stood.

Mister Hong of the
Chinese Lantern (there
Auntie as waitress queened it
nights) brought freesias, wept
beside the coffin.

Beautiful, our neighbors
murmured; he would be proud.
Is it mahogany?
Mahogany—I'd heard
the victrola voice of

dead Bert Williams
talk-sing that word as macabre
music played, chilling
me. Uncle Crip
had laughed and laughed.

Uncle Crip is introduced to the reader at the moment of his funeral, so that every subsequent mentioning of him is framed by the notion that he has already died, murdered (even though we are not told who murdered him and how he was murdered). In death he becomes a "waxwork" who simply seems to occupy the space previously occupied by a Christmas tree. However, in death, Uncle Crip also provides the occasion for a communal gathering and furnishes the reader with a glimpse of another aspect of the life in Paradise Valley, a life in which neighbors gather to celebrate the death of a loved one.

According to Sacks, the modern elegy "questions the conventions and idealizing ceremonies of the elegy as a genre" (303). Ramazani explains that the modern elegy is not written to provide consolation, but rather to indulge in melancholic mourning, as well as opposing this by refusing to give in to straightforward melancholia; Uncle Crip's funeral is portrayed in a quasi-comical tone, achieved through the comments of the neighbors on the mahogany casket. The enjambment of the first line of the third stanza, "Beautiful, our neighbors / murmured" also contributes in adding a positive image of the collectivity of Paradise Valley, as the first line can be read simply as an attestation of the beauty of the neighbors.

In "City Limits, Village Values," Toni Morrison claims that

> contemporary Black writers seem to view urban life as lovable only when the ancestor is there. The worst thing that can happen in a city is that the ancestor becomes merely a parent or an adult and is thereby seen as a betrayer—one who has abandoned his traditional role of advisor with a strong connection to the past. (40)

"Elegies" are concerned with the community living in Paradise Valley and not with the spatial aspect of the place, of which we get only a glimpse in the first section and which is not reminisced with any sense of nostalgia. In this way Hayden's poetry anticipates Morrison's argument with regards to the relationship between ancestors and the space of the city or of the village. Uncle Crip and the other inhabitants of the district are what make this city environment as something memorable and positive for the narrator of the poems. In particular, Uncle Crip seems to have the function of the ancestor, with "the traditional role of advisor" and the "strong connection to the past." In his death he is, after all, the person who brings together the inhabitants of the neighborhood and, through his presence in and out

of these eight elegies, he also functions as a center for the poems and as a guide for the navigation and remembering of the community.

Marcellus Blount, who ascribes to Paul Laurence Dunbar the beginning of a tradition of African American elegies, in line with Morrison also argues that in African American elegies "the individual comes to stand for a specific community" so that "these meditations on the dead enact an emotional and ideological relationship to the living" ("Robert Hayden" 241). He further argues that "part of the patterns of figuration at work in the African American elegy depend on viewing familial relations as model for what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would characterize as the 'beloved community'" (242). Thus, we can see how Hayden's elegies participate both in this act of remembering and recovering of a community, as well as in the building and imagining of such community.

After the description of his funeral, in section III, Crip reappears briefly in section IV, a section in which we are introduced to Madame Artelia, who, just like Uncle Crip, represents one of those ancestors who, in this case, is literally keeping the connection between past and present alive, as she is a medium. As such she now "materialize[s] before the eye / of memory" so that the speaker can recall an event in his youth, when he accompanied his aunt and mother to see Madame Artelia so that they could get in contact with Uncle Crip. The words spoken by Crip through Artelia, "Happy yes I am happy here," and "dying's not death. / Do not grieve," are what initiates a moment of irreverence in the poem: "Didn't sound a bit like Crip, Ma snapped." "Elegies," therefore, not only become a place where it is possible to revere and memorialize the dead, but also a literary space where an honest conversation can be had with them, to the point of criticizing them.

Uncle Crip returns in the last three sections of "Elegies." In particular, sections VI and VIII are possibly the two most personal sections of the whole series, the ones in which we hear the almost confessional and child-like voice of the persona. Both sections open with similar, but not identical lines: "Of death. Of loving too" in section VI and "Of death, of loving," in section VIII. The coupling of death and love introduces the reader to the heart of these elegies, the remembering and lamenting the loss of a loved one. As Fetrow aptly notes, "'Elegies' is ultimately a personal poem rather than a cultural one" (*Robert Hayden* 136). Section VI, therefore, throws the reader into a private memory of the narrator, a memory that talks about yearnings:

VI
Of death. Of loving too:
Oh sweet sweet jellyroll:
so the sinful hymned it while
the churchfolk loured.

I scrounged for crumbs:
I yearned to touch the choirlady's hair,
I wanted Uncle Crip

to kiss me, but he danced
with me instead;
we Balled-the-Jack[107]
to Jellyroll

Morton's brimstone
piano on the phonograph,
laughing, shaking the gasolier
a later stillness dimmed.

[107] "to ball the Jack" has different meanings, from gambling everything in one single game, to dancing and having a good time. In this particular case, the poetic voice danced to the sound of Jelly Roll Morton (Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe, 1890-1941), one of the first and most influential Jazz players from New Orleans.

The use of half-rhymes, assonances, and repetition in the first stanza seem to present the reader with a more immature, almost childish voice, than the voice we heard before. Slowly, this young voice finds the courage to confess, but not before prefacing his confession with the confession of a less "sinful" yearning, the yearning to touch the hair of the choir lady. The sentence "I wanted Uncle Crip / to kiss me" is split, with an enjambment that takes the sentence across stanzas, as if to mask it, to confuse the reader, put some distance between the admission of the desire and the specification of what it is that is desired. Following the confession dealt to the reader, the poem moves quickly on to the narration of what actually happened, as opposed to what the narrator wished for, thus submerging again that confessional language of yearning. That same language comes back in stanza VIII where, however, desire becomes clearly associated with sin and the punishment that sin entails.

VIII
Of death, of loving,
of sin and hellfire too.
Unsaved, old Christians
gossiped; pitched

from the gambling table—
Lord have mercy on
his wicked soul—
face foremost into hell.

We'd dance there, Uncle
Crip and I,
for though I spoke
my pieces well in Sunday School

I knew myself (precocious
in the ways of guilt
and secret pain)
the devil's own rag babydoll.

In stanzas three and four of this section we can see the younger voice of personal recollections and confessions returning, confessing his sin, desires, and hypocrisy: "I spoke / my pieces well in Sunday school." Yet, this same young voice ends the whole series of the "Elegies" with another act of irreverence and criticism of the dead, so that Uncle Crip becomes "the devil" and the narrator his "own rag babydoll.[108]"

In "Elegies" we have seen how Hayden plays with the genre of the elegy in ways that both make him conform to the traditional elegy, such as the use of the *Ubi Sunt*, as well as in ways that conform to the modern elegy, such as the sense of mockery and irreverence. At the same time, however, "Elegies" also show us a specific type of elegy that escapes from the classic definitions of elegy such as the one provided by Peter Sacks. "Elegies" are concerned with community and personal mourning, a characteristic that is, instead, present in the African American elegy, thus making of Hayden one of its rightful representatives.

"The Peacock Room"

Another poem that exemplifies Hayden's use of the genre of the elegy is "The Peacock Room" ("The Peacock Room"), a complex poem that combines mourning with a reflection on art, life, and the role of the artist. The person elegized in the poem was a famous painter and friend of Hayden, Besty Graves Reyneau. Classifying the poem as an elegy, however, should not trick the reader into believing that "The Peacock Room" is only about mourning and loss. As for most great elegies (think, for instance, of Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*),

[108] The use of the word "babydoll" is in line with Hayden's use of images of dolls in previous poems. For instance, in "Mystery Boy," as analyzed in the previous chapter, we can see how the doll stands in for a sense of family and familiar relations as well as for a sense of ominousness and negative connotation. So in "Mystery Boy" we have a "disremembered doll" which assonates with "dismembered" and in "Elegies" the "babydoll" is the "devil's own."

mourning and loss are simply the occasion for much bigger and broader narratives and questions. “The Peacock Room” can be considered Hayden’s poetic statement and declaration. It encapsulates the characteristic themes of Hayden’s poetry: art, beauty, horror, history, death, memory, longing, folklore, etc. and it sums up his quest for formal and thematic beauty as well as his critique of aestheticizing practices,[109] “triste metaphor[s]” that obscure life’s horrors and obfuscate history.

The Peacock Room was first published in 1971 in *Concerning Poetry*,[110] then inserted in *The Night Blooming Cereus* (1973), and republished in 1975 in *Angle of Ascent*. Quite surprisingly, considering the beauty and excellence of the poem, “The Peacock Room” has not received too much critical reception. There are only a handful of articles about the poem, and no article discusses it exclusively or in a sustained fashion; it inevitably found more critical space in the monograph dedicated to Hayden by John Hatcher, who discusses “The Peacock Room” and its various drafts at length. Fetrow and Williams also comment on it, but in a less in-depth fashion.

The poem is composed of six regular-looking stanzas of nine lines each. While the lines are all of different lengths, “The Peacock Room” still maintains a rhythm, both visual and sonorous, which is given visually by the indentation of every third line and sonorously, in particular, by the relentless enjambment. Thematically, as Hatcher argues, the poem is

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[109] I make a distinction between the word “aestheticizing” and the word “aesthetics.” When talking about “aestheticizing,” I refer to those practices for which beauty is used to obscure and obfuscate reality. For instance, in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* the beauty of the novel narrative structure and language helps to mask the horror underlying the story. With the word “aesthetics,” instead, I refer to the discipline that looks at aesthetic properties of art and life, of which “beauty” is part.

[110] *Concerning Poetry* 2 (Fall, 1971): 58-61.

divided “into six stanzas, each representing more-or-less a complete thought in the persona’s pattern of mental associations” (294). After the opening question, the stanza starts from the persona’s personal recollections of childhood that being in the Peacock Room generate. In the second stanza, the persona’s thoughts go in the direction of historical events and the relationship between the room and a larger understanding of history. In the third stanza we read the history of the room itself and the story behind its creation. In the fourth and fifth stanzas we have the recollection of the dead friend Betsy Graves Reyneau. Finally, in the last stanza, the poem comes full circle and asks the questions” “What is art? / What is life? / What is the Peacock Room?” and provides the beginning of a potential answer.

There seem to be two speakers in the poem, both using the “I.” The first speaker is the persona, the second speaker is Betsy Graves Reyneau. Her voice appears only momentarily in the fourth stanza, where we read “*When I turned twelve, / they gave me for a birthday gift / a party in the Peacock Room*.” This shift between voices is announced by the use of italics, yet, because of its suddenness and brevity, the reader is displaced by the unforeseen shift in perspective and point of view and is forced to go back and re-read the poem to understand how it plays with pronouns and voices.

As in much of Hayden’s poetry, one of the more prominent features here is setting. According to Leonard Lutwack, “poetry transforms place by making it serve subjective and imaginistic needs” (18) and, especially after Eliot, it becomes “more allegorical than substantial – poetic symbolism” (16). A discussion of the setting in this poem, is not only important because “the poet’s space must be capable of arousing feelings and becoming the vehicle of meanings” (27), but also because details of the history of the room, both in terms

of its creation and in terms of its use, are present in the poem where they are used as starting points to discuss much broader themes.

"The Peacock Room" is set up as an ekphrastic poem, its title directly referencing a work of art, James McNeill Whistler's *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*. According to art historian Linda Merrill, the room, originally located at 49 Prince's Gate, London, was commissioned to architect Thomas Jeckyll (1827-1881) by Frederick Richard Leyland (1831-1892), a shipping magnate from Liverpool, to use as a space to exhibit and keep his collection of porcelain from China. Jeckyll started decorating the room with leather and latticework for the shelves. In April 1876 Leyland and Jeckyll consulted with James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), who was already decorating the entrance hall of the house, about the color with which to paint the doors and shutters.

Figure 6: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61

The room also already housed Whistler's painting *La Princesse du pays de la porcelain* (1863-65).

Figure 7: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61

Left alone during the summer in Leyland's house, and now fully in charge of the room because Jeckyll had become ill and blind, Whistler, proceeded to work on the entire room, including the gilding of the shelving and the painting of golden peacocks on the window shutters. Leyland unexpectedly returned in October 1876. He refused to pay the two-thousand pounds that Whistler asked for the work and agreed to pay only half of that amount. Moreover, he paid Whistler not in guineas, but in pounds.[111] Whistler conceded at these conditions in order to be allowed in the room to finish his work. It is at that point that Whistler painted the final piece of the room, the mural of two battling peacocks that he titled "Art and Money: or, the Story of the Room."

Figure 8: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61

[111] Merrill explains that this is important because artists of the time were usually paid in guineas, which were worth 21 shillings; while a pound was only worth 20 shillings, thus further reducing the amount that Leyland had decided to pay to Whistler (15).

In the mural, the artist is the peacock on the left, identifiable by its silver crest that recalls the artist's white hair. Leyland is the peacock on the right, identified by the silver shillings that he had refused to pay to Leyland, which lay scattered at its feet (ibid).

After Leyland's death (he never changed the room and left it as Whistler had), the room passed into the hands of different owners and was, in the end, purchased by Charles Lang Freer, who brought the room to his house on Ferry Avenue in Detroit. The room was finally moved to Washington, D.C. in 1919, after Freer's death, to be placed in Freer's gallery of art and revealed to the public in 1923 (16).[112]

This background information is significant because the poetic voice questions the role of art; the story of the room as well as the room itself describe the conflict between art and life and art and money. The history of the making of the setting becomes, therefore, just as valuable as the setting itself and it becomes the springboard for asking questions and reflecting on the makings of history.

The poem opens with the lines:

> Ars Longa   Which is crueler
> Vita Brevis   life or art?

These lines introduce the poem as a reflection of the role of art and of the artist, in particular with relation to life. The history of the making of the room is one about art as well as life,

[112] Whistler wrote a famous letter to Leyland, where, among other things, he wrote: "it is positively sickening to think that I should have labored to build up that exquisite Peacock Room for such a man to live in! You speak of your 'public position before the World' and apparently forget that the World only knows you as the possessor of that work they have all admired, and whose price you refused to pay!" (MacDonald 02589). In another letter, Whistler wrote: "The work, just created, *alone remains* the fact - and that it happened in the house of this one or that one is merely the anecdote - so that in some future dull Vassari [sic] you also may go down to posterity, like the man who paid Corregio [sic] in pennies!" (MacDonald 02575).

and in particular one's livelihood and the price that art should have. The intersection between the economic theme (as a tangible aspect of life that is not only spiritual and made of art, but practical too) and the artistic one, represented in the room itself in the main painting with the peacocks trampling the gold coins, is represented in the poem through the description of that same scene, as well as through the use of the word "gold." More in general, it is represented through the poem's overall continuous shifting between personal memories that deal with the spiritual aspects of life and reflections on the world and politics. It presents a critique of the world's materialism as well as, at the same time, stating how the two cannot be made apart, at least not in life.

While, as argued by Lutwack, modernist literature did away with the idea of the house as "a significant place in the writing of our time" (quoted in Wolf 53) and that modernist writing, as argued by Wolf, privileged "fragmentation and loss" (53) without the safety, unity, and comfort of the house, Hayden returns to the house in "The Peacock Room," but limits it to one room, thus combining both the modernist idea of fragmentation, as well as choosing a solid spatial point from which to start his larger reflections on the world: thus the house, and the room in particular, function as a microcosms. The room as a spatial unit is familiar in Hayden's poetry. Multiple are the poems set in one single room. For instance, "As My Blood was Drawn," "The Night Blooming Cereus," "Monet's Waterlilies," among them. Hayden uses the space of the room to explore personal insights. His rooms do not have the "cozy" dimension that houses often provide and, instead, allow him to focus on a dimension of solitude, highlighting pain and discomfort, perfectly fitting for the themes of elegies.

There is another space that is present in “The Peacock Room,” even if not visible. It is Eden, which is evoked through the image of the peacock. The understanding of the space of the room as Eden informs the readers’ understanding of that space as well as expanding the spatial and temporal framework of the poem itself. This sensation is reinforced by the descriptions of the colors of gold and blue that decorate the room. More in general, setting in the poem is evoked through a series of quick brush strokes that locate the reader solidly in the space of the Peacock Room. The second stanza is where the room is described. This is done more in terms of the significance of the room than in terms of the room itself. The room is “exotic, fin de siècle, unreal / and beautiful” and it is a “triste metaphor.” The room is then further described through a quasi-synecdoche where it becomes a “vision chambered in gold / and spanish leather, lyric space.”

By virtue of its title and setting, the poem tricks us into believing that it is giving us a realistic description of the room. However, the space of the room is described through the eyes of history; the story behind the room colors its description. For instance, we don’t get an objective description of the peacocks painted in the wall, but we get a description of them in the act of “*in fury* trampling coins of gold” (emphasis mine), so that,

> […] As in a dream
> I see the crazed young man.
>
> He shudders in a corner, shields
> his face in terror of
> the perfect malice of those claws. (26-30)

The poem is, therefore, not describing but, rather, presenting us with a slice of three-dimensional life that is anchored both in the past and in the present of the persona. The beginning of stanza three aptly starts with the line “Environment as ornament” thus

underlining how space itself is ornamental; it is what space represents and the history that it embodies that are the foundation of what space really is important for. Significantly, a closer description of the decorations of the room are given to us when these decorations lose their status as decorations *qua* decorations, but become alive and take part in a story of their own. In stanzas four and five, the setting momentarily becomes alive: the peacocks, which are the main element that the poem uses to describe setting, flutter down spreading their tails to conceal the cadaver of Betsy. Stanza six begins with "the birds resumed their splendored pose" and continues with the description of *La Princesse du pays de la porcelain*. In this way, "The Peacock Room" assigns multiple layers and dimensions to art, which first becomes alive through the descent into reality of the peacocks, and then becomes a layered element of representation over and inside another representation: we have the Peacock Room, which is a room but it is also a work of art because it has been decorated by Whistler; the room also contains within itself another work of art by the same artist. Yet, while providing a historical portrait of the room through its spatial description, the persona also reminds us that "history scorns the vision chambered in gold / and Spanish leather," thus referring both to the materials used to build the room itself, but also calling for a refusal of parergon effects in historical narrations, and apparently asking for an unembellished historical "truth."

We find this shift between aestheticizing and de-aestheticizing practices regularly in almost every stanza.[113] The most conspicuous of these shifts happens in the transition

[113] For instance, in the first stanza we pass from visualizing "the glow of a lamp shaped like a rose" to discover that the lamp is there to keep "Raw-Head-And-Bloody-Bones away."

between stanzas four and five, where, after hearing from Betsy's voice how she had been gifted with a birthday party in the Peacock Room, it is surrealistically revealed to us how

> the peacocks flutter down,
> their spread tails concealing her,
>   then folding, drooping to reveal
> her eyeless, old—Med School
> cadaver, flesh-object
>   pickled in formaldehyde
> who was an artist, compassionate,
> clear-eyed. Who was beloved friend.
> No more. No more. (37-45)

Betsy Graves Reyneau was a Detroit-born painter and friend of Hayden, famous for depicting a series of portraits of famous African American people, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Paul Robeson. The poem, thus, which begins with the question "which is crueler, art or life?" is not only a speculative investigation of that question, but a grounded exploration of the relation between art and life when the life of the artist ends, as is the case with Betsy Graves Reyneau. At the same time, that same question is, in and of itself, an illusion, since it does not find a resolution in the poem. The ending of the poem breaks the illusion of receiving an answer by presenting us with more questions while, simultaneously, tricking us into believing that, after all, there is some hope for an answer:

> The birds resume their splendored pose.
> And Whistler's portrait of
>   a tycoon's daughter gleams
> like imagined flowers. What is art?
> What is life?
>   What the Peacock Room?
> Rose-leaves and ashes drift
> its portals, gently spinning toward
>   a bronze Bodishattva's ancient smile. (46-54)

The space of the Peacock Room, hence, becomes a functional symbol of the conflictual relationship between art and life, which can be seen in the history of its inception and in the painting and decorations themselves.

Formally, the irregular and rhythmic layout of the lines, the long hyphenated names (such as “Raw-Head-And-Bloody-Bones”), the use of French words (“fin the siècle,” “triste,” “connoisseur,” etc.) as well as the mentioning of decorations in the poem itself, (“the lamp shaped like a rose,” and “Satiric arabesque of gold”) create an overarching ornamental effect. This should be added to the continuous recalling of the theme of deception and illusion through the use of words and lines like “mocking,” “the vision chambered in gold,” “environment as ornament,” “give the lie,” and “imagined,” which is used in the first and the last stanza. This self-reflexivity exposes the illusion and the engineering that went behind the creation of the poem and calls attention to the architectural structure of “The Peacock Room.”

The poem moves beyond the meta-theme of setting and the story of the Peacock Room. Thematically it ranges from history and war to art, life, death, and friendship. One of its dominant themes is history and historical narration. As for the poems analyzed in Chapter Two, history here has a personal and a collective dimension. It is a global, macro-history, and a private, personal, micro-history. The personal dimension of history is provided in the very first stanza, when the persona speaks about “thoughts in the Peacock Room, / where briefly I shelter” and then proceeds to create an atmosphere of childhood’s recollections, “(remembered or imagined?).” That atmosphere is provided by “the glow” “of the lamp

shaped like a rose" that the persona's mother would light at night "to keep / Raw-Head-And-Bloody-Bones away."[114]

This initial atmosphere of a suffused and intimate glow is what illuminates the second stanza, which, instead, takes us into a whole different historical dimension:

> Exotic, fin de siècle, unreal
> and beautiful the Peacock Room.
>   Triste metaphor.
> Hiroshima   Watts   My Lai.
> Thus history scorns
>   the vision chambered in gold
> and Spanish leather, lyric space;
> rebukes, yet cannot give the lie
>   to what is havened here. (10-18)

Here, illuminated by the glow of the lamp, coming to light are the tragedies of history that are exemplified in the poem by the events of Hiroshima,[115] Watts,[116] and My Lai.[117] It is the space of the room, its beauty and, in particular, its artistic value, which highlight the tragic element in these events. As in an initial answer to the opening question, the persona is

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[114] This is a reference to a nursery rhyme as well as a folklore/horror story. In the folk story, Raw Head was conjured up by his lady friend Old Betty after he had been unjustly killed. The conjured spirit repossessed his head and his bloody bones and killed the hunter who had killed him and his horse. The nursery rhyme, instead, describes Raw Head as taking away naughty children from their homes to never return them. Noteworthy is that this is ultimately a story about two friends, Old Betty and Raw Head, separated by death, and that the female protagonist of the poem shares the same name as the woman to whom the poem is dedicated to, *Betsy* Graves Reyneau.

[115] Reference to the Japanese city of Hiroshima, bombed with the atomic bomb by the Americans on August 6th 1945.

[116] Reference to the neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles, CA, and in particular to what have come to be known as the Watts Riots of 1965, ultimately set off by the confrontation between a policeman and a young driver, but due to the *de facto* urban segregation and housing discrimination as well as constant police brutality present in L.A.

[117] This is a reference to the My Lai massacre, when, during the Vietnam War, between 350 and 500 civilians (including children and infants) were killed (and, in the case of many women, gang raped and mutilated) on March 16, 1968, in South Vietnam, by U.S. soldiers.

saying that yes, art lasts longer than life, but so does history with all its horrors. The beauty of the Peacock Room, thus, becomes a "triste"[118] metaphor for what happens in the world, where beauty covers the horror, providing us "a vision chambered in gold and Spanish leather,"[119] which hides both the events underlying the creation of the room as well as the events happening in the world. It is also, perhaps, camouflaged and kept silent by that world of art of which the poetic persona is, so fond and part of. And herein lies the crux for the persona; the question of whether art lasts longer than life hides or detracts attention from the more important question: what does art hide in life? What does it camouflage or, as in this case, help bring to light? The answer is provided indirectly by presenting us with the full weight of history and inserting it into the physical space of the Peacock Room to show how beauty and art ultimately cannot hide the truths of history.

While in the second stanza the history spoken of is the collective one, in the following stanzas the poem again enters a private dimension where history, like in the first stanza, is one made of memories and recollections. Stanza three, the content of which merges on to the beginning of stanza four, provides a commentary and description of the story of Whistler and the Peacock Room, which we have previously discussed.

The fourth stanza presents a further transition into an even more personal history, which is the story of Betsy Graves Reyneau and the thoughts that the poetic persona has about her and her death. As previously mentioned, it is Betsy who speaks in the fourth stanza and provides the reader with the information necessary to understand the connection between

[118] From the French "triste," indicating "feeling or expressing sorrow; sad, sorrowful, melancholy."

[119] Parts of the walls in the Peacock Room were covered in Spanish leather.

herself and the Peacock Room: "*When I turned twelve, / they gave me for a birthday gift / a party in the Peacock Room*" (33-35). The reader is then catapulted to stanza five where she witnesses the hallucinatory, dream-like thoughts of the persona, who sees the environment, the ornaments, take life and, as in a vision, the cadaver of Betsy Graves Reyneau. With this stanza and the following one, the poem becomes a modernist, non-traditional elegy and non-traditional *ubi sunt*, where what is evoked is not *where* art or life may be, but *what* they are. The last stanza moves away from history, and returns to the questions raised in the first stanza. The two stanzas frame the poem as a poem about the relationship between art and life, about being an artist, and about the relationship between art and history. However, the questions that the poem ask at the beginning, "which is crueler / life or art?" are not answered directly but rephrased and expanded at the end of the poem.

Ultimately, for Hayden history is something that needs to be unveiled and represented in its most disturbing truth. In at least two of his poems he makes specific references to the generally opaque and embellished view of history. In "The Peacock Room" he expresses this with the lines "thus history scorns the vision chambered in gold / and Spanish leather" while in "The Island" the poetic voice is "tired today / of history, its patinas clichés / of endless evil" (21-23).

As an elegy, "The Peacock Room" can be considered transpolitan in many respects, the first of them being building and/or commemorating "communities of compatriots" (Ramazani 612), as we have seen with "Middle Passage" and "Elegies." Ramazani argues that elegies' transnationalism can be traced extrinsically, as their influence happens "across national lines," so that, for instance, Yeats influenced Auden and Auden influenced Walcott, Plath, etc. (612). When we extend Ramazani's point to Hayden, we can see, for instance,

traces of Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" in "The Peacock Room," in the way in which space is used to talk about emotions, the real is mixed with the imaginary, history is created through the mixture of personal and communal knowledge, and in the way in which the poem explores the connection between art and life: "for poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / in the valley of its making […]" (Section II, 5-6). This allows us to think of Hayden the author as well as of his elegies, which give us a narrative of grief that is both universal yet historically and spatially contingent, as another link in a chain of influence and inspiration.

Another way in which we can explore Hayden's extrinsic transnationalism is through his use of symbols. Symbols acquire their potency because of their partial codification, evoking certain sets of images and responses. Yet symbols (as opposed to "signs" for instance) are by their very nature polysemic. Symbols can trick the reader "into meaning," giving resolution and meaning even when this is perhaps not clear or straightforward; they entrap the reader in a sort of multi-stable picture which, according to Stephen Behrendt, produces in the audience "both delight at the illusion and … discomfort at its inability to resolve all ambiguities" (40).

While there are various symbolic images in "The Peacock Room," such as the three geographical names "Hiroshima Watts My Lai," the primary symbol of the poem is, undoubtedly, the peacock. The fact that the poem is titled "The Peacock Room," that the word peacock appears eight times, and that images of peacocks are described in stanzas three to six, make of it a very pervasive image, the interpretation and understanding of which colors the reading and understanding of the entire poem. As a symbol, however, the

peacock is extremely multivalent and it can symbolize contrasting images, feelings, and ideas.

In Greco-Roman mythology, for instance, the peacock is a representation of Hera and it symbolizes heaven and the stars;[120] in Hinduism the peacock is the Vāhans of the god Kartikeya.[121] As a Christian symbol, it primarily signifies immortality, pride, and it represents the all-seeing church.[122] According to *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, the peacock is described as being vain, worrying about its ugly feet. It is also the representation for both the effete and the learned teacher. It is described as having “a fearful voice, an unaffected walk, a serpent's head and a sapphire breast.” The *Bestiary* adds that “the diversity of the peacock's colouring […] signifies the diversity of the virtues”. We could add that the diversity of the peacock’s coloring also represents its polysemic symbolic nature.

The peacock, therefore, can be read in light of different symbolic interpretations so that the poem can be said to generate different meanings that depart from the western, canonical ones provided by the associations of the peacock to immortality and pride. In fact, as John Hatcher argues,

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[120] Hera (Juno) turned Argos/Argus into a peacock after he had been killed by Hermes (in other accounts, Hera simply took Argos’ many eyes and put them on the tail of her favorite bird, the peacock). She then put him in the heavens, and named the constellation Pavo (Dixon-Kennedy 45).

[121] Vāhans are the vehicles upon which certain Gods travel. In the peacock’s case, it is the Vāhans of Kartikeya (Wilkins 448), who is the god of war (Dowson 157). In one of the mythological stories of the Hindu Gods, Paravāni (Kartikeya’s peacock) rescued Ganesa’s rat that was about to be eaten by a snake, by making “such an awful noise that the snake disgorged the rat” (Wilkins 445).

[122] The idea of the peacock as symbol of immortality derives from the belief that its flesh does not decay. When found in nativity scenes, this is its meaning. The symbolism of the “all seeing church” derives from the “eyes” present in its tail. The ideas of vanity and pride are connected to the behavior of the peacock, often strutting and displaying his beautiful tail (Ferguson 23).

> the speaker in 'The Peacock Room' observes *how Whistler* has employed traditional Christian symbolism in depicting peacocks trampling gold coins, as symbol for Christ's chasing out the moneychangers, just like Whistler may have presumed he was purging the connoisseur's philistinism. (273 emphasis mine)

It is Whistler, therefore, who used the peacock as a negative Christian symbol, not our poetic voice who, instead, gives more latitude to the bird. The reader, in fact, can connect the peacock's allegedly immortal flesh to the image of the cadaver of Betsy Graves Reyneau and the new status of immortality of her flesh, "flesh-object / pickled in formaldehyde" (41-2). But the peacock is also associated with the Bodisatthva (by virtue of it being located inside the peacock room), thus becoming a symbol of peace, love, and kind-heartedness.[123]

It is likely that in writing the poem Hayden was well aware of how the peacock was a symbol used by many of his illustrious modernist predecessors, including Yeats, Pound, and Crane.[124] While borrowing from Crane for some of the vocabulary and "feeling" of the

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[123] The peacock is a symbol dear to Hayden, who uses it also in the poem "The Islands" to describe morning. In this instance, as in The Peacock Room for certain aspects, the peacock has been devoid of the usual negative associations and is used more as a symbol of beauty and of the beautiful: "I wake and see / the morning like a god / in peacock-flower mantle dancing / on opalescent waves" (lines 25-28).

[124] Yeats published "The Peacock" in 1914. It is said to have been written in response to (or in memory of) the famous "Peacock Dinner" offered by the poet W.S. Blunt on January 18, 1914 in the "attempt to solidify the notion of the new generation" of poets (Getsy 39). To the dinner were invited Yeats, Moore, Manning, Masefield, Plarr, Flint, Aldington, and Pound who presented some of their verses to Blunt, offering them inside a coffer that Pound himself had had sculpted for the occasion by Henri Gaudier Brzeska. Blunt apparently did appreciate neither the poems, too unconventional, nor the coffer (42). Because at the dinner the main course had been a roasted peacock served with all its plumes, Yeats's poem can literally merge the anecdotal with the symbolic: "What's riches to him / That has made a great peacock / With the pride of his eye?" (1-3). The poem, as well as the event itself, are then recaptured by Ezra Pound in canto LXXXIII. Both Yeats and Pound's references to the event deal with the ideas of mortality and immortality, and thus clearly connect to Hayden's poem not only for the subject of the poems, the peacock itself, but also for the types of questions the symbol of the peacock seem to generate. Yeats, for instance, sarcastically writes about the immortality of the soul of his host, whom he compares to a peacock, prideful: "Live he or die / Amid wet rocks and heather, / His ghost will be gay / Adding feather to feather / For the pride of his eye." (lines 7-11). Pound, in an affectionate attempt to recall the times he spent working as a secretary for Yeats at Stone Cottage in Sussex, in Canto LXXXIII mimics Yeats Irish accent that he remembers hearing while he composed the poem, and commenting

poem and from Pound and Yeats for some of the questions addressed in the poem, Hayden, however, seems to reply to the much older question posed by the Sufi poet Farid Ud-Din Attar in *The Conference of the Birds*. In particular, the opening of "The Peacock Room"

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on the ever-lasting power of art which makes the peacock of the dinner (as well as the one of the poem) one "perdurable" and "perennial." This section of the Canto is perhaps worth citing in full:

> "There is fatigue deep as the grave.
> The Kakemono grows in flat land out of mist
> sun rises lop-sided over the mountain
> so that I recalled the noise in the chimney
> as it were the wind in the chimney
> but it was in reality Uncle William
> downstairs composing
> that had made a great Peeeecock
> in the proide ov his oiye
> had made a great peeeeeeecock in the…
> made a great peacock
> in the proide of his oyyee
>
> proide ov his oy-ee
> as indeed he had, and perdurable
> a great peacock were perennius
> or as in the advice to the your man to
> breed and get married (or not)
> as you choose to regard it
>
> at Stone Cottage in Sussex by the waste moor
> (or whatever) and the holly bush
> who would not eat ham for dinner
> because peasants eat ham for dinner
> despite the excellent quality
> and the pleasure of having it hot"

Hart Crane's "Carmen de Boehme" recalls "The Peacock Room" for its form and for the feeling it generates. For instance, the following stanza closely recalls the third stanza of the "The Peacock Room:"

> Bright peacocks drink from flame-pots by the wall,
> Just as absinthe-sipping women shiver through
> With shimmering blue from the bowl in Circe's hall.
> Their brown eyes blacken, and the blue drop hue.

These lines can be compared to the third stanza of "The Peacock Room," in particular the lines "with satiric arabesque of gold / peacocks on a wall peacock blue." The lines of Crane's poem that talk about the tapestry of the room: "The tapestry betrays a finger through / The slit, soft-pulling:—and music follows cue" are echoed in the second stanza of the poem, where we have a "vision chambered in gold / and spanish leather, lyric space." As already explained, the similarities between the two poems are not so much a matter of Hayden's parodying Crane, but rather a matter of Hayden borrowing from Crane the same type of effect and the same sensation the atmospheres and the details in the poem produce. It is a matter of affect and of how the two poems seem to evoke similar atmospheres.

seems to be responding to that part of Attar's long poem in which the peacock[125] gives its excuse for not wanting to make the long journey to find the Simorgh and the hoopoe replies to it concluding its answer with "Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems— / Which matters more, the body or the soul? / Be whole: desire and journey to the Whole." (40). The question of whether the body or the soul is more important can easily reflect and parallel the one about art and life that Hayden poses. Both life and body are mortal and temporal, while art can be considered to be at the extent of the soul, as immortal, ever lasting, persisting. This connection with Attar's poem, whether intentional or not, speaks to the universality of Hayden's poetry and to the depth and expansiveness of Hayden's "time." Not only are his references polyvalent but he is also communicating a message that can be communicated to contemporary Americans or African Americans and universally, through shared set of symbols, images, and questions that are common in the "west" as in other parts of the world, both then and now.

"The Peacock Room" alerts the reader that while the beauty of art persists through the ages, life is ephemeral and death, in all its cruelty, is something we all must come to terms with. It also highlights death as a "private" matter and a public and historical one (see the references to Hiroshima, Watts, My Lai in the second stanza of the poem). Hayden's primary concern is to try "to come to grips with reality, to define reality as [he] can perceive it" (*Collected* 9). He saw poetry "as the illumination of experience through language;" being a poet for him meant "to care passionately about justice and one's fellow beings" through

[125] Also in Attar's poem the peacock is described in terms of its pride as well as an exiled figure, enticed by a snake that turned its "untutored heart" into a "tangled darkness of the orchard's shade" (31)

the medium of poetry, which is “a medium, an instrument for social and political change” since it “changes sensibility.” Ultimately, Hayden considered poetry “as the art of saying what cannot be said or at least not said quite so effectively in any other form” (12), thus showing how form and content work with each other, and how his quest for beauty, in the form and imagery of his poems, is not separate from his quest for social justice.

Reading “Middle Passage,” “Elegies for Paradise Valley,” and “The Peacock Room” together allows us to see certain threads that have previously been unexplored in connection with these three major works. The first thing to be noted is the way in which Hayden operates as an elegist. His most distinguishing trait, as we have also seen for his historical poems, is his interest in the collective. “Middle Passage” and “Elegies” mourn entire communities of people, of ancestors. “The Peacock Room,” while seeming an elegy for a specific person, which it is, also expands its concern to a more global dimension, and ponders on the meaning, and loss of, life, whether in the past or in the present, whether in the U.S. or in My Lai.

The second characteristic of Hayden’s elegies is their use of both traditional and modern features. “Elegies” and “The Peacock Room” use the *ubi sunt*, a traditional formal feature. They also make use of irreverent tone and mockery in the invocation and remembrance of the dead, in line with modern features of the elegy. All elegies seem to be transpolitan because they expand both our time frames and our geographical ones. Whether through the use of intertextuality, symbols, or the presence of characters that embody the local and the global, such as the gypsies, Hayden’s elegies are grounded in “deep time.” Moreover, it is interesting to note how many of Hayden’s volumes of poetry have to do with ideas of

memory and mourning: from *A Ballad of Remembrance* to *Words in the Mourning Time* and *American Journal*. While, so far, Hayden has mostly been recognized and praised for his historical poems, it is perhaps worth starting to think of Hayden as one of the major African American elegists, one who not only wrote within and outside of the genre conventions, but also as a poet in conversation with other African American poets famous for their elegies, from Wheatley and Dunbar to Michael Harper and the irreverent elegies of Gwendolyn Brooks.

The chapter also highlights many recurring formal and thematic features present in Hayden's oeuvre, which testify to his various interests and poetics. First of all, together with Chapter One, it shows how ekphrasis is one of Hayden's principal modes of poetic production. Various artistic forms are often at the core of his poems. In "Middle Passage' we may call this "intertextuality," but in the case of Muriel Rukeyser it extends to ekphrasis, as *Willard Gibbs* becomes the artwork the reading of which inspired the entire third section of the poem. In "Elegies" we have seem how the origin of the poem had at its art a filmic representation of gypsy characters. And in "The Peacock Room" a work of art is used as a canvas onto which he inscribes different histories.

The intersection of place and space and the spatial connection to history, including the use of rooms and enclosed spaces as microcosms of the human experience is also another characteristic of these poems, so that space is narrated *through* the lives of people as opposed to space *qua* space. As a last major feature, one must highlight Hayden's incessant interest in the character of the "alien" who, in these three poems, takes on different forms but who is always present. In "Middle Passage' the aliens are the voiceless enslaved people on board of the ship and the heroic figure of Cinquez. In "Elegies," the aliens are both the

inhabitants of Paradise Valley as well as the "aliens among aliens," the gypsies and Madame Artelia. In "The Peacock Room," while there is no clear "alien," the entire poem seems to be about the poetic voice's sense of inadequacy and sense of outsider in the face of death, especially when thought of in the context of the relationship between art and life.

Memory, finally, is what holds these poems together. The urge to journal and memorialize not simply history, but a history of displacements, personal *and* collective, is what informs Hayden's writing, not only with his elegies but in his overall oeuvre. As Hayden once said: "in a sense there is no past, only the present. The past is also the present. The experiences I've had in the past are now part of my mind, my subconscious, and they are there forever. They have determined the present for me; they exist in it" ("A Romantic Realist" 124).

Coda

African American Literature under the Big Top

In 2014, Nigerian author Chris Abani published *The Secret History of Las Vegas.* This detective novel, set in part in Las Vegas and part in South Africa, tries to bring together the two continents via a dark murder mystery connected to war, torture, and human experiments. The result of one of these experiments, a test-nuclear explosion in the Nevada desert, brings into the world two black conjoined Siamese twins, Fire and Water, "born fused, like the glass formed by the shattering of sand jinn" (4). Abani's novel is, perhaps, not completely successful. The reader gets lost in the various threads of the stories, and the ending is quite anticlimactic. There also does not seem to be any solution to the main murder case. What is interesting, however, is the novel's investment in discussing alterity in relation to the United States in ways that subsume race into the broader discourse of difference while, however, still commenting on American racial policies.

The circus we encounter in the novel is called "The Carnival of Lost Souls" and is located in the middle of the desert. It becomes "alive" only at night. The act of the Siamese twins is called "*King Kongo*." Initially, the only indication that we have that the twins are black is, precisely, the name of their act. The novel hints at the connection between "freaks" and race in ways at times obvious, but nonetheless significant. At some point we are reminded of the history of the great exhibitions of the turn of the century, where peoples of color were literally treated like animals and exhibited in zoos: "we may need to ask the zoo to assist, because the twins clearly won't fit our own machines […] You don't think taking a

pair of conjoined black twins to a zoo for a medical procedure presents a problem, Sunil asked. No. Brewster said" (110-111).

The novel also strives to connect Africa to the United States through the various plot intersections and story threads that cross the Atlantic in different moments, but also through ironic comparisons: "Vegas is really an African City, Sunil thought. What other imagination would build such a grandiose tomb to itself?" The circus element in the novel appears as a structuring device, giving cohesiveness to the story. The space of the circus, however, is only described once, and we never witness a circus act in the whole novel. The circus and the character of the Siamese twins are, therefore, used as a means to discuss politics of difference and race in the United States and in South Africa.

Abani is not the only author to do this, and it is surprising to see how many references to the circus and the sideshow one finds in African American texts. Ralph Ellison, for instance, in the very first paragraph of *Invisible Man*, uses the trope of the circus to address the relationship between the black body and in/visibility: "like bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination" (3).

Chapter One of *Circus Aesthetics* provides us with an entry point for the discussion of the role of the circus in African American literature. We have seen how Hayden uses the space of the circus to investigate the relationship between otherness and race, the performative aspect of race, and the relation between art, performance, and different artistic media. Hayden's circus poems also highlight the relationship between veneer, fakery, and

life. The spectacle is not only seen as a circus or a sideshow, but as life. The clowns and the freaks are us, the readers, the viewers.

In *The Circus Age,* historian Janet Davis notes that African Americans, while often part of the audience, were regularly excluded from taking part in circus performances (292). This is in spite of the fact that minstrel shows have seemingly developed from the circus, as Eric Lott argues. Not only did minstrels often begin by working in a circus, but Lott also suggests that blackface was a result of clowning as well as being the inspiration for the contemporary clown mask (25). For instance, the "Virginia Minstrels" (Dan Emmett, Billy Whitlock, Dick Pelham, and Frank Bower), the first blackface minstrel band, were originally employed in a circus (140). P. T. Barnum himself was an occasional blackface performer and among the early shows and enterprises he organized at the American Museum, he showcased minstrel dancers, the "Fejee Mermeid," Joice Heth, and a production of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (80). In Postbellum America, hence, circuses and sideshows functioned as a way to explore and perform blackness.

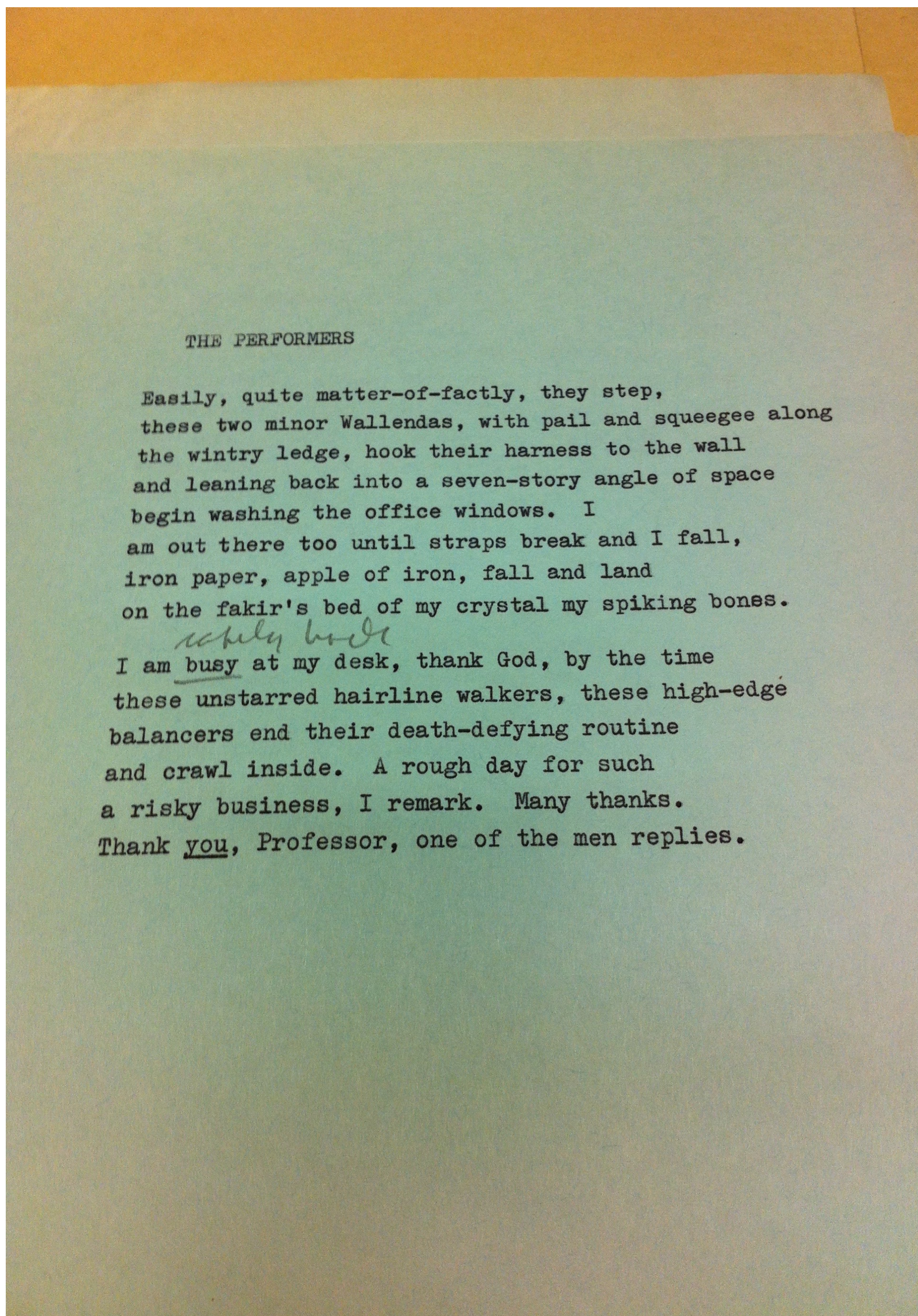
Similar is the discourse for sideshows and their connection to ethnographic shows, where, however, people of color regularly "performed." The incorporation of "natives" in animal displays, or Barnum and London's 1886 "ethnological congress," are only two instances of how the Other was often connected to the animal world. According to Davis, the chimpanzee Johanna, for instance, was described with the same language used to described women of color: "immodest […], brawnier, and bolder than man" (Davis 96). In 2004, in *The Greatest Show on Earth*, an African American female vocalist, Dannette Sheppard, joined the company in order to perform regularly on stage with the ringmaster.

Sheppard is not the first African American to perform in a circus, but she is probably the first to have such a relevant role in a show.

African American art reflects the historical role of the circus in the formation of the connection between race and spectacle in Postbellum America. At the same time, it also challenges it, and, by using the trope of the circus in multiple and unexpected ways, as we have seen in Hayden, it leads us to ask: is the circus a polyfunctional trope? Is, for instance, William Faulkner's use of a circus reference in *The Sound and the Fury*—"You're funny, aren't you. You ought to join the circus"(93)—the same as Ellison's in *Invisible Man*? If for E. E. Cummings, "within 'the big top,' as nowhere else on earth, is to be found Actuality. Living players play with living" (255), what is to be found inside "the big top" for African American authors?

Appendix I

Figure 9. Draft of "The Performers." (Hayden Papers, Box 45 Folder 7)



THE PERFORMERS

Easily, quite matter-of-factly, they step,
these two minor Wallendas, with pail and squeegee along
the wintry ledge, hook their harness to the wall
and leaning back into a seven-story angle of space
begin washing the office windows. I
am out there too until straps break and I fall,
iron paper, apple of iron, fall and land
on the fakir's bed of my crystal my spiking bones.

I am busy at my desk, thank God, by the time
these unstarred hairline walkers, these high-edge
balancers end their death-defying routine
and crawl inside. A rough day for such
a risky business, I remark. Many thanks.
Thank *you*, Professor, one of the men replies.

Appendix II

Figure 10. Draft of the "Confessions of a Tattooed Man" (Hayden Papers, Box 39 Folder 5)

Confessions of the Tattooed Man

". . . .for the tale I wish to share with you
I do not wish to tell, nor have you hear, lest
gargoyle speech appalling you -- "

The needles? The Pain? But I desired
pain, endured it in stinging sweat
of ecstasy. If now I speak to you
of pain I do so no arouse your pity,
hoping it will change to love.

I had no choice, born blemished as
I was. I'm told my pious father cried
out in horror the evening I was born
No son of mine, see how the Devil's marked
him.Zodiacal blotches, cabalistic signs,

lion and butterfly. Strange figurations.
Upon my forehead semblance of a cross
or mark of the beast? My parents wished
me dead yet cared for me and sought for ways
to ease their shame and

How should I survive in a world that from
the first made me pariah? I hid in books,
I dwelt in fantasies. At every chance
the so-called normal played vicious tricks
on me. Once they tore my clothes off

at dead of winter in dark snowy woods
to see if "It" was blemished too
then disappointed kicked and pommelled me.
I could not speak of this to anyone
hating not my tormentors but myself.

Figure 11: Draft of the “Confessions of a Tattooed Man” (Hayden Papers, Box 39 Folder 5)

Years of loneliness, claustrophobic
years. How did I live? And why?
I planned my death one day. The bridge
was high, the tumultuous river deep,
I would have leapt but for the arms

that locked around me, pulled me back.
God will not welcome an intruder, son,
the Stranger gently chided. God
mocks me, I cried, amuses himself with me.
Then be his harlequin, his jester,
~~hisxgrotesquexx~~ Let me
his grotesque. Come, I'll take you home.
I have no home, I wept. Then come with me

add to IV | I lived in fantasies I drew on blood-flecked butcher's paper

Appendix III

Figure 12. Draft of the “Gypsies” (Hayden Papers, Box 41 Folder 1)

GYPSIES

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

We'd risk being drugged, though, and
scrunched into a gunnysack,
to stand and wonder at the picture
of the naked head with diagram crown

in the window of the store where Gypsies
camped. Once a Gypsy woman peered out
at us from those floral curtains -- Pola Negri
spying from the mystery mummy-case --

and we skedaddled. Hard-head, I told you
keep away from there. . . .

Zingaros: Tzigeune: Gitanos: Gypsies:
Alines among the alien -- thieves

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