Introduction

When Robert Hayden composed a poem about Richard Hunt’s sculpture of Arachne, the mortal weaver who challenged the goddess Athena to a competition and was turned into a spider for her hubris, he fixed on the ultimate horror of her transformation: “mouth of agony shaping a cry it cannot utter.” To be silenced in the act of protest, to be rendered inarticulate when the fierce spirit yearns to create language about the violation of one’s humanity—this was a condition Hayden struggled against all his life. Despite personal and professional obstacles, he wrote poems throughout five decades with the clear purpose of shaping himself and his oeuvre into a triumphant testimony to the lasting power of passionate and well-wrought speech.

Every poetic career has something of the heroic about it, but Hayden’s especially was forged and sustained against the grain of his native culture. An African-American poet who drew nourishment from a number of traditions—European, African, Latino, and Bahá’í, among others—he suffered from episodes of white bigotry and black hostility without succumbing to a speechless rage. He wrote some of the finest modern poems about African-American history, a kind of crypto-epic that would secure his immortality even if he had not also written a large number of near-perfect lyrics and verse narratives, on a variety of topics, still too little known even to students of late-twentieth-century poetry. Now that some of the furor over influences and reputation has abated and Hayden’s *Collected Poems* has served a generation of readers, we can begin to see him as the champion of the creative life he aspired to become, a *becoming*, to cite the repeated word of his poem on Richard Hunt’s *Arachne*, that places him in the front rank of poets of his generation.

Hayden has been the subject of four books at this writing (see “Selected Bibliography”), and a large number of essays, some in publications no longer in existence. The purpose of this book is to collect for convenient reference the most original and useful of the
fugitive book reviews and essays extant and add to them some commentaries unpublished before this volume. No work in this anthology is excerpted from the books about Hayden, since they are easily accessible. The editors assume that the reader has Hayden’s *Collected Poems* in hand, with its biographical essay by Arnold Rampersad, and does not require substantial quotation of poems being discussed. Nor have we selected materials that reiterate unduly the territory covered in Hayden’s *Collected Prose*. The materials here extend what all these other writings provide. They deepen the discourse about Hayden’s craft and the literary, historical, and cultural traditions in which he worked.

The book begins with some of Hayden’s own previously uncollected work, including two interviews, a poem from *The Night-Blooming Cereus* he chose not to reprint in his *Collected Poems*, and a longer poem about Josephine Baker he left unfinished at his death in 1980. Hayden wrote only three book reviews of significance in his life, and they are all included in this section; they give us a further sense of his criteria for good poetry and for clear thinking on the most complex issues facing citizens of the modern world.

Reviews of Hayden’s work are sparser and scarcer than one might expect. His early books were published by small presses: Falcon, Counterpoise, Hemphill, Paul Breman, October House. Though grateful for the support of these struggling venues, Hayden remained bitter throughout his life about the fact that it took him some forty years of constant writing to secure a major East Coast publishing house. He recalled to one of the present editors how he had approached one well-known publisher in the early 1960s with a manuscript of his selected poems and enthusiastic letters of support from some of the most significant poets of his generation, only to be turned away by an acquisitions editor who explained to him, “We already publish a Negro poet.” Reviews of volumes from small presses then and now tend to be brief, often a paragraph in an omnibus review of some dozen volumes of the season. The reviews collected here are the most substantial contributions to the evolution of Hayden’s reputation.

A section of general essays on the work and one on individual poems round out the volume. Three poems by Hayden have received the lion’s share of attention over the years: “Those Winter Sundays,” a frequently anthologized personal lyric about his foster father; “Frederick Douglass,” an encomium of high rhetoric and complex syntax in honor of the ardent foe of slavery; and “Middle
Passage,” an evocation in collage form of slave ship experiences culminating in the mutiny aboard the Amistad in 1839. The present volume includes a suite of essays on “Middle Passage,” in keeping with its status as central to Hayden’s oeuvre, as well as essays on the other two poems. We have endeavored to include writings about the totality of his Collected Poems, however, and even a critical essay about poems that predate the earliest poems in that compendium. (Hayden requested that his “‘prentice work” from the 1930s and early 1940s not be reprinted, but it is both right and inevitable that these poems see the light of day in the near future.) It remains a mystery to us that in the year 2001 so many of Hayden’s best lyrics have received virtually no commentary at all.

Hayden’s career, as Dennis Gendron points out, begins in the 1930s with poems displaying a mixture of influences. The hortatory, impassioned lyricism of Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Muriel Rukeyser attracted him, in part because of their radical politics. A pacifist poem like “In Time of War” catches the tone of their rhetoric:

Though I be cast by war unto the rat, the dark,
Though nightmare horrors mark my generation’s end,
Now while I live I’ll not acknowledge death
As Fuehrer to which the will must bend.

O poets, lovers, eager-lipped young men,
Say with me now that life is worthy—O give
It affirmation; bring largesse of living,
Make urgent now the will to live.

The balladry of Sterling Brown and the blues structures of Langston Hughes inform his best work of that period, as in his story-poem about a slave hanged for leading a slave revolt, “Gabriel”:

The black folk weep,
The white folk stare:
Gabriel is
A sword in the air.

His spirit goes flying
Over the land
With a song in his mouth
And a sword in his hand.
W. H. Auden’s more complicated poetry and the towering example of Yeats nourished Hayden’s aesthetic of the 1940s. In order to make a clear break from the more formulaic “proletarian” phase of his work, he declared in a coauthored manifesto of 1948: “we believe experimentation to be an absolute necessity in keeping the arts vital and significant in contemporary life.” In retrospect some of his experiments seemed to him too baroque or mannered, and he suppressed them, but this endorsement of modernist practice lies behind many of the masterpieces of his middle period, among them “Middle Passage” and “Runagate Runagate.” Having entered his mature phase under the pressure of global events such as World War II and the Cold War, as well as the inception of the civil rights movement, Hayden wrote ever more capacious poems exploring, as if programmatically, every byway of the human condition he could imagine. One season might bring forth a comic poem about a woman reportedly abducted by extraterrestrials (“Unidentified Flying Object”), another might produce an elegy for Malcolm X or an appreciation of Monet’s Waterlilies or a meditation on the philosophy of being, as in “Traveling through Fog.” Many of the critics in this volume remark appreciatively on the manifold surprises of Hayden’s volumes of poetry, as his attention turned alertly and artfully throughout the years to subjects of deep significance to any likely reader.

There is a range of methodologies at work in these essays, as is proper in a half-century’s worth of considerations of a poet whose work invites large historical commentaries as well as minute observations on matters of idiom, lineation, stanza structure, and tone. Our criterion in selecting essays was straightforward: we asked whether the essay illuminated Hayden’s artistry and his vision of human experience. We found that some early essays had become the victims of their own success—all of their insights had been thoroughly absorbed and extended by later essays. In recent years Hayden has attracted the notice of many poet-critics, an unsurprising turn of events for one who had been something of a poet’s poet even when he spoke plainly on urgent matters of state. We welcomed a diversity of styles and approaches, from the most personal to the most scholarly.

Because Hayden’s central concerns remain in the forefront of our attention as citizens, there is no danger that his work will lose its appeal to partisans; they will continue to cast their speculations on his work in the hermeneutical patterns popular in their time.
Nor do we doubt that his meditations on being and transcendence, the nature of artistic and religious experience, matters of racial and gender identity, and the ambiguities of time and temporal process, will continue to engage readers who find in verse the most satisfying enactments of profound thinking on those matters. Hayden is a poet for the ages, and we offer this collection of writings as an homage to one whose work repays all the scrutiny a conscientious reader can give to it.

This volume has benefited from the encouragement given the editors by many friends and colleagues. David Lehman, editor of the Under Discussion series, and LeAnn Fields, of the University of Michigan Press, have been exemplary monitors of our progress in bringing the book to completion. Maia Hayden Patillo, the poet’s daughter, has graciously encouraged our efforts. The Special Collections libraries of the University of Michigan, including the Hopwood and Labadie holdings, as well as the Bentley Library on the same campus, have assisted us over a long period of time. We are especially grateful to Doris Knight for her Promethean labors in preparing the manuscript for publication.

A note on usage. Authors in these essays variously use the terms Negro, Afro-American, Black, black, and African-American. Because each term has some ideological and period significance, we have retained the original usage in each case.