

A MAN THAT IN HIS WRITING WAS MOST WISE

Reginald Gibbons

If by "civilized" we mean neither an empty courtesy nor a bland neutrality nor an isolation from life in favor of books, but a focused compassion and sympathy, an understanding of how social forces drive personal relationships and how others require our compassion and sympathy partly on that very account, then Robert Hayden was one of the most civilized poets we have had among us. Every citizen, every *civis*, is a member of Hayden's household, and to every one he extends not only a refined sensibility but a genuine interest both curious and responsive, an interest that has been educated by life and by reading.

Several times in his poems what appears to be a mild habitual civility is transformed into a trenchant and deeply felt sense of wonder at all human transactions—and it is not always himself whom Hayden puts into the position of seeing deeper or feeling more keenly. He has too much self-knowledge for that. On the contrary, he uses others to illuminate the reaches into which he wants to extend his own emotional understanding, as when, at the end of "The Performers," the onlooker thanks the window-washers re-entering the safe world through his window.

... A rough day, I remark,
for such a risky business. Many thanks.
Thank you, sir, one of the men replies.

(*Angle of Ascent*,
1975, p. 27. Hereafter
abbreviated AA.)

He thus makes his daydreaming transformation of them into "minor Wallendas" a reciprocated human exchange of feeling, and they gain dignity from acknowledging that they have a sense of themselves as performers occupied in a daily labor which they have transformed into mastery. They acknowledge the onlooker as a spectator, and they validate, beyond the extent to which his reverie could do so, his admiration of them. The quiet gesture which yet contains a powerful revelation is typical of Hayden's poetic manner.

Perhaps, out of the complex struggles and doubts that attended Hayden's thinking about his own origins and childhood—personal and social spheres of irony, disappointment, difficulty, accomplishment, and love, nested one inside the other—Hayden was particularly sensitive to feelings both of dislocation and of the humiliation that comes with

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dependence. He sought to balance these with a sense of identity. To quote the ending of another poem is to reveal a turn in this direction. In the "mystery boy" poem, after creating the disoriented and fearful mood that surrounds the wandering lost child, and in which voices are calling to him in a way that frightens rather than comforts, Hayden has the "dollbaby wife" point him toward a solution to the great riddle:

We'll go and find them, we'll go
and ask them for your name again.

(AA, 38)

We will return to the importance to Hayden of names, but for now let us note that it is a similar gesture—in this case, honoring an unself-conscious identity—that shifts the narration of "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves" from the expected to the unexpected, from the observer of the seaside carnival, whose attitude is uncertain and shot through with knowledge of historical ironies and indignities, to "Aunt Jemima" herself, whose presence is built out of concrete personal history—her travels and loves, her triumphs and humiliations, her delicate and dignified acceptance, her wisdom. And these are not spelled out by Hayden as the requisites of an adequate personal response to a social reality, but are 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.

Never an effusive poet, always spare and precise, working to control the emotional response that a poem realizes, Hayden at moments of greatest intensity will cut back to the sparest lines of all, letting an image—in the purely visual sense—stand for everything he does not wish to state explicitly. "Kodachromes of the Island," a poem that is one version of a poetic impulse Hayden seems to have honored more than once ("An Inference of Mexico," "Islands," for example) is characteristic. The poem is divided into three sections, each of four stanzas, each stanza of three lines. Part II ends:

On the landing, women
were cleaning a catch and
tossing the guts to

squealing piglets. A tawny
butterfly drunkenly circled
then lighted on offal.

(AA, 48)

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This is one way to bring an irony to bear, in a poem. But that isn't enough for Hayden, as it shouldn't be. The third section is far more weighty; in it, the photographic sharpness of the description leads not to another final image (which, after all, gains its strength by virtue of its very partiality, its incompleteness, because it stands for *what is not said*: a kind of metonymy that should be considered further, perhaps) but to a consideration of self, in the photographed landscape. Hayden evokes a poetic kinsman, whose own anguish over the adequacy of poetry to speak of the life of men and women in extreme circumstances is often echoed in Hayden's work:

Alien, at home—as always
everywhere—I roamed
the cobbled island,

and thought of Yeats,
his passionate search for
a theme. Sought mine.

(AA, 49)

It is worth noting that the last two words affirm not only a kinship with Yeats, but a distinction between Yeats's theme and Hayden's. George Seferis says, "*In essence*, the poet has one theme: his live body." If that is true, it is nonetheless true that for Hayden and Yeats the exact contours of identity and morality are very different.

But what precisely is Hayden's sense of image? I think he experiments in moving between two poles, and decides resolutely—without calling into question the other extreme—in favor of a sense of image that again returns us to Yeats. Let me quote from Yeats's poem, "Ego Dominus Tuus," one of his various castings of an *ars poetica*. It is in the form of a dialogue between figures called simply by the Latin *hic* and *ille*: the one and the other.

Ille. By the help of an image
I call to my own opposite, summon all
That I have handled least, least looked upon.
Hic. And I would find myself and not an image.
Ille. That is our modern hope, and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen or brush,
We are but critics, or but half create,
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed,
Lacking the countenance of our friends.

The special importance to Yeats of inspiring friendship needs no comment here; what I want to point out is that this rejection of "the gentle, sensitive mind"—a gesture rather harsher in Yeats than in Hayden, certainly—is in favor of a special sense of the "image." That is,

the image takes the poet out of himself, into others, and makes possible love and friendship, and helps him come to understand his own identity among men and women. And by "image" Yeats does not mean the vague floating oddity that fills many contemporary poems nowadays, the ropes of silence and the stones of loneliness and the water's sad shadow, etc. Yeats meant among other things a living face, like the one Dante saw and dedicated his poem to, like Hayden's "Aunt Jemima," like the faces of the gone dead in Hayden's "Elegies for Paradise Valley." Yeats's poem answers another objection as well:

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors,
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.

...
Those men that in their writings are most wise
Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.

The various parts of "Elegies for Paradise Valley" gloss these assorted lines from Yeats's poem. They establish the living face—with a *name*—as Hayden's necessary poetic image. The beautiful section V is not only Hayden's version of Villon's "Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis," as Donald Davie has pointed out, but also a gathering of images in the Yeatsian sense. Hayden not only eulogizes others, but works, in this poem, toward an understanding of himself, by using the Yeatsian sense of the image. This progress is worth noting in some detail.

Section V asks the unanswerable question, Where *are* the dead? The last line says, as both an answer and, as we will note, yet another question, "Let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell." Hayden makes us realize that this answer is itself a question: "Tell of what?" He does this by making the first line of the next section provide the next answer, "Of death. Of loving too." That is followed by section VII, which finds its Yeatsian image in the Gypsies—a wonderfully complex and sympathetic shift of perspective, full of ironies and compassion. Section VIII, after this interlude, answers that implied question of section V again: "Let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell . . ."

Of death, of loving,
of sin and hellfire too.
Unsaved, old Christians
gossiped; pitched

from the gamblingstable—
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.

(AJ, n.p.)

Why does the question of section V receive another answer here? I think it is because of Hayden's feeling that his own identity—which is the ground-note of the poem, over which the elegies are sung individually—must still be sought among those who are dead. Earlier, I mentioned Hayden's sensitivity to a sense of dislocation. Here he is at pains to present himself, as a child, in a light of intense self-consciousness, as he tries to forge a connection to Crip and to the others. This self-consciousness does not diminish the joy of remembrance: like Roethke waltzing with his papa, Hayden does dance with Uncle Crip, and the dance is both joyous and frightening, for if they seem to be dancing round the gambling table, they are also, given the poem's careful double implication, dancing already in hell—where some of those dead of section V must now reside. Hayden, seeking a final image, moves, however, from the resurrected Uncle Crip (whose funeral we have already seen in section III), to himself as a child. This movement is not merely a return to the child who appeared earlier in the poem, but from that child's relatively unselfconscious voice (especially of sections III and IV) toward much greater consciousness. This is enacted by the syntax and line-breaks of the last stanza. The effect of the parenthesis and the end of the first line of that stanza is to open a possibility with this last sentence, something first considered and then rejected. "I knew myself (Precocious" seems to answer to Yeats's *Hic.*, who says, "I would find myself and not an image." In this line, the poem proposes merely a knowledge of self—if not then, then now, looking back. But knowing the self isn't enough, and the continuation of the sentence, after the pause enforced by the end of the line, provides us with a possibility that is more important. Knowing one's self won't take one *outside* the self, to where others are. It isn't, in fact, a dislocation—for Hayden's discovery seems to have been, in several poems ("Alien, at home—as always/everywhere") that dislocation as an existential predicament can also be a poetic method. "By the help of an image/I call to my own opposite." Yeats wrote. Hayden effects a dialectical reversal, to make use of dislocation much the way Williams made us of failure in "The Descent":

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—since
the world it opens is always a place

formerly

unsuspected.

The last sentence of the "Elegies," and the stanza, completes itself by saying, "I knew myself [to be] the devil's own rag babydoll." Shifting the syntactical perspective changing "knew" from a reflexive verb of self-knowledge to one that leads us on to the predicate nominative, "the devil's own rag babydoll," Hayden makes us go through a cognitive shift to seeing that the self is *something else*, that it is an image.

In a number of poems, Hayden perceives himself as an other—from the poem in which the lost "mystery boy" is waiting to discover his name, to the poem that follows "Elegies," "Names," in which Hayden's discovery of his true parentage provokes a profound sense of non-identity, as if the real Hayden were someone else, *out there*, who really did exist, unlike the one writing the poem. Am I, he asks, merely the ghost or alter ego of that *other*? In this last stanza of "Elegies" what happens is that a syntactic and poetic device stresses this sudden sense of being transformed into an *other*, subject to force and the will of others. It is not unambiguous: it gives the poet the image he needs, at the same time that it takes from him a sense of security in his identity. But it is the double motion which perhaps provides the strength of the poem: in remembering those who are gone, the poet goes into them, until remembering himself, he too is gone, and at last suitably transformed into an image in the poem, given the kind of power and representativeness that a mere narrator may not achieve. Hayden becomes one of his own images, and is both released from grief and sorrow, and confirmed in compassion and sympathy.

I hope this does not seem too great a philosophical or poetic weight to put on this delicate stanza with its subtle undermining of our first expectation. A poet's vision is as much built up out of local poetic triumphs, as it is imposed out of a pre-poetic understanding. And in Hayden's work, I believe I see a compellingly honest, even modest, openness as the poet carries out the never-ending search for figures of men and women who will be the emblems of his loss and his joy. Hayden's accomplishments as a poet are considerable, and lie in every good line, in his scrupulousness as an artist, and in the great value of the poetic tasks he sets himself in each poem. The theme he sought is the simple necessary one of the man who must make his way through the world's sorrows and take heart from those he meets there, all the while struggling with his own sense of himself. Much remains to be said about Hayden's poetic technique, about his vision, about the special quality of his work, that I have called "civilized"—a quality always in short supply. And if readers continue to come to his work with the sort of humane sympathy that Hayden himself offers to *them*, then his poems will continue to be read and will continue to instruct us all. His work gives us the image of man.