

AMERICAN JOURNAL by Robert Hayden. Liveright Publishing, \$4.95 (paper).

Robert Hayden's poems have the chiseled precision of sculpture. From the vast, shapeless mass of language, he carved and cut, sliced and pared until he brought forth the art imbedded in it. The poems in this book, published two years after the poet's death in 1980, are lean, taut, muscular. Spare and restrained in style, in effect they are complex and

dense. Seemingly simple lines radiate waves of strength and power, fury almost, held back only by the poet's control of his medium.

Here are the first three lines of part one of "John Brown," a poem in five parts:

Love feared hated:
aureoled
in violence.

Those few words burst forth with the force of John Brown himself at Harper's Ferry. The first line establishes the trinity of themes (the religious implications of the number are obvious) that are woven throughout the poem. The striking grammatical shift infuses the line with a power it would lack if the poet had used a consistent tense. By moving from the one syllable present-tense to the one syllable past-tense, and then to the two syllable past-tense word, Hayden makes the line build in intensity; it literally surges across the page. Then follows the single word/line "aureoled," with its multiple suggestions of the sexual, the sacred, and the mythic -- all proper and appropriate connotations for the subject. The last line, which culminates the tercet and foreshadows John Brown's destructive obsession, blends beautifully with the second line. The gentle meshing of sounds (aureoled, violence) undercuts the harshness of the opening line. All of this in six words. It is the kind of density of thought and meaning that only the best poets can achieve, and Hayden does it over and over throughout this book. It is poetry at its purest; words pushed to capacity, beyond any conventional sense of themselves. In short, Hayden makes words new.

The sensibility that informs these words is both receptive and generous, but not self-deluding nor

sentimental. Belief in God is a recurrent motif, but it is a belief often troubled by the reality of evil. Two poems, "The Rag Man" and "Ice Storm," illustrate these characteristics. "The Rag Man" describes one of the many homeless people who wander the streets of our cities, dressed in "scarecrow patches and tatters," the ones "who long since/ rejected all/ that we risk chills and fever and cold/ hearts to keep." It is a vivid, though fairly conventional, poem which teeters on the edge of sentimentality and seems designed to elicit from the reader a sense of pity, concern, the Christian duty: "We'd like to buy/ him a Goodwill overcoat, a bowl of soup;" But in the next (and final) line, the poet pulls the rug out from under our hypocrisy and makes his real point, which is not about the Rag Man, but about ourselves: "and, yes, we'd like to get shut of the sight of him."

"Ice Storm" is a short, lyric meditation which both echoes and updates William Cullen Bryant's famous poem, "To A Waterfowl." Bryant's poem describes the long, solitary flight of a bird against a bleak winter sky, then concludes with the comforting conviction that God guides both bird and man in their lonely, respective journeys. Hayden's poem, reflecting the age he lives in, is less sure about the goodwill of God towards men. Here are the first and last stanzas of the three stanza poem:

Unable to sleep, or pray, I stand
by the window looking out
at moonstruck trees a December storm
has bowed with ice.

The trees themselves, as in winters past,
will survive their burdening,
broken thrive. And am I less to You,
my God, than they?

Though the questioning of faith is obvious in the closing line, the acknowledgement that the trees will survive their burden, and the inspired phrase "broken thrive," implies that the poet, despite his doubt, believes in the benevolence of his God.

As the title suggests, this book is unmistakably and intentionally American. The poet's personal history, and the nation's collective history are explored in the chronologically ordered poems. The book begins with a poem titled "Letter From Phyllis Wheatley" (the slave-poetess of the 18th century), and continues with poems to or about John Brown, Paul Dunbar, Paul Robeson, Peary's North Pole expedition, the astronaut's moon-landing, and the title poem, a delightful yet serious tract written in the form of an alien's report to "The Counselors" of his home planet. This final poem is a tour-de-force of style and substance. It incorporates the several concerns that Hayden explores throughout the book and renders them in the clinical style of a scientist. His insights into the American psyche are alternately comic and tragic, and uniformly accurate. Here are a few:

...what do
they fear mistrust betray more than the freedom
they boast of in their ignorant pride...

...they are celebrating their history...a divided
people seeking reassurance from a past few under
stand and many scorn...

...item learn to use okay
their pass word okay...

...much violence much that repels i am attracted
none the less their variousness their ingenuity
their elan vital and that some thing essence
quiddity i cannot penetrate or name.

Perhaps he is right, it may be impossible to get at the essence of the American experience. But in this poem and book, he comes as close to naming it as any poet since Whitman.

Eric Nelson