reading

Culture, Community,

the middle

and Form in

generation

Twentieth-Century

anew

American Poetry

Edited by Eric Haralson

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For John Hollander

—who got this whole business st[…]

most warmly and appreciatively

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—Gertrude Stein, *Narr*

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Introduction

Eric Haralson

In this collection of ten original
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Resistance, Sacrifice, and Historicity in the Elegies of Robert Hayden

W. Scott Howard

I

I listen for the sounds of cannon, cries
vibrating still upon the air,
timeless echoes in echoic time—
imagine how they circle out and out
—Robert Hayden, "On Lookout Mountain"

Robert Hayden is best known for his poems, such as "Middle Passage," that draw upon African American history and link vivid scenes of brutality to an ongoing struggle for a greater humanity that might eclipse boundaries of race, class, gender, religion, and politics.[1] During the late sixties, of course, Hayden was castigated by Melvin Tolson, Arna Bontemps, Margaret Walker, and other adherents of Ron Karenga's "black cultural nationalism" precisely because of those so-called apolitical, antihistoricist, high modernist, and humanistic values.[2] Karenga declared that "all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution" and that "any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid."[3] As Pontheolla Williams reflects, however, Hayden's "refusal to be categorized as a black poet was not a rejection of his biological inheritance or the black struggle but

was rather a refusal to be restricted in subject matter to 'race' or to be identified with . . . jingoism and propagandistic didacticism" (P. Williams, 31).[4] Hayden's repudiation of what has come to be called identity politics should be seen (then and now) as a passionate defense of the literary aesthetic: poetry fashions a figural reality engendered (but not contained) by the political and the historical.[5]

Despite these prevalent characteristics in the poet's works, the pivotal role of both figural historicity and sacrificial violence in Hayden's elegies and elegiac texts has not yet been addressed by critics and scholars.[6] This chapter accordingly advances a study of Robert Hayden's elegies as vehicles for the poet's historical imagination. In order to define more precisely that working context of analysis, I wish to make a distinction between three key terms already invoked by these opening paragraphs: history, figural historicity, and historical imagination.

Hayden's poetry often engages with the matter of historical personages (as in "Frederick Douglass"), historical events (as in "Belsen, Day of Liberation"), and historical documentation (as in "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley"), which together establish his grounding in and commitment to *history*, strictly defined. History (as such) conditions Hayden's poems, which, in turn, constitute their own terms of figurative confrontation with the known world in order to form a contiguous reality, or what I will call *figural historicity*.[7] In his landmark challenge to "all evolutionary/progressive styles of thought, not excluding Marxism," Benedict Anderson observes that "fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations."[8] Just as Anderson theorizes relationships between figurative discourse, politics, and nationalism, Hayden's *historical imagination* invests concrete personages, events, and documentation with the generative powers of metaphor.[9] Hayden's poetry ultimately celebrates a long-standing notion of praxis, one that bespeaks his humanistic politics and confidence in the artist's social responsibility as both maker and visionary.[10]

The elegy and elegiac mode of writing predominate in Hayden's oeuvre, thereby illustrating a poetics of loss at the heart of this writer's life and artistic achievement. He was raised in Detroit as a devout Baptist and would have been acutely aware of key books and passages from the Old and New Testaments (such as Isaiah 51:6, 11, 12; and 2 Corinthians 4:18) in which grief is apprehended as a transitory, yet useful, worldly and temporal precondition for the believer's acceptance of consolation that rests with the everlasting, atemporal joys of heaven.[11] However, in the majority of his texts

about losses both personal and public,
Western mourning practices (that celeb
to affliction and suffering) in order to
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texts, qualify solace and place it within
strife and cultural crisis.[13]

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about losses both personal and public, Hayden writes against conventional Western mourning practices (that celebrate transcendent spiritual remedies to affliction and suffering) in order to shape his own private grief into an aesthetic form of oppositional cultural work and a linguistic mode of social resistance.[12] By transgressing religious, literary, and cultural norms, Hayden's elegies brave the world's intractability, thus articulating the negotiation of loss within a dynamic context of interpersonal, textual, and social transformation. Hayden's poetics of loss, in this regard, participates in an emerging tradition of the modern Anglo-American elegy, illustrated richly and diversely by his forerunners and contemporaries who also, in pivotal texts, qualify solace and place it within and against predicaments of artistic strife and cultural crisis.[13]

Hayden's elegies, I will argue, wield sacrificial violence in order to critique atemporal visions of poetic apotheosis and thereby infuse unorthodox consolations with an imaginative historicity that is at once autonomous and yet, in another sense, contingent. My thesis thus counters Charles Davis's claim that Hayden's "activity of truth-telling from memory, of reconstructing the past, is purgative" (C. Davis, 97), and also challenges Wilburn Williams's interpretation that Hayden's artistic contract between symbolism and history strives toward "the ultimate redemptiveness of the universal and timeless order of spirit that threatens to kill the life of his art" (W. Williams, 69). The crux of my argument complements Vera Kutzinski's assertion that, for Hayden, "identity, or selfhood, is a matter of history and of historicity" because his work—the historical poetry in particular—seeks not to escape from the past, but to revise the "linguistic surfaces" of the text of history, thereby achieving a historical and poetic truth that "emerges from . . . the *limbo* of [the poet's] ever-transfiguring poetic imagination" (Kutzinski, 308, 319).

Six major themes or modes inflect Hayden's works of mourning: transience, transcendent consolation, resistant consolation, the contingent present, the presentness of the past, and what I shall call sacrificial historicity. Within this thematic context, I will argue more specifically, Hayden achieves a precarious yet vital balance between, on the one hand, acknowledging a desire for transcendence and, on the other, subverting that possibility for atemporal solace and subordinating it to the poem's ongoing engagement with the wayward course of human action. The occurrence (real or imagined) of violence often serves as the fulcrum for that crucial leverage in the text's figuration of grief within a temporal sphere for mourning and social progress, as the above quotation from "On Lookout Mountain" sug-

gests: "the sounds of cannon, cries / vibrating still upon the air, / timeless echoes in echoic time." Images of violence in Hayden's elegies and elegiac poems consequently embody a dialectical tension that may be represented in terms of the following equation: sacrificial violence equals a desire for transcendence multiplied by an acknowledgment of historical contingency. Hayden often accentuates images of such tension with the technique of chiaroscuro—"what / auroral dark"; "*Sol y sombra*"; "brightness / so bright that it was darkness"—oxymora that underscore the knife edge "covenant of timelessness with time" that drives his work's tenacious (if paradoxical) commitments to aesthetics, politics, and human conditions.[14]

Hayden's elegies thus deliver a figural historicity comparable to Nietzsche's theory of critical history that entails a threefold critique: the origin of any new age "*must* itself be known historically, history *must* itself resolve the problem of history, [and] knowledge *must* turn its sting against itself."[15] For Nietzsche, as for Hayden, poetry is the catalyst in this formulation; only poetry regenerates life in apposition to both unhistorical and suprahistorical knowledge that would together otherwise annihilate life (Nietzsche, 116–23). Hayden's reputation has withstood much misplaced criticism, due mainly to generalized reflections on his confrontations with black nationalists in the late 1960s: his professional life, as one of bourgeois hypocrisy; his publications, as apolitical and antihistoricist. The majority of Hayden's critics have responded defensively by interpreting his poetry largely in terms of biography and formalist methodologies.[16] However, when placed within such a tradition of poetics and historiography (one that depends on a vital link between aesthetics and praxis, as discussed above), Hayden's texts, and the elegies in particular, should be seen as ultimately entrusted to social justice in terms of their achievement as autonomous and contingent works of modernist art.

Hayden's critique of normative mourning thereby engenders a rather paradoxical solace: the given poem allows for (yet also undermines) a hope for transcendence, positing instead the resistance to consolation as a call for the ongoing work of ethical involvement among poet, text, readers, and world-at-large. In this way, his poetics of loss "does make something happen" (as he consciously rebuts Auden's famous declaration to the contrary): Hayden's elegies and elegiac poems fashion "an instrument for social and political change" in keeping with his own reflections on, and hopes for, the worldly work of poetry ("How It Strikes," 197).[17]

II

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.
(*CP*, 118)

"The Peacock Room"—one of H
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and Spanish leather, lyric space;
rebukes, yet cannot give the lie
to what is havened here.
(*CP*, 118)

"The Peacock Room"—one of Hayden's finest poems on the elegiac theme of transience—poignantly embodies these tensions between the poet's desire to praise the timelessness of art—"the vision chambered in gold"—and his concomitant awareness that the "lyric space" of artistic autonomy turns upon the work's apprehension of the historicity of unspeakable sacrificial suffering—"Hiroshima Watts My Lai"—that "rebukes, yet cannot give the lie / to what is havened" within and against the "here" of the text. This elegy of six stanzas dedicated to the memory of Betsy Graves Reyneau (the portrait artist who introduced Hayden to James McNeill Whistler's "Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room" at the Smithsonian)[18] complements the transience and tragic joy evoked by other poems that convey this theme of the poet's crafting of an intricate counterpoise among personal and public, transcendent and contingent resolutions to the hard facts of loss: "Locus," "The Night-Blooming Cereus," "Theme and Variation," "October," and "Monet's 'Waterlilies.'"

Critics have often observed, in tandem with Dennis Gendron, that "cycles of depression, sterility and self-doubt . . . bedeviled this man and poet" and that Hayden's emotional and psychological suffering, his "feelings of futility," deeply inflect "the subject of his poetry" (Gendron, 11–12).[19] Hayden's writing, though often personal, is not confessional; his consummate art transfigures private crises, as well as his empathy for and indignation against social suffering, into fictions at once lyrical and dispassionate, worldly and autonomous. Here, for example, in the fifth stanza Hayden transposes the image of the "spread tails" of Whistler's peacocks—"concealing her, / then folding"—onto the imagined presence of Reyneau's corpse:

her eyeless, old—Med School
cadaver, flesh-object
    pickled in formaldehyde,
who was artist, compassionate,
clear-eyed. Who was belovéd friend.
    No more. No more.
(*CP*, 119).

Of the symbolism at work here, Hayden remarks, in a 1973 interview, that the "peacocks lead me into this pain, and they also help me get away from it" (O'Brien, 122). Through such striking (if disturbing) contrasts, Hayden permits yet qualifies this elegy's ache for transcendence, foregrounding the theme of contingency (introduced in the second stanza) that returns again in the sixth by means of a subtle juxtaposition of two images: the redemptive "Rose-leaves" and the fallen "ashes." These ashes drift "toward / a bronze Bodhisattva's ancient smile" (*CP*, 119), which intimates unflinching compassion for the world of human suffering, rather than an ascetic wish for eternal release from social conflict and temporality.

Hayden's achievement in "The Peacock Room"—a poem he considered to be "one of [his] most important" (O'Brien, 120)—resonates with his remarks on the ultimate purpose of art: to "transcend our differences and underscore our similarities as human creatures" (Gendron, 181): pain, suffering, and often shocking images of violence deeply inform this writer's articulation of those existential commonalities that continually bind his commitment to the realm of human time, action, and social progress. Hayden translates his personal grief into public mourning through the text's deft and qualified acknowledgment of a wish for transcendent consolation within a context of social suffering: "weaving a wish and a weariness together / to make two wings" (*CP*, 55). Hayden's figurations of grief thus engage in a personal and public work of mourning that does not eclipse a search for faith, but grounds spiritual truths in the ongoing accomplishment of cultural praxis. His ability to negotiate this difficult path derives partly from his religious inclinations as a follower of the Baha'i faith, largely from his life experience and remarkable skill as a poet, and also at least in part from the inherent resources in the tradition of the poetic elegy.

This transition, though, from internal, inchoate grief to public mourning demands troublesome and unpredictable work. In his foundational essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud theorizes that the outcome (positive or negative) of the related processes of mourning and melancholia funda-

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mentally hinges on the degree to which the individual consciously checks the desire to form new attachments through object-cathexis. In the case of what Freud terms "normal mourning," the greater the resistance to new love-objects, the more positive the ultimate result; while in "melancholia," the less the opposition, the more negative the consequence.[20] The "work of mourning"—Freud's phrase that has been appropriated by numerous scholars and writers in diverse fields—thus depends on the work of resistance to consolation and thereby shares a strong affinity with the poetics of loss embodied by Western elegies and elegiac literary texts.

Elegies often achieve their most profound and beautiful moments at crisis points in that labor of shaping sorrow, praise, and consolation—the three fundamental modes of expression integral to grief, mourning, and the genre's rhetorical dimensions. In the wake of Freud, the majority of studies in the tradition of the Anglo-American poetic elegy have, until recently, emphasized the genre's psychological dynamics. Eminent figures in the field differentiate the premodern from the modern poem with respect to various iterations of psychoanalytic resistance-theory.[21] The general paradigm, roughly shared by all of these scholars, assesses the genre's struggle either toward or against consolation: the premodern elegy attains positive solace, while the modern elegiac poem thwarts, qualifies, or at least complicates resolutions to grief expression and mourning. This epistemology, though, warrants further scrutiny since one of the elegy's oldest preoccupations involves movements toward and against unqualified resolutions to loss and suffering.[22]

What, then, is distinctively "modern" about Robert Hayden's elegies if the frustration of consolation holds true, as a dominant theme, across the genre's avatars from the classical, through the Renaissance and early modern, and into the modern and postmodern eras?[23] First of all, it should be noted that the trajectory of the poetic elegy's modernity is not linear but progressive (if erratic at times). While figural resistance to consolation might not be the most telling sign of the elegy's modern tendencies, the genre's increasing concern with voicing oppositional resolutions with regard to secular, political, and social contexts as a call for cultural critique indicates, I believe, a truly "modern" predicament.

An elegy serves as a vehicle for the transformation of loss into gain, absence into presence, sorrow into solace, and also of the past into the wished-for present or future. Since at least the early seventeenth century, I contend, the Anglo-American elegy and elegiac poem has, with greater frequency, situated resistant consolation within secular contexts as a mecha-

nism for delivering political and social criticism, and consequently becomes increasingly implicated in the philosophy of human time.[24] Works by black American poets articulate, in their own way, that emerging modulation of praise and protest, devotion and dissent, as the poetic elegy forms (and is informed by) changes in artistic craft and social consciousness. Phillis Wheatley's "On the Death of General Wooster," for example, stands apart from the majority of her elegiac poems (which celebrate transcendental solace) and, through the utterance of General Wooster's dying wish, admonishes white slave owners to heed the call for social justice: "While yet (O deed Ungenerous!) they disgrace / And hold in bondage Afric's blameless race?"[25] In "Frederick Douglass" Paul Laurence Dunbar breaks from his own rhetorical patterns and concludes the elegy by invoking "The kindling spirit of [Douglass'] battle-cry" to teach "thy race how high / her hopes may soar" and how to "[rise] from beneath the / chast'ning rod."[26] And "From the Dark Tower" departs from the main current of Countee Cullen's elegiac poetry through a lament for the "abject and mute" labor of generations of blacks that reaches a defiant consolation of tenacious perseverance for the day of earthly (not heavenly) justice: "So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds, / And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds."[27]

These works, though, illustrate notable exceptions from the more conventional elegiac texts by Wheatley, Dunbar, and Cullen, which seek transcendent spiritual resolutions to suffering. The writings of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Audre Lorde, by contrast, include far greater numbers of resistant elegies and elegiac poems that formulate, through their unraveling of solace, social and political critiques, such as: (by Hughes) "Death of Do Dirty: A Rounder's Song" (ca. 1921–30), "The Bitter River" (ca. 1941–50), and "Montage of a Dream Deferred" (ca. 1951–60); (by Brooks) "of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery" (1945), "Memorial to Ed Bland" (1949), and "Malcolm X" (1968); and (by Lorde) "The Same Death Over and Over" (1978), "Power" (1978), and "For the Record" (1986). Of course, the political edge to these works highlights the particular sensibility and vision of each writer; at the same time, however, such manifestations of the elegy underscore both the genre's vitality and its increasing potential to deliver social criticism through a secular poetics of loss that challenges a consolation grounded on purportedly universal, sacred, atemporal principles.

While Hayden's elegies address primarily the intractable work of mourning that necessitates varying degrees of resistance against consolation, the poet's modernity, I believe, resides in his predominant concern with articu-

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III

I saw his body shoved into a van.
I saw the hatred for our kind
glistening like tears
in the policemen's eyes.
(*CP*, 163)

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om beneath the / chast'ning rod."[26]
s from the main current of Countee
nt for the "abject and mute" labor of
fiant consolation of tenacious perse-
renly) justice: "So in the dark we hide
tend our agonizing seeds."[27]
ole exceptions from the more conven-
ıar, and Cullen, which seek transcen-
The writings of Langston Hughes,
by contrast, include far greater num-
oems that formulate, through their
ical critiques, such as: (by Hughes)
g" (ca. 1921–30), "The Bitter River"
ream Deferred" (ca. 1951–60); (by
s way to Lincoln Cemetery" (1945),
'Malcolm X" (1968); and (by Lorde)
1978), "Power" (1978), and "For the
ıl edge to these works highlights the
h writer; at the same time, however,
erscore both the genre's vitality and
ıl criticism through a secular poetics
grounded on purportedly universal,

ıarily the intractable work of mourn-
of resistance against consolation, the
is predominant concern with articu-

lating solace (however qualified or negated) within and against interpersonal, cultural, and historical contexts rather than with positing any firm belief that loss may be compensated by the intervention of immutable transcendent values. A difficult paradox here, though, at the heart of Hayden's life and work, emerges from the productive tension between his personal quest to surpass racial, cultural, and social differences and his artistic commitment to remaining engaged, through his work's crafted autonomy, with the specific conflicts and contexts of human time.

In a letter from December 1970, which has since become a touchstone for the poet's philosophy of writing, Hayden describes his work as "one way of coming to grips with inner and outer realities—as a spiritual act, really, a sort of prayer for illumination and perfection."[28] Hayden's poetry indeed strives to grasp a nimble balance between "inner and outer realities," between personal and public confrontations with tragic circumstances, while also voicing an attunement to spiritual truths. Although strong religious energy dwells within his writing, Hayden's elegies and elegiac poems only occasionally seek unqualified, transcendent resolutions to conflict.[29] Hayden incessantly struggled to believe fully in an immutable universal order behind the realm of human affairs, as in his stated conviction, in 1974, "that there is a divine plan for the world" (Gendron, 159);[30] yet his poetry shoulders the heft of a resilient and contingent skepticism.

III

I saw his body shoved into a van.
I saw the hatred for our kind
glistening like tears
in the policemen's eyes.
(*CP*, 163)

Suffering is inherently political and ethical for Hayden because, as the above passage from "Elegies for Paradise Valley" illustrates, pain and violence demand from the poet what they often so gravely lack in their immediate historical contexts of occurrence: a witness.[31] Hayden excels as a "symbolist poet struggling with the facts of history"[32] in the eight ballad-like poems that constitute this celebrated reflection on his early years in the Detroit ghetto (ironically called Paradise Valley) where he was born. Through the work's concluding image of Hayden and Uncle Crip dancing together "to Jellyroll // Morton's brimstone / piano on the phonograph, /

laughing . . . face[s] foremost into hell" (*CP*, 168, 170), "Elegies for Paradise Valley" brazenly challenges traditional themes of elegiac consolation that would have been so familiar to the poet, having been raised in the Baptist tradition. Composed late in life, this elegiac sequence from *American Journal* (1978) looks backward, from the perspective of liberated spiritual energy, to the poet's childhood when he perhaps first confronted his own ambivalence about moralistic dichotomies between the worlds of the living and the departed.

Across the spectrum of his poems that counter transcendental resolutions to loss—such as "Full Moon," "A Plague of Starlings," "Killing the Calves," "A Ballad of Remembrance," and "Electrical Storm"—Hayden posits an ironic "anticonsolatory" consolation within the complexities of human time. His elegiac witnessing therefore forestalls the lapsing into oblivion of the past through the paradoxical premise that social progress may be achieved only when loss becomes a catalyst for persistent ethical activism. Through such qualification, Hayden's elegies and elegiac poems articulate brave (often bracing) repudiations of the dominant social order, political ideology, and historical consciousness characteristic of twentieth-century American culture.

"Night, Death, Mississippi," for example, concludes with a variable refrain—*"O Jesus burning on the lily cross . . . O night, rawhead and bloodybones night . . . O night betrayed by darkness not its own"* (*CP*, 16)—that merges the speaker's persona with that of the lynched slave "squealing bloody Jesus," a figure first invoked by the "old man" who, "in his reek / and gauntness" (*CP*, 15), laughs while fondly recalling his escapades with the Ku Klux Klan. "'From the Corpse Woodpiles, from the Ashes'" opens with a lament for victims of brutality from Dachau to Johannesburg to Seoul, then shifts toward a final figure of a "man beatified" who "lies chained" and delivers, through his pain, "our anguish and our anodyne" (*CP*, 46). Even the spare, imagistic "Approximations" underscores, in the last stanza, the context of quotidian affairs within which the work of mourning continuously resides: "On the platform at / dawn, grey mailbags waiting; / a crated coffin" (*CP*, 11). In each of these cases, Hayden limns a double bind: suffering engenders the poet's desire for solace as well as a concomitant and persistent awareness of the social conditions that warrant vigilance and correction. These thematic and existential factors also predominate in Hayden's elegies that formulate resistant consolations within and against contexts of either the contingent present (e.g., "Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday," "The Return," and "The Year of the Child") or the presentness of the past (e.g.,

"Runagate Runagate," "Belsen,
Sue Ellen Westerfield"). And, a
work, some type or instance of
light/dark imagery—serves as
and historical imagination.

"John Brown" powerfully illu
craft, cultural discourse, and his
resources inherent in the poetic
Brown's life and legacy from a
mings, Hayden often played wit
William Webb, reputedly haunt
Frederick Douglass, and a group
house in the spring of 1859 in
Ferry [Cummings, 6].) Pontheo
the poem, Hayden drew deepl
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with the underground railroad)
received his first poetic patrona
see also C. Davis, 96–100). Hay
"story" emerged slowly, though
his time as a writer and researc
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first appearance in print in 1978

According to Ellen Sharp,
"could not bring himself to w
would equal the depth of feeli
"Runagate Runagate" (1949) b
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he could not stomach the viole
Kansas."[34] Three fortuitous eve
of Michigan, Professor Marvi
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for publication" (Cummings, 8
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tion of Jacob Lawrence's *John B*
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"Runagate Runagate," "Belsen, Day of Liberation," and "The Ballad of Sue Ellen Westerfield"). And, as argued above, in virtually every elegiac work, some type or instance of sacrificial violence—often accentuated by light/dark imagery—serves as a matrix for Hayden's faith, social critique, and historical imagination.

"John Brown" powerfully illustrates this nexus of life experience, artistic craft, cultural discourse, and historical consciousness achieved through the resources inherent in the poetic elegy. Hayden had been fascinated by John Brown's life and legacy from an early age. According to Frederick Cummings, Hayden often played with his friends, in Detroit, "near the house of William Webb, reputedly haunted by the ghost of John Brown."[33] (Brown, Frederick Douglass, and a group of prominent black citizens met at Webb's house in the spring of 1859 in advance of the October raid on Harpers Ferry [Cummings, 6].) Pontheolla Williams notes further that, in writing the poem, Hayden drew deeply from his near thirty years of fellowship with the Second Baptist Church in Detroit, where "John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and church elders periodically rendezvoused" (in conjunction with the underground railroad) and where, two generations later, "Hayden received his first poetic patronage and grew to manhood" (P. Williams, 171; see also C. Davis, 96–100). Hayden's own contribution to the John Brown "story" emerged slowly, though, from an initial period of 1936–40 (when his time as a writer and researcher for the Works Progress Administration Federal Writers' Project piqued his interest in black history) to the poem's first appearance in print in 1978 (Cummings, 7).

According to Ellen Sharp, despite many years of planning, Hayden "could not bring himself to write a heroic poem" on John Brown that would equal the depth of feeling in his "Frederick Douglass" (1947) and "Runagate Runagate" (1949) because it "was difficult for him to come to terms with the enigmas and paradoxes in the character of John Brown, and he could not stomach the violence and bloodshed of Brown's activities in Kansas."[34] Three fortuitous events intervened: a colleague at the University of Michigan, Professor Marvin Felheim, "discovered that [Hayden] had been working on a poem on John Brown and persuaded him to finish it for publication" (Cummings, 8); the Detroit Institute of Arts subsequently commissioned the text from Hayden to accompany a photographic edition of Jacob Lawrence's *John Brown* (1941), which depicts the abolitionist's story through twenty-two sequential gouaches; and Hayden was given the opportunity to study Lawrence's images at the institute, which, as Sharp believes, somehow "aided in resolving his difficulties with the subject"

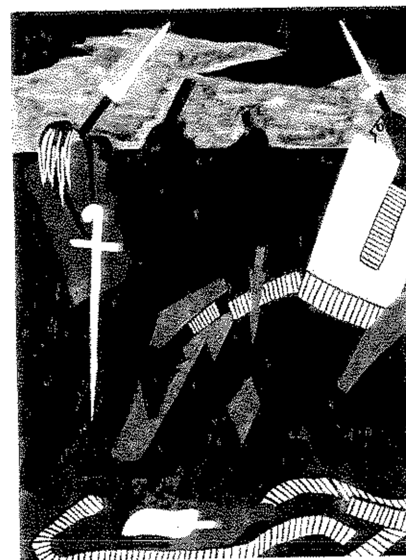
(Sharp, 13). Hayden seems to have been especially moved by "Lawrence's interpretation of Brown as a God-driven man, consumed by an ideal" as well as by the artist's "symbolic use of color and form" and "the images of the series which are the least realistic and which suggest rather than illustrate their subject" (Sharp, 13).

Several passages from Hayden's "John Brown" indeed resonate most strikingly with Lawrence's gouaches, such as the following lines from the elegy's final section:

> And now
>
> these mordant images—
>
> these vibrant stainedglass
>
> colors, elemental shapes
>
> in ardent interplay
>
> with what we know of him
>
> know yet fail to understand—
>
> even we
>
> for whom he died:
>
> (Shall we not say he died
>
> for us?)
>
> (*CP*, 153)

The last words of Hayden's text, in fact, conclude with a colon that gestures directly to Lawrence's "haunting stark / torchlight images:" (*CP*, 153), such as the twentieth work in the series to which Lawrence added the following description: "No. 20. John Brown held Harpers Ferry for 12 hours. His defeat was a few hours off."[35]

In "John Brown," as in his other elegiac poems about specific individuals or historical events ("The Ballad of Nat Turner," "Middle Passage," "Words in the Mourning Time," "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz" [for Malcolm X], "Elegies for Paradise Valley"), Hayden witnesses violence in order to signify the transcendent realm that hinges on the contingent dimension of human time—"Fire harvest: harvest fire:" (*CP*, 152)—thereby investing his texts with sacrificial historicity. On the one hand, Hayden's "John Brown" gives voice to private and public grief for the victims of the abolitionist's rampages—"spent forlorn colossal / in that bloody light / death-agonies around him"—and, in reply, conveys a wish for transcendent consolation—or "fire harvest"—that is, for an eternal release from human conflict: "I have failed: / Come, Death, breathe life / into my Cause, O Death" (*CP*, 152). On the other hand, the elegy does not rest here, but hastens forward



1. "No. 20. John Brown held Harpers Ferr off." From the series of twenty-two gouacl Jacob Lawrence. By permission of Gwend Society (ARS), New York.

to the chiasmal legacy of such sacri swiftly moves his text from the han clockwise / in the air" (*CP*, 153)—tc grounded in the immanent/immin the poet's lines, and the reader's acti

> the hour
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> speeding to that hour
>
> his dead-of-night
>
> sorrows visions prophesied:
>
> And now
>
> these haunting stark
>
> torchlight images:
>
> (*CP*, 153)

Hayden, thus, often writes the eleg resistance in which violence functic bility: to invoke the sacred while ur

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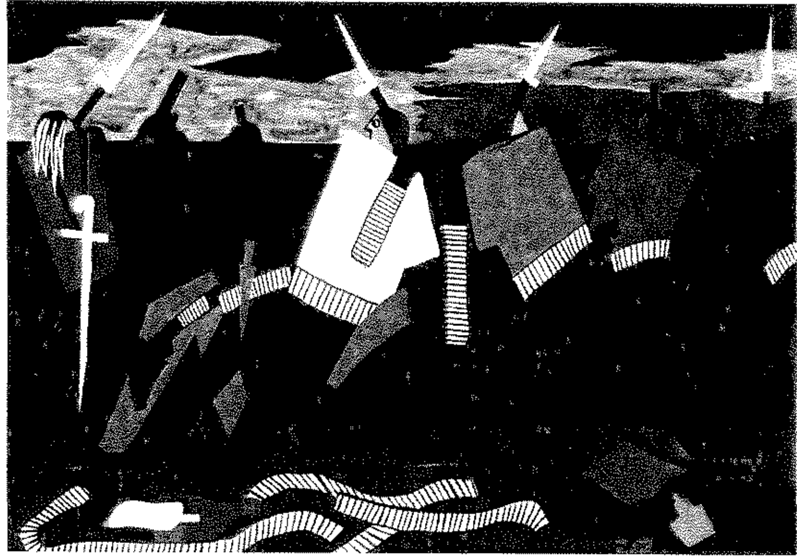

1. "No. 20. John Brown held Harpers Ferry for 12 Hours. His defeat was a few hours off." From the series of twenty-two gouaches *The Legend of John Brown*. 1941. Jacob Lawrence. By permission of Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

to the chiasmal legacy of such sacrificial violence: "harvest fire." Hayden swiftly moves his text from the hanging of John Brown—"body turning clockwise / in the air" (*CP*, 153)—to a concluding trope of prophetic time grounded in the immanent/imminent moment of Lawrence's gouaches, the poet's lines, and the reader's active interpretation:

> the hour
> speeding to that hour
> his dead-of-night
> sorrows visions prophesied:
>
> And now
> these haunting stark
> torchlight images:
> (*CP*, 153)

Hayden, thus, often writes the elegy as a vehicle for personal and political resistance in which violence functions as a sign of the text's dual responsibility: to invoke the sacred while underscoring the secular, social contexts

through and against which the poem's expression of grief may intervene (as a work of mourning) in the entanglement among personal recollection, cultural memory, and official historical discourse.[36]

This singular juxtaposition of an expressed desire for spiritual release together with a persistent, compassionate return to the world of interminable conflict shines with brilliant complexity and warmth throughout Robert Hayden's poetics of loss. His elegies and elegiac poems enact a redemptive (but not transcendent) vision—a "voyage through death / to life upon these shores" (*CP*, 48)—through their witnessing of suffering and their shaping of the poet's figural historicity. Hayden's great determination for that hopeful journey, as in his symbolic elegy "The Diver," engenders what may be the most impossible (and essential) work of mourning: to accept the want of deliverance from worldly suffering—"the numbing / kisses that I craved"—and yet relinquish such wished-for consolation, "somehow [begin] the / measured rise" (*CP*, 4) into the half-light of human time.

Notes

This chapter is dedicated to John F. Callahan. I would also like to thank my colleague Clark Davis for his comments on an early draft.

1. The inclusion of religion here might appear dubious, if not contradictory, given Hayden's conversion, in the early 1940s, to the Baha'i faith, except that Baha'i holds that all religions grow from a common ground. Hayden's poetry, after that point, becomes increasingly informed by such a pluralistic spiritual (if secular) ideology, which also shapes his artistic concerns with politics and history. See Pontheolla Williams, *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 115–16, 154–55. Subsequent references appear in the text as P. Williams.

2. Tolson led the attack against Hayden during the spring of 1966 at Fisk University's First Black Writers' Conference. See Brian Conniff, "Answering 'The Waste Land': Robert Hayden and the Rise of the African American Poetic Sequence," *African American Review* 33, no. 3 (1999): 487–506.

3. Ron Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 33.

4. Hayden's wariness, in this regard, anticipates a resistance to (black) theory that would augment the comparative notions of literature, criticism, and theory advocated by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in "Authority, (White) Power, and the (Black) Critic; It's All Greek to Me," in *Culture/Power/History*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 252–258.

5. The influence of W. H. Auden and, through him, W. B. Yeats, plays a major role in this matter from as early as 1941, when Hayden participated in one of

Auden's classes at the University of Mi
also Robert Hayden, introduction to A
Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 1c
View of His Life and Development as
Carolina, 1975), 174–76; and Robert H
in *Written in Water, Written in Stone*, ed. N
Michigan Press, 1996), 195–96. Subsec
abbreviated "How It Strikes."

6. See Charles Davis, "Robert Hayc
ed. Donald B. Gibson (Englewood Cl
burn Williams Jr., "Covenant of Tim
Michael Harper and Robert Stepto (I
66–84; and Vera M. Kutzinski, "Char
Revisionism in Robert Hayden's 'Mid
Poetry, ed. Laurence Goldstein and R
Michigan Press, 2001), 306–21. Subs
Davis, W. Williams, and Kutzinski.

7. For a more extended discussion
historicity, see W. Scott Howard, "C
Renaissance Dialogue," *The Comparati*

8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Co*
Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983), 18.

9. For a useful reflection on Althus
bolic power of metaphor, signifying p
"Metaphor and Social Antagonisms,
ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Gros
1988), 249–57.

10. Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology
Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt
Williams describes Hayden as a poe
his poetic genius and scholarship" w
criticism" in order to contribute (thro
and social change (P. Williams, 81). C
tics, see also P. Williams, 47, 51, 80–8

11. On Hayden's religious backgr
low the Baha'i faith, see P. Williams.
12, sorrow and mourning are figured
that "shall wax old like a garment" w
deemed of the Lord." Suffering from
the tract of human time, yet the finite
the language of 2 Corinthians 4:18, a
"the things which are seen *are* tempo
nal" (*The Holy Bible: King James Versio*

12. My argument here that links th

expression of grief may intervene
ment among personal recollection,
discourse.[36]

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return to the world of interminable
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age through death / to life upon
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African American Poetic Sequence,"
-506.

lism," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Ad-
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/History, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff
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hen Hayden participated in one of

Auden's classes at the University of Michigan. See P. Williams, 22–27, 30–33. See also Robert Hayden, introduction to *Kaleidoscope*, ed. Robert Hayden (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 108; Dennis Gendron, "Robert Hayden: A View of His Life and Development as a Poet" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1975), 174–76; and Robert Hayden, "'How It Strikes a Contemporary,'" in *Written in Water, Written in Stone*, ed. Martin Lammon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 195–96. Subsequent references appear in the text, the latter abbreviated "How It Strikes."

6. See Charles Davis, "Robert Hayden's Use of History," in *Modern Black Poets*, ed. Donald B. Gibson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 96–111; Wilburn Williams Jr., "Covenant of Timelessness and Time," in *Chant of Saints*, ed. Michael Harper and Robert Stepto (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 66–84; and Vera M. Kutzinski, "Changing Permanences: Historical and Literary Revisionism in Robert Hayden's 'Middle Passage,'" in *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Laurence Goldstein and Robert Chrisman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 306–21. Subsequent references appear in the text as C. Davis, W. Williams, and Kutzinski.

7. For a more extended discussion of this theoretical formulation of figural historicity, see W. Scott Howard, "Companions with Time: Milton, Tasso, and Renaissance Dialogue," *The Comparatist* 28 (2004): 20–22.

8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 18, 40.

9. For a useful reflection on Althusserian overdetermination vis-à-vis the symbolic power of metaphor, signifying practice, and hegemony, see Ernesto Laclau, "Metaphor and Social Antagonisms," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 249–57.

10. Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 157, 163. Pontheolla Williams describes Hayden as a poet who strove to balance a "reckless faith in his poetic genius and scholarship" with a "stern sense of self-discipline and self-criticism" in order to contribute (through his teaching and writing) toward justice and social change (P. Williams, 81). On Hayden's humanistic aesthetics and politics, see also P. Williams, 47, 51, 80–81, and 90.

11. On Hayden's religious background and choice, in the early 1940s, to follow the Baha'i faith, see P. Williams, 115–16 and 154–55. In Isaiah 51:6, 11, and 12, sorrow and mourning are figured among the mutable substances of the earth that "shall wax old like a garment" while "everlasting joy" shall return to the "redeemed of the Lord." Suffering from affliction or loss may thus transpire within the tract of human time, yet the finite and particular experience of grief reveals, in the language of 2 Corinthians 4:18, an infinite and universal pattern for salvation: "the things which are seen *are* temporal; but the things which are not seen *are* eternal" (*The Holy Bible: King James Version* [New York: Meridian, 1974], 586, 160).

12. My argument here that links the modern elegy to registers of social protest

is strongly informed by two outstanding works of scholarship and interpretation: Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). Subsequent references appear in the text. On the relationship between the elegy and historical discourse, see W. Scott Howard, "Landscapes of Memorialisation," in *Studying Cultural Landscapes*, ed. Iain Robertson and Penny Richards (London: Arnold, 2003), 47–70, and "'Mine Own Breaking': Resistance, Gender, and Temporality in Seventeenth-Century English Elegies and Jonson's 'Eupheme,'" in *Grief and Gender, 700–1700*, ed. Jennifer C. Vaught (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 215–30, 295–98.

13. See Arthur Davis, *From the Dark Tower* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1981), 1–14, 137–46, 174–80, and Ramazani, 1–31, 135–75, 361–65. This tradition, which my chapter addresses later, might include writers such as Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Elinor Wylie, W. B. Yeats, Countee Cullen, Georgia Johnson, Langston Hughes, W. H. Auden, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Michael Harper, Sapphire, and Carl Phillips. Such a gathering of poets represents some (but certainly not all) of the predecessors and contemporaries who shaped Hayden's work as well as writers of more recent generations who continue to test the aesthetic and cultural limits (and possibilities) of the elegy and elegiac mode.

14. Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York: Liveright, 1985), 99, 26, 56, 99. Subsequent references appear in the text abbreviated *CP*.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 75, 102–3. Subsequent references appear in the text.

16. See note 19.

17. Hayden's final address (as consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress) in May 1978 underscores his hope that his own writing might contribute toward the improvement of social justice: "To be a poet, it seems to me, is to care passionately about justice and one's fellow beings" ("How It Strikes," 198).

18. John O'Brien, ed., *Interviews with Black Writers* (New York: Liveright, 1973), 120–21. Subsequent references appear in the text.

19. Biographical interpretations prevail in Hayden studies. See, for example, Robert B. Stepto, "After Modernism, after Hibernation," in Harper and Stepto, *Chant of Saints*, 470–86; Frederick Glaysher, "Re-Centering," *World Order* 17, no. 4 (1983): 9–17; John Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984); Fred M. Fetrow, *Robert Hayden* (Boston: Twayne, 1984) and "Portraits and Personae," in *Black American Poets between Worlds, 1940–1960*, ed. R. Baxter Miller (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 43–76; Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Black American Poets and Dramatists* (New York: Chelsea House, 1995), 121–37; and Phillip M. Richards, "Robert Hayden (1913–1980): An Appreciation," *Massachusetts Review* 40 (1999–2000): 599.

20. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Collected Papers*, vol. 4, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1934), 154–55, 159–60.

21. In addition to Ramazani's text, s
Johns Hopkins University Press, 19
(University Park: Pennsylvania State U
and Paradox (Baltimore: Johns Hopk
Beyond Consolation (Ithaca, NY: Cornel
"Stanley Plumly and the Elegy of Re
38, no. 3 (2002): 227–43.

22. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual*
bridge University Press, 1974), and
University of North Carolina Press, 1

23. On the postmodern elegy, see
Greenwood, 1999), and W. Scott Hov
Postmodern American Elegies," *The*
Joseph Donahue (Jersey City, NJ: Ta

24. See, for example, Kate Lilley, "
ing, History, ed. Isobel Grundy and Su
Press, 1992), 72–92, and W. Scott Ho
ing," in *Speaking Grief in English Liter*
Press, 2002), 177–96.

25. Phillis Wheatley, *The Collected*
(New York: Oxford University Press

26. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Co*
Braxton (Charlottesville: University

27. Countee Cullen, *Copper Sun* (N

28. Robert Hayden, "Statement on
ed. Laurence Goldstein and Robert C
Press, 2001), 9.

29. "The Point" stands as Hayden'
a moment of transcendent release fro
scape merge as the elegiac text ("insc
ration on the isthmus at Stonington
liminal and literal/littoral point—t

All for a moment seems in
on brightness, as on sunlit
bronze and stone, here at l
praise for dead patriots of Stonin
we are for an instant held i
like memories in the mind of Go
(*CP*, 181)

30. Within the gathering of Hayd
posit consolation beyond the measu
poems include "Soledad," "Homag
and "'Lear Is Gay.'"

21. In addition to Ramazani's text, see Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Celeste Schenck, *Mourning and Panegyric* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Bryan Walpert, "Stanley Plumly and the Elegy of Relationship," *Papers on Language and Literature* 38, no. 3 (2002): 227–43.

22. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), and Ellen Lambert, *Placing Sorrow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).

23. On the postmodern elegy, see David Rigsbee, *Styles of Ruin* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), and W. Scott Howard, "Formal Mourning, Transgression, and Postmodern American Elegies," *The World in Time and Space*, ed. Edward Foster and Joseph Donahue (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 2002), 122–46.

24. See, for example, Kate Lilley, "Women's Elegy, 1640–1740," in *Women, Writing, History*, ed. Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 72–92, and W. Scott Howard, "An Collins and the Politics of Mourning," in *Speaking Grief in English Literary Culture* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 177–96.

25. Phillis Wheatley, *The Collected Works of Phyllis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 149–50.

26. Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Joanne Braxton (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 6–7.

27. Countee Cullen, *Copper Sun* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), 3.

28. Robert Hayden, "Statement on Poetics," in *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Laurence Goldstein and Robert Chrisman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 9.

29. "The Point" stands as Hayden's singular articulation of unqualified solace in a moment of transcendent release from worldly contingency. Here poem and landscape merge as the elegiac text ("inscribed / on brightness") of Hayden's transfiguration on the isthmus at Stonington, Connecticut, moves paradoxically toward a liminal and literal/littoral point—the instant (*atomus*) of spiritual illumination:

> All for a moment seems inscribed
> on brightness, as on sunlit
> bronze and stone, here at land's end,
> praise for dead patriots of Stonington;
> we are for an instant held in shining
> like memories in the mind of God.
> (*CP*, 181)

30. Within the gathering of Hayden's few elegiac works that, in my estimation, posit consolation beyond the measure of the clock or the record of history, other poems include "Soledad," "Homage to Paul Robeson," "Paul Laurence Dunbar," and "'Lear Is Gay.'"

31. Brief portions in the following discussion of "Elegies for Paradise Valley" first appeared in W. Scott Howard, "Elegies for Paradise Valley," *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 283–85.

32. Michael Harper, "A Symbolist Poet Struggling with Historical Fact: *Angle of Ascent* by Robert Hayden," *New York Times Book Review*, February 22, 1976, 9. See also Harper's poems (such as "In Hayden's Collage," "Healing Song," "Double Elegy," and "Figments") as well as his tribute to his friend, "Remembering Robert Hayden," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 21 (1982): 182–86.

33. Frederick J. Cummings, preface to *The Legend of John Brown* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1978), 6. Subsequent references appear in the text.

34. Ellen Sharp, introduction to *The Legend of John Brown* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1978), 13. Subsequent references appear in the text.

35. Jacob Lawrence, *The Legend of John Brown* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1978), 35.

36. On this notion of "entanglement," see Sturken, 1–17.

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Time is the fire in which we
—Delmore Schwartz, "Cal
through This April's Day

Nor can it be said that post
reward for those who were
though time were a racetrac
run so swiftly that they sim
spectator's range of vision.
—Hannah Arendt

7 Delmore Schwartz's S

Jim Keller

By the time his full-page obituary ap
14, 1966, Delmore Schwartz's body
the Bellevue morgue.[1] The poet's na
a *Times* journalist who regularly per
still be a matter of some time before
a family member who had read the
series of delays is often used to mea
calls Schwartz's "fall from grace" d
commentary is devoted to noting th
ferred physical identification, given
so early and profusely in his youth.
funeral onward, though, Schwartz v
the century's most underrated Ame
had come too early and one whose t

Schwartz's delayed literary recog
links that have been drawn between
and his posthumous reception. Rob
was removed to the city morgue, it
process of lamenting that twelve yea
consider one of this century's most