# The Place of Poetry in Religion and Society: An Interview of Robert E. Hayden with Douglas Ruhe

Introduction by JOHN S. HATCHER

The life of Robert E. Hayden (1913-1980) was replete with ironies, some propitious, some cruel, but ultimately he emerged victorious. A few weeks before his death, the Department of African and American Studies at the University of Michigan paid tribute to him and his work, and after the vilification he had endured from those who felt he was not sufficiently passionate or vitriolic in his poems about race, this honor had an incredibly powerful meaning for him.

Hayden was born in a ghetto of Detroit, studied at the University of Michigan under W. H. Auden, and became a Bahá'í in 1942. But Hayden rejected the notion of being considered what he called a "hyphenated poet," either a "black-poet" or a "Bahá'í-poet"; he wanted his art to stand on its own merits and not be "ghettoized," as he put it. Ironically, many of his best-known poems—such as "Middle Passage"—allude powerfully to African American history and his own experience from living in the segregated South. Similarly, one of his most repeated themes deals with the sense of being an alien in his native land. And that sense of alienation rankled most when it came from those who criticized him for not being sufficiently polemical after the rise of the Black Power movement in the 1960s.

In his earlier years when he was a professor at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, few on campus paid much attention to his accomplishments, until he was hired away from Fisk by the University of Michigan after he won the Grand Prize for Poetry at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966. A decade later, after honorary doctorates and rapidly increasing notoriety, he was appointed in 1975 to serve two terms as the Poet Laureate of the United States, the first black poet to receive this honor.

The interview that follows took place at the National Bahá'í Center in 1975 just after Hayden's appointment as poet laureate, and it thus reflects the energy, ebullience, and wonderful humor of Hayden in his prime as poet and at the mere beginnings of the national and international recognition that would follow. Ironically, though, his reputation would ascend most powerfully belatedly after he died from cancer five years later. He is now considered among the first rank of American poets of the twentieth

century, and his work is anthologized in virtually every major collection of American literature.

During the course of this informative and delightful conversation, we are allowed to sense some of Hayden's views about the art of poetry in general and, more particularly, about what he believed to be the intimate relationship between poetry and the revealed word of the Manifestations. We are also touched by his wonderful wit, and we are surprised by his candid assessment of what he felt to be the decline in the quality of much contemporary confessional poetry, a great deal of which he considered self-indulgent and little related to loftier concerns regarding global peace and freedom and dignity for all the peoples of the world—cardinal themes of his beloved Bahá'í Faith. Still, it is only by turning to the superb poetry of Hayden that one can, in the long run, come to apprehend the enduring contribution he made to the art of poetry and to understand the extent to which those values underlie his perspective as an artist and as a Bahá'í.

> Hayden's stand as enunciated in his statements on poetic, then, was in no way a denial of his racial identity or a denial of his belief as a Bahá'í—it was a courageous and forceful statement of the bare requisites for good poetry and a caution against those who would dictate what the artist must say or how he should say it. It should not be confused with an advocacy of complete license; it was the expression of Hayden's belief that we must not let "monsters of abstraction/police and threaten us," but strive for an atmosphere where "godliness/ is possible and man/ is . . . / permitted to be man" (Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness* 74).

## The Interview

RUHE: I think I would like to start with a question about the future of poetry. What will the future of poetry in America be? What will the third century bring? Maybe you could talk about that in two parts: the content of the poetry, and then the themes and techniques.

HAYDEN: The best way to begin is by saying that it's hard to predict, but it seems to me that there is a great variety in poetry today, and I think that variety will continue. I think there will be many diverse voices in American poetry in the next century. Today we have all sorts of forms, although, on the whole, there seems to be a reaction against formally constructed poetry and there is a lot of interest in open forms. Perhaps, as the century goes on there will be more interesting forms, and even new forms may emerge. I think that even film, cinema, and TV may somehow influence the direction poetry takes, may influence the form of it. I can imagine poems used with films

As far as content is concerned, I think American poets will go on writing about life as it is lived here in the United States, and coping with the special experiences that are characteristic of us. Beyond that I really can't say too much. I think that if we remain a free people, if the individual continues to be allowed his freedom and we don't have some kind of regimentation, if we don't have groups that rise and gain control over us, then poets will be allowed diversity and all kinds of new forms. Because there are experiments being made in this century that will carry over time in the arts, as well as in the sciences, I think that in the future there will be the same kind of diversity.

RUHE: What about the content of poetry? To be more specific, I've observed in my own reading of poetry that many of the themes of contemporary poetry are what I would call fragmented, or they deal with chaos and they reflect chaos, in a sense. It's hard to get a coherent idea. In other words, our lives are consecutive, but these poems don't seem to be consecutive.

HAYDEN: One reason for that, I think—and I don't mean that it's necessarily a good thing—is that poets of this century—and I myself feel this very strongly—have wanted to get away from the grandiose and from the didactic. There has been a growing concern with the nature of the individual life. Not so many poets are trying to write some kind of epical poem or make some universal statement. Our contemporary lives almost don't permit that.

One of the things we have to struggle against in this society is anonymity, not only in America but in the world. The computer, the insistence on conformity, and the threat of regimentation—all these make it difficult to maintain individuality.

I realize that there is a great deal of poetry today that is rather trivial in content. "I want to cross the street . . . Wow!" And my feeling is, "After you did that, so what?" But the positive aspect of it is that poets are celebrants of the individual, and many of us feel that the day-to-day lives of people, the happenings—the things that we have to do in the course of a day in order to just survive physically—these things are important and have their place.

It's not just the great moments when you have a profound feeling, when you fall deeply in love, or when you hear great music. It's not only the great moments that are important. Everything is important! But, unfortunately, the tendency sometimes is to get bogged down in petty details, to get bogged down in trivia and not see anything beyond that.

Now, of course, one reason for the fragmentation—in the other arts as well as in poetry—is the fact that there is no strong transcendent belief in anything. We all know that the "religious impulse"—to use a kind of

academic term—is still very much alive, it is but thwarted and misdirected. In fact, a good many artist feel that life doesn't have too much meaning, that it is a physical thing and, like all physical things, it has an ending; and that if it has a purpose, what is it?

Well, you can't know the purpose of life—or the purpose of anything—without some sense of transcendence, some kind of spiritual vision. It's impossible to know. For example, I think that a poet like Whitman had a tremendous cosmic vision. And while Whitman did not align himself with some particular church or some particular religion, he possessed what I call a "God consciousness."

He was, of course, pantheistic. He saw God in all things. And while I do happen not to believe in that, I can understand it. This belief gave force and vitality to a great deal of Whitman's poetry. Even for people who are not religious, who are not inclined to think that there is a religious or spiritual dimension to reality, there is still humanism. Because if you love humanity and are working for the good of humanity, this ideal will empower you. But there isn't even this minimal sort of transcendent underpinning in the work of many people.

RUHE: How does this lack of transcendence relate to your own poetry? What directions are you taking now and will you be taking in the coming years, and how do they depart from or build on what you have done in the past?

HAYDEN: It's easy for me to talk about everybody else's work. I could give you a great lecture about W. H. Auden at the drop of a hat. It's hard for me to talk about my own work. But I suppose I am of my times. I'm rather like Robert Frost—I feel like I have a lover's quarrel with the world. I don't hate the world I live in, but there are some things about it I really deplore, and there are some things about it I find downright frightening.

I am a realist about most things and certainly about political, social, and moral questions. I am responding to the world around me, and I have been trying to find new forms. I have been trying to work toward something new (that really won't be new: I can't say that it is a brand new form that has never been used before); I have been trying to get away from conventional forms or use them in some way that is distinctly my own.

At one time I really didn't know what my subject matter was. It has been wisely said that a poet does not choose his subject; his subject chooses him. And I've been fortunate in that some rather important subjects have chosen me. I have sort of a sense of what it is I ought to be doing.

I seem to be concerned, like all writers who are really dedicated writers, with the struggle between good and evil. I guess it comes down to that. In my poems there are often references to darkness and light. I have become conscious of that and now I try not to use those symbols quite so much

because I think I tend to overdo it. But I suppose in the work of most serious poets, the great theme *is* the struggle between good and evil, a concern with good and evil, but not in any narrow, moralistic sense.

And this brings me to another point: I think that all art—if it does reflect human values, even in a negative way sometimes—is religious and has spiritual impact, because it comes from the inside; it wells up from the psyche.

I really don't know how to talk about my own work other than in these terms. I think that when you are really good about the work you're doing, and you can rattle it off, then your audience should be suspicious of you, because that's not the kind of thing poetry, or any art form, is. You don't go about it in some deliberate way. Edgar Allen Poe, in discussing the way he wrote "The Raven" says things like, "I got this effect when I did this, and this effect when I did that." But he is talking through his hat. I am sure Poe didn't go about his poetry that way. I have said, rather nastily, that if that's the way he wrote "The Raven," then no wonder it is no better than it is.

This doesn't mean to say—as I am careful to point out to my students—that the poet is some kind of brainless child who is just playing with words and who might arrive at something, hit or miss. We all have a deep sense, if we are any good, of what the art involves and how impossible it is for any of us to achieve perfection.

I suppose I would have to fall back on what has become a formula for me, and that is Dylan Thomas' statement that he is a poet who is seeking to honor men and praise God. That, too, is what it comes down to for me, and I suppose it is very similar to what is stated in the Bahá'í Writings about the role of the artist.

RUHE: What about the destiny of America as a theme, and particularly beginning the third century of American history? Is this a worthy theme for poets to explore? And how does it fit with the destiny of mankind as a whole?

HAYDEN: It's certainly a worthy theme, but you'd be surprised at the number of poets who really don't want to write on that theme. They fear the flag waiver, the jingoist in our midst, the people who believe in "our country, right or wrong." The politicians, the rhetoricians have discouraged serious poets from writing about America.

I have written a poem, which I call my bicentennial poem, and it is not mindless or overweening or overbearing praise for America. At the same time it is not a condemnation or a vicious satire. I started writing a satirical poem about the bicentennial, but I never could do it. My heart was not in it because that is not the way I feel about America.

I think that many American poets have a very positive vision of the country. Some of my friends who are

poets have a rather deep feeling about America. I know that Michael Harper does. He is one of our outstanding poets, one of our best. But this patriotism is qualified or modified by an awareness of all the dreadful things that we permit to go on. It is very difficult for poets on the whole.

It is always rather difficult to write about America because America is so many different things. We are not a unified people, although many would agree on something called the "American dream," as I say in this poem, and, at least on paper, we recognize the sanctity of the individual, and we do believe in individual rights and so on. But I cannot imagine any poet writing a poem—no matter how much goodwill he felt—about freedom and the sacredness of the individual without being aware of all the things that stand in the way of the realization of these ideals.

I could not do it when I was writing my poem; there is no way that I could ignore it. But I hope that we will always be able to dissent and to keep this lovers' quarrel with America going, because—to paraphrase the paraphrase that I just made—that is what it comes down to. We poets have this lovers' quarrel with America: we love it; we want it to do better; we don't want the bad guys always to have control over the good guys.

Increasingly, as America goes on, poets are going to reflect in various ways the state of things. Today, if you were to read the work of, say, ten or fifteen American poets who were not ostensibly writing about America, you would find that the work they do, in the final analysis, would be some sort of commentary on the quality of life in America.

[*In Hayden's last volume "American Journal," he writes a poem about his perspective on America from the point of view of an alien visitor taking notes in a journal, much as an anthropologist might do. We include it here*]:

AMERICAN JOURNAL[1]

here among them the americans
this baffling multi people extremes
and variegations their
noise restlessness their almost
frightening energy how best
describe these aliens in my
reports to The Counselors

disguise myself in order to study them
unobserved adapting their varied
pigmentations white black
red brown yellow the imprecise and
strangering distinctions by which
they live by which they
justify their cruelties to one another

charming savages enlightened
primitives brash new comers
lately sprung up in our galaxy how

1 *American Journal*, pp. 57-60. Reprinted from *American Journal: Poems by Robert Hayden*. Copyright © 1982 by Irma Hayden. Copyright © 1978 by Robert Hayden. With permission of the publisher, Liveright Publishing Corporation. All rights reserved.

describe them do they indeed know
what or who they are do not seem
to yet no other beings
in the universe make more extravagant
claims
for their importance and identity

like us they have created a veritable
populace of machines that serve and
soothe and pamper and entertain
we have seen their flags and foot
prints on the moon also the intricate
rubbish left behind a wastefully
ingenious people many it appears
worship the Unknowable Essence
the same for them as for us but are
more faithful to their machine made
gods
technologists their shamans

oceans deserts 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 indigenes 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

something they 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
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

must be more careful item learn
to use okay
their pass word okay

crowds gathering in the streets today
for some reason obscure to me
noise and violent motion repulsive
physical contact sentinels pigs
i heard them called with flailing clubs
rage and bleeding and frenzy and
screaming machines
wailing unbearable decibels i fled
lest vibrations of the brutal scene do
further harm
to my metabolism already over taxed

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

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 Counselors 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

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

america as much a problem in metaphysics as it is a nation earthly entity an iota in our galaxy an organism that changes even as i examine it fact and fantasy never twice the
same so many variables

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

confess i am curiously drawn unmentionable to the americans doubt i could exist among them for long however psychic demands far too severe 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

RUHE: Who would you identify as some of the poets in America who are pointing in new directions that you consider to be significant?

HAYDEN: It is difficult to say. There is a whole school of poets who write in the open forms. There are some very avant-garde poets, whose work I don't know too well, who are interested in creating a kind of oral poetry that isn't written down, that is recited. I suppose, unless it is recorded, it just disappears.

I would say that there are so many good poets who seem to be pointing in a new direction. I think of some African American poets—and I think of them first of all because we have for so long identified with one particular kind of writing, and we have been considered as more sociologist than artists—but I would refer to a poet like Michael Harper, who teaches at Brown; Jay Wright, who teaches at Yale; David Henderson, who is on the Coast; Norman Loftis, and Herbert Martin.

But this gets to be very dangerous because your friends will say, "Aha, you didn't mention *me*!" But I mentioned mostly poets who are my friends. I think that what is new in their work is a new attitude about what it means to be African American and that theirs is a concern with poetry as an art and not with poetry as a weapon.

Some other poets, who happen not to be African American, and are pointing in a new direction, would be William Meredith, James Wright, and Lisel Mueller. What is new in all these poets is a new attitude toward life, an attempt to write a poetry that has a certain amount of flexibility and does not depend so much on the old techniques, the old devices.

There are a lot of young poets whose work is appearing in the quarterlies and the poetry papers and who are making all sorts of experiments with words and forms, but nothing has really gelled; nothing is yet really fixed.

Speaking of new movements and experiments that have been characteristic of this century, this has been a century of almost ceaseless experimentation and trying new forms. However, we won't really find new forms, and we won't really get a poetry profoundly new and original until we get new concepts.

The whole inner landscape, the spiritual domain, has to change before there can be any outer change. It may sound like one of those things you just say, but it is true for artists, and I think we lose sight of that sometimes. We think that, somehow, the arts spring out of the brow of Jove, but they don't! If you carry this absurd figurative image forward, they spring out of the brows of brand new concepts. New spiritual orientation brings about new forms, gives a new impetus to the arts. In some senses, we have a developing, an emerging sense of something new and grand in the realm of the spirit, and you can see shadows of it in the work that is done today, and I guess it will be blazing forth in the next century. Hopefully!

And all the atoms cry aloud[2]

I bear Him witness now
Who by the light of suns beyond the sun beyond
the sun with shrill pen

revealed renewal of
the covenant of timelessness with time, proclaimed
advent of splendor joy

alone can comprehend
and the imperious evils of an age could not
withstand and stars

and stones and seas
acclaimed—His life its crystal image and
magnetic field.

I bear Him witness now—
mystery Whose major clues are the heart of man,
the mystery of God:

Bahá'u'lláh:
Logos, poet, cosmic hero, surgeon, architect
of our hope of peace,

Wronged, Exiled One,
chosen to endure what agonies of knowledge, what
auroral dark

bestowals of truth
vision power anguish for our future's sake.

"I was but a man
"like others, asleep upon
My couch, when, lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious
were wafted over Me. . . ."

Called, as in dead of night
a dreamer is roused to help the helpless flee
a burning house.

I bear Him witness now:
toward Him our history in its disastrous quest
for meaning is impelled.

RUHE: Earlier you were talking about groups of poets and pressure on poets to conform in certain ways. Recently you were elected to the American Academy of Poets and you mentioned that it was totally unexpected, that you felt you would probably go to your grave without any recognition of this kind. And now you have been appointed consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress (Poet Laureate of America). What will your role be as consultant to the Library of Congress? What do you see as your role in a leadership position of some kind among American poets today?

HAYDEN: I will answer the last question first. I really don't want to be any kind of leader. I want to be left alone so I can do my work. This often happens to people. I find myself in a very strategic position. I find, also, that when I talk with my colleagues at the Library that the role of a consultant has to be defined and redefined.

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2 *Words in the Mourning Time*, pp. 50-51.

It has been suggested that I try to do all kind of things, and I do things that I think might be appropriate and things that might interest me. I need not be bound too much by traditions of the past. I think that the best leadership in the realm of the arts, certainly as far as poetry is concerned, is the kind of leadership that is not leadership at all. I would hope that when occasions present themselves, when I have to say anything about poetry or be directly involved with poetry groups or whatever, that it would become very clear that I feel that we should be freewheeling, because there are many different kinds of poetry. There is not just one kind, or just the kind I write, and any poetry can be good depending on the skill of the poet producing it. I have always recognized that there are many kinds of poetry. There isn't just my kind, or Ginsberg's kind, or Wallace Stevens' kind. There are all kinds of poetry, and they can all be good, and I think they should all be encouraged.

I will be inviting poets, or suggesting names of poets who should be invited to read. I will be gathering poets for taping sessions for the poetry archives. I will be suggesting different kinds of symposia that we could have. One that I am very much interested in is on science and poetry, although we will probably call it science and literature. Many poets have written poems on outer space, space exploration, UFOs, and so forth. And there are others who have written about scientific matters and technology.

That is one of the things I would like to do. It illustrates the kind of program that I may be able to bring about there. I would like to have groups of young developing poets who have published books. The criteria for appearing at the Library of Congress are that the poet has to have been published and to have won a certain amount of recognition. There are some young poets who have published some books and won some recognition but are not too widely known, and it would be of service to them to get a few of them in a group to read at the Library.

Those are some of the things I'd like to do. Whether I can do them or not depends on a lot of other things that have to be taken into consideration. But Dr. Boorstin, who is the Librarian of Congress, suggested to me quite recently that I throw my weight around and try a few things. So, when I get there, who knows what I will be inspired to do?

RUHE: In an interview you mentioned that one of your concerns would also be to have poets representing the diverse peoples of America.

HAYDEN: Oh, yes, very much so. In one way or another, I am in touch with so many poets and with poets of many different ethnic backgrounds. I am going to encourage the Library to have readings in which two poets of different ethnic backgrounds might share the program, or in which a man

poet and a woman poet would read together.

That is not revolutionary, but it is not done so often that it is ordinary. I am not going to make it into a big sociology festival or anything of that kind, but with the diversity of American poets and poetry styles being what it is, it would seem to me unjust not to do as much as one could to let the various poets of different ethnic backgrounds have their chance.

What some people are not going to understand is that not just any poet comes to read at the Library of Congress. It took me something like twenty to twenty-five years before I was invited to read at the Library of Congress. I have talked with people, since my appointment, who feel that since they have written some poems and maybe typed up a collection of poems this should guarantee them an invitation to the Library of Congress. I know how they feel, but that work alone really doesn't warrant an invitation. There is a standard, and it is pretty much that a poet must publish and must have some recognition. And I think that's only fair; otherwise, the distinction would become meaningless.

RUHE: Why is it that you expected never to receive this kind of recognition?

HAYDEN: When you receive the kind of recognition that I have received now at this age, it means two things: first of all, your friends take you more seriously and don't feel that they can run in on you and interrupt your writing; it also brings you opportunities for getting into your work and doing more work. That's why it is important to me. All the pictures in the papers, the interviews, and so on get scary after a while because I find myself thinking, "What am I saying? Am I saying the right thing?"

Really, I just want to be in a corner, writing. When I was not as well known as I am today, which is putting it mildly, I wanted to get my poems published, as all poets do, and I was very devoted to writing and really dedicated to it, and thought of it day and night. I would have a long teaching day, teaching four or five classes in a day, and I would get home bone tired, rest for a bit, amuse myself with my wife and daughter as best I could, and then I would start writing again.

I will be totally honest and very blunt about it. I didn't think I was that good. It is as simple as that. People seem to have the impression that for thirty years I sat around brooding because I wasn't recognized. I didn't do that, but I wanted to write well enough to receive recognition, I didn't just want the ego trip.

I would try to write around twelve o'clock—between twelve and three. Years and years of that, and eventually I got up to something that was worth publishing. I never expected to get any of those prizes because I didn't think my work was that good. I

wanted it to be that good! I hoped that it would be! But I didn't have that sort of confidence.

I think it is marvelous if you know that you are great and that you are penning deathless lyrics, but I think there are very few poets who know that. I guess rank amateurs *always* know how good they are, but I don't think great writers know.

RUHE: Who is to say or how it is determined who is good? It seems so ambiguous. Who is a good poet? Who is a great poet? Who is a mediocre poet, and why?

HAYDEN: Well, it's certainly not the Academy that decides, although I guess the Academy does sometimes have some influence. What it really comes down to is the impact that your work has on people. And let us say that by people we mean *discerning* people, people who know something about the art. Because there are poets today who are immensely popular and have published books that sell incredibly well, in the millions! And every once in a while these poets come up with something that is rather good. But these poets are not acclaimed because their poetry gives readers a new experience, rather because it gives them what they already know! The readers don't have to do any work. They don't even have to think. These poets remind readers of something they already know.

Then let's take a very good poet whose work has an impact, a poet whose work has tremendous appeal for people of discernment and people who have some intellectual interest. His work may also appeal to people who are not that au-courant with things, and why is this so? I think there is some kind of communication of something that is essentially human—I don't know really how else to say it.

The poetry of the good poet has nothing to do with the kind of popular poetry we have been talking about; rather, it has to do with poetry that speaks to all kinds of people because it touches some nerve, some fundamental thing, some concern. I certainly don't want to be immodest, but I'm very close to being that kind of poet.

I have read to all kinds of audiences, which rather surprised me because I didn't think I would ever have that kind of audience. I've read on so many campuses, but I've also read in prisons and community houses, and small churches to people who don't particularly know about poetry. And I've read to audiences who were made up mostly of town people—people who didn't spend much time reading poetry.

I would really be interested in finding out what it is that appeals to these audiences. As close as I can get to it, it has something to do with my feeling for the universality of the human experience, or something equally that fundamental. I tend to think of life in very fundamental ways and I tend to see an importance into things so that everything becomes symbolic to me.

This undercurrent of meaning comes through in the poetry, and yet that still doesn't explain what I mean.

Language, the power and magic of language, works on people. Some poets have this power, this skill with language, some kind of magical quality. I don't mean that *I* have that, but I hope I can work toward it.

RUHE: I want to ask you now a series of questions connected with the Bahá'í Faith. What is the connection between spirituality—the soul of man—and poetry?

HAYDEN: Poetry is very close to religion, and I am going to say, tangentially, that when we speak of the prophets as being poets—and we speak of Bahá'u'lláh in particular—this is very true because the prophet uses symbols. Bahá'u'lláh speaks in parables, metaphors, and all the devices that we associate with poetry in an attempt to give us analogies and make clear, as far as possible, the mysteries of which He speaks.

It is really very hard to understand life after death. It is very hard to understand God. I remember how happy I was when I came across the passage that God is man's mystery and man is God's mystery. I thought, "That is so marvelous; that is great poetry!" I thought, "I've got to do something with that." We have to have something to compare with things we cannot understand. We have to talk about God being like a shepherd or like a father.

I have always seen a close connection between poetry and religion. Poetry wells up out of the depths of the human spirit, and it was the Báb Who said in a passage something to the effect that visions are vouchsafed to poets that the poet himself may not understand.

Poetry itself is a mysterious kind of thing. Sometimes I wonder what is it that I think I am doing. It's all kind of mysterious. Some poets say that it is a game you play with words, and that is true, up to a point. Some say it is an artifact like any other—and that is also true, up to a point. But there are artifacts and there are artifacts, and why is it that a poem by Whitman is one kind of artifact and a poem by Yeats is another kind of artifact entirely?

I think that there will always be certain mysteries about poetry as there will always be certain mysteries about religion. There is something that brings poetry and religion very close together. They both come out of the spirit and they both deal with the unknown. Indeed, poetry has been described as being on the line between the known and the unknown. Certainly religion is on that line:

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH
IN THE GARDEN OF RIDVÁN[3]

Agonies confirm His hour,
and swords like compass-needles turn
toward His heart,

3 *Ballad of Remembrance*, p. 43.

The midnight air is forested
with presences that shelter Him
and sheltering praise

The auroral darkness which is God
and sing the word made flesh again
in Him.

Eternal exile whose return
epiphanies repeatedly
foretell

He watches in a borrowed garden,
prays. And sleepers toss upon
their armored beds,

Half-roused by golden knocking at
the doors of consciousness. Energies
like angels dance

Glorias of recognition.
Within the rock the undiscovered suns
release their light.

RUHE: I get the feeling, sometimes, when I read poems that I would characterize as affective that I am energized by the poem. It's as though I receive a kind of energy from that poem and I feel as if it is on a different level. My mind, my consciousness, my awareness moves on. I am here on the ordinary plane of existence, then I read the poem, and all of a sudden I'm on a different level.

HAYDEN: A poem should do that because it is taking you into the realm of imagination, and it is also eliciting an almost total response. For example, there are poems that make you feel something—kinetically, I mean. You feel something inside your stomach, say, or even a change in your breathing.

There are poems that appeal to most of your senses, to hearing, sight, and so on. There are poems that seem to possess you totally, and they are usually very great poems. For me the poems of W. B. Yeats are like that. I can be totally possessed and immersed in the poem, and the reason is the intensity of the spiritual vision that produced the poem combined with the ability of the poet, to communicate something of the purity and intensity of that vision.

Even when a poem is very realistic—I have written some poems that are fairly realistic because they grew out of some quotidian, some ordinary experience—but what makes it a poem is something that has nothing to do with the realism. It's something else again. But the poet can't always achieve that something else, can't always hit it, and that is why you don't write a poem a day. You don't even write a great poem every year. You get down on your knees and thank the Lord if you get one in ten years.

But the reason that you do feel so possessed by a poem is that you are sharing in some intense vision with the poet.

RUHE: You mentioned earlier Bahá'u'lláh as one of the prophets of God. How did you become a Bahá'í, and how does it affect your poetry?

HAYDEN: I went back to the University of Michigan in 1941 and 1942, and there were Bahá'ís on the campus. They held firesides,[4] and my wife and I became interested. At first, Erma was more interested than I was, and she became a Bahá'í before I did. And when I did become a Bahá'í, I wasn't really what one might think of as a typical or stereotypical seeker.

I wasn't looking for a religion. I had been a Baptist, and while I had pretty much repudiated the denomination, I still believed in God and still felt a certain loyalty to Jesus Christ. That was one of the hardest things for me to get over. I had such a loyalty to Jesus Christ, and He was so very real to me that when I heard that Bahá'u'lláh represented the return of Christ, I thought, "Oh, no! Watch out here. What are we getting into?"

I wasn't looking for anything, and my wife—we talked about this—really wasn't either. We would have been perfectly content to go on with our work. But once we learned about the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, there was nothing to do but accept it because it was the truth, and we were convinced it was the truth.

Everything we read—everything we experienced as Christians—rather corroborated the statements that were made in Bahá'í writings. If we had never heard of this truth, then we would never have had any spiritual obligation to it. But once we had heard it . . . well, what could we do?

If you care for the truth—and I think that artists are working toward the truth; art is one way toward the truth, even though there are many other ways—certainly I could not ignore the truth of the Bahá'í Revelation.

For a long time I didn't know how it was affecting my work. I didn't see the relationship between what I was writing and the Faith. Indeed, when I was less sophisticated in my outlook, I thought that the only way that I could really serve the Cause was by writing religious poems.

Later on as I pondered what Bahá'u'lláh said about the role of the artist, I began to realize that if you really had this new spiritual orientation, just about anything you did could be of service. For example, I began to be aware of things that ostensibly have absolutely nothing to do with religion, but I think my poems take the turns they do because I have certain beliefs and a certain set of principles by which I live and by which I write.

This is of great comfort to me because one time I was troubled. I could write you quite an interesting memoir on how I sat in my front room one day when I was still teaching at Fisk University, and suddenly I was filled with a sense of cold, almost inexpressible horror, because something swept over me: "You know, you are not really

4 "Firesides" are informal discussions about the Bahá'í Faith usually held in the homes of Bahá'ís for seekers interested in finding out about the Faith.

dealing with reality! Everything you are doing is false! You are not really seeing the connection between what you *say* you believe in and what you are doing as a writer!"

Imagine the horrifying experience. It doesn't seem like anything in the telling, but it was one of those moments. After that I began to try and find out what the relationship was. As a result, today I feel very comfortable about that relationship. I don't have to worry about it, because it lies behind everything I do.

I would like to write a poem about the martyrdom of the Báb, but it might be a poem that would not be of any use at all to Bahá'ís, not if they want to use it in some way and not just respond to it as a poem. You see, I don't feel impelled to propagandize. I am sort of happy.

As I get older, my mind gets clearer. Why, when I was your age, my dear young man, I greatly feared that when I got to be in my fifties (and now I am in my sixties), it would be curtains! There would be nothing left. Well, I am delighted to discover that now I have even more ideas. You say the word "sunrise," and I could fill up pages, and that is a marvelous feeling. Yes, I may yet do something before I die.

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# The Ideal Person

STEPHEN DUNN

When we returned to the shop
after lunch, we were surprised
to discover the ideal person
totally assembled, looking similar
to some of our earlier designs.
Hands, a bowtie, paper clips,
tear ducts – things with, things
without – all put to use. Who
did this? we collectively asked.

No one answered, except the ideal
person himself. "I'm guaranteed,"
he said, "I've been given…,"
His language trailed off, and other qualities
he must have believed to be everlasting
began to collapse around him.

"Let's dismantle it, start over, locate
what made it work in the first place,"
I said. We all agreed
it must be a parts problem --
maybe this time a real heart instead of
a spigot, lips instead of a spit valve.

And so we proceeded to again look
at everything we'd collected,
try to select the best possible parts
to build the best possible person.

Yet the mystery remained. How did
the ideal person get built without us?
The famous Screw Instead of Nail Theory,
and Wilson's Part B, Second Cause of all
Things Theory, were offered as possibilities.

When Paulsen raised The God Theory
everyone laughed. We were makers,
after all, had studied at the best schools
with the very best makers of our time.
Besides, if there were such a thing as a God,
all of us would be trembling, wouldn't we?
I felt a little something in my hand. The others
already had resumed the vast undertaking.