

## Pantheolla T. Williams: On Middle Passage

Pantheolla T. Williams In "Middle Passage" he treats the origin of the slave trade in Africa as it relates to the development of the new ethnic group—the Afro-American. "Middle Passage" tries to achieve a two-fold purpose. Hayden says that he wanted to fulfill Benet's prophecy and to write a poem that would give the lie to bigots who had distorted the Afro-American's history. Though it was inspired by epic intentions and contains elements of the epic, it is not quite that. The traditional epic depicts the values and patterns of the life of an entire people or culture through the experience of a hero who represents in himself certain ideals of that culture. "Middle Passage" attempts through a hero to present the values, both positive and negative, of the slavery era and the Afro-American's historic condition, depicting his dislodgment and displacement from his mother country to an alien land. The hero of the poem is Cinquez, the captive prince who inspired and carried out the Amistad mutiny. This figure, however, blends with the poet-observer, who enunciates "the deep dark immortal human wish / the timeless will to be free" (lines 172-73). Another epic element in "Middle Passage" is the device of cataloging—the listing of the ships and the listing of the African tribes, all historically authenticated by Hayden's research. It begins in medias res with the depiction of ships under full sail carrying slaves in mid-Atlantic. Its tone is dignified. The ending is not without a note of triumph, though this term does not adequately describe the mystical exaltation of the concluding stanzas. Yet, the poem is not an epic. It is too short. Moreover, it is more lyrical than narrative; whenever a narrative section appears, it is telescoped or fragmented. The issue of religion is handled with great irony and for the purpose of condemnation. Intervention of the gods is lacking. The intervention of John Quincy Adams is the nearest approximation to this convention. And the hero does not engage in monologues; his words as well as his deeds are presented from the reportorial consciousness of the poet-observer. The poem is set in the classic framework of a journey—one that begins when the African principals leave their villages. The exodus is engineered as much by the African kings who sell their captives to satisfy their greed for "luxuries" as it is by the Spanish greed for gold. The first lap of the journey is to the "factories"—places where the captives are sorted out, processed, and subdued for their coming enslavement. The second lap, the horrific "Middle Passage," is the journey across the Atlantic Ocean to America and slavery. The third lap, only alluded to in the poem, is the journey from the barracoons in America to the plantations. Part 1 begins with a chilling description of the inhumane treatment slavers gave the Africans aboard various slave ships. Moving from the general to the particular, part 2 presents the reminiscences of a corrupt old slave-trader who is stopped from plying his trade only by the physical toll the tropics take on him—"fevers melting down [his] bones." Ironically his greed for gold is shown as being of a piece with that of the African kings' greed for luxuries. Part 3, the climactic section of the poem, is the poetic recreation of the Amistad mutiny, which occurred in 1839 and became a cause célèbre. The personae are the omniscient poet-observer, the African tribal chiefs and their subjects, the heroic Cinquez, the Spanish captain of the Amistad, common seamen, Celestino the mulatto, and the silent voice of John Quincy Adams, who argues the case for Cinquez and his people and who, in fact, argued the case for the Amistad rebels. It is a tribute to Hayden's poetic genius that in the poem, otherwise so brilliantly and uniquely his own, he stands in debt to two poets who demonstrated conflicting views of America. Evident in "Middle Passage" are the techniques T. S. Eliot used in "The Wasteland"

and the influence of Hart Crane's vision of crucifixion and resurrection, horror and squalor out of which radiates hope and light. As Crane, in "The Bridge," attempted to forge the American identity, Hayden likewise forges in "Middle Passage" the American identity of the Afro-American. In part 1, Hayden introduces the technique of fragmentation which Eliot used with striking effect in "The Wasteland." It is a device that lends itself to a vivid portrayal of the disintegration of a society--in "Middle Passage," the historic disintegration of African society. Accordingly, the development of part 1 includes sequential presentation, without transition, of names of ships, a section of a ship's log, a sailor's prayer, a portion of a sailor's letter, and a legal deposition. The Eliot-like motifs that achieve unity are the refrain "Jesus Savior Pilot Me" (a hymn line which creates an ironic commentary), the biblically derived names of ships, and the poet-observer's chorus-like voice. From a vantage point that spans time and place, the poet condemns the horrors of the Middle Passage, describing it as a "voyage through death" (lines 3-7). He condemns American greed--that of the New England shipping interests as well as that of the southern plantation owners: Standing to America, bringing home black gold, black ivory, black seed. Deep in the festering hold thy father lies of his bones New England pews are made, those are altar lights that were his eyes. The "altar lights" motif establishes an ironic relationship with Shakespeare's theme of death and resurrection in *The Tempest*. The allusion is to Ariel's speech to Ferdinand that falsely reports the death of Ferdinand's father. Hayden explains that his intention was based on his feeling that there was some connection between the sea change Shakespeare describes and "the change from human beings into things--objects, suffered by the enslaved Africans--the idea that slavery was a kind of death." Hayden's immediate purpose in using the allusion, according to Charles Davis, is to mock "a less than spiritual transformational while reminding the reader of a supposed death by drowning, which in reality led to a regeneration through sea change, Ariel's song also portrays a metamorphosis from blindness to new vision. (The sailor writes that "Ophthalmia has struck the Captain as well as the Africans aboard the ship.") The line "those are altar lights that were his eyes" may be seen as a scathing indictment of a Christian people with eyes blind to the enslavement of their fellowman. It is a blindness that prevails in the poem until John Quincy Adams, as the champion of human rights, speaks "with so much passion of the right of chattel slaves" (lines 164-65) and their will to be free. When the justice he represents proves not to be blind, it opens the way for the African "to life upon these shores." According to Elizabeth Drew, Eliot uses the Shakespeare line "Those are pearls that were his eyes" as the central symbol for the whole of Western tradition, which, as he saw it, was lifeless as a pearl. Eliot also used the symbol to suggest metamorphosis from blindness to vision. Drew further notes that Eliot's purpose in making the allusion was to symbolize the transmutation of life into art--a creative act the poet must find, not only through suffering but in suffering. Whether in response to the Eliot model or not, Hayden develops this dimension of the metaphor in the sailor's letter: "8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick with fear, but writing eases fear a little since still my eyes can see these words take shape upon the page & so I write, as one would turn to exorcism. The passage speaks of the transformation from blindness to vision that can be effected through the arts. The blindness theme is continued in another variation of *The Tempest* motif which appears in part 3: Deep in the festering hold thy father lies, the corpse of mercy rots with him, rats eat love's rotten gelid eyes. In this passage the poet also decries the rotting bodies of his ancestors interred in the holds of slave ships. The contrast of "rotten" with what ought to be living thoughts--"mercy" an "love"--is reminiscent of yet another precedent set by Eliot in "The Wasteland," especially in "Burial of the Dead." Further reminiscent of "The Wasteland" is the use of several voices, some of them ghostly, including those of the poet-observer, of the praying sailor, of the old slaver, and of the attorneys who speak for the Spanish deponents. As in "The Wasteland," though to a lesser extent, Hayden shuffles history, past and present, in his depiction of the African's "coming to

life upon these shores." Hart Crane's epic "The Bridge" also influenced the shaping of "Middle Passage." After announcing his vision of hope, which he contrasted to Eliot's negations, Crane attempted to create, through the use of history and folklore and of his key bridge symbol, the American identity, achievement, and future hopes. It is, certainly, a subject matter for a myth that could support an American epic. This is a vision similar to that of Hayden's poem--a vision that creates an Afro-American identity around the central metaphor of the "Middle Passage" and a vision that carries, indeed, a constructive note of hope. At the time he composed "Middle Passage," Hayden was a young man with certain identifiable ideas about Afro-American history, justice, and social change. He was, however, a poet who was making a search in himself for a new iconography that would inform his poetry along with the beliefs he had accepted. He was tossed up to rhetorical heights by his reckless faith in his poetic genius and scholarship; yet he was brought to a more even keel somewhat later by his stern sense of self-discipline and self-criticism. The true extent of these flights of optimism and the degree of his self-discipline and self-criticism cannot be known. Hayden said that the working sheets of "Middle Passage" are long since lost. Nonetheless, there are four published versions of the poem: version A, in Phylon (1941); version B, in Cross Section (1945); version C, in A Ballad of Remembrance (1962); and version D, in Selected Poems (1966). The painstaking revisions of "Middle Passage" from 1945 to 1966 produced a poem that won the acclaim of eminent critics and fellow-poets. A passage from the letter that Allen Tate wrote to him about the poem will indicate the measure of that approval: "I am especially moved by 'Middle Passage,' a beautifully written poem. The power is in the restraint and the purity of diction." More important is the fact that the poem was produced by a black poet speaking of black history and heritage in the most sophisticated traditions of twentieth-century western poetry.

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