

MIRIAM KUROSZCZYK, *Poetic Brokers: Robert Hayden, Melvin B. Tolson, and International Modernism in African American Poetry*. (Trier: wvt, 2013. Mosaic: Studien und Texte zur amerikanischen Kultur und Geschichte 47). 193 pp.

This dissertation sets out to correct race-based misconceptions regarding the poetics and the sociopolitical perspectives of two African American poets whose works, the author claims, need to be reread and freshly understood within the modernist movement as an international cultural phenomenon (see, for instance, 2). According to Kuroszczyk, “[b]oth Hayden and Tolson share visions of advancing mankind toward a future of freedom and equality” (2), albeit from contrasting vantage points of religious belief (Hayden was a member of the Bahá’í Faith) and of the Marxist international (which determined Tolson’s outlook). In Hayden’s case, a universal perspective on mankind transcends race as the poet’s sole concern; in Tolson’s case, the African American experience is brought into sharp relief by relating it to modernism (4). The author proceeds from delineating the poets’ respective aesthetics (chapters one and two) to discussing further poems (chapters three and four) and thus intending to offer unprecedented ways of reading these poets’ works from what she calls a “cross-cultural” vantage point (see 9, 11, 14 et passim). As a result of these readings, she argues, Hayden and Tolson emerge as poets who “realize [...] their premise of art as social agent” (18).

The two chapters following the introduction explain the respective genesis of the two writers’ poetics. Following in the footsteps of John Hatcher’s groundbreaking study of Hayden’s work as seen through the lens of his religious beliefs, Kuroszczyk—who also conducted research at the National Bahá’í Archives in Illinois and who includes reproductions of manuscript pages—explores the significance of the central principles of Hayden’s faith for his work as a poet. The exploration of this side of Hayden’s thinking is laudable because most critics in the past have avoided acknowledging it altogether. Although the research project as a whole certainly deserves praise, pressing questions remain. Tolson’s Christianity-infused Marxism could be explained in further detail (see 45–48) so that the comparison between the two authors’ outlooks becomes clearer. The distinction

between Hayden’s ostensibly “monolithic universalism” and Tolson’s tripartite universalism (71) deserves more discussion. As this is a comparative study, the analysis of Tolson’s poems in the second chapter could be enhanced by pointing out details such as similarities to Hayden’s works (e.g., weaving metaphors in Tolson’s “Tapestries of Time” [75] and in Hayden’s “Middle Passage”), the use of musical forms as tropes (78), the fact that Tolson and Hayden often refer to the same historical figures (78–79), as well as possible similarities to the aesthetics of modernists like T.S. Eliot (which would make more sense within the contextualization of the poets as modernists than the references to nineteenth-century writers Dickinson and Whitman [79]) and William Carlos Williams (80).

Chapter three mostly expands on points raised in the previous chapter. The fourth chapter again stresses the poets’ hitherto underestimated contribution to modernist poetry. The claims made regarding the two poets’ works could have been supported through discussing poignant allusions. For instance, Hayden’s allusions to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* in his poem about Malcolm X (93–95) can be profitably discussed in light of the philosophical discourse in the novel and in light of its biblical subtext; Tolson’s allusions to Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” and William Blake’s “Tyger, Tyger” (143) and his religious imagery (144) offer thrilling material for exploring intertextual embeddedness. The discussion of Allen Tate’s preface to Tolson’s *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (105–07) lends itself to pondering the contextualization of Tolson’s work within the problematic practices of cultural hegemony and of whites claiming to ‘authenticate’ or ‘authorize’ non-white writers’ works ever since Phillis Wheatley. The whole idea of a ‘libretto’ may also be contemplated in light of the cultural implications of opera in the United States and on the efforts of non-mainstream artists to enter this field.

The author concludes that the two poets are similar in some respects and different in others, while they were both concerned with employing art to bring people together across racial and other divides. The potential ideological or philosophical conflicts between a religious and a Marxist orientation are conflated by both poets’ desire to forge links between otherwise distinct people and places. Kuroszczyk finds that twenty-first-century readers,

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or at least those who live a globalized and digital media-dominated lifestyle, coupled with world-embracing inclinations, can understand these poets' internationalist trajectories better than readers in the mid-twentieth century did (155). Further research should be

done on how Hayden's and Tolson's "cosmopolitan set of poetics" (155) distinguishes them from or integrates them into a modernist outlook on the arts and on the world.

Graz

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