Miriam Kuroszczyk

Poetic Brokers

Robert Hayden, Melvin B. Tolson, and International Modernism in African American Poetry

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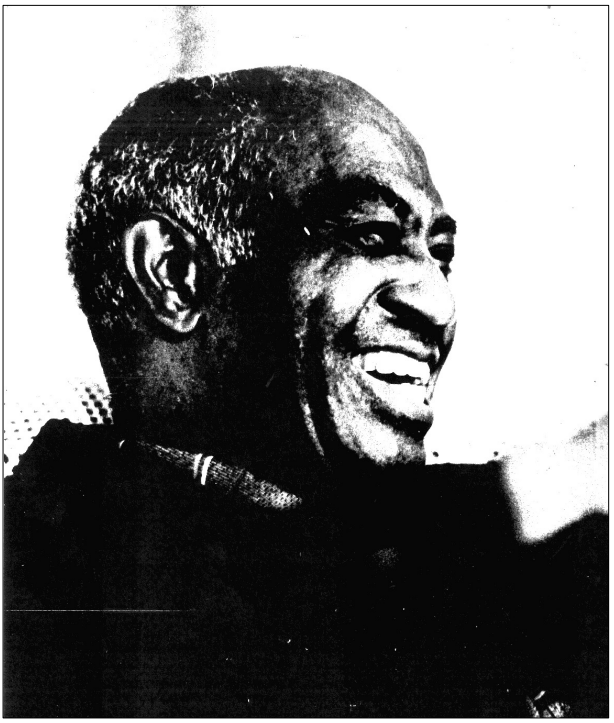
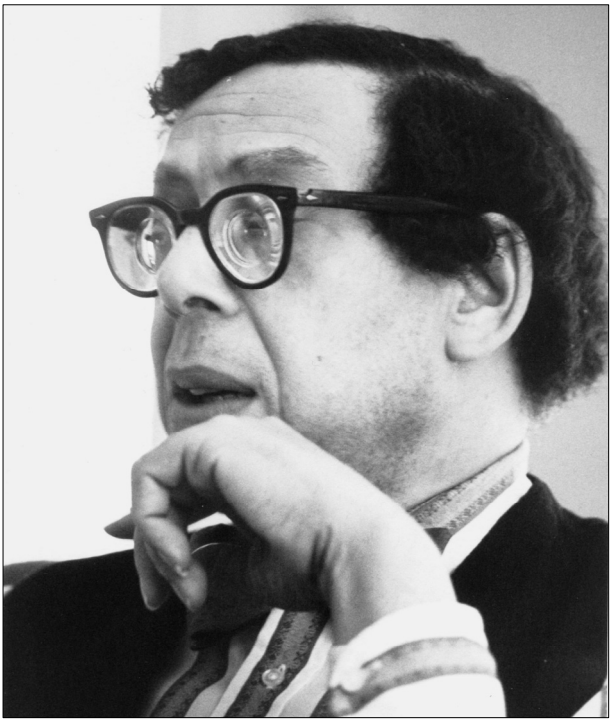
Live. Love. Matter.

--- Brendon Burchard



Melvin B. Tolson

Photo courtesy of the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (n. d.)



Robert Hayden

Photo courtesy of the National Bahá'i Archives,
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List of Abbreviations

HP	Hayden Papers, National Bahá'i Archives, United States (source indicated as box/folder)
TP	Tolson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. (source indicated as box)
CP	*Collected Poems* (1997) by Robert Hayden
HGOP	*"Harlem Gallery" and Other Poems* (1999) by Melvin B. Tolson

Introduction

> I am convinced that if poets have any calling,
> function, *raison d'etre*
> beyond the attempt to produce viable poems […]
> it is to affirm the humane, the universal,
> the potentially divine in the human creature.
> --- Robert Hayden, "Interview" (1984, 119-120, original emphasis)

Lines such as "time unhinged the gates"[1] or "the angle of ascent / achieved,"[2] are synonymous with the socioeconomic and cultural upheavals characteristic of Robert Hayden's and Melvin B. Tolson's poetry. By over- and rewriting established narratives inside and outside the United States they each articulate their visions of world orders that defy the traditional binary system of white sophistication and black struggle, in order to substantiate cross-cultural dialogues. It is the connective quality of the 'open gates' philosophy, then, that enables Hayden and Tolson to shuttle back and forth between traditions, cultures, countries, and centuries which synthesize their aesthetics. As a result, both poets have developed oeuvres that are truly modern in the sense of "making it new" in form and content as they generate cosmopolitan truths from their cultural roots. Geared toward the advancement of mankind, both Hayden and Tolson realize and harness the educational and inspirational qualities of art.

Moving into the second decade of the twenty-first century, it almost feels bizarre to approach an African American modernist as a special species in the literary world, or to question the choice of a man of African American descent who wants to be considered just a poet without any reference to race. Precisely, Hayden connects past and future by paying homage to African American icons such as Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X who, through their metamorphoses, come to represent mankind's universal values. Tolson's approach, on the other hand, is different from Hayden's in that he strongly affirms his blackness. What is of utmost importance about his aesthetics is that it merges the black experience and the modern idiom. As Wilburn Williams, Jr. remarks, "Tolson wanted both to be true to the revolt of modernism and to be faithful to the black

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1 "Rendezvous with America," HGOP 3, l. 1.
2 "For a Young Artist," CP 133, final couplet.

tradition coming into being" (1979, iii). Tolson not only intends to do justice to the "black tradition coming into being," but to African American history in general by claiming territory for a technique that up to this point seemed to belong to whites only. A black Marxist modernist, Tolson thus pioneers poetry that gives voice to the African American experience in the modern vein.

Furthermore, in the *Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry* (2011) editor and former U.S. Poet Laureate (1993-1995) Rita Dove disapproves of the narrow definition and acceptance of black art by both academia and audience.

> As the recipient in 1966 of the grand prize for poetry at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, Robert Hayden should have been widely praised by his own race; instead he was held suspect for his ties to the white poetry establishment (he had studied under Auden), and it would be nearly a decade before his poems could regain the recognition they deserved. (2011, xlvi-xlvii)

In direct conjunction, Dove repositions Tolson's work in American letters. Quoting from Karl Shapiro's foreword of *Harlem Gallery* (1965) and Sarah Webster Fabio's response in *Negro Digest* (Dec. 1966), Dove concludes: "Others joined in, deriding Tolson's book as mere high shenanigans, an Uncle Tom's attempt to impress his masters so that they might admit him into the white-dominated literary pantheon" (2011, xlvii). As will become clear in the course of this argument, both Hayden and Tolson do not fit the cookie-cutter preconceptions of what is considered traditional black poetry, which is often thought of as an expression of dialect, spirituals, or protest poetry. It is my intention, therefore, to locate Hayden and Tolson in the contexts that reflect the parameters of their poetics, and make known the breadth and depth of their art. As *Poetic Brokers* affirms, Hayden needs to be seen as a poet of genuine concern for his fellow citizens around the world who transcends ethnic labels, carves out the human, universal qualities in his poems and reflects them at us. He achieves the dialogic quality of his poetry through recontextualizing history, race, art, and faith into a poetic synthesis that seeks to illuminate the uniting element of mankind. Tolson's poetry, moreover, represents the missing link between high modernism and African American subject matter, which reterritorializes the black experience onto the world stage of literary history while articulating it in the modern vein. Both Hayden and Tolson share visions of advancing mankind toward a future of freedom and equality. I choose to characterize Hayden's poetic approach as a recontextualizing or reframing of subject matter because the term alludes to his reflexive style that illuminates new vantage points. The term reterritorializing, in contrast, underlines Tolson's confidence

and vigor in the act of crossing color and culture lines in order to stake claim in literary ground traditionally occupied by others.

The chapters here are designed to both stand on their own and synergistically help provide the big picture of Hayden's and Tolson's oeuvres. The structure of this study provides a gradual narrowing of scope from the macro to the micro level: the conceptual parts of Hayden's and Tolson's aesthetics in chapters one and two are supplemented through essays, interviews, and columns that illuminate their universalisms. *Poetic Brokers* then zooms in on their long and persona poems about race in chapter three, while chapter four illustrates their lyric poems about art as exemplified through allegory, inner monologue, and vignette.

As part of a generation that can be called their "vertical audience" through the sheer passing of time but implicitly through shifts in awareness and world view too, I feel responsible for honoring Hayden's and Tolson's work by providing literary and cultural contexts that are open to dialogue rather than being prejudiced by preconceived notions of what American or African American poetry is supposed to sound and look like.[3] Albeit academia is seemingly starting to catch up on the research on Hayden and Tolson, decades have passed where their poetry was viewed through the lens of either black propaganda or white ignorance.[4] Since things are rarely just black or white, I intend to draw attention to the complexity and wholeness of both poets' oeuvres. Observing and commenting on events throughout history, pointing out grievances in society, and offering solutions to render the future brighter, Hayden and Tolson consider art a means of change. Those are certainly changes in

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[3] In his 1958 essay "Dialogue with an Audience," John Ciardi explains the difference between the horizontal audience and the vertical audience: "The horizontal audience consists of everybody who is alive at this moment. The vertical audience consists of everyone, vertically through time, who will ever read a given poem" (12). He adds: "[a]ll good poets are difficult when their work is new. And their work always becomes less difficult as their total shape becomes more and more visible. As that shape impresses itself upon time, one begins to know how to relate the parts to their total. […] The point is why *should* I write for you? – you're going to be dead the next time anyone looks. We all are for that matter. But not the poem. Not if it's made right. If I make it for you I have to take the chance that it will die with you" (42). Since decades or even centuries can lie between the creation of a poem, or any form of art, and new sets of audiences, these new members of the vertical audience will approach the poem differently than the horizontal audience (who was alive during the creation of the poem) because of their advanced state of awareness of, for instance, civil rights, internationalism, and literary period. Therefore, each new generation of the vertical audience can add fresh interpretations of any given work. Moreover, the vertical audience ensures that literature through circulation is being kept alive and engaged in social dialogues.

[4] Cf. Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Molefi Kete Asante; Gertrude Stein (HGOP 264).

aesthetics but, more importantly, they are transformations of mankind initiated through the poets' perceptions of life. In this light I'm hoping my work does its part in unhinging those gates.

Offering a solution to the situation of African Americans W.E.B. Du Bois identifies in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (2008, 15), Hayden's and Tolson's poetics reevaluate and rewrite the black man's place in history and the future.[5] Beyond the political and economic color lines, the aesthetic color line, what Paul Gilroy dubs "*culture lines*" (2000, 1, original emphasis), used to keep artists in their place. Countee Cullen's famous couplet, "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" communicates the rigorous limitations of literary tradition imposed upon minorities.[6] The dilemma of being perceived as either not black enough to advance "the cause" of black empowerment or being too black to master white modernism makes Hayden and Tolson fight many a battle for their convictions about thematically and linguistically inclusive poetry. An "aesthetic synthesis," as Craig Werner argues, their poetry breaks down the "false dichotomies" of high modernism versus racial folklore, and thus arrives at a "re-vision of aesthetic perspectives which have typically been seen as incompatible" (1990, 453). Immersed in cosmopolitan dialogues, *Poetic Brokers* will show that Hayden's and Tolson's aesthetics thus overcome the boundaries of categorization as they draw from foreign cultures and languages, yet make them their own by creating poetic visions that recontextualize and reterritorialize their African American heritage into an international framework. As Dudley Randall remarks, "they were conscious of their Negro race, but they regarded it in the wider context of a world-wide depression and a world-wide war against fascism. Their world view was wider and more inclusive than that of the Renaissance poets" (1973, 40).

Albeit Hayden and Tolson differ greatly in their artistic and thematic expressions, the former taking a holistic approach by moving beyond race to a comprehensive vision of humanity, the latter focusing on the black experience in a modern idiom, they are united in their efforts to create a future defined by progress. Propelled by the purpose of reaching and educating people through their art, Hayden and Tolson are champions of mankind who shed light on race, politics, religion, and the role of art and the artist in society.

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[5] Samira Kawash (1997) notes: "The end of slavery did not bring the end of social division along racial lines, of course. Rather, what emerged after slavery was another principle of division along the color line, now in terms of segregation and the law of 'separate but equal'" (viii).

[6] Cf. Countee Cullen: "Yet Do I Marvel" (1925), in *The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry*, 2011, 132.