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William Kluback. *Leopold Sedar Senghor: From Politics To Poetry.* New York: Peter Lang, 1997. xi + 117 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8204-3488-9.

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In *Leopold Sedar Senghor: From Politics To Poetry*, William Kluback undertakes the ambitious project of transforming the scholarly monograph into a form of intellectual conversation. Rather than presenting a study of Senghor's thought and poetry, he attempts to draw us into the intertextual world that Senghor created in his work. Moreover, he adds his voice to those of the French thinkers who influenced Senghor so deeply. As he explains in the first chapter of the text, conversation "is the source of creativity" (p. 3). It is also the source of the humanistic values that Kluback appeals to in his defense of Senghor's vision of a "civilisation de l'universel" and the dream of "surpassing cultural frontiers" (p. 45). Senghor's goal of establishing cross-cultural dialogue through a poetics that combines political action and the poetic word,[1] then, provides the basis for this exploration of the possibility of combining intellectual and spiritual dialogue with political goals.

This brief book consists of eight "conversations" and a conclusion. In the first chapter, "The Conversation," Kluback outlines his reasons for choosing to share his dialogue with Senghor and thinkers such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Claudel, Gaston Bachelard and Jacques Maritain, rather than presenting a standard analytical monograph. Since Senghor, a devout Catholic, has often expressed his philosophy of politics and poetics in religious terms, Kluback's decision to include spiritual and religious issues in this dialogue are hardly surprising. His inclusion of his own religious beliefs, however, is daring in the context of contemporary scholarly debate. Apart from African-American scholars such as Stephen L. Carter, bell hooks and Cornel West, or the minister and professor Michael Dyson,[2] few intellectuals share this side of their personal life, in spite of the wide acceptance of a form of "autoethnographic criticism" that encourages scholars to share details about the personal experiences relevant to their analysis.

This emphasis on the spiritual side of Senghor's work shows itself clearly in a corresponding emphasis on religiously-inspired thinkers or artists such as Teilhard de Chardin, Claudel and Marc Chagall. Although the Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin's influence on Senghor is well-known, Kluback does students of Senghor a service in highlighting Chagall's importance for the Senegalese poet. Indeed, Senghor promoted an exhibition of Chagall's work in Dakar and invited the artist for that 1971 event. Kluback also reviews the relationships between Senghor and other thinkers and poets of the intellectual circle created by the journal Esprit. In Chapter Seven, Kluback explores the notion of personalism promoted by the journal and its contributors. Although we might take issue with Kluback's definition of personalism because it uncritically accepts the circle's anti-Marxist, anti-materialist stance without explaining how Senghor combined personalism with his conception of African socialism, the chapter does provide an introduction to this philosophy of conscience.

In spite of its qualities, this text will almost certainly meet highly critical responses. The title will mislead readers seeking a clear, analytical exposition on Senghor's work and thought. Other clues will mislead potential readers as well. For example, Peter Lang usually publishes scholarly monographs and has developed an important series on Francophone Literature that includes many revised doctoral theses. However, *Leopold Sedar Senghor: From Politics To Poetry* is more likely to interest readers seeking spiritual solace in a world in which "human creativity is a lonely affair" (p. 6) than students of Senghor's work.

In addition, the text fails in its attempt to include readers in this dialogue, judging from this reader's experience. The sexist language of the book, the insistence on "man's" needs and drives, repeatedly highlights the difficulties of establishing dialogue within patriarchal paradigms. The sententious style that characterizes much of the book also works at cross-purposes with the author's attempts to share various responses to human problems of injustice, loneliness, and pain. Too often,

this "dialogue" turns into monologues that weave the author's thoughts into those of Senghor or other thinkers in a seamless and potentially confusing web. Worse, these monologues lack the energy and grace of other texts, such as those by Carter, Dyson, hooks and West, that offer creative, spiritual responses to western traditions of academic discourse. Language clearly presents serious problems in this work.

Since language is at the heart of any dialogue about poetics, we might turn to this question for more insight. However, Kluback's recurrent definitions of poetry provide clear evidence of a monolithic, ahistorical notion of poetry and poetics that contradicts Senghor's project of including western and Sereer poetics in his work. Indeed, the book focuses entirely on Senghor's encounter with French thought and poetry. Apart from a single, glancing reference to Alassane Diaw, the book ignores the dynamic relationships between Senghor and other black intellectuals and offers no explanation for this silence. Although Senghor himself has stressed the importance of Esprit and Teilhard de Chardin in his thought, Alioune Diop and the group around Presence Africaine provided other partners in the dialogue that Senghor worked to achieve. Aime Cesaire and the poets of the Harlem Renaissance also played key roles in Senghor's thought. Although this brief series of dialogues could not possibly cover all aspects of Senghor's thought, disappointed readers will look for some explanation for this silence in vain.

In sum, the uncritical neo-Platonism of Kluback's conceptions of poetry and Christianity works against his attempts to promote cross-cultural dialogue. As we might expect, his unexamined idealism (in the Platonic sense, which supports the notion of one ideal form or truth) does not allow him to consider the possibility that these forms vary according to culturally-specific semiotic systems. As Plato's famous allegory of the cave reminds us, however, we are all chained in the cave of our illusions. If we wish to come closer to some notion of truth or justice through dialogue, we cannot retain a single, monolithic definition of language or poetics.

Notes:

[1]. Leopold Sedar Senghor, *La poesie de l'action* (Paris: Stock, 1980).

[2]. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993); Cornell West and bell hooks, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991); Michael Dyson, Part III, "This Far By Faith: Black Religion," *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) and *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness To Black Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).

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