

## *Caviar and Cabbage*

### The Voracious Appetite of Melvin Tolson

Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes represent the antipodes of the Harlem Renaissance. The former is a classicist and conservative; the latter, an experimentalist and radical. . . . With a biography that reads like a page from the *Arabian Nights*, Langston Hughes, the idealistic wanderer and defender of the proletariat, is the most glamorous figure in Negro literature.

So Melvin Tolson began the essay on Langston Hughes in his master's thesis, "The Harlem Group of Negro Writers." The glamour of Hughes's career contrasted starkly with Tolson's own circumstances, supporting a wife and four children on the modest income of an English teacher at a small black college in East Texas. Yet Tolson knew something about Harlem, which would remain at the center of his poetry for more than thirty years.

Alfred Kreymborg says of Langston Hughes: "He is the poet laureate of Upper Seventh Avenue." Of course, Mr. Kreymborg, not being a native of Harlem, got his streets confused. Seventh Avenue is the promenade of the upper classes and the strivers.

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However, we know what Mr. Kreymborg means. Langston Hughes is the chief ballad-singer of proletarian Upper Lenox Avenue, the street of “the unperfumed drifters and workers” . . . Hughes has received much adverse criticism from the colored bourgeoisie. . . . They say his poems are “just like the nigger Blues,” unmindful that this is the highest tribute they can pay to these artistic creations. (“Harlem Group,” 120–28)

The son of a poor Missouri Methodist preacher, Melvin Tolson had earned money for college by working in a Kansas City meatpacking plant. He was recommended to Fisk University as a scholarship student, and after a year there moved on to Lincoln University, where he supplemented his scholarship over summer breaks by working as a waiter in Atlantic City hotels. While at Lincoln, he met Ruth Southall; they were married during his junior year. At graduation, the best job offer he received was from Wiley, a small black college in Marshall, Texas. He remained on the Wiley faculty for twenty-five years, raising a family of three boys and one girl, all of whom would receive advanced academic degrees. As coach of the Wiley debating team, Tolson developed a system that resulted in a ten-year winning streak, including a national championship win over the University of Southern California. But when Arna Bontemps visited Wiley at Tolson’s invitation in 1941, he wrote to Langston Hughes that he was “amazed by the poverty” of the college. He added that some “of the top teachers were in patches” (Nichols, 76).

In addition to training champion debaters to compete on the national level, Tolson devoted much of the depression era to organizing sharecroppers in East Texas and Arkansas. (Tolson would note thirty years later that he had known Ralph Ellison, since both were active sympathizers, if not members, of the Communist Party during this time.) Because of the dangers of this activity, he was secretive about specifics, even with his family. His children recalled that he often returned from all-night

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meetings at dawn, but never said a word about where he had been. It was only through the stories recounted by those who accompanied him on those trips that they gradually realized how close he had come on several occasions to being lynched. From this vantage, it's difficult to judge which was most perilous—organizing sharecroppers or traveling through the Jim Crow South with a team of proud young African American debaters. Members of his teams (including the young James Farmer, later director of the Congress of Racial Equality) told many stories about narrow escapes from grave peril, both owing to and despite the qualities of Coach Tolson.

From 1937 to 1944 he also wrote a column for the *Washington Tribune* titled “Caviar and Cabbage.” Reading those columns, it's apparent that Tolson made no distinction between the radical injunctions of Christ to give all that you have to the poor and Marx's “unto each according to need.” But he was always careful to distinguish the teachings of Christ from the “mouth-Christianity” that dominated established churches, and the insights of Marx from the oppressions of the “Red Whites.” Tolson consistently hammered “the Big Boys” whose limitless greed promoted colonialism in most of the world and racism in the United States. He stated frequently that the cause of racism was capitalism, the profits of which required an exploited low-wage class. Though his columns ranged far and wide, he returned most often to the politics of race, class, radical Christianity—and literature.

In the academic year 1931–32, Tolson's wife and four children moved in with his parents while he studied for a master's degree in comparative literature at Columbia University. That year in New York City researching “The Harlem Group of Negro Writers” inspired his first book of poems. Though the collection was only published posthumously, many of the poems from *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* were published individually, beginning in 1937, when Tolson was thirty-nine years old.

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Radicals, prizefighters, actors and deacons,  
Beggars, politicians, professors and redcaps,  
Bulldikers, Babbitts, racketeers and jig-chasers,  
Harlots, crapshooters, workers and pink-chasers,  
Artists, dicties, Pullman porters and messiahs . . .  
The Curator has hung the likenesses of all  
In *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*.

(*Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, 4)

Because of this late beginning, although Tolson was as old as the younger members of the Harlem Renaissance group (e.g., Hughes, Cullen), he was generally considered as a younger poet. When Margaret Walker in 1950 wrote an article for *Phylon* magazine titled “New Poets of the Forties,” she included Tolson with herself in the third generation of Negro poets, following that of the Harlem Renaissance and the protest poets of the 1930s (e.g., Sterling Brown and Frank M. Davis). At that time, Tolson’s poetic reputation rested entirely on *Rendezvous with America*, published in 1944, which included the much reprinted “Dark Symphony,” awarded first prize four years earlier by judges Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Frank Marshall Davis in a national contest sponsored by the American Negro Exposition.

Out of abysses of Illiteracy,  
Through labyrinths of Lies,  
Across waste lands of Disease . . .  
We advance!

Out of dead-ends of Poverty,  
Through wildernesses of Superstition,  
Across barricades of Jim Crowism . . .  
We advance!

With the Peoples of the World . . .  
We advance!

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Like her own *For My People*, Walker wrote, Tolson's poetry reflected "the note of social protest" that had been more popular in the 1930s. But a large part of her article defended Gwendolyn Brooks against charges of obscurantism. Though Walker deplored the return to neoclassical form that characterized post-war poetry, with its emphasis "on technique rather than subject matter" and its turning from social concerns to religious individualism, she said, "Coming after the long complaint of white critics that Negro poets lack form and intellectual acumen, Brooks's careful craftsmanship and sensitive understanding, reflected in *Annie Allen*, are not only personal triumphs but a racial vindication." Tolson, who seems to have read everything, most certainly read Walker's article with its sympathetic reference to his own poetry. At that time, he was beginning his *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, which would mark his own turn from direct social protest to a poetry as difficult and obscure as that of any modernist. Walker's defense and justification of Brooks may have spurred and must have supported his own new formal directions.

Discussing a poet's influences is always risky and sometimes profoundly misleading. Tolson, however, was so deliberate in his methods and articulate in discussing his poetic concerns that he helps us to understand the change that he underwent between *Rendezvous* and *Libretto*. As late as 1946, he was still an ardent champion of Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, and his friends Langston Hughes and Edwin Markham (author of "The Man with a Hoe"). But he had always experimented with a range of verse forms, from traditional sonnets to stark disyllabics.

I judge  
My soul  
Eagle  
Nor mole  
A man  
Is what

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He saves  
From rot.

(“*Harlem Gallery*” and *Other Poems*, 45)

In addition to the sinewy free verse that characterizes most of “Dark Symphony,” *Rendezvous with America* includes sonnets, a variety of meters and rhyme schemes, and many kinds of stanza. Compared to the free verse that comprised *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, *Rendezvous* seemed a return to more traditional forms. But only six years later Tolson wrote about his *Libretto* that “if one wants to be a modern poet, one must study modern poets—and the greatest—Stevens, Rimbaud, Blok, Eliot, Pound et al. I have done this for twenty years. . . . Away with the simple Negro! This is a book to be chewed and digested” (Farnsworth, 167).

The Parliament of African Peoples signets forever  
the *Recessional of Europe* and  
trumpets the abolition of itself:  
and no nation uses *Felis leo* or  
*Aquila beliiaca* as the emblem of  
*blut and boden*; and the hyenas  
whine no more among the barren  
bones of the seventeen sunset  
sultans of Songhai; and the  
deserts that gave up the ghost  
to green pastures chant in the  
ears and teeth of the Dog, in  
the Rosh Hashana of the Afric  
calends: “*Honi soit qui mal y pense!*”

(“*Harlem Gallery*” and *Other Poems*, 187)

What incited this radical shift in poetic strategy by a fifty-year-old poet? What did Tolson hope to accomplish with this belated conversion to what is commonly called high modernism? Because Tolson asked Allen Tate to write the preface for *Libretto* and Karl Shapiro to write the introduction for *Harlem Gallery*,

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some critics have dealt with his new poetic directions as a gesture to gain the applause of the white critical establishment. Shapiro himself contributed to this viewpoint by attacking Tate as a “confederate of the old school who has no use for Negroes but who will salute an exception to the race. . . . Mr. Tate invites Mr. Tolson to join his country club” (Farnsworth, 171).

It may be more instructive, however, to return to Margaret Walker’s essay. Walker, like Tolson a poet of national stature who spent her adult life teaching at an underfunded black southern college, recognized that the “social protest” poetry she had written during the previous decade was by 1950 considered outmoded. The most esteemed white poets were not only emulating T. S. Eliot’s return to neoclassic forms, but emulating his orthodox Christianity and reactionary politics. As a poet, Walker worried about the “future of the Negro writing poetry in America,” and concluded that that future was bright “only if the future of the world is bright” (112).

Looking at the same situation, Tolson refused to compromise his faith in social progress. He reasoned instead that progress must be made on all fronts, including art. He wrote, “No man escapes his race, his milieu, his class, his moment of history. . . . Great Art does not repeat itself, but, like history, obeys the Heraclitean law of change” (Farnsworth, 213). As a young poet, he had been startled to discover Sandburg’s free verse, so unlike the traditional poetry he had studied in school. By 1950 he was, like Walker, convinced that the poetry he had been writing no longer reflected “his moment of history.” He had always believed that the distinguishing property of poetry was condensation. Now his reading of his contemporaries convinced him that the historical imperative demanded technical innovations that included extravagant conceits, a surfeit of allusions, complex symbols, and violent cubist juxtaposition. But if he accepted the techniques of high modernism, he had little regard for the reactionary content of its most popular practitioners.

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[W]hen you look at my ideas and Eliot's, we're as far apart as hell and heaven. I guess Shapiro, a Jew of the Jews, sees that and takes me under his wing. . . . My work is certainly difficult in metaphors, symbols and juxtaposed ideas. There the similarity between me and Eliot separates. That is only technique, and any artist must use the technique of his time . . . (Farnsworth, 145)

Tolson often teased his students that white people used the library to hide information from them. For years, he had struggled to find an artistic method that would harmonize his own scholarly zeal and his desire for a popular audience. As early as 1943, when he was still composing in the vein of "Dark Symphony" and "Rendezvous with America," he had written with characteristic folksiness in a "Caviar and Cabbage" column,

Some people say the language of my poetry is very different from the language of "Caviar and Cabbage." Well, when you go to a formal ball of the Big Boys, you have to put on evening clothes. No lie! When I'm at home, among friends, I go about the house in my patched pajamas. A woman doesn't cook cabbage in her Sunday best. In "Caviar and Cabbage" I try to be so simple that only a Howard professor can tell I am a professor. (*Caviar*, 271)

Since at least 1937, and most probably since his student days at Lincoln, Tolson had displayed an appetite for both caviar and cabbage. In an era when the line between high and popular culture was more pronounced, Tolson aspired to speak to a popular audience and to the audience of the ages. This tension holds throughout Tolson's poetry, in all its formal variations. As late as 1964, in *Harlem Gallery*, this tension would be represented in the character of Hideho Heights, "the poet laureate of Lenox Avenue" whose split identity is reflected in

the bifacial nature of his poetry:  
the racial ballad in the public domain  
and the private poem in the modern vein.

(*"Harlem Gallery" and Other Poems*, 335)

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In the Zulu Club, Hideho recites a ballad about John Henry to wild applause. But when the narrator of the poem takes the drunken poet home one night, he discovers a poem “in the modern idiom” called “E. & O.E.” Tolson had published the same poem fifteen years earlier in *Poetry* magazine under his own name. That he reprints the poem as the work of a fictional “People’s poet,” written in “a sort of Pasternakian secrecy,” adds yet another layer of irony to an already difficult poem. Hideho is torn between his identity as a popular entertainer and his realization that “with no poems of Hideho’s in World Lit— / he’d be a statistic!”; between his wish to speak to and for his people and his desire to enter the canon of world literature.

here was the eyesight proof  
that the Color Line, as well as the Party Line,  
splits an artist’s identity  
like the vertical which  
Omar’s *Is* and *Is-not* cannot define. (337)

After his discovery of Sandburg, Masters, and the modern idiom, Tolson had composed a Harlem version of *Spoon River Anthology*. With “Rendezvous with America” and “Dark Symphony,” Tolson established a poetic reputation in the 1940s as a master of heroic populist rhetoric, a composer of poems that cry out for declamation. (Tolson is reputed to have been a stirring orator, whose recitations moved even those who failed to understand the poems.) But by 1944, Tolson was also gaining a reputation for scholarship. In his review of *Rendezvous with America*, Richard Wright had written perceptively, “Tolson’s poetic lines and images sing, affirm, reject, predict, and judge. His vision is informed by the core of Negro experience in America, and his poetry is direct and humanistic. All history, from Genesis to Munich, is his domain” (Flasch, 69).

In 1947, Tolson was appointed poet laureate of the Liberian

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Centennial and Peace Exposition. (Duke Ellington was named composer laureate for the same event and composed his “Liberian Suite.”) Founded by the American Colonization Society as a refuge for former American slaves, Liberia shared a special bond with Lincoln University, which had been founded as the Ashmun Institute for the purpose of educating Negroes to assume leadership roles in Africa. In his “Caviar and Cabbage” columns, Tolson had criticized the oppression of African inhabitants of Liberia by the descendants of black American colonists. But by the time of Tolson’s appointment, William Tubman had been elected president of Liberia on a platform that promised to reconcile these populations in a new national harmony. Tolson now determined to celebrate the dawn of a pan-Africanism that would resolve ethnic strife between Africans, and to praise Liberian independence as harbinger of the liberation from colonial oppression that was soon to sweep the continent. It must be remembered that at the time of Tolson’s poem, in 1953, Liberia was the sole independent republic in sub-Saharan Africa. His *Libretto* remains one of the most poignantly optimistic and joyful documents of its era.

*Liberia?*

No micro-footnote in a bunioned book  
Homed by a pedant  
With a gelded look:  
You are  
The ladder of survival dawn men saw  
In the quicksilver sparrow that slips  
The eagle’s claw!

*Liberia?*

No side-show barker’s bio-accident,  
No corpse of a soul’s errand  
To the Dark Continent:  
You are  
The lightning rod of Europe, Canaan’s key,

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The rope across the abyss,  
*Mebr licht* for the Africa-To-Be!

.....

O Calendar of the Century,  
red-letter the Republic's birth!

O Hallelujah,  
oh, let no *Miserere*  
venom the spinal cord of Afric earth!

*Selab!*

.....

O Africa, Mother of Science

... *lachen mit vastchekes* ...

What dread hand,  
to make tripartite one august event,  
sundered Gondwanaland?  
What dread grasp crushed your biceps and  
back upon the rack  
chaos of chance and change  
fouled in Malebolgean isolation?

The poem's epic scope and glorious ebullient juxtapositions are balanced by its extreme compression. Tolson's modernist technical vocabulary relies heavily on far-flung allusions, breathless concision, multilingual internationalism, and hybridized idiom. The *Libretto* closes with a Whitmanic travelogue across a developed Africa. Tolson begins the voyage in the Futurafrique, "the chef d'oeuvre of Liberian Motors," transfers to a "stream-phrased and air-chamoised and sponge-cushioned" train, the *United Nations Limited*, then to the "diesel-engined, fourfold-decked, swan-sleek" ship, the *Bula Matadi*, and finishes the journey on *Le Premier des Noirs* of Pan-African Airways. The poem concludes with a jam-packed list of accomplishments by the Parliament of African Peoples.

As often as the poem was compared to Hart Crane's *The Bridge* for its elevated odic rhetoric, its architecture much more

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closely resembles Pound's *Cantos*—a pastiche of cross-cultural and multilingual references. But its other distinguishing feature reminds you of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The twenty-nine-page *Libretto* was followed by sixteen pages of closely spaced notes. For examples:

69. *Black pearls*. V. Shakespeare, *Two Gentleman of Verona*, V, i.  
Also *Othello*, II, i: "Well praised! How if she be black and witty?"

Mr. J.A. Rogers treats the subject and time and place adequately in *Sex and Race*.

274. *Lachen mit vastchebes*: "laughing with needles being stuck in you"; ghetto laughter.

355. *Hearts of rags . . . souls of chalk*: Whitman's epithets for the "floating mass" that vote early and often for bread and circuses. *Hanorish tharah sharinas*: "Man is a being of varied, manifold, and inconstant nature." V. Della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Cf. Cunha: "The fantasy of universal suffrage [is] the Hercules' club of our dignity."

Dan McCall wrote that "the *Libretto* is immensely difficult—obscure and referential, composed in several languages and buttressed with now-scholarly, now-sly notes to historiography, anthropology, philosophy, music, odd-lore" (Flasch, 79). Stubbornly, almost perversely, Tolson went to Allen Tate, a conservative Southern Fugitive, for a preface to this difficult poem celebrating the promise of postcolonial Africa! But in 1953, Tate was also among the most powerful of American critics, and it's easy to understand why Tolson thought his support might be crucial. Though the insensitivity of Tate's preface remains embarrassing, he did recognize in the poem "a great gift for language, a profound historical sense, and a first-rate intelligence at work." He compared its dense allusions and elevated diction to Pindar and Hart Crane. Selden Rodman and John Ciardi both picked up Tate's reference to Crane, and in favorable reviews in the *New York Times* and the *Saturday Review of Literature* com-

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pared the poem to *The Bridge*. When a selection from the poem appeared in *Poetry* magazine, along with Tate's entire preface, William Carlos Williams noted the event in *Paterson IV* and repeated Tolson's "Selah" to conclude stanzas throughout an entire section of the poem.

—and to Tolson and to his ode  
and to Liberia and to Allen Tate  
(Give him credit)  
and to the South generally  
*Selah!*

(183)

Langston Hughes and Tolson had been friends and mutual supporters for years. Both were Lincoln alumni. Both had gained reputations for their radical political work during the depression. And as poets, both had begun their careers under the inspiration of Carl Sandburg. Hughes, of course, though younger, had known success much earlier, and had even served as mentor for the older poet. Hughes had been on the panel of judges that awarded Tolson his first literary prize, and frequently included Tolson in the anthologies he assembled. Cosmopolitan, widely read, dazzlingly productive, and dwelling in vibrant Harlem, Hughes was already a literary eminence of international reputation when the graduate student Tolson interviewed him for his thesis. In several "Caviar and Cabbage" columns, Tolson wrote admiringly about Hughes as a grand celebrity whom he was proud to know. And Tolson several times directed college productions of Hughes's plays.

For his part, in 1945, Hughes wrote in the *Chicago Defender*,

Melvin Tolson is the most famous Negro professor in the Southwest. Students all over that part of the world speak of him, revere him, remember him, and love him. He is a character. He once turned out a debate team that beat Oxford, England. . . . He is a poet of no mean ability, and his book of poems, "Ren-

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devious with America,” is a recent fine contribution to American literature. The title poem appeared in that most literate of literary publications, the ATLANTIC MONTHLY. But Melvin Tolson is no highbrow. Kids from the cottonfields like him. Cow-punchers understand him. . . . It is not just English he teaches, but character, and manhood, and womanhood, and love, and courage, and pride. (Farnsworth, 106)

Hughes was committed to a popular art, both in content and technique. He wrote with the assurance of a poet who knows his audience, and with a faith in that audience bred by his early success. As in the *Defender*, he celebrated Tolson as a kind of East Texas grassroots phenom. Tolson, on the other hand, despite his epistolary friendships and cherished visits to New York, suffered the anxiety of the poet working in isolation, whose audience is often idealized. As Tolson grew older, he identified increasingly with Boris Pasternak, writing in a kind of rural secrecy. While Hughes continued to gain in social and literary grace, Tolson grew more eccentric and independent. Gradually Hughes developed reservations about what he perceived as the increasing pedanticism in Tolson’s verse. At one point he objected to Tolson’s rhyme of China and orchestrina: “Nobody knows what an orchestrina is (that is, nobody of the Race)” (Rampersad, *II*, 173). Hughes might have been right about most of the race, and humanity—unless they had attended Wiley and studied with Professor Tolson. According to his students, the dictionary was a textbook in every class he taught—and if you didn’t know the meaning of a word, he could always find time to make you an example of backwoods ignorance.

Hughes and Arna Bontemps had their own reasons to resent the positive review given Tolson’s *Libretto* in the *New York Times*. Reviewer Selden Rodman had for years neglected to include Negro poets in the anthologies he edited. So they were irked when Rodman wrote that the *Libretto* “is not only by all

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odds the most considerable poem so far written by an American Negro, but a work of poetic synthesis in the symbolic vein altogether worthy to be discussed in the company of such poems as 'The Waste-Land,' 'The Bridge,' and 'Paterson' (Farnsworth, 165). Hughes and Bontemps felt that Rodman was using his praise for Tolson to give the back of his hand to every African American poet he had deemed unworthy for his anthologies. In this, Rodman was once again following Tate. In his preface to *Libretto*, Tate had mentioned Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks by name, admitting that they had written "interesting and even distinguished work," but in a folk idiom that "limited the Negro poet to a provincial mediocrity in which one's feelings about one's difficulties become more important than poetry itself."

Even his admirers frequently criticized Hughes for his facility. Margaret Walker believed that he never revised. And after Hughes's death, Amiri Baraka told an interviewer, "See, what I thought about Langston was that Langston was very glib and facile, that he could write, you know, as easily as breathing, and it's true. What I didn't understand is the consistently high quality of all that he did write" (Rampersad, *II*, 384). But when others attacked Tolson for his obscurantism, an amused Hughes generously defended him. He wrote to Bontemps about *Libretto* that Tolson "told me he was going to write with so many foreign words and footnotes that they would have to pay him some mind!" (Nichols, 320). With the publication of *Harlem Gallery* twelve years later, Hughes again wrote to Bontemps,

This volume has no footnotes, but a lot of BIG words: (says Tolson)—O Cleobulus / Othales, Solon, Periander, Bias, Chilo, / O Pittacus, / unriddle the phoenix riddle of this? . . . I say, MORE POWER TO YOU, MELVIN B., GO, JACK, GO! That Negro not only reads, but has read! (Nichols, 472).

By 1966, Hughes even included Allen Tate in the "tributary" section of his revised *Poetry of the Negro* anthology, perhaps in

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recognition of a change in Tate that began with his championing of Tolson.

Advocates for Hughes's popular art have been less sympathetic toward what they see as Tolson's apostasy. In his excellent biography of Hughes, Arnold Rampersad charged that Tolson renounced his earlier "militant pro-Marxism" (Rampersad, *II*, 234) and "gentrified his aesthetic into High Modernism" (193). Don L. Lee (now Haki Madhubuti), reviewing an anthology of black poetry, wrote, "Melvin B. Tolson is represented with some of his less obscure poetry which still exhibits his range and his capacity to lose the people that may read him" (Flasch, 135). The French academic Jean Wagner, author of *Les Poètes Nègres des Etats-Unis*, savaged Tolson as "the learned circus-monkey in the Battle Royal of Afro-American literature, with his ridiculous Allen Tate connections" (Rampersad, 390).

Rampersad's and Wagner's comments assume that the new directions in Tolson's poetry signaled an abandoning of his political principles. But Tolson's politics had always been international in theory and local in practice. During the depression, he had put his life on the line organizing sharecroppers. Beginning in 1954, the poet laureate of Liberia was four times elected mayor of the predominantly black town of Langston, Oklahoma. He was still seeking to effect political change, but he also knew the compromises of public office. And unlike Langston Hughes, Tolson did not write to earn his living. He taught a full load of college courses for more than forty years; put in long hours as debate coach, drama teacher, and small-town mayor; and composed poetry after midnight in his basement. In his midforties, Tolson had written in "The Poet":

A Champion of the People versus Kings—  
His only martyrdom is poetry:  
A hater of the hierarchy of things—

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Freedom's need is his necessity.

(*Harlem Gallery* and *Other Poems*, 29)

Tolson didn't change his ideas about championing the people or hating hierarchy. The controversy about his last two books swings instead about ideas of freedom. Does freedom extend to the poet's imagination, or must the poet address the expressed needs of a prescribed community? How does a poet find an audience, and how does an audience find its poet?

Tolson himself wasn't entirely comfortable with the nature of his critical reception, and even joked, "My poetry is of the proletariat, by the proletariat, and for the bourgeoisie" (Nielsen, *Writing Between the Lines*, 54). But Tolson's obsessions in the last two books don't vary far from *Rendezvous with America*. Tolson reinforced attitudes expressed as early as "Caviar and Cabbage" when he read *Black Bourgeoisie*, a work published by Howard University sociologist E. Franklin Frazier in 1957. *Harlem Gallery* is infused with insights drawn from Frazier. In the poem, the black bourgeoisie, represented most vividly in the character of Guy Delaporte III, pose the most oppressive challenge to the African American artist. And the formal experiments of the later poems put Tolson squarely on the side of radicalism and experiment, where he placed Hughes in his thesis. That more expansive form allows him to stretch into regions and voices denied to the oratorical single narrator of his earlier work. Instead of filtering his material through one voice, his poems now contain a multitude of voices that carry his democratic commitment even more effectively. And his legendary sense of humor finds room in his poems smack up against his most earnest declamations. Both contribute to an irony that keeps readers off-balance and demands that you be poised to follow the next line in any direction.

In 1966, Dan McCall, author of a study of Richard Wright, became a colleague of Tolson's at Langston College. During the next year McCall spent a great deal of time with the older man.

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At the end of the year, McCall published an article about Tolson in *American Quarterly* in which he paid special attention to the *Libretto*.

Eliot describes a failure of civilization; the poem establishes a sense of terrible loss. Grace has been withdrawn from the society of Western man. . . . But in reading the *Libretto* one feels a certain “pell-mell joy,” resulting from a revolutionary sense of the high comedy of history. . . . Tolson’s poetic integrity would not allow him to retreat into the folksiness of Langston Hughes—making things “simple”—nor would it allow him to lose his own voice in mere imitation. He gives us folk-wisdom and out-Pounds Pound to show what is involved in a country which is profoundly both African and American. (Farnsworth, 173)

The following year, when an interviewer asked Tolson about the “out-Pounds Pound” comment, Tolson replied, “Well, I did go to the Africans instead of the Chinese” (Nielsen, *Writing Between the Lines*, 60). Tolson never tired of repeating, and refuting, Gertrude Stein’s remark “that the Negro suffers from Nothingness.” Mentioned as early as his “Caviar and Cabbage” columns, the comment finds its way into his last poem.

In the *ostinato*  
of stamping feet and clapping hands,  
the Promethean bard of Lenox Avenue became a  
lost loose-leaf  
as memory vignetted  
Rabelaisian I’s of the Boogie-Woogie dynasty  
in barrel houses, at rent parties,  
on riverboats, at wakes:  
The Toothpick, Funky Five, and Tippling Tom!  
Ma Rainey, Countess Willie V., and Aunt Harriet!  
Speckled Red, Skinny Head Pete, and Stormy Weather!  
Listen, Black Boy.  
Did the High Priestess at 27 rue de Fleurus

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assert, "The Negro suffers from nothingness!"  
Hideho confided like a neophyte on The Walk,  
"Jazz is the marijuana of the Blacks."  
In the *tribulum* of dialectics, I juggled the idea:  
then I observed,  
"Jazz is the philosophers' egg of the Whites."  
(*"Harlem Gallery" and Other Poems*, 264)

Tolson seemed ever incredulous that Stein, of all people, made such a comment, given that she had propagandized so fiercely for a band of painters inspired by their acquaintance with African sculpture. Was it arrogance or ignorance that dismissed as primitive Africa's fabled and productive civilizations? Tolson's own rich study of Africa is evidenced throughout his work, and the allusions of the *Libretto* are foreshadowed in "The Negro Scholar," written in 1948.

The ground the Negro scholar stands upon  
Is fecund with the challenge and tradition  
That Ghana knew, and Melle, and Ethiopia,  
And Songhai; civilizations black men built  
Before the Cambridge wits, the Oxford dons  
Gave to the Renaissance a diadem.  
Behold the University of Sankore  
In Timbuctoo, a summit of the mind!  
Behold, behold Black Askia the Great,  
The patron-king of scholars, black and white.

(*Midwest Journal*, 81)

Like the Negro scholar of his poem, in his *Libretto* Tolson stands on fecund historical ground. Through the poem swirl many historical allusions, from the depiction of the Songhai empire, which flourished for the millennium between the seventh and sixteenth centuries, to denunciations of Italy's rape of Ethiopia and South Africa's vicious apartheid. The "Sol" sec-

*Caviar and Cabbage*

tion, which begins with the infamous Middle Passage, becomes a succession of African proverbs that continues for sixteen triplets:

“A stinkbug should not peddle perfume.  
The tide that ebbs will flow again.  
A louse that bites is in

“the inner shirt. An open door  
sees both inside and out. The saw  
that severs the topmost limb

“comes from the ground. God saves the black  
man’s soul but not his buttocks from  
the white man’s lash. The mouse

“as artist paints a mouse that chases  
a cat. The diplomat’s lie is fat  
at home and lean abroad.

Melvin Tolson traveled beyond U.S. borders only once in his life, at the invitation of the Liberian government to attend President Tubman’s third inauguration in Monrovia in 1955. On the way home, he stopped in Paris for a week, where Melvin Jr. was studying at the Sorbonne and where the Tolsons spent an afternoon with Richard Wright. Like William Carlos Williams, at fifty-five Tolson still had to underwrite the publication of his poems. Unlike Williams, the expense of publication challenged Tolson’s means. He was able to pay Twayne \$650 to publish *Libretto* and still find \$100 to send to his son Wiley as a wedding gift, but having spent that \$750 he could not afford to travel to the wedding (Farnsworth, 201).

After an itinerant Missouri childhood following his preacher father from small church to small church, Tolson spent his entire adult life at small Negro colleges in East Texas and Oklahoma. He glimpsed the possibilities of Harlem during his year of graduate study at the beginning of the depression, and subsequent treasured trips to New York, where he sometimes stayed

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with his friend, V. F. Calverton. In the last years of his life, he frequently visited family in Detroit, and often traveled to New York City on literary business. But his internationalist vision was nurtured primarily by books, and his poems are celebrations of a literary, even pedantic, liberation. While Williams was searching for a modern American idiom, Tolson was seeking a modern international idiom—through which the Afro-American subject would at last stride boldly onto the stage of world literature. While the first book of *Harlem Gallery* reconciled and integrated many of the concerns voiced abruptly and fragmentally in *Libretto*, and in many ways is more satisfying, it was the *Libretto* that successfully thrust Tolson onto that world stage—or maybe we should say world library. A stage implies an audience of some magnitude. I prefer to think of the professor proclaiming a new dawn as he writes after midnight in the basement workshop of his small house in Langston, Oklahoma—a basement where he also entertained guests and which he called the Zulu Club.