**Melvin B. Tolson (1898-1966)**

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Melvin Beaunorus Tolson was a poet, journalist, and teacher whose literary work examines the conditions for black life and art from the African diaspora through the throes of the Civil Rights Movement in his contemporary America. Although most of his major poetry volumes were published following the Second World War, Tolson thought of his work as a continuation of the modernist project in an African American idiom: he would pronounce his intentions just so, to “visit a land unvisited by Mr. Eliot” (qtd. in Dove xi). His poetry looks thematically, aesthetically, and critically at the institutional heritage of high modernism and other dominant Anglo-European cultural forms in order to locate a place for African American artistic production within—rather than in a space apart from—otherwise hierarchical high art cultures in the first half of the twentieth century.

A product of, and faculty member at, several historically black universities, Tolson graduated with honors from Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania in 1923 before holding teaching appointments at Wiley College and Langston University. He took a year’s leave from Wiley in the 1931-2 academic year to pursue a master’s degree in comparative literature at Columbia University. Finally submitted in 1940, his master’s thesis, “The Harlem Group of Negro Writers,” is a literary critical and ethnographic account of the Harlem Renaissance that sought to codify an academic canon of 1920s-30s black writers and intellectuals—a number of whom he knew personally, and interviewed for the project—while reading their work against the social, cultural, and political contexts of Harlem and modern America. The thrust of this critical study, an examination of the place of the black artist in cultural modernity, would be a key concern of his creative work as well. Given his evident fluency in both dominant academic discourse and modern black artistic achievement, Tolson’s poetry evinces the tensions inherent in negotiating the relations between these two spheres of influence.

Though some of his character sketches and short poems appeared sporadically in journals and magazines during the 1930s and 40s, *Rendezvous with America* (1944)marked the first collection of Tolson’s poetry to see print. Many of the poems of *Rendezvous* are formally and metrically regular and lack the semantic and referential difficulty of much of his later work, yet this volume attests to the historical scope and visionary transcendence that Tolson attributed to his lyric voice. The title poem opens as “Time unhinged the gates / Of Plymouth Rock and Jamestown and Ellis Island” to unfetter men of “myriad patterns and colors” into the mainstream of American life in all its democratic but yet violent, racist, and imperialist complexities (3, 5). “A Song for Myself,” both parody of and homage to Walt Whitman, constrains Whitman’s sprawling free verse into paratactic lines that echo the conflicted place of the black artist in American cultural life, yet place his speaker in line with other spiritual, intellectual, and artistic radicals in a Whitmanesque egalitarian flourish: “Jesus, / Mozart, / Shakespeare, / Descartes, / Lenin, / Chladni, / Have lodged / With me” (49). In “The Poet,” Tolson writes of the black poet’s emancipatory obligation in an ostensibly democratic society that is nevertheless rife with systemic racial exclusions:

A champion of the People versus Kings—

His only martyrdom is poetry;

A hater of the hierarchy of things—

Freedom’s need is his necessity. (29)

Tolson expanded this interest in the intersections of racial, political, and historical pluralism in his next major work, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953), composed following his 1947 appointment to the post of Liberian poet laureate to commemorate the centennial of the nation’s founding as a colony of freed African American slaves. *Libretto* tells the story of Liberia’s formation and social history from the slave trade and the founding of the American Colonization Society in 1816 through Tolson’s present, and envisages the enduring potential of an “Africa-to-be” emancipated from the strictures of Anglo-European dominance (159). In *Libretto*,Tolson, now working in the densely allusive, polyglot, and intertextual tradition of the high modernism, articulates the history of the African diaspora and political visions for “Futurafrique” in the aesthetic forms and practices of the (notionally apolitical) modernist avant-garde.

The interplay among high cultural practices, political populism, and black art central to *Libretto* informs Tolson’s final poetic work, *Harlem Gallery: Part One, The Curator* (1964). This long poem narrated in the voice of the curator of a museum of African American art mediates the high/low cultural divide through an unhierarchical treatment of various forms of cultural production and their different audiences, including portraiture and so-called “primitive” art in the gallery, and experimental poetry and free jazz performed in Harlem’s vibrant bars and nightclubs. With its assortment of memorable characters—from the PhD-educated Curator and Mr. Guy Delaporte III, a pedantic connoisseur representative of the white intelligentsia, to the political painter John Laguart and Hideho Heights, the popular “poet laureate of Lenox Avenue”—*Harlem Gallery* compartmentalizes the art gallery and its associations with conventional high cultural values as just one space within a broader modern art world that includes diverse aesthetic forms, artists, spaces, and evaluative systems.

Tolson planned *Harlem Gallery* to be the first in a five-poem epic sequence on black art in modernity; however, it was the only volume to be written prior to this death in 1966. Before his passing, Tolson was awarded an honorary doctorate from his alma mater Lincoln University and the prestigious poetry award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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