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THE AESTHETIC EVOLUTION OF MELVIN B. TOLSON: A THEMATIC STUDY OF HIS POETRY

by

HERMINE D. PINSON

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Terrence A. Doody, Professor of English, Chairman

Wesley Morris, Professor of English

Bernard Aresu, Associate Professor of French

Lorenzo Thomas, Writer-In-Residence, University of Houston

Betty Taylor-Thompson, Associate Professor of English, Texas Southern University
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ABSTRACT

Within the context of Euro-American and Afro-American modernism Tolson is an enigmatic figure. Only in recent years have critics and students begun to reappraise the works of a poet whose body of work reveals the varied influences of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the Symbolists, and the Euro-American modernists.

Tolson shares with Afro-American modernists, from Langston Hughes to Ralph Ellison, an indebtedness to Afro-American music and culture, from the blues to black vernacular speech to the tradition of "signifying," whether in the service of citing or "righting history." On the other hand, he shares with Euro-American modernists, from Ezra Pound to T. S. Eliot to W. B. Yeats, a predilection for symbolism, imagism, obscure allusions, and a preoccupation with confronting the chimeras of history and consciousness. To understand how Tolson manages to incorporate elements of aesthetic approaches that are often politically and stylistically antithetical, this study traces the poet's developing aesthetic, from his first manuscript, Portraits in a Harlem Gallery, to his last work, Harlem Gallery. The poet's subtle
shift in emphasis on his staple themes -- race, class, the role of the artist, and the nature of art -- from one work to the next evidence the poet's struggle to clarify and sharpen a developing aesthetic that culminates in his final and best work, *Harlem Gallery*. Tolson's final solution to the psycho-historical phenomenon of double consciousness is a delicate synthesis of the most salient elements of both aesthetic approaches -- Afro-American and Euro-American modernism. The result is neither derivative of Langston Hughes or T. S. Eliot, but a strong, individualistic Melvin B. Tolson.
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INTRODUCTION

When critics consider the mature verse of Melvin B. Tolson, they inevitably express their difficulty in making Tolson's poetry square with the whole of the Euro-American modern literary tradition. However, by the same token, neither can they securely place him with the Afro-American modernists who were, by all accounts, his contemporaries. Tolson seems to have been one of the most celebrated "invisible men" of his generation, and only in recent years has Tolson begun to receive the kind of critical attention he deserves. Perhaps his recognition has been so long in coming precisely because he is so hard to place. The recent plethora of scholarship leads one to ask why Tolson's recognition has been so long in coming. As late as 1965, approximately one year before the poet's death, Karl Shapiro declared in his "Introduction" to Tolson's final book, Harlem Gallery: Book I. The Curator, "A great poet has been living in our midst and is almost totally unknown, even by literati, even by poets."\(^1\) As Jon Stanton Woodson suggests:

The small amount of critical attention accorded the poetry of Melvin B. Tolson has contributed little to the understanding of his works. . . . No investigation of Tolson's poetry has attempted to deal with the content of his much-touted dazzling display of allusion and technique. The vast range of mythic, philosophic, cultural, historic, and aesthetic ideation that constitutes the very raison d'etre of Tolson's epical poems yet remains a terrae incognitae wherein many discoveries await the explorer. The very lushness and density of the verbal foliage attract and repel the would-be reader.\(^2\)
Of Tolson's problematical position in the history of arts and letters, Ronald Lee Cansler has observed that a "major part of the problem in getting Tolson read and accepted as a great twentieth-century poet is that he is both a modern and a black poet"; or as Tolson himself puts it, the black artist has been "shoved" into but not necessarily subsumed by the "white and not-white dichotomy, / the Afroamerican dilemma in the arts -- / The dialectic of/ to be or not to be/ a Negro."

To assess fully the ramifications of this "dialectical dilemma" and to understand Tolson's own solution, one must first understand Tolson's aesthetic in so far as it informs the body of his works. This task, though intriguing, is nevertheless tricky, because major aspects of Tolson's aesthetic undergo significant changes from his first collection, *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, to his last collection, *Harlem Gallery*. What does remain fairly constant are Tolson's thematic concerns: black consciousness, the class struggle, the problem of history, and the role of the black artist. Through an analysis of these thematic concerns as they change in response to the evolution and maturation of Tolson's aesthetic, one can discover how Tolson grappled with and eventually transcended the problem of "double consciousness" as a writer. Other published studies have not directly addressed these issues, though Jon Stanton Woodson, Wilburn Williams, and Robert Farnsworth have all touched upon them. Unlike the foregoing studies, the present discussion links Tolson's growth as a poet to his changing views of language, theme, and style; and offers an explanation of how Tolson ultimately settles his own aesthetic dilemma, his own private valley of "dry bones" and lives to tell the tale.
It is my intention to identify the most significant elements in Tolson’s aesthetic and to trace the development and continuous modification of that aesthetic as it is reflected in the poet’s presentation of his dominant themes during his major stages of literary development. As this study will show, Tolson’s presentation of his themes becomes increasingly dependent on his interpretation of and response to Euro- and Afro-American modernism. Tolson’s solution to the apparently antipodal camps formed by black and white modernists is to blend the best aspects of both worlds to create his own hybrid modernist poetry.

Tolson’s career can be generally divided into two major stages of literary development: the period of social realism (1936-45) and the longest and most characteristic American modernist period (1945-66). During the first stage of Tolson’s literary development, he wrote two collections of poetry: Portraits in a Harlem Gallery (unpublished during his lifetime) and Rendezvous with America. The first collection reveals the mixed influence of such Harlem Renaissance writers and thinkers as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and W.E.B. Dubois on the one hand and Vachel Lindsay and Edgar Lee Masters on the other. Generally speaking, the Harlem Renaissance writers taught Tolson how to invigorate his poetry with a kind of blues-inspired realism which is evident, for instance, in "Pearl Triplett," a typical poem in the collection, where Tolson alternates blues stanzas with free-verse stanzas to depict the underbelly of Harlem night life. Pearl "picks up cargo in the nocturnal shadows along One Hundred and Fifteenth Street." The poem opens with the blues stanza,
Come on, Daddy, come on,
What makes you so slow?
Come on, Daddy, come on,
What makes you so slow?
If you's a homeless daddy,
Yo' babe knows whar to go.

Juxtaposed to this slangy, street-wise verse is the free-verse account of one such siren, Pearl Triplett. The absence of black dialect and rhyme in the second stanza clarifies the poem, while deepening its pathos, principally because Tolson uses the free-verse stanzas to explain and, by implication, to justify Pearl's existence. Tolson's quasi-sociological approach to the poem calls to mind Carl Sandburg's "Chicago. And yet Tolson's alternation of the discursive stanza structure with the blues stanza does something a Sandburg poem does not do. It places this experience within the context of black life. As the last stanza reveals, Pearl's virtue was soiled when she was left "under the too-loving care/ of Old Uncle Billy" while the mother worked "twelve hours a day/ In the white folk's kitchen." The incisive folk wisdom of the penultimate stanza which precedes the explanation of Pearl's womanish ways is both comment and complaint as it transcends the chronological boundaries of the poem to relate a universal truth.

When de gold is in de mud,
It ain't never gonna shine.
When de soil ain't black an' rich,
'Tain't no crop a-lookin' fine.
Lawdy . . . Lawdy . . . Lawdy! (p. 64)
This poem is a good sampling of Tolson’s early approach to structure and content. It also reveals one of his thematic concerns, namely the fate of the working class, and by extension the nature of the parasites on the working class. At the same time, it inherently demonstrates the conflict between Tolson’s classical tendencies and the oral tradition, which will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

Rendezvous with America, Tolson’s first published collection, is decidedly more uneven in stylistic approach. However, there are other more profound reasons why Rendezvous is at once better and worse than his first unpublished effort. As the second chapter will reveal, Tolson, for the most part, abandons his blues-inspired, Hughes-inspired approach in favor of rhymed forms, including sonnets and ballads, and the free-verse paragraph style made famous by Walt Whitman. As for content, he still focuses on his characteristic themes of racial consciousness and the class struggle, but he also broadens his thematic purview to include the problem of history and makes tentative, albeit brief, statements about the role of the artist in general and the black artist in particular. But perhaps the most important distinction between this book and the preceding one is that Rendezvous does not confine itself to Harlem or even America; rather, from an aesthetic viewpoint it espouses a world-view, in part, a result of the historical context of its publication in 1944 at the height of World War II.

Although Tolson’s experiments in prosody prohibit an extended discussion here of a "representative" poem, one can still point to a poem such as "Tapestries of Time," for example, in order to see how Tolson declares his aesthetic freedom from
what he perceived as the imaginative and ideological constraints of the Harlem Renaissance. The following excerpt from "Tapestries," the last poem in the collection, is revealing in several ways. In stanzaic structure and syntactic arrangement it reveals Tolson’s temporary return to traditional Euro-American verse forms. Conversely, on the level of content, it represents a broadening of the poet’s conceptual field from a preoccupation with Harlem as the locus of black culture to a concern with the world and oppressed peoples’ place in it; and from "Rendezvous with America," as stated in the opening poem, to a "rendezvous with God," as stated in the last poem. The following passage is taken from Section III of "Tapestries."

In the golden ages Man was quick to die
for truths and freedoms beyond the ear and eye;
But as his empires climbed on dead men’s bones
He duped the halt and blind with the Nietzschean lie.6

This passage is indicative of more than a change in Tolson’s stylistic approach. It signals a crisis which can be fully understood only within the historical context of race, an issue which will be taken up in Chapter One.

The second major stage of Tolson’s literary development, which has been designated as the period of American modernism, spans twenty-one years, roughly from 1945 to 1966. This period represents a significant change in Tolson’s aesthetic perspective. The major issues here revolve around formal approach and thematic emphasis in the sense that Tolson consciously eschews the socialist-influenced realism of his former poetry, turning for stylistic guidance to the image-oriented poetry of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens. However, to complicate
matters, Tolson does not abandon his concern for issues relating to race and class. In other words, Tolson does not change his "game," he simply changes the way he plays it. For this reason, the poet's actions, especially during his transitional period, are better comprehended when discussed within the context of Houston Baker's theoretical assumptions on "the mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery,"\(^7\) which partially explain how Tolson could marry Euro-American form to Afro-American content without unduly compromising his artistic integrity through mere stylistic capitulation. These issues will be discussed at length in Chapter 3. A brief excerpt from the book-length poem, \textit{Libretto for the Republic of Liberia} will suffice to give a general idea of the extent of Tolson's literary metamorphosis. The following excerpt is taken from "Do," the first canto, which establishes the "are's and ain'ts"\(^8\) of the republic.

\begin{verbatim}
Liberia?
   No oil-boiled Barabas,
   No Darwin's bulldog for ermined flesh,
   No braggart Lamech, no bema's Ananias:

   You are
   Libertas flayed and naked by the road
   To Jericho, for a people's five score years
   Of bones for manna, for balm an alien goad!\(^9\)
\end{verbatim}

Tolson's allusive "definition" of the African republic draws upon Shakespeare, Darwin, Eastern appellates for "sanctuary," and the Bible to make its point. But more than a fetish for far-flung allusions is at work here. This stanza represents Tolson's appropriation of Euro-American forms again for the purpose of black
expression. It represents a kind of aesthetic sojourn that ends in the production of *Harlem Gallery*.

The first chapter traces Tolson's initial steps toward achieving his own voice and the accompanying conflict that this decision entailed. I will focus on selected poems from *Portraits in a Harlem Gallery* and discuss them within their historical context. The second chapter will examine *Rendezvous with America*, Tolson's first published effort. This chapter marks the beginning of Tolson's transition from realism alternately inspired by Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters to American modernism as defined by the poetry of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams. Moreover, this chapter underscores the basic aesthetic conflict within Tolson's poetry even as he embarks upon his poetic career. A discussion of the work written during this period would have to take into account the historical context within which it was written to further elucidate the mechanics of an aesthetic conflict that practically all black artists have faced: how to adapt black life (content) to Euro-American language (form).

Chapter Three looks at two poems, "The Black Scholar" and "E. & O.E.," the latter of which is Tolson's first published poem written in the modernist vein. For the latter poem, the poet eventually received *Poetry* magazine's Bess Hokim Award, in 1951. This chapter reveals Tolson in a pensive mood as he apparently ponders the "Scylla and Charybdis" dilemma of whether "to be or not to be" a "Negro" poet; and, as the chapter attempts to prove, Tolson does rite/write his way out of the
psycho-historical dilemma of all black poets -- double consciousness -- using a "stolen" language and borrowed images.

Chapter Four focuses primarily on Tolson's first book-length poem in the American modernist tradition, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*. The chapter's thesis enlarges upon Jon Stanton Woodson's assumption that "Tolson's *Libretto* was written to serve as both a parody of *The Waste Land* and as a corrective to the admitted incompleteness of Eliot's methodology." It is with this idea in mind that I proceed in the fourth chapter to discuss Tolson's suggested alternative to the traditional Hegelian paradigm of history. By using Liberia as the symbol of true democracy, the poet "revises" history while concomitantly challenging the grim prophecies of major European and American modernist poets, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats.

Chapter Five will concentrate on Tolson's last and perhaps best book, *Harlem Gallery*. This book reveals a poet in full possession of his craft attempting to transcend the Euro-American and Afro-American modernist tradition to create what can only be called New World poetry of modern America. The key word in this chapter is "debate," a fitting term for a poet who successfully served as debating coach at both Wiley College and Langston University. Tolson uses various characters in the poem, from the Curator to Doctor Nkomo to Hideho Heights, to dramatize the conflict between Afro-American modernist aesthetic orientations and Euro-American modernist aesthetic orientations. He directs this often meandering debate
by adjusting his narrative technique to character and circumstance, subjects upon which Chapter Five will further elaborate.

Finally, this chapter will examine the ways in which Tolson attempts to reconcile two apparently antithetical aesthetic approaches -- Afro-American and Euro-American modernism. The poet attempts in Harlem Gallery to synthesize the two idioms to the extent that social, political, and aesthetic synthesis become the most significant motif of this, his final collection. The following line from "Alpha," is indicative of the poet's stylistic intentions. Says the Curator:

As a Hambletonian gathers his legs for a leap,  
dead wool and fleece wool  
I have mustered up from hands  
now warm or cold: a full  
rich Indies' cargo;  
but often I hear a dry husk-of-locust blues  
descending the tone ladder of a laughing goose,  
syncopating between  
the faggot and the noose:  
"Black Boy, O Black Boy,  
is the port worth the cruise?"¹⁰

The preceding passage combines the Euro-American modernist qualities of hyperallusion and compression of images, while at the same time allowing for the spontaneity of black vernacular speech -- "is the port worth the cruise" -- that distinguishes Afro-American modernist poetry. This is but one example of the poet's frequent and intentional elision of the two idioms in what came to be his final collection. Indeed, Harlem Gallery is Tolson's final solution to the problem of creating poetry which evokes the spontaneity of the oral tradition so characteristic of
Afro-American modernist idiom and the technical complexity and panoply of images characteristic of Euro-American modernism. In this respect, *Harlem Gallery* figuratively brings the poet's career full circle -- from Harlem to Harlem.
Introduction

End Notes


8 Edward F.J. Tucker, Interview with author. Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, 10 May 1976.

CHAPTER ONE

"Melvin Tolson's Harlem"

Commenting on his aesthetic perspective before the publication of Portraits in a Harlem Gallery, Tolson once said, "In 1932, I was a Negro poet writing Anglo-Saxon sonnets as a graduate student at an Eastern university. I moved in a world of twilight, haunted by the ghosts of a dead classicism."\(^1\) Portraits marks Tolson’s first major attempt to exorcise those "ghosts" that he revered in his youth -- Edgar Allan Poe, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and William Shakespeare among others. In "The Odyssey of a Manuscript," Tolson recounts how he came to write Portraits.

My best friend [in graduate school] was a German-American who’d sold stories to the magazines. We read each other’s manuscripts and discussed art, science, and literature instead of cramming for the examinations. My ignorance of contemporary writers was abysmal.

One cold wet afternoon the German-American read my sonnet "Harlem," cleared his throat, and said: "It’s good, damned good, but-

The word "but" suspended me in space. I could hear the clock on the desk; its tick-tock, tick-tock, swelled into the pounding sledge-hammer on an iron plate. The brutal words knifed into my consciousness: "You’re like the professors. You think the only good poet is a dead one. Why don’t you read Sandburg, Masters, Frost, Robinson? Harlem is too big, too lusty, for a sonnet. Say, we’ve never had a Negro epic in America. Damn it, you ought to stop piddling!"\(^2\)

By 1933, Tolson had resumed his teaching duties at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and by 1934, he had completed Portraits. Between his duties as teacher, drama and debate coach, and junior varsity football coach, Tolson tried in vain to find a
publisher for his manuscript. The last major publisher who rejected his manuscript was Maxwell Perkins of Charles Scribner’s Sons Publishers. *Portraits* was not published during Tolson’s lifetime, although numerous images and many characters from the work resurface over 30 years later in *Harlem Gallery*. Nevertheless, *Portraits* is still one of the most significant collections Tolson ever wrote, because it marks his debut as a poet. Moreover, within this work Tolson begins to solve some of the usual problems of a beginning poet: discovering his own voice, discovering those themes which have meaning and significance for him, and as an emerging black poet at the end of the Harlem Renaissance, handling the whole issue of form and content.

After his abandonment of "classicism," Tolson turned for inspiration to the earth-laden language and the blues-inspired rhythms of the place that many had come to consider the cultural mecca of black America, Harlem. *Portraits* is a testament to Tolson’s initial choices as a poet, but in order to understand the bases for the choices which shaped his aesthetic development, one should understand the social and political climate of the 20’s and 30’s, the literary influences of these eras, and finally Tolson’s own vision of his times. This chapter will examine these major factors in the poet’s life as they affect and in a sense infect his poetry. The first part of the chapter will focus on literary influences; the second part will examine select poems which illustrate Tolson’s initial exploration and presentation of major themes.

During the time Tolson was writing *Portraits*, Harlem, the subject of his blues epic, was coming down from a high that began in the twenties, a time when "a
cultural rebellion of the first order erupted from beneath the complacency and conservatism that were dominant characteristics of American society and politics then. In Gilbert Osofsky's account of the twenties he observes that:

It was a time writers, artists, scholars, aesthetes and bohemians became aware of the standardization of life that resulted from mass production and large-scale, efficient industrialization. Intellectuals declared war on tenets of American thought and faith that had remained sacrosanct for three hundred years. As a by-product of their attack on traditional American middle-class values, which were constantly called "Puritanical," literary rebels and others discovered the Negro, America's "Outcast," and created a semi-mythical dreamland which they came to idealize - "storied Harlem."

During and after World War I blacks gained a new sense of militancy. Alain Locke observed that the "New Negro" was no longer content to be regarded as a "chronic patient for the sociological clinic, the sick man of American Democracy," but was instead moving toward the realization of his own "inner" and "outer" objectives. The New Negro's sentiments were reflected in such landmark events as Harlem's Silent Parade which protested the 1917 East Saint Louis Race riots and the rise of Marcus Garvey.

The twenties also witnessed the emergence of such noteworthy black writers as Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, George S. Schuyler, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, Rudolph Fisher, Jean Toomer, Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, and especially Langston Hughes, the poet acknowledged as the best and most prolific writer of the movement which came to
be known as the Harlem Renaissance. It is on this group of writers that Tolson eventually wrote his master’s thesis, entitled "The Harlem Group of Writers."

However, by the time Tolson arrived at Columbia University to pursue his master’s degree, the Great Depression at the end of the twenties had brought an abrupt end to Harlem revelry. The ghetto had always loomed around the corner from the raucous, smoke-filled cabaret where jazz was king, and white elite gathered in "nigger heaven" for a taste of "exotic" life. Harlem was among those areas hardest hit by the nation's economic plunge, and it is this Harlem that Tolson depicts in *Portraits*.

To be sure, Tolson was not the first to attempt to capture in print the violent energy of the inner-city. Nancy Cunard’s "Harlem Reviewed," Vachel Lindsay’s "The Congo," Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, Langston Hughes’s *The Weary Blues*, Wallace Thurman’s "Editorial from Harlem," Claude McKay’s "Harlem Shadows," and James Weldon Johnson’s "My City" are just a few of the works written about New York City and Harlem in particular. However, Tolson differed from his peers in that he saw Harlem’s potential as the subject of a blues epic, a work whose content and form reflected black rhythms. Tolson understood that Harlem with its panoply of people and places could not be sufficiently described within the constricted forms of sonnet or rhyme. *Portraits* was, then, for Tolson an experiment in blues prosody.

*Portraits* was not published during Tolson’s lifetime, but its importance lies in its evidence of the poet’s developing voice and his initial handling of themes that would become his staple material. As an emerging artist, Tolson used a wide-ranging
selection of literary models. In an interview in *Anger and Beyond*, some thirty five years after he'd written *Portraits*, Tolson claims to have used Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* and the Imagists as models. The poems show little evidence of the influence of the latter group, contrary to Marian Russell's assertion that Tolson "relies on presentation more than commentary." However, the poems do maintain certain affinities to Masters' book, if on a superficial level. Both books comprise a series of brief free-verse character sketches, and both center on characters who occupy common geographical locations. In *Spoon River*, each poem is spoken by one of the characters buried in the cemetery "on the hill." The names of Masters's characters range from the commonplace to the whimsical to the bizarre: Henry Phipps, Ollie McGee Sexsmith the Dentist, and Isaiah Beethoven. Masters' attitude toward his characters is one of detached sympathy or, as Babette Deutsch has termed it, "compassionate objectivity." His characterizations reflect the gamut of emotions, from light and happy to bitter and despairing, but all the characterizations are rooted in a naturalism reminiscent of Theodore Drieser. Moreover, Masters creates a sense of continuity in the lives of the characters by using novelistic devices to link their lives.

Tolson's *Portraits* similarly strives for a realistic representational mode, and the poet maintains an objective distance from his subjects. However, here the similarities between the two poets end. Where Masters, like Ulysses, serves his deceased characters the figurative blood of the artist as creator and gives them the power of speech, Tolson's curator, as grand master of the gallery, allows the viewer
a glimpse of life in motion. And where Masters’ characters are the former inhabitants of a small, midwestern town, Tolson turns to the city to capture the sometimes brassy, sometimes humble, but always colorful canvas which is Harlem.

Masters’ poems are written predominantly in the first-person, but the speakers’ voices vary little from one poem to the next. Tolson, on the other hand, freely uses both first and third person to tell each character’s story. He also uses a variety of voices, each one offering a different interpretation of the urban landscape. In one poem he uses standard English; in another poem, he uses the black vernacular. In effect, Tolson borrows techniques from Masters while retaining his own vision of life in America. And, in fact, Tolson’s habit of borrowing what he needs from other poets and discarding the rest becomes, in future years, his trademark.

Tolson borrowed little more than a technique from Masters. He needed an accommodating structure for the expansive content of Portraits, and Masters’ showed him how he could do it. Langston Hughes, on the other hand, has a much more abiding connection with Tolson’s work. Not only did he influence Tolson on a stylistic level, but more importantly he helped Tolson to understand the necessity of confronting in his work the issues that were important to his survival as a black writer and as a black man. From a stylistic perspective Hughes taught Tolson how to infuse his poetry with black presence in the form of black vernacular folk speech. So that in one sense, Portraits illustrates what Tolson learned from Hughes regarding the use
of free-verse and the blues in a contiguous relationship. Hughes introduced the technique in *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Fine Clothes to the Jews* (1927), and *The Dream-Keeper* (1932).

In his thesis on the Harlem writers, Tolson observes that,

Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* catches the undercurrent of philosophy that pulses through the soul of the Blues singer and brings the Blues rhythms into versification.7

Tolson goes on to say that when racially authentic, the blues "have all the devices of an O. Henry short story with its surprising crack at the end."8

However, Tolson and Hughes also differ in their characteristic uses of the idiom. For Hughes, the perennial folk poet, the blues and jazz with their accompanying themes and rhythms are the mainstays of his poetry. He often uses the blues format exclusively, allowing it to speak for itself as he adjusts it to the poetic line. One has but to view such poems as "The Cat and the Saxophone/ (2 A.M.)" or "Midwinter Blues" or "Hard Daddy" to hear in them the syrup-slow ambience, the syncopated rhythm of the blues. Take, for example, the following passage from "Midwinter Blues":

In the middle of the winter,
Snow all over the ground,
In the middle of the winter,
Snow all over the ground-
'Twas the night befo' Christmas
My good man turned me down.
Don't know's I'd mind his goin'
But he left me when the coal was low.
Don't know's I'd mind his goin'
But he left when the coal was low.
Now, if a man loves a woman
That ain't no time to go.9

Hughes delights in the vivid metaphor or simile that evokes a mood or image in a single telling line, but he always keeps the line short and simple, a technique that at its best conflates music and poetry and at its worst makes the poem appear too facile.

Tolson, on the contrary, is a long-breathed singer. He cannot confine himself to the short, repetitive format of the blues line or the ballad. He therefore uses the blues as a kind of poetic shorthand or as an earthy summary of the longer narrative which is written in free-verse stanzas. Moreover, it's not unusual for the same blues stanzas to occur in different poems throughout Portraits.

"Sootie Joe" is a good illustration of Tolson's integration of free-verse and the blues. But equally important, it expresses an unpleasant truth about life in America. The first three stanzas, written in free-verse, reflect on the life of Joe, "a chimney sweep without peer .../ Whether he raced a weighted corset/Up and down the throat of a freakish flue,/ Or,... wielded his scraping knife/Through the walled-in darkness."10 The cost of Joe's dedication to his profession was an irrevocably grime-ridden body.

As the speaker observes in stanza 2:

The soot from ancient chimneys
Had wormed itself into his face and hands.
The four winds had belabored the grime on him.
The sun had trifled with his ebony skin
And left ashen spots. (p. 17)
But Joe was no happy "darky," as his "wealthy white customers" came to understand when they heard his song. His song was, of course, the blues, and as the final stanza reveals, the unadorned truth.

I's a chimney sweeper, a chimney sweeper,
I's black as the blackest night.
I's a chimney sweeper, a chimney sweeper,
And the world don't treat me right.
But somebody has to black hisself
For somebody else to stay white. (p. 17)

Like William Blake's "Chimney Sweep," Joe is aware of his place at the bottom of the economic ladder. However, Joe's resignation to his fate as a laborer is offset by his awareness that "the world don't treat [him] right." It is no accident that the poem's most telling line arises from the blues stanza. Tolson learned well from Hughes that the blues was not only an articulation of a people's spirit but their collective wisdom. And thus, to understand Portraits as a whole, its rhythm and flow, is to realize that each poem, in one sense, is another verse in a kind of literary opus that depends on Euro-American free-verse form to tell the story of each Harlem inhabitant but depends on the blues to complete the poem, to raise it to a universal level. If the Euro-American stanza creates a linear movement in time, the blues, conversely, transcends time. As Ronald Walcott points out:

... the blues transmutes the time-world of history into the time-less world of the epic. What distinguishes it as a result is not its revelation of the actual historical world, its catalogue of the brutal unpleasant facts of Black life in America, as so many posit, but its insistence on the formal possibilities inherent in style itself. If one can hold oneself together long enough to perceive the slapstick, surreal, altogether
absurd predicament of oneself in all this trouble which so nearly could have been avoided and for which one is largely responsible; if one can apprehend this comedy for what it is, a comedy of incongruity, of human fallibility in which one suffers so outrageously; and if one can, then, order the impressions of this otherwise chaotic and near-meaningless existence to achieve some aesthetic end, then, just maybe then, one can work one's way, next time, around some of this trouble, even as one knows in the bottom of one's heart that, later, one will even more surely work one's way back to exactly the same spot. The Blues somehow manage to affirm human possibility in the most conspicuously impossible seeming situations.\textsuperscript{11}

"Harlem," the first poem of the collection, conflates several of the various blues stanzas that appear throughout the book, giving the reader a preliminary glimpse of the blues that bind the lives of Harlemites and also serve as a narrative linking device for the author. From:

\begin{verbatim}
  Happy days are here again.
  Dat's sho' one great big lie.
  Ain't had a beefsteak in so long
  My belly wants to cry. (p. 3)
\end{verbatim}

to:

\begin{verbatim}
  My two-timin' Mama says to me:
  Daddy, did I let you down?
  Gonna break dat woman's goddamn neck
  Befo' I leaves dis town. (p. 3)
\end{verbatim}

the blues sustain the energy level of the poems and create a sense of continuity from one piece to the next. In addition to teaching Tolson a stylistic approach to poetry that was grounded in the black experience, Hughes taught him the importance of dealing with issues relevant to the black (and by extension the Third World) community. The thematic
concerns of *Portraits* are evidence of what Tolson learned, but more importantly, they represent the seminal soundings on themes which will occupy Tolson's work for the rest of his poetic career.

That is not to say that Hughes is exclusively responsible for alerting Tolson to the social and political exigencies of the era as they concerned black people. George Schuyler, "iconoclast" of the 30's, "arch foe of class snobbishness and a fearless defender of the underdog," as Tolson called him, also served as a model for Tolson. Perhaps Schuyler appealed to Tolson because he expressed ideas in his work, specifically his novel *Black No More*, that Tolson himself held but had not creatively expressed until he wrote *Portraits*. In his master's thesis, Tolson commends Schuyler's attacks on the middle class.

Dr. Dubois had been thought radical; but, nevertheless, he did respect the middle class virtues. Schuyler's radicalism, on the other hand, centered its attack on those mores dear to the soul of dark responsibility. The Negro clergy and the caste-system within the race did not escape venomous assaults. Schuyler sneered at the so-called progress of the race. He ripped open the inhibitions and complexes of "Big Niggers."[13]

In *Portraits*, Tolson takes up some of the same themes that Schuyler wrote on: class conflict, racial prejudice, intra-racial prejudice, and the hypocrisy of the black clergy as well as Tolson's own thematic interests such as the artists' role in society. An examination of representative poems for each aforementioned theme will not only show how Tolson deals with important contemporary issues but it will also reveal how
Tolson gropes for his own voice among the cacophony of voices that arise from the Harlem Renaissance and the decade that follows.

To begin with the class conflict, Tolson handles this theme from a predominantly sociological perspective, focusing on the several levels of black society. An examination of the poems that treat the general theme of class conflict reveals several sub-themes, which attest to the complexity of the class issue in America as Tolson perceives it. There are the workers, whether skilled or unskilled, the poor and destitute proletariat. There are the pimps, prostitutes, and hustlers who feed on the unfulfilled desires of the proletariat. And then there are the black bourgeoisie, which most often appear in Portraits as the group which has enough power to do the most good but does the least. The characters play out their lives against the backdrop of the Depression years and emerging rumors of World War II. Tolson's awareness of the political ramifications of this situation is reflected in those poems which give a Marxist interpretation of the problems of the working class and the defects in the capitalist system. Poems such as "Zip Lightner," "Hamuel Gutterman," "Ferenc Glaspell," "Big Jim Casey" "Jack Patterson," and "The Underdog" are the best examples of this theme in action. For our purposes, let us look first at "The Underdog" which is the book's most powerful indictment of class conflict and the capitalist system.

"The Underdog" is the last poem and summarizes the sentiments of all the other thematically related poems, because it is a rallying cry to the "workers of the world [to] unite" (p. 230). The poem gains its strength from the literal thrust of its
statement. It differs from many of the poems in Portraits in that it is not an individual characterization; rather, the speaker represents the universal underdog.

Sambo, nigger, son of a bitch,
I came from the loins
Of the great white masters. (p. 229)

Describing the downside of the "American dream," the speaker declares that "kikes and bohunks and wops,/ Dagos and niggers and crackers" were the pawns of the "great white masters."

Then a kike said: Workers of the world, unite!
And a dago said: Let us live!
And a cracker said: Ours for us!
And a nigger said: Walk together, children. (p. 230)

The racial epithets, ordinarily demeaning appellations in themselves, achieve a kind of dignity in their concerted battle-cry for unity. And yet the poem's strength is also its weakness, for propaganda's gain is often poetry's loss, or to cite John Crowe Ransom, "the repetitive moral earnestness of poetry of ideas is more a scientific concern than an aesthetic one."14 Certainly, one could say there is no poetry or music in racial, economic, and political oppression, but what else other than a raw, unadorned voice could arise from those whose teachers were "Vice and Superstition/
Ignorance and Illiteracy . . ./," from those whose "pals were TB and Syphilis,/ Crime and Hunger." Tolson does not attempt to settle this controversy, but the poetry of this volume implicitly favors what can be termed poetry of social consciousness in the sense that it "reflects the effects of social, political, and economic conditions of its
characters and embodies an implicit or explicit thesis recommending social reform.\textsuperscript{15}

The reform that "Underdogs" explicitly calls for is, as Russell observes:

the union of the masses, poor white and poor black, as the solution to racial and class discrimination. The final goal of proletarian unity is an apocalyptic democracy -- classless, multiracial, multicultural -- an attainable goal.\textsuperscript{16}

"Jack Patterson" places class conflict on an intimate level. The reader hears the "little man's" interpretation of socio-economics. Here, Tolson demonstrates his talent for salty monologue that captures the truth in a few choice phrases. Perhaps the only problem is that there are not enough choice phrases. Jack Patterson, the working man's world traveller, relates the political truth to Uncle Rufus that he "heard [from] Steamboat Bill." "Big fish eat up little fish,/ An' the color of the fish don't count." It took Jack "seven years of bummin' around/ In America an' China an' Africa an' Europe" to discover this truth. Jack shares his hard-won wisdom with Uncle Rufus:

Uncle Rufus,
This great wide world that God forgot
   Opened my eyes!
   Seen big yellah fish in Shanghai an' Peking an' Liaoyang
   Eatin' up little yellah fish.

   Seen big white fish in London an' New York an' Stockholm
   Eatin' up little white fish.
   Seen big black fish in Addis Ababa an' Monrovia an' Port-au-Prince
   Eatin' up little black fish.
So help me God. (p. 127)
In effect, the speaker gives a sociological explanation in lay terms of the mechanics of the capitalist system. In *Caviar and Cabbages*, Tolson expresses the same view in prose:

Hitler . . . unites the Big German Boys and appeals to race prejudice to put over his nasty policies, while the little Germans eat sawdust sandwiches. Mussolini whoops it up against the Ethiopians, while the little Italians starve on 25 cents a day for twelve hours' work. Ed Cotton comes to the United States on a platform of racial hate, while the poor Crackers eat sow's belly and corn pone. The poor Crackers sing "My Country Tis of Thee," and they don't own enough of their country in which to bury a cockroach.

Rufus goes on to relate the story of the "colored president of Bedrock College" who was so prosperous that his long Packard "couldn't turn no corners in town." When a jealous white complains to the mayor of the town that "that black sonofabitch has the finest car/ In the whole state of Alabama," the mayor consoles him with the following rationale:

The white race hasta stay on top, don't it?  
Well, that nigger president does more  
To keep these niggers in their place  
Than all the white folks in the State of Alabama;  
An, my good man, a servant is worthy of his hire. (p. 128)

A quick comparison of poem and prose passage confirms that Tolson has not yet mastered the art of economy of line. He begins well with the blues verse:

White boss worked me so damn hard  
Lawn, I couldn't git my breath.  
White boss worked me so damn hard  
Lawn, I couldn't git my breath.
Black boss cut my wages down.
Till I almost starved to death. (p. 127)

The blues stanza adds ethnic texture and authenticity to the speaker's narrative, and the analogy of the big fish and the little fish is an earthy simplification of a complex problem. However, the poem becomes bogged down by the speaker's unnecessary anecdote about the Bedrock president. The speaker talks on after he has already made his point, demonstrating, if inadvertently, the limitations of didacticism.

Although the poems in Portraits do retain characteristics of social realism, the majority of the poems on working class Harlemites do not necessarily carry Marxist overtones. The majority of the characters Tolson depicts are not especially introspective. Most of them are ordinary people who represent the lumpen proletariat: laundry workers, jackleg preachers, and cabaret singers. Some despair and succumb to the vices of the city; some survive and even prevail. They may hail from as far away as China or as near as Arkansas, but they have all ended up in Harlem and all must ultimately subscribe to the laws (whether written or informally acknowledged) of the city. Of the myriad poems written in this vein "Mammy Tyler" is a good representative poem, because it demonstrates the wry fortitude that many Harlemites adopted during the bleak thirties.

Mammy, whose been "tried in de fiery furnace of life," speaks in the black idiom, but her advice to her daughter carries universal connotations of fortitude and stoicism. Mammy advises her daughter not to abandon her children simply because
her husband abandoned her. "Honey, 'taint no use to act like dat./ Don't cut off de big toe to punish de foot." Mammy gently browbeats her daughter with her moralizing, but more importantly she sympathizes with her daughter's plight and recounts her own experience of abandonment by her husband.

What would you think of me, Honey,
If I'd run off an' left you
When you was a po' little, helpless baby? (p. 59)

Mammy's summarizing argument to her daughter recalls that of Hughes's speaker in "Mother to Son," except that here Tolson doesn't quite capture the subtlety and pathos that Hughes' poem does.

We all has troubles, Honey.
But you cain't git away from trouble
By runnin' away from trouble.
You hasta stand right here, toe to toe,
And fight it out with Ole Man Trouble! (p. 59)

Of the poems on class conflict, the ones that focus on the middle class are perhaps Tolson's most satiric. He has no sympathy for the "Eulaline Briffaults," "the Napoleon Hannibal Spears," or the "Alexander Calvertons" of this world who have assimilated the most venal capitalist values. Tolson exposes the carefully circumscribed lives of the black middle class as shallow and imitative. "The Reverend Eutaw Lamb" is one of the more humorous pieces on this theme. Written in the form of Lamb's last will and testament, just six months before he dies of heart failure, the poem is Lamb's vengeful swan song. His gentle name belies the fact that he has suffered and survived life's adversities to win a reputation as a successful lawyer and a "well known figure/ In the civic, fraternal, political, and religious life of Harlem."
However, upon closer scrutiny of Lamb's life, it would seem that he has been a commanding presence everywhere but in his own home. His absence is reflected in the extent to which his family and housekeeper have betrayed him. He addresses each subject of his contempt or affection in successive stanzas.

To his philandering wife, he leaves "her love of Big Shot Lacy." To his pastor, Reverend Hart Newman, he leaves "five hundred dollars," because "The Sabbath is a day of rest," and many Sunday mornings Reverend Newman's voice "lulled [him] to sleep in the Shiloh Baptist Church." To his daughter he leaves one "thousand dollars" to enable her to "spend the summer in Atlantic City/ With her sweet man, Diamond Canady." To his cook he leaves "all the food and all the scandals/ She carried out of [his] kitchen" over the years. Lamb is most generous to "Ma Goodwin" to whom he leaves his "Sugar Hill apartments." His reasons are simple and in his final reckoning suggest his belated understanding of the most important values. He says of Ma Goodwin:

When I was homeless,  
She took me in;  
When I was hungry,  
She fed me. (p. 176)

Lamb's belated generosity is commendable, but he is really no better than the people he condemns. And for his own lamblike sacrifice to Mammon, he ultimately reaps more than he sows.

Tolson's criticism of the middle class includes some of the most prominent and numerous members of that group -- the black clergy. Tolson was raised in the Christian tradition, and he liked to say that he was "the son of a preacher who was
the son of a preacher who was the son of a preacher." However, Tolson's association with Langston Hughes and George Schuyler forced him to reevaluate Christianity's role in the life of society, especially black society. Hughes and Schuyler viewed Christianity as an opiate first used by Euro-Americans to "civilize" the slaves and later used by blacks to enslave each other. In 1932 while in Russia, Hughes wrote "Goodbye Christ," which was eventually published in the United States. The first stanza gives a sense of the poem's radical denouncement of a religion which the poet believed had become corrupt.

Listen, Christ
You did alright in your day, I reckon
But that day's gone now.
They ghosted you up a swell story, too,
Called it Bible -
But it's dead now,
The popes and the preachers've
Made too much money from it
They've sold you to too many

The poem's reception was controversial; Socialists hailed it as progressive while clerics and conservatives lambasted Hughes for his blasphemy. Following a minister's stinging attack on the poet and the poem in the Pittsburgh Courier, Tolson vigorously defended Hughes's poem in the same periodical. His assertions can serve as introduction and underlying premise for Tolson's own poems on the Christianity motif; Tolson considered himself a "radical" Christian whose fervor was tempered by his equal allegiance to certain Marxist tenets, as poems in later works will reveal. As he observes:
The world is in a terrible condition today, and, if Christianity does not do something to solve the problems of humanity, it will have hurled at it repeatedly such challenges as "Goodbye Christ," and all the personal vituperations of a Reverend Mr. Henderson will do nothing more than increase the force of that challenge. The disciples of Karl Marx carry his teachings forward with a verve and courage that are admirable; the followers of Christ, on the other hand, enter into bootless denunciations. The leaders of Communism starve ... and die to put over the teachings of Marx; the leaders of Christianity live in comfortable homes and ride around in big cars and collect the pennies of washerwomen. Magnificent edifices are erected, while people go hungry and naked and shelterless.  

Tolson concludes that:

Men are concerned with present-day Christianity. Christianity must come down from the pulpit and solve the problems of today. Men will no longer listen to the echo of that beautiful, but illogical spiritual of long ago:

"You may have all this world. Give me Jesus." In fact, Jesus Christ would not have sung a song like that. He was a radical, a Socialist, if you will. His guns were turned on Big Business and religionists. He heralded the dawn of a new economic, social and political order. That is the challenge to all.

The poet's intent here is not so much to praise Marxists as it is to shame Christians.

In his own assessment of Tolson's problem with the role of religion in the modern world, Robert Farnsworth comments:

Tolson's view of Christ as a radical heralding the dawn of a new order probably preceded his year in Harlem and almost certainly did not stem simply from his reading of Hughes. Such a view of Christ had been common for some time. Art Young had depicted Jesus as an outlawed agitator in a cartoon in Masses as far back as 1913. His caption reads, "He Stirreth up the People." When Angelo Herndon was arrested in Atlanta in 1932 on the charge of inciting insurrection, a charge that was to lead to his becoming, next in fame only to the Scottsboro boys, a cause celebre of the early thirties, one of the
"incriminating" documents found in his room was a pamphlet by a Bishop Brown entitled "Christianism and Communism." And the view would have been familiar to Tolson, since his father was a Methodist minister .... There were also many other influential voices scathingly critical of the church's role during these times of hardship. W.E.B. DuBois in The Crisis had been acerbically critical for years. But Tolson's defense of Hughes also reveals how his zeal for a relevant church in times of desperate economic hardship caused him to syncretize the teachings of Marx with the Christian prophetic tradition. Christ led a revolution of the poor and powerless. Marxism, with its promise of wresting power from the bourgeoisie in favor of the deserving proletariat, seemed to follow in this prophetic tradition.  

Besides Tolson, Schuyler, and Hughes, other black writers questioned Christianity's relevance to the world and black people in particular. Waring Cuney's "Conception" satirizes the immaculate conception with an irreverence amplified by the poet's use of black folk speech:

Jesus' mother never had no man.  
God came to her one day an' said,  
"Mary, chile, kiss ma han".  

In "Suppliant," Georgia Douglas Johnson's closing verse controverts the passive stance of the devout Christian: "The strong demand, contend, prevail; the beggar is a fool!"  

"Reverend Thomas Brazeale, "Reverend Isaiah Cloud," "Faith Hanley," "Black Moses," and "Aunt Martha" reflect the tonal range and variety of poems on this theme. For our purposes, we will look at "Reverend Thomas Brazeale" and "Aunt Martha." In "Reverend Thomas Brazeale" the poet severelyjudges black clergymen who use religion to punish the consciences of their congregation. Brazeale is "An ebony Orpheus,/ He plays upon the lyre of their emotions." When he threatens sinners with the "wrath of an angry God," the congregation goes into various
postures of fear and frenzy. "The temple shudders." Some "shrink in their seats./ Some bound from their pews"; others "hide their ashen faces in their hands," but most, "catching the mighty rhythms of the intoned periods,/ Rock their bodies and stamp their feet." In this church, the medium is the message. Brazeale offers no earthly solutions to the problems of his fearful flock, but rather the promise of "The New Jerusalem" where "cherubim and seraphim [hover] about the thrones of God." Brazeale's pie-in-the-sky promises of "gold-paved avenues" and "pearly gates" make a spectacular conclusion to his performance. Tolson's hyperbolic adjectives connoting the greed and deception of the protagonist lend the description an ironic tone.

    Leaning over the pulpit,
    He draws the congregation forward in their pews,
    Like a magnet tensing iron filings. (p. 15)

The preacher's name conflates two words -- "brazen" and "zeal," and both equally apply to this man whose brazen manipulation of his congregation is matched only by the zeal with which he pursues his task.

    On the other hand, "Aunt Martha," with its mischievous humor, attests to faith's ingenuity. Aunt Martha is a church-going woman, but in times of trouble she becomes a hard pragmatist. When the old woman is evicted from her apartment, she takes the "one-dollar bill/ crumpled in the top of her stocking" and judiciously spends it where it will do the most good. First, she goes to church to pray and forget her troubles. There she receives divine inspiration that ironically leads her to a place far from the altar.
When the Reverend Joshua Lovelace
Announced hymn number 11,
And a bustling deacon raised the collection,
Aunt Martha placed ten cents on the ancient walnut table.
And repeated the mystical numbers again and again. (p. 179)

"The next morning she gives the figures 711" along with her last "ninety cents" to a
numbers agent named Jazz Boker, the same Jazz Boker who supplies poet Vergil
Ragsdale with cocaine.

While arranging her pieces of battered furniture
In her new quarters, late that evening
Aunt Martha sang triumphantly:
Gawd moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform. (p. 179)

Tolson, however, does not condemn all clergymen alike. He includes "portraits" of
"Isaiah Cloud," "who leveled the social barriers in the church/ and practiced simple
democracy" and "Black Moses" (modeled on the real life figure of Elder Claybourne
Martin, the "Barefoot Prophet") who carried an "ebony staff in one hand/ And a large
white satchel in the other" filled with pamphlets on "the second advent of the
Messiah."26

By now it is apparent that many of the themes overlap; but perhaps the one
theme that pervades all the others is racial prejudice. It is not surprising that
Portraits treats this theme more explicitly than any of the works that come after it,
perhaps because a young, impressionable Tolson composed parts of Portraits in the
wake of Garvey's "back to Africa" movement and in the midst of the Scottsboro case,
events which the poet was well aware of and which undoubtedly influenced his view

The second stanza of "Carrie Green" is a lyric from a spiritual; its weariness and sorrow give the gist of Carrie's story.

Nobody knows de trouble I seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus. (p. 69)

In the land of Jim Crow, Carrie Green, who has worked hard all her life, has earned nothing more than the right to work for the rest of her life. The tragedy of her fate is compounded by her own ignorance and gullibility. Carrie believed her mistress "Dear Miss Smithfield" in Vicksburg, Mississippi, who told her:

That the blacks were poor
Because God was punishing them for
for their laziness;

But that if Carrie would be thrifty,
Like white folk,
She could lay aside enough money for her
old age. (p. 69)

Carrie's faith in the efficacy of Miss Smithfield's race-biased opinions and her faith in "de Lamb of Gawd" leave her penniless after "good Miss Smithfield dies" and her "pitiable sum" is lost "in the collapse of the Security National Bank."

Nevertheless,
Faith can move mountains . . .
So Carrie goes to Mr. Maranto's cafe at 6 a.m. 
And works over the red-hot stove till 6 p.m. (p. 69)

Carrie does not have the vision of a "Hamuel Gutterman" or a "Big Jim Casey." In this sense she epitomizes passive blacks who, through ignorance and misdirected faith, believe they are inferior. Tolson's message is that the reward of ignorance and passivity is poverty, sorrow, and death. Carrie winds up in Harlem and goes to work in "Mr. Maranto's cafe," and she is just as "tired in body and spirit" as she "used to be" when Miss Smithfield "now in heaven/ worked her fourteen hours a day/ and gave her two dollars a week/ and cast-off clothes/ and good advice." Tolson's satiric tone here is balanced by his authorial distance, so that Carrie's tragic predicament is revealed to be as much her fault as her racist employers.

The tone of "Crip Mackay" is lighter, but the underlying message is nevertheless the same. Crip declares in the first stanza,

I may have to go to hell to live 
Wid Satan an' my po' ole Pa. 
But I's gonna keep my pot-black self 
Outa de State of Arkansas. (p. 145)

Crip relates his hair-raising adventure down south in the all-male intimacy of the "Four Square Barbershop." His conversational tone is enhanced by his dependence on the rhythms of black speech. And his colorful analogies add depth and humor to an otherwise deadly serious topic, because Crip's story is a lesson in loving humanity. It is a reminder that sorrow and guilt are the common inheritance of black and white alike. It is a reminder that blacks can be just as tainted by the poison of racism as
whites. While stowing away on a freight car, waiting for the "Memphis Yellah Dog" to pass and "dreamin' about Harlem," Crip is surprised by the sudden entrance of a white woman who boards the car, unaware of his presence. Crip's reaction to her presence is indicative of his understanding of the cultural codes of the South. "A white woman climbin' into the car./ Another Scottsboro case." Crip's fear of the woman almost blinds him to her humanity. It is only when he discovers that she bears an awful burden of guilt for the murder of her husband that Crip sees beyond the color barrier. Crip relates his sudden conversion.

A funny thing happened to me.
I always hated white people.
I'd always rejoiced when whites were killed
In storms an' floods an' wrecks. The hand of God, I said.
You see the white militia had murdered my brother
In the race riots in East Saint Louis.
Yes, a funny thing happened to me in that boxcar.
The walls of the prison of race hate
Pushed out ... out... an' left me free.
I forgot the woman was white
An' remembered she was a woman ...
A woman who needed help. (p. 146)

Before Crip can offer help, the woman commits suicide by jumping from the freight car which is moving "along at about fifty-five." And Crip is left with nothing but his own thoughts and "the moon shinin' through the open door." Tolson has turned the tables here to make the point that whites do not have a patent on racism, and racism is itself a kind of prison that shuts off the afflicted from the rest of humanity.

Intra-racial prejudice is an important sub-theme in Portraits. In fact, throughout the 30's many writers dealt with the general theme of intra-racial
prejudice, but their treatment of this controversial issue often took the form of the "tragic mulatto" scenario. Thus, there were Dubose Heyward’s *Mamba’s Daughters* (1927), Nella Larsen’s two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), and Ridgely Torrence’s *Granny Maumee* (1927), all of which expressed conventional attitudes towards color in one form or another. The basic message in all of these works tended to affirm the notion that "the true American tragedy was to be less than pure white." However, there were authors who attempted to deal more realistically with the theme; Wallace Thurman’s novel, *The Blacker the Berry*, Langston Hughes’ play and poem of the same name, *Mulatto*, treat the "barely legitimate" topic of discussion in literature and explore the ever-widening implications of racial miscegenation. Tolson chooses to explore the larger theme of intra-racial prejudice, a move which affords him the opportunity to deal with the the variety of sub-themes which arise from the historical problem of miscegenation. Whether in poetry or prose, Thurman, Hughes, and Tolson share a realistic vision of a situation brought about through socio-historical and political circumstance. Oliver C. Cox, author of *Caste, Class, and Race*, explains the complexities and far-reaching effects of intra-racial prejudice. In a discussion of "The Ruling-Class Situation," he observes:

"Degrees of color tend to become a determinant of status in a continuous social-class gradient, with whites at its upper reaches. Thus, assuming cultural parity among the group, the lighter the complexion, the greater the economic and social opportunities. In this situation, then, there are significant color distinctions among the colored people themselves . . . . The colored people as a whole tend to become perennially preoccupied with the problem of degrees of pigmentation and lament the luck of their dusky progenitors."
Cox's observations are not significant to Tolson's poems merely for their topical affinities; Cox, a professor of sociology, was also Tolson's colleague at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, from 1938 until 1944, and the two writers shared ideas on the nature of race and class conflict and its accompanying problems.

In Portraits, Tolson examines prejudice within the race in poems such as "Big Bessie," "LadyHope," "Black Zuleika," "Babe Quest," and "Mrs. Edith Parker." We will examine three poems which form a trilogy on the theme, "Lady Hope," "Black Zuleika," and "Babe Quest." "Lady Hope", the first poem of the trilogy depicts Lady Hope, an octoroon from Lake Charles, Louisiana, who goes from one marital difficulty to another. When her marriage to the "near-white" Rex Gallomb fails due to his predilection for "consoling the misunderstood wives/ of henpecked Sugar Hill businessmen," Lady marries Sam Childs, who is "black and ugly and well-to-do." Sam Childs confirms Lady Hope's sense of superiority by "slavishly" courting her "ivory whiteness." However, when the burden of keeping Lady up on a pedestal becomes too great, he falls in love with "Black Zuleika" who could dance the "Jelly Roll" and sing the "Yellah Girl Blues." As the final stanza says:

> Her gold teeth shining in twin rows,  
> Her lean-muscled body swaying like a tall palm  
> Caught in a simoon, Black Zuleika sang huskily:  
> Look out, Yellah Gal, lookout  
> Bettah tie yo' man at home,  
> Cause I got the kind of lovin'  
> That makes the men-folks roam! (p. 21)
"Yellah Gal Blues" is a song that Black Zuleika has literally learned by heart. In the second poem of the trilogy, "Black Zuleika," the speaker recounts Zuleika's past and in so doing explains her vindictive pursuit of other women's and particularly "yellow" women's husbands.

Down at Onward, Mississippi, ten years ago,
A yellow field girl had stolen her peon-husband,
And Black Zuleika had sworn vengeance
On the whole race of yellow women. (p. 21)

No one was more entranced by Zuleika's dusky beauty and sensuality than Marcus, who had composed "Yellah Gal Blues" in the first place. The composer had drawn from his own experience since he, like Sam Childs, was married to a yellow woman. The last stanza of "Black Zuleika" finds Marcus in the Sundown Cabaret:

His passionate eyes devouring the thighs of the blues singer
And the next morning he slipped noiselessly out
Of Zuleika's loud-red bedroom
And went home to his yellow wife
With an oily lie on the tip of his tongue. (p. 22)

"Babe Quest" ends the trilogy on a dangerous note, because Babe does not take her man's infidelity well. All the names of the characters have a stereotypical quality and Babe's is no different. If "Lady Hope" conjures images of a society matron, then "Babe" connotes a certain street savvy. A jealous Sam Childs tells Babe of her husband's indiscretions with Zuleika, and Babe purchases a razor from "old
Goldberg's pawnshop" with the intention of setting things straight. The blues lyrics of the second stanza comment on Babe's dangerous mood.

I love ma daddy,
But ma daddy's been untrue.
Love ma daddy,
But ma daddy's been untrue.
Ma daddy hurt me so bad
I don't know what to do. (p. 23)

Intra-racial prejudice is not confined to boudoirs and speakeasies, although Tolson often presents the theme in these settings. Nevertheless, Tolson's presentation does assert that the insidious presence of intra-racial prejudice is a direct result of the internalization of the oppressors' values, as Cox has pointed out. Portraits deals more completely with this sub-theme than any other work.

It is interesting that "Black Zuleika" is a blues singer, because as an artist her raw voice is a reflection and summary of her own experiences. Oddly enough, however, Tolson does not significantly emphasize this aspect of the artist's work in poems that specifically focus on artists, whether they are entertainers like "Ivory Frysinger" or middling piano players such as "Richard Birch." "Virgil Ragsdale" is perhaps the exception to this rule and even here the connection between his art and his life is only implied in his poetic summary of the curator's "gallery" and his own subsequent portrait in the gallery. Tolson's concept of the artist, and especially the writer, is that of an isolated figure, an observer more than a participant; as an artist at the beginning of his career, Tolson did not yet have the knowledge or experience to synthesize anything as formal as a theory on the artist's role and especially the
black artist's role in society. Therefore, Portraits does not present a cogent thematic argument. However, it does initiate a discussion on the nature of art and the artist which the poet eventually pursues with increasing clarity through Rendezvous with America, "E. & O.E.,” and Harlem Gallery. In the latter work, Tolson dramatizes the black artist's dilemma as it pertains to "performing blackness," as Kimberly Bentson terms it, while concomitantly delineating the nature of art itself.

Although Tolson had not quite worked out the details of his own theory of the black artist's dilemma, he understood enough even at this early stage in his career to distinguish the "authentic" artists from the "inauthentic" ones, as Mariann Russell applies the term to Tolson's depiction of artist in Portraits. According to Mariann Russell, Tolson depicted artists as either "authentic" or "inauthentic" with regard to their commitment to their roles and their resistance to external pressures, whether socio-political or aesthetic. Some of the poems that depict "authentic" poets are "Virgil Ragsdale," "Percy Longfellow," "Sterling the Artist," "Abraham Dumas," and "Xavier van Loon." "Inauthentic" artists are represented by two poems: "Simon Southern" and "Richard Birch."

Of the first group, "Virgil Ragsdale" and "Abraham Dumas" are the most striking examples of Tolson's idea of what the artist is and what he should be. Virgil Ragsdale, "Dishwasher poet at Mr. Maranto's cafe,/ Who wrote the epic An African Tragedy/ Burned as trash by Big Sadie's husband" (p. 4), first appears in the introductory poem, "Harlem," and represents the tragic plight of poets whose voices often go unheard due in part to their own self-destructive tendencies and to the
ignorance or indifference of the community. And yet for all the obstacles in his way
Ragsdale’s vision of Harlem is wryly humorous, hard-edged, and clear-eyed. Ironically,
Ragsdale’s declaration that he "shall not see" the goings on in Harlem is followed by
a lively enumeration of all the things he will not see. He summarizes the rhythm and
reason of the city in the the following apostrophe:

"Harlem, O Harlem,
I shall not see the quiet Dawn
When the yellow and brown and black proletarians
Swarm out of stinking dives and fire-trap tenements,
Pour through canyon-streets,
Climb Strivers' Row and Sugar Hill,
Erase the liveried flunkies,
And belly laugh in the rich apartments of the Big Niggers.

"I shall not see the unwashed mob
Hoofing the Lindy Hop in Madame Alpha Devine’s drawing room,
Guzzling champagne in Banker Calverton’s library,
Bouncing their unperfumed butts upon Miss Briffaults silken beds,
Gorging the roast chicken and eclairs in Editor Speare’s kitchen.

"Harlem, O Harlem,
City of the Big Niggers,
Graveyard of the Dark Masses,
Soapbox of the Red Apocalypse . . .
I shall be forgotten like you
Beneath the Debris of Oblivion." (p. 4)

Regardless of his personal failure, Ragsdale’s vision is very similar to Tolson’s own;
like Tolson, his poet’s eye separates the wheat from the chaff of humanity and sees
beyond the horizon the fate of the people.

Regrettably, Tolson’s individual depiction of Ragsdale smacks too much of
melodrama in its attempt to delineate the tragic features of the dishwasher poet’s
days "standing twelve hours on a damp floor/ And bending his frail body over steaming sinks" to "save enough money" to write his epic.

He worked in an ill-lighted rear room,
Fired by the hectic afflatus that had inspired
Keats and Watteau, Mozart and Chopin.
His vitality ebbing rapidly,
He stimulated himself with gin and cocaine
Bought from Jazz Boker. (p. 100)

Ragsdale's body is discovered by "Big Sadie, the landlady," who unceremoniously dumps his epic, An African Tragedy, in the waste basket and orders her husband to burn it as "trash." Tolson counterpoints his narrative with the blues stanza,

I's on dat Lonesome Road
An' my heart's like lead

Don't want no mourners
When I's laid out dead! (p. 100)

an act which in this poem is too mechanical to add depth or texture to the poem. On the other hand, Ragsdale serves as the prototype for John Laugart who suffers a similar fate in Harlem Gallery.

"Abraham Dumas," although an otherwise undistinguished poem, offers a contrasting perspective to the short, tragic life of "Virgil Ragsdale." In a portrait that strongly resembles real-life writer/activist, W.E.B. Dubois, Tolson briefly sketches the life of an "elderly man of catholic tastes and interests/ Nurtured by the cultures of two continents." The poet calls him "the Flaubert/ Of fledgling Negro poets and novelists" and the "Dean of Negro Letters." Dumas's apparent success as a writer suggests that black artists do have options; they can transcend social, political and cultural barriers.
Portraits spends little time on "would-be" artists. Therefore, "Simon Southern" will suffice to represent this dubious group. "Simon Southern" is a portrait of the over-rated novelist, "Mr. Masters," and "Simon Southern" is the protagonist of Masters' "magnum opus." Unfortunately Mr. Masters, who has been called "the most subtle writer in the Harlem Renaissance" "becomes so subtle [in his writing] / There is no danger of anyone's detecting his meaning" (p. 177).

His novel is a no-man's-land
Of mutilated experiences
His diction consists of crutches
On which the characters hobble
From sentence to sentence.
His style is that of a meat cleaver
Finishing tainted dog scraps. (p. 177)

Perhaps the greatest irony is that Tolson's own writing here lacks the needed ironic tension to properly show up Masters as the poor novelist that he is. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, the afore-mentioned poems represent an initial and at best tentative exploration of the artist's place in the Harlem community. As Tolson broadens his own experience as a writer, he better articulates the position of black artists and ultimately all artists. And certainly, the general themes represented in Portraits are the seminal soundings of a poet at the beginning of his career. In this sense they are not static; rather their interpretation and modification in each successive work are dependent on and adapted to the poet's changing social, political, and literary environment.
From an overall standpoint, *Portraits* is the seed from which Tolson's other works grow. It is in this collection that the poet takes his first tentative steps toward developing his own voice and projecting his own vision. He discovers those themes which will, for the most part, remain constant throughout his career. In *Portraits*, Tolson begins to explore racial consciousness, class conflict, and Christianity. And if, as Farnsworth has asserted, Tolson sees "Marxist ideals and ambitions through the lens of radical Christianity,"*32* *Portraits* is his opening statement.

And yet it is also clear that Tolson has not yet discovered an appropriate form to accommodate the broad parameters of his imagination. For all his excursions into the blues format, he still relies heavily upon the Euro-American free-verse stanza to give the gist of his message. Unlike Hughes, who allows the blues stanza to stand on its own, Tolson feels constricted by the short repetitive lines that the blues offers. In this sense, one can say he has more in common with Countee Cullen and Claude McKay whose formal repertoire is almost exclusively Euro-American, ranging from sonnets to ballad variations. However, neither Hughes, Cullen, or McKay is finally satisfactory as a model for Tolson, precisely because their decisions to embrace one or the other idiom -- Afro-American or Euro-American -- is limited by its own exclusivity. Clearly, Tolson's own failure to successfully blend characteristic forms of both cultures leads him to temporarily abandon his heavy reliance on the blues idiom when he writes *Rendezvous with America*. Like *Portraits*, *Rendezvous* is heavily influenced by social realism; however, unlike the first manuscript, *Rendezvous*, with its verse-paragraphs and its broad thematic concerns, is a step toward the long
poems Tolson eventually writes, namely *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* and *Harlem Gallery*. 
Chapter One

End Notes


4 Osofsky, *Harlem*, p. 80.


12 Tolson, *Harlem Group*, p. 78


17 Tolson wrote weekly articles on social, political, and economic subjects for *The Washington Tribune* from 1937 until 1944.


19 Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, p. 3.


27 Patricia Romero, ed. International Library of Negro Life and History: I Too Am America (New York: Publishers Co., Inc., 1969), p. 225. On March 25, 1931, nine Negro youths were arrested near Scottsboro, Alabama, and were subsequently charged with criminal assault. They had boarded a freight train and found themselves with a handful of white youths and two white girls. A fight started, and some of the white boys left the train and summoned the local law authorities. The law officers stopped the train, found the nine Negroes and took them into custody. The girls, who were of questionable reputation, related a horrendous tale of their encounter with the Negroes on the train. Within three weeks, all nine youths had been convicted, and all but one had been sentenced to die. The lone reprieve was granted the youngest, a thirteen-year-old, while another boy of fifteen was among those to receive the death penalty.


31 Russell, Melvin Tolson's "Harlem Gallery", p. 3.
CHAPTER TWO

"A Poet of Two Minds"

A discussion of Rendezvous with America and its place in Tolson’s aesthetic development must begin with an examination of the socio-political and literary milieu in which it came into being. Tolson published his first book (although his second collection) in 1944, one year before the end of WWII. Indeed, "war and rumors of war" is a stated or implied theme in many of the poems in the collection. Equally important is Tolson’s inner debate on the aesthetic direction which his poetry should take, so that in one sense Rendezvous is the working out of the poet’s aesthetic problems with form and content. Farnsworth aptly observes that Rendezvous seems to "look in two directions at the same time,"1 perhaps because Tolson is still in active search of a voice that will accommodate the prismatic variety of his intellect and creativity.

In Portraits Tolson’s classicist tendencies are often subverted by the demands of his text. In Rendezvous, he yields to those tendencies and experiments with a variety of Euro-American verse forms, from ballads to sonnets, with varying degrees of success. Certainly, critics welcomed Tolson’s first published volume. Moreover, "Dark Symphony," one of the long poems in the collection, won the main prize for poetry in Chicago’s Negro Exposition, 1940. Ironically, Tolson’s poem was chosen over Gwendolyn Brooks’s "The Ballad of Pearlie May Lee," because the judges thought the latter poem was too militant. Oddly enough "Dark Symphony" was one
poem out of a collection which was at least partially informed by a socialist aesthetic. Wilburn Williams explains Tolson's stylistic oscillation as his inability to balance "erudition and intuition, high culture and folklore."^2 To support his contention, Williams points to Tolson's evaluation of Langston Hughes' and Countee Cullen's contrasting aesthetic positions as Tolson outlined them in his master's thesis. Williams uses Tolson's analysis as a theoretical springboard from which Williams launches his own assessment of the poet's deficiencies. According to Williams:

Tolson could not see the clash between Hughes and Cullen for what it was because he was too blind. Tolson could sense the achievement of Hughes but he could not make out the depth of Cullen's enthrallment to a bygone era. Cullen did provide a needed corrective to Hughes' vaunting of blackness, but his inability to see that Anglo-American tradition itself required renewal severely limited the utility of his opposing view.4

Williams makes a creditable observation here, but he seems to ignore the fact that on a political and aesthetic level Hughes sees himself as a black nationalist and says as much in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." He does not simply "vaunt" blackness. On the contrary, he lifts the black masses; he explores black folkways; he, in essence, articulates the black experience as he perceives it. Cullen, on the other hand, accepts his inevitable assimilation of Euro-American traditions and consciously works to integrate his African and American heritage, his success or failure notwithstanding. It is this aspect of Cullen's philosophy that most appeals to Tolson, who already leans toward cultural pluralism, the best alternative to assimilation.
Moreover, "aesthetic blindness" is not a satisfactory explanation for the pendulum action of Tolson's stylistic preferences; rather, Tolson is conducting a furious inner debate on whether "to be or not to be a Negro poet." This debate is not unique to Tolson as a black artist or as a black person. It is derivative of W.E.B. DuBois's theory of "double consciousness." In *Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois articulates "double consciousness," "a term at once large and ambiguous enough to encompass a complex social, cultural, and psychological phenomenon." 

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. 

Since DuBois's definition of this problem, many black writers, from Paul Lawrence Dunbar to Langston Hughes, have dealt with the dilemma of double consciousness, often coming up with widely differing solutions that manifested themselves in the writers' approach to content and form. In this respect, Tolson is no different from his literary predecessors, for certainly this historical issue influenced Tolson's own choice of content and form.
Attempting to free himself and all black American writers from the externally imposed prison of identity, Langston Hughes explicitly addressed the issue of double consciousness from a black nationalist perspective eighteen years before the publication of *Rendezvous*. Hughes stated:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*. The colored people did not buy it.8

Hughes's solution, as he states in his closing paragraph, is "indifference."

We the younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are
beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the
tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are
glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter
either. We build our temples for tommorow, strong as
we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free
within ourselves.9

At the writing of Rendezvous Tolson was certainly cognizant of Hughes’s
position. On the other hand, he was also aware of the young Richard Wright’s
general condemnation of black American writing up to the time of the Harlem
Renaissance as either a sort of "conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of
‘achievement’ or the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for
justice."10 As he states in the following passage, Wright’s solution to the problem of
double consciousness, his way out of the cultural chiasma of race is to embrace a
Marxist vision.

Hence, it is through a Marxist conception of reality and
society that the maximum degree of freedom in thought
and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer. Further,
this dramatic Marxist vision, when consciously grasped,
endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other
vision can give. Ultimately, it restores to the writer his
lost heritage, that is, his role as creator of the world in
which he lives, and as a creator of himself.11

Faced with the often conflicting views of his contemporaries, Tolson chose to
create art that reflected something of both Hughes’s and Wright’s perspectives
without compromising his own idea of what art should do and be. Thus, at the
writing of Rendezvous, Tolson’s solution to the problem of double consciousness was
to embrace a Marxist vision, but to temper his ideological position by placing content
within the "envelope" of Anglo-European forms when applicable. That is not to say that Tolson viewed form and content as separate entities. Rather, he understood that as an American poet, he had inherited the English language and was free to explore all its possibilities. If any characteristic distinguishes *Rendezvous* from *Portraits*, it is Tolson's inherent joy in being an American and having the freedom and the responsibilities that this status entails. Thus, in *Rendezvous* Tolson returns to some of the same "ghosts" that he had heretofore banished from his poet's republic -- Emerson, Whitman, Poe, Shakespeare. And it is not coincidental that the first three writers should be part of the American Renaissance, for in *Rendezvous* Tolson acknowledges his ideological predecessors by enlarging upon some of their basic transcendentalist concepts, namely in approaching an understanding of the universe through an understanding of the individual and in attempting to find harmony with God's immense scheme of things.

Thus, *Rendezvous with America* records the history of freedom, the demise of tyranny, and the prerequisites for peace. It is up to this point in his career his most inspiring paean to the American dream, because it is ultimately about the potential of true democracy in America and the world. It is about social, political, and economic freedom, not just for the few but for all. With this work Tolson declares his status as an American poet in the Whitmanian spirit, of the people and for the people.

Just as Whitman accepted Emerson's delineation of the American poet and considered himself that singer whom Emerson looked for in vain, Tolson, in following
Whitman onto the stage of American national poetry, saw himself in a similar role.\textsuperscript{12}

Four of Tolson's general themes are represented in \textit{Rendezvous}: racial consciousness, class conflict, the artist's role in society, and the nature of war; but more significant, Tolson articulates these themes through the powerful and often paradoxical lens of history. Moreover, his intentional overlapping of themes evidences his understanding of their interrelatedness. \textit{Rendezvous} confirms that class conflict is irrevocably tied to race conflict and these very conflicts often sow the seeds of war, whether in America or in the world.

Tolson's presentation of the poet's role in society is a good starting point in the discussion of the major themes in \textit{Rendezvous}, because it explains in some respects the aggressive attitude the poet takes toward the handling of all the other themes in the book. In addition, his presentation reveals a broadening of his own perspective on the poet's identity. For Tolson, the poet has a responsibility to examine, explain, comment on, and interpret the ways of the world to the world. In this sense, the poet is a kind of hero who champions the cause of the people to the king, whether that king takes the form of a Fascist government or a race-biased Southern town. Mariann Russell suggests that the poet "combine[s] the characteristics of poet, orator and prophet,"\textsuperscript{13} and Farnsworth adds to these roles that of "both champion and martyr."\textsuperscript{14} Tolson's thematic handling of the poet's role, in \textit{Rendezvous}, demonstrates this notion of the poet-hero. \textit{Portraits} began the initial exploration of the poet's real and ideal role in society. \textit{Rendezvous} expands the
discussion by showing the reader not only what a poet should write about but what a poet should be. In Rendezvous, two poems address this theme: "The Poet" and "The Bard of Addis Ababa." The former focuses on the poet's social responsibility as well as his license as poet to "[plunder] the dialects of the marketplace,/ [and thieve] lexicons of Crown jewel discoveries,"\(^{15}\) while the latter depicts a heroic poet in action.

"The Poet" demonstrates Tolson's growth as a writer, not necessarily because it is written predominantly in ababb rhyme or because the accentual syllabic meter conforms to iambic pentameter, but because he makes more economical use of phrasing; he uses a more interesting and more expansive vocabulary; and he displays a more practiced hand in the use of paradox and irony. This poem views the poet from outside and in.Externally viewed, the poet is both humble and proud. "The poet cheats us with humility . . . He shapes and polishes chaos without a fee," and yet, as the third stanza declares:

He stands before the bar of pride,
Gives not a tinker's dam
For those who flatter or deride
His epic or epigram
The potboy, not the connoisseur, toadies for a dram. (p. 28)

Tolson allows the reader to "peep through [the poet's] judas-hole/ And see the dogma of self at work," but inside "the nerve and verve of soul" is an "eagle's heart."

As for technique, the poet (as Tolson himself eventually becomes famous for the same habit) "plunders the dialects of the marketplace/ . . . Pillages the symbols
and meccas of the race." For Tolson, the paradoxical nature of the poet's role lies in his obligation to be champion and martyr, memoirist and prophet. The poet is both "Ishmaelite" [who] "breaks the icons of the Old and New" and "an anchoret" [who] feeds on raven's bread,/ Candles worlds whose suns have set." In his attempt to articulate the myriad roles of the poet, Tolson synthesizes disparate images, a definite improvement over the sometimes flat narrative poems of Portraits.

Where "The Poet" is a general description of a writer, "Addis Ababa," a longer narrative poem, depicts a particular poet who shares many of the characteristics of "Abba Micah Soudani," a character in "The Lion and the Jackal," one of Tolson's many unpublished prose manuscripts. As Farnsworth points out:

This 'bard of the little people' wears a native shamma, has a 'magnificent busby of lion mane,' was a classmate of Haile Selassie's and has won respect across all tribal lines for his simple life and his impassioned songs and oratory. He is a national patriot and author of a ballad that has become for all practical purposes a national anthem. He also wears a Chinese dirk and an English pistol, utilitarian and symbolic gifts for his past deeds.16

Written in three sections of 6-line, 4-line, 6-line stanzas respectively, the poem is a fair demonstration of what Tolson called the "S-trinity of Parnassus," "the linking of sound, sight, and sense in poetry."17 With its alternation of anapests, dactyls, and iambs within the boundaries of a trimeter line, the poet creates a mesmerising rhythm to match his near-fantastic tale. The very sight of the bard is unusual, as the following description confirms:
Now the Bard of Addis Ababa,
Looms, barefoot, on the height,
Thicket-bearded, cadaverous,
Black as the Gojjam night,
The gray eyes under tuft-ridges
Glowing like anthracite. (p. 83)

It is not surprising that this bard possesses some of the same qualities Tolson elaborates upon in "The Poet." He is humble: "A blooded Amharic scholar/ With the lore of six thousand years-/ Yet he wears a sackcloth shamma/ From the looms of Tafwaiperes." He is, as "The Poet" describes, "a champion of the people versus Kings," because for the Ethiopian people "His name is an emblem of justice,/ Greater than lumot or priest" (p. 84), and "The seven-league boots of his images-/ Stir the palace and marketplace" (p. 84).

Section II moves from characterization to exhortation to arms, to prophecy, as it opens with the imperative, "Rise up, ye warriors . . .":

The Fascist jackals shall die on the dunes,
From Gambela to Danakil
And the rain and sun shall rot their thighs
From Gojjam to Bodaba Hill. (p. 85)

The speaker's prophecy that "the days of masters shall pass like dust" reminds us that Tolson has not abandoned his socialist-oriented vision.

The poem ends on a celebratory note as "The Black Shirts slump on [their] camels" in defeat. The allusion to Haile Selassie as "The Conquering Lion of Judah/ And the diadem of Light" reveals Tolson's own political sympathies. The poem ends where it began with a far off glimpse of the Bard of Addis Ababa with his great
mastiff at his side as the conquering soldiers cry out his name with a vigor to "wake up the dead."

On one level "Addis Ababa" is about a heroic poet and "the battle-cry of his ballads" that spur the Ethiopians to defend their land against "fascist" invasion. However, on another level, the poem illustrates Tolson's belief that capitalism and various forms of capitalism are at the root of the world's problems. What began in Portraits as an explicit call to the "underdogs" of the world to unite is continued in Rendezvous. In a "Caviar and Cabbages" column, Tolson passionately denounces what he perceives as capitalist greed in the "tragedy of Ethiopia." He opens his article with a cynical account of the events leading up to Ethiopia's invasion.


This passage illustrates Tolson's opposition to what he perceived as the unmitigated greed of imperialist nations. So in a sense "Addis Ababa" imaginatively fulfills Tolson's need to publicly condemn imperialism. In addition, from a literary perspective this act aligns him with his predecessor, Walt Whitman, and his contemporary, W.H. Auden, in his commitment to social change.

In Rendezvous Tolson takes on the large social and political themes that occupy the world's stage. Of those themes, racial consciousness has a significant place, and although it does not dominate the collection, its presence is felt nevertheless throughout the book. Tolson's handling of the theme differs from
Portraits in several ways. First, the poet treats racial consciousness from a historical perspective in such poems as "Dark Symphony" and "Rendezvous with America." Secondly, the sub-theme of racial bias is revealed to be the experience of many ethnic groups, from the Jews to the Polish to the Irish to the Chinese, again signalling Tolson's own awareness of the global dimensions of the problem. That is not to say that he does not specifically treat the Afro-American experience. He does so and eloquently in "The Town Fathers," "The Ballad of the Rattlesnake," "The Braggart," "Ex-Judge at the Bar" and "Dark Symphony." In 1939, the last-mentioned poem won first place in the National Poetry Contest sponsored by the American Negro Exposition in Chicago. However, "Rendezvous with America" and more specifically, "Idols of the Tribe" make it clear that black people are not the sole inheritors of racial bias; on the contrary, almost every ethnic group that ever immigrated to America has experienced some form of oppression whether in America or in their mother country.

For our purposes, we will examine "Rendezvous with America," "The Ballad of the Rattlesnake," and "Idols of the Tribe." The first poem is a striking illustration of Tolson's broad perspective on racial prejudice, but it is also a testament to America's promise as the "melting pot" of the world and the ultimate experiment in democracy. "Ballad of the Rattlesnake," on the other hand, specifically focuses on the consequences of white domination of a seldom mentioned ethnic group, Native Americans, although the poem is ostensibly aimed at "black and white sharecroppers."
And "Idols of the Tribe" explores racism as a socio-political inheritance and ultimately places it within the context of the Aryan narcissism of Hitler's Third Reich.

In "Rendezvous with America," Tolson indulges his predilection for the large, panoramic motion. Here, the "seven-league boots of his images," to quote "Addis Ababa," "span two world wars and record the actions of "men who bridged the ocean/ With arches of dreams/ And piers of devotion" (p. 3). The parabolic images suggest an intentional allusion to Crane's "The Bridge," another epic paean to America. Such a reference attests to Tolson's awareness of his indebtedness to his literary predecessors. The same can be said for the following Whitmanian cataloging of the settlers of the New World:

Messiahs from the Sodoms and Gomorrah of the Old World,
Searchers for Cathay and Cipango and El Dorado,
Mystics from Oubangui Chari and Uppsala,
Serfs from Perugia and Tonle Sap,

Jailbirds from Newgate and Danzig,
Patriots from Yokosuka and Stralsund,
Scholars from Oxford and Leyden, (p. 3)

The second section gives a detailed description of the kind of men who first came to America. In hyperbolic couplets the speaker pays homage to "men who dared to be/ The sires of things they could not see,/ Whose martyred and rejected bones/ Became the States' foundation-stones" (p. 4). This section rises on a crest of the speaker's own enthusiastic homage, and yet it falls because the speaker fails to temper this same enthusiasm, causing the section to become a monotonous hosanna with awkwardly conceived couplets such as the ones that follow:
These were the men of iron lips
Who challenged Dawn's apocalypse,
Who married Earth and Sea and Sky
And died to live and lived to die. (p. 4)

However, as Hart Crane and Whitman discovered, it is often difficult to maintain momentum in a poem of such grand dimensions. If the poet lacks the structure of a narrative or a set of unifying symbols, he is sometimes at a loss as to how to fill the line. Tolson falls prey to this tendency here.

Sections III and IV image America's cultural multiplicity by distinguishing "the babels of bloods,/ The omegas of peoples," poured "into the arteries of the Republic." The penultimate and ultimate stanzas of section III begin with the question, "America?" and then proceed to define America through an enumeration of metaphors, a syntactical strategy that Tolson will use again with more powerful results in Libretto for the Republic of Liberia. Tolson makes it clear that America is the creation of myriad peoples, good and bad. As he declares in section IV, "I see America in Daniel Boone,/ As he scouts in the Judas night of a forest aisle;/ In big Paul Bunyan, as he guillotines/ The timber avalanche that writhes a mile" (p. 5). Moreover, each stanza of section IV repeats this structure as the speaker conjures a variety of folk heroes in American history from Jesse James to John Henry to Casey Jones to Joe DiMaggio. Also contributing to the unity of the section is the poet's use of predominantly iambic pentameter with an abcb rhyme scheme.

Perhaps the most powerful section is section V. Tolson employs the same repetition of phrase, but to better effect. Each stanza is a historical refutation of the
ignorance and bigotry of "a [universal] blind man." As he states in the first stanza of the section:

A blind man said,
"Look at the kikes."
And I saw

Rosenwald sowing the seeds of culture in the Black Belt,
Michelson measuring the odysseys of invisible worlds,
Brendeis opening the eyes of the blind to the Constitution,
Boas translating the oneness in the Rosetta stone of mankind. (p. 7)

For each racial epithet uttered by "the blind man," whether "chink," "bohunk," "nigger," or "wop," the speaker counters with a powerful enumeration of each group's historical triumphs. More specifically, they figuratively transform America from a wilderness to a nation by the very acts of "sowing," "measuring," "opening," and "translating."

However, in contrast to the preceding laudatory stanzas, section VII depicts the dire consequences of America's lapses in moral and political vigor. When "Uncle Sam" "sinks into the nepenthe of slumber," "the termites of anti-Semitism busy themselves/ And the Ku Klux Klan marches with rope and faggot/ And the money-changers plunder the Temple of Democracy" (p. 9). On a stylistic level, the section balances the preceding one; from a substantive viewpoint it underscores Tolson's commitment as a poet to social change.

Like many of the preceding passages, section VIII is marked by parallel structure. Each stanza begins with the declaration, "I have a rendezvous with
America." In long stanzas, all with the exception of one consisting of 15 lines, the poet recounts America's history from "Plymouth Rock" to "Pearl Harbor:"

I have a rendezvous with America
At Plymouth Rock,
Where the Mayflower lies
Battered beam on beam
By titan-chested waves that heave and shock
And cold December winds
That in the riggings pound their fists and scream.

Here,
Now,
The Pilgrim Fathers draw
The New World's testament of faith and law:

A government of and by and for the People,
A pact of peers who share and bear and plan,
A government which leaves men free and equal
And knits men together as one man. (p. 10)

Tolson's ability to manipulate sound and rhythm is no doubt evident in the preceding passage. However, the poet's lofty phrasing of his verse-paragraphs sounds too derivative of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Both sections IX and X comprise a single stanza and employ parallel phrasing that begins, "In these midnight dawns." Section IX, in accordance with preceding stanzas, mixes historical and biblical imagery to characterize the times:

In these midnight dawns
Of the Gethsemanes and the Golgothas of Peoples,
I put my ear to the common ground of America. (p. 11)
What the speaker hears are "swells the Victory March of the Republic." Here Tolson borrows a technique from Crane's *The Bridge*, ending the poem with a kind of prophetic homage to technological progress. Using musical imagery, the speaker describes this progress as a figurative symphony with "the bass crescendo of power dams/ And the nocturne adagio of river boats,/ In the sound and fury of threshing machines/ And the clarineting needles of textile mills" (p. 12). However, again Tolson's encyclopaedic vocabulary, which is often his strength, serves to his disadvantage when it is overused, so that by the end of the stanza, the proliferation of musical metaphors has become mere rhetorical showmanship. The poet achieves the same effect in the final stanza when metaphorically comparing America to a giant, "granite-footed . . . deep-chested . . . tough-tendon . . . clean flanked . . . eagle-hearted."

"Rendezvous with America" undeniably demonstrates Tolson's thesis that America is "an international river with a legion of tributaries!/ A magnificent cosmorama with myriad patterns and colors." In effect, it belongs to all the people, and all the people at one time or another in their history were demeaned because of race, creed or kind. However, what passes as brilliant rhetoric sometimes fails as brilliant poetry. More than anything else, "Rendezvous" demonstrates that Tolson is not at his best when he is too closely following in the stylistic footsteps of Whitman, Lindsay, and Crane. He does not quite succeed in revivifying a fading interest in traditional verse forms. However, to his credit, there are inspired passages which redeem the poem.
Of all the poems in the collection, "Idols of the Tribe" best explains the whole notion of race antagonism and the dynamics of its psychological manifestation. It also underscores the differences between *Rendezvous* and *Portraits* in that "Idols of the Tribe" is about the global dimensions of race bias. The poem opens with a quotation from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which extols the virtues of "A Teutonic State of the German Nation" and endorses a kind of pseudo-Darwinism.

A state which, in the epoch of race poisoning, dedicates itself to the cherishing of its best racial elements, must some day be master of the world. (p. 87)

The juxtaposition of the title to the opening quotation adds to the horror and tragedy of its import for the modern world. Tolson takes his title from the first book of Sir Francis Bacon's *The New Organon*. The poet shares Bacon's contention that:

The Idols of the Tribe have their foundation in human nature itself, and in the tribe or race of men. For it is a false assertion that the sense of man is the measure of things. On the contrary, all perceptions as well of the sense as of the mind are according to the measure of the individual and not according to the measure of the universe. And the human understanding is like a false mirror, which receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it.\(^9\)

With Bacon's observation as his implied thesis Tolson sets about to explore the regressive aspect of human nature and in light of the title of the collection, the impact of this mortal flaw on the social and political progress of America. In this sense the poem is both an analysis of the limits of human nature and prophecy of the
fall of civilization as a direct result of these ascribed limits. The poem is written in three sections with each section written in a different accentual syllabic meter. Section I is predominantly in iambic dimeter with an abcb rhyme scheme. Section II conforms to the structure of a ballad, while section III alternates between the meters of the former and latter sections. In section I, the genesis of racial conflict is the genesis of mankind. This section images the fear and ignorance of primitive people who feel an unconscious need to submit to a power greater than themselves, one that understands the mysteries of the universe. And so they create their own idols, not by the "measure of the universe," but "by the measure of themselves." As the last lines of section I iterate, the misguided ritual of primitives has hardened into a law of existence.

> Ages fag out
> In cyclic nights,
> But sire and son
> Repeat the rites. (p. 99).

In section II, each ethnic group is metaphorically figured as a "god:" from "the black-veldt god" to the "yellow god" to the "Nordic god." The speaker suggests each god's hamartia in cryptic references but reserves his most vituperative adjectives for the "conquering Nordic god." The black god, whose "python arm" is "at the beck of tribal law," "is not aware/ Of civilizations buried in the jungle's maw." The yellow god is "lulled by the incense wisdom of repose,/ Millennials of candlelight,/ The vegetarian god turns up his nose/ At odors of the carnivorous white." The Nordic god "makes a pseudo-science of his skin/ And writes his autobiography Superman."
Tolson's allusion to the Nietzschean concept of the "superman" is not coincidental. In later works, the poet is less subtle in condemning the philosopher's misguided vision. If the section begins in the interrogative mood, it ends in the imperative, with the speaker demanding,

Eat, O Fool, the racist shibboleth-
Damn the soul to sodomy!
Damn the soul to death (p. 101)

Section III narrows its scope to America, the poet's native land. However, the plaintive quality of the speaker's rhetorical queries maintains the momentum of the preceding section as it lays open America's sores:

How many times
Does a Southern town
Waste white genius
To keep the Blacks down?

How many times
Does progress stop
To find the maimed
A mythical prop? (p. 101)

One is reminded of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" in which the citizens of a small town continue to blindly observe a barbaric ritual long after they've forgotten its significance, and implicit in the following passage is a comparison between modern man and the "veldt men." Tolson appropriates the figure of the soldier in "The Courthouse Square" to symbolize the world's belief in the ritual of war, although the
allusion to the Confederate soldier can also be inferred from the specific reference to the "Lost Cause."

Nor man nor beast prowls in this world,
But on the Courthouse Square
A statue of the Lost Cause bayonets
Contemporary air. (p. 103)

The last five stanzas come full circle in their references to "Mein Kamp," "lepra/ That whores the soul,/ And the brothels of race/ Nordic bawds control." Moreover, the entire poem, with its balladic rhyme scheme and its use of repetitive devices, reinforces a sense of endless perpetuation that "[jails] the spirit fast."

In contrast to the two preceding poems, "The Ballad of the Rattlesnake" is a tightly written, tersely delivered tale of ritualistic vengeance. Moreover, it is one of many poems in the collection that demonstrate the inextricable relationship of race and class. Told by a "bearded dreamer," to black and white sharecroppers, the plot is simple.

The Apaches stake
On the desert sands
The blond man's feet
And the blond man's hands. (p. 54)

There is no heavy-handed moralizing; Tolson wisely allows the tale to speak for itself. In this ritual killing, the "Apaches" tie a rock to the tail of a "diamond head" rattler, then set it on the captive "blond" man.
A madness crawls
In the rattler's brain;
The naked white thing
Is the cause of its pain.

At every lurch,
The blond man dies.
Eternity ticks
Behind the eyes. (p. 54)

The poet figuratively parallels the enmity that exists between man and the snake to that of relationship of white landowners to the black and white sharecroppers. On one level, black and white sharecroppers alike are captives of the prison of poverty. However, it is to the landowner's advantage to fabricate distinctions between the two ethnic groups. "And many a thing/ With a rock on its tail/ Kills the nearest thing/
And dies by the trail."

The iambic and anapestic dimeter quatrains help to maintain the poem's high level of intensity. Moreover, by framing the the present tense within the past and thus telling a tale within a tale, Tolson structurally imitates the concentric coilings of the snake, suggesting simultaneously the paradoxical and cyclical nature of existence.

"Ballad of a Rattlesnake" really touches on two themes: race conflict and class conflict, further evidence of Tolson's contention that the two issues go hand in hand. In Caste Class and Race, Cox hypothesizes:

... race prejudice developed among Europeans with the rise of capitalism and nationalism, and ... because of the world-wide ramifications of capitalism all racial antagonisms can be traced to the policies and attitudes of the leading capitalist people, the white people of Europe and America.20
Cox's hypothesis guides Tolson in his own exploration of the dual themes of class and race, so it is not surprising that the two themes are treated conjunctively in poems throughout the collection. Two poems that deal more specifically with class conflict, its cause and effect, are "Babylon" and "A Song for Myself." However, for our purposes we will look at the latter poem, because stylistically it widely differs from most of the poems in the collection and is evidence of Tolson's continual quest for the perfect marriage of form and content.

The title, "A Song for Myself" recalls Whitman while the dimeter scansion and the aphoristic phrasing have a Dickinsonian quality. In uncharacteristically minimal lines, the poet turns over several of the important questions he has raised throughout the collection. However, the issue of class conflict and its social and political consequences predominates. He attacks his subject with rhetorical queries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who filled</th>
<th>Shall tears</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The moat</td>
<td>Be shed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twixt sheep</td>
<td>For those</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And goat?</td>
<td>Whose bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let Death,</td>
<td>Is thieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The twin</td>
<td>Headlong?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of Life</td>
<td>(p. 45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slip in?</td>
<td>(p. 45)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

If, as the speaker avers in the opening lines, "a man/ Is what/ He saves/ From rot," then the false prophets, "mask-hid,/Unwise" are the "rot" that "Divide/The earth/By class/And birth" (p. 46). These "idols of the tribe," these "Caesars" without and within, predicts the speaker, will be "routed" by "The People." But the speaker implies here that only when the people act to save themselves will they achieve true
democracy. They cannot leave their fate to God, "Leave not/To God/The boot/And rod." And they cannot ignore the signs of the times ("times have/Their Braille"). But they must, as the speaker does, "sift/The chaff/From wheat/And laugh." This transcendental joy and visionary strength will grow ("The truth/Is not/Of fruits/That rot") from the "wheat" that they save.

A sponge,
The mind
Soaks in
The kind
Of stuff
That fate's
Milieu
Dictates. (p. 46)

For the speaker, "fate's milieu" must necessarily encompass past, present, and future, and it is only through knowledge of one's "milieu" that one can act for the good. Thus, the speaker counts "Jesus,/Mozart,/Shakespeare,/ Descartes,/Lenin,/ [and] Chaldni" among those who have "lodged in [him]."

One is reminded of "Michael Ramsey," in Portraits, whose world opened up only when he entered the world of knowledge that books provided. In "A Song for Myself" the speaker reiterates this prerequisite for achieving those "frontiers" he seeks in his "rendezvous with America," with the implication that everything one knows and is forms the foundation of one's personal "creed." Thus, the the two final questions summarize the speaker's argument, because the answer to either depends on an acceptance of the poet's premise and the poet's faith in "the power of democracy to make its way toward universal realization." 22
I harbor
One fear
If death
Crouch near
Does my
Creed span
The Gulf
Of Man?

And when
I go
In calm
Or blow
From mice
And men,
Selah!
What . . . then (p. 51)

In one sense war is the inevitable product of race and class conflict. It is the inexorable product of the kind of perverted hero-worship that Tolson deplores in "Idols of the Tribe." War figuratively lies at the heart of the book, permeating the fabric of almost every poem. At stake in every war is freedom. As a poet, Tolson understands the necessity of defending freedom. He avidly followed the events of World War II and recorded his interpretation of those events in prose and verse, nearly always attempting to articulate for his readers what he saw to be the most important issues of this global conflict. "The Legend of Versailles" declares that to achieve lasting peace:

... We must give
Up secret cartels, spheres of power and trade;
Tear down our tariff walls; let lesser breeds live
As equals; scrap the empires we have made. (p. 65)

"The Unknown Soldier" surveys the history of freedom in America and pays homage to those soldiers who "open doors/ To the Rights of Man, letters incarnadine" (p. 34). The opening lines are a kind of Whitmanian roll call:

I was a minuteman at Concord Bridge,
I was a frigate-gunner on Lake Eric,
I was a mortarman at Stony Ridge,
"Tapestries of Time" is one of the most interesting and profound poems to treat the idea of war, its cause and effect, perhaps because it encompasses nearly all the themes discussed within the parameters of the larger theme of history. Therefore, I will discuss it in conjunction with the two major themes of war and history.

"Tapestries of Time" concludes the collection and is well placed, because within it most of Tolson's thematic concerns converge. But more importantly, "Tapestries" explicitly takes history as its subject, a fact which makes it unique among all the poems in the text which more often use history to support their major themes. Thus, "tapestries" is an appropriate metaphor for what the poet attempts to achieve in this poem, to explore "the woof and warp of the whole" of human history, to explore the why's and wherefore's of human behavior.

The poem, written in eight sections of varying meters, rhymes, and line lengths, is Tolson's first serious attempt to articulate his ideas about the nature of time and man's place within it. Tolson does not have a firm theory about time, or at least not one as well worked out as that of Libretto. And so he does not resolve the conflict that he perceives as existing between man's conception of time as cyclical and history's evidence of continuing human progress.

The first section, however, in its introductory discussion of the mysterious workings of time, asserts that man's ultimate rendezvous is "with God." With their
eloquent phrasing and their imaginative metaphors, the first three stanzas are evidence of Tolson's maturing style and broadening vision.

The tugboat of the sun
Drags planet-laden barges
Past crags and shoals and marges,
Tomb worlds of vapor spun.
And harborless ships of stars,
Like whales with whited scars,
Steer through a universe
Naked of prayer and curse,
Along arc routes begun
Ere the Alpha of the Years
Axled the hemispheres.

The hoary druid Time
Leans upon his mace,
Discerns the odyssey of the tiny dace,
Sees the raison d'être worming from the slime,
Discovers the vigils of a soul-rived clod
In a rendezvous with God.

Time
Speaks in pantomime,
In spite of mimic clocks
And dirty voices on the soapless box. (p. 107)

The stanzas' music derives from the poet's strategic use of several poetic devices. First, he manipulates rhyme creating sporadic couplets that more or less conform to abbac scheme: as in "sun," "barges," "marges," "spun," "stars," "scars," "universe," "curse," "begun," "years," "hemispheres." Secondly, he underscores the transcendant order of the universe by employing nautical metaphors to represent its movement: "the tugboat of the sun/ Drags planet-laden barges/ Past crags and shoals and marges,/ . . . And harborless ships of stars," and by invoking the name "odyssey" to
describe man's own movement through history. Thirdly, the poet's expert handling of sound reinforces the whole idea of texture in this poetic "tapestry" as he sprinkles alliterative phrasing among the lines: "ships of stars," "whales with whited scars," "Alpha of the Years/ Axled the hemispheres." The successful confluence of these devices distinguish this poem from those in *Portraits* and foreshadows the modernist poems that follow in later collections.

Section II begins to explain not nature, but rather the workings of human nature. It makes the point that warrior-generals from Attila to Caesar to Alexander to Napolean, no matter their military prowess, are eventually defeated if not by the people then by themselves.

Attila comes, the Scourge of God  
And his wormy flesh manures the sod  

Caesar ladders to the throne  
And topples, daggered to the bone  
And the dustbroom of the wind sweeps clean the spot.

Alexander weeps and weeps because  
No worlds uprear to give him pause  
And maggots fat on his brain  

And, cancer-eaten, walks the sands  
God-damning in the oblivion of the rain. (p. 108)

The images move through world history as the eye would move across a magnificent tapestry, noting the recurrences of certain leitmotifs. The motif repeated here is that nature, not man, ultimately triumphs. Nature, not man, retains a kind of infinite
beauty. In alternating stanzas the poet contrasts the finitude of man to the infinite beauty and renewal of nature. For example, the first stanza of the section depicts the demise of Attila and Caesar, while the second stanza depicts the beauty of nature. As the second stanza observes:

The sands of the Sahara shimmer while
The peaks of Everest bastion the night,
As the black ox ages go by. (p. 108)

And again, after the depiction of Alexander and Napoleon in stanza 3, the speaker returns to nature as he observes in stanza 4:

The Atlantic crescendos its symphony,
The Mississippi swashbuckles to sea

The Alps bow their heads in cathedrals of snow
The Tiber scoops out the valleys below. (p. 109)

The implied contrast of nature and human nature illustrates the poet's growing awareness of shading and nuance born of his study of Euro-American modernist texts during this time.

Section III, on the other hand, returns to a more characteristic didacticism. In selective details the "Undersoul of the quick and the dead" recounts some of the most grievous errors of man: the rise of capitalism and the worship of science; the demise of true Christianity; and the rise of class and racial conflict. The speaker declares:
In the golden ages Man was quick to die
For truths and freedom beyond ear and eye
But as his empires climbed on dead men's bones
He duped the halt and blind with the Nietzschean lie. (p. 109)

The aforementioned stanza scans the ages and concludes with an allusion to the "Superman" theory promulgated by Freidrich Neitzsche and used in a debased form by Hitler's Nazi regime to justify the atrocities of Auschwitz, Dachau, and other concentration camps during World War II.

However, where section III scans political history from past to present and finds it wanting, section IV, in contrast, offers hope for mankind in its almost incantatory enumeration of instances of human progress. Again, here Tolson shows a growing awareness of the paradoxical nature of existence and the necessity of reflecting its presence in the structure of the poem.

The speaker, the "Oversoul of the brothered dead," illustrates the time-worn phrase that man is doomed to repeat those lessons of history that he does not learn. The speaker's identification of himself as the "oversoul of the brothered dead" alludes, of course, to New England transcendentalism and appropriately articulates man's awesome cosmic ignorance even as he acknowledges and evidences human progress. The poet contrasts the "bearded Saxon's" "hoary bard at mead" to the future "Shakespeare;" "In Timbuctoo, the ebony craftsman, untaught" to the "Diesel-powered zephyr;" and the "Malayan artist [who] dips his stick in sapan" to the "[Florentines who] will fresco the Vatican." Paradox is presented without further comment. However, this catalogue is also interesting for what it reveals about the
poet. It reveals a cultural bias in Tolson, whether conscious or unconscious, toward European achievement.

In section V, the poet passionately asserts that freedom is inevitable. Each metaphor, no matter how disparate, points to the same conclusion:

The oak, root-fisted, plugs the rock-climed soil,
....
The eagle lashes the steel wires that entoil

The tyrant is a fool with a lighted match
Who walks into a powder-freighted room
....

The tyrant is a dwarf bedeviled to prop
An avalanche that rives the bastile of night. (p. 118)

Certainly, Tolson's point here is well taken. However, here as in other poems in the volume, the poet continues to generate metaphors after he has made his point.

Section VI also depends on parallel phrasing in each stanza as the poet observes the various forms of "Death [he has] seen" whether "a cuckold dirked in a dead-end maze of spleen" or "a rebel subdued by the guillotine,"

But I, nor Prophet Time, shall ever see
The death of liberty. (p. 119)

Section VII alternates stanzas of rhetorical questions with stanzas illustrating global reactions to tyranny in the present. Thus, the question,
Shall the mad dog bite  
From the goad of heat  
And go free to fang  
The child in the street

is juxtaposed to specific historical examples of human heroism:

The Chinese rivet the Burma Road and Valley Forge,  
The Greeks fight again with teeth at Thermopylae's gorge  
The Ethiops duel tanks with Danakil spears  
The Dutch and Belgians dynamite trains and piers. (p. 120)

As the final lines of the stanza iterate, the resounding answer to tyranny is "No:"

The French set the Day of Judgment underground,  
The Lavals and Quislings quake at a Banquo sound.  
The Anglo-Americans bridge the Middle Sea  
The Continents paean the V for Victory. (p. 121)

In passages that resemble the newsreel montage popular during this period, the final section conjures in apocalyptic images the sights and sounds of war as "cities crunch in the python coils of tanks" and "Bellies of oceans bloat with men and ships." But the poet envisages "The New World Charter [that] banners the people's fit" and triumphantly concludes that "The Swastika Terror cannot conjure a plan/ To stop the calendared March of the Global Man!" "Tapestries of Time" concludes Rendezvous. Its thematic focus on the rise and fall of nations and the enduring quality of truth is mirrored in the historical montage the poet creates. As in Libretto, history is the muse of Rendezvous, albeit less subtly and creatively handled. Rendezvous must attribute some of Tolson's rhetorical fervor to the "100% mobilization" of the early forties. Thus, the work's patriotic stridency is an extension of the highly opinionated articles the poet was writing in Caviar and Cabbages during this time.
On a stylistic level, "Tapestries" looks both fore and aft, to paraphrase Farnsworth's general assessment of the book, in that Tolson does indeed depend on obviously dated stanzaic formulas (from 4- to 6-line stanzas with balladic rhyme schemes to the concluding couplets that predominate in the final section of the poem). And yet Tolson's ability to crystallize myriad images that embody the world he measures in the balance of things points to his more able apprehension of it in *Libretto*. Such lines as, "The Amazon pyramids her catacomb bars,/ The nightingale psalms the silver-casqued stars" reveal an idiosyncratic use of nouns as verbs that will resonate with characteristicly salty wit and bitter irony in later works -- *Libretto* and *Harlem Gallery*. Finally, Tolson's penchant for revolving the same idea through numerous metaphors and similes will also continue in later works, again however with more sensitivity for condensation of the line and less rhetorical verbosity.

As to the question of identity, with which this chapter began, Tolson is at this point in his career still grappling with the issue at the level of participant who has little time to accept life's paradoxes and incongruities with the philosopher's sanguine disaffection. More to the point, he has not yet come to terms with his own position in this debate on which side of the ideological fence he is on -- "to be or not to be" a "black" poet, or even the aesthetic implications of either choice. What is certain is that *Rendezvous* moves in the direction of cultural pluralism. As we shall see in Chapter Three, this move will involve the synthesis of aspects of Afro-American and Euro-American modernism, a synthesis that reveals a poet mellowed enough by
knowledge and experience to revise the "double consciousness" polemic with a candor and sense of irony that both puzzles and provokes his critics to this day.

Finally, *Rendezvous* achieves the expression of Tolson's controlling thesis, the necessity of preserving freedom in America, in the world by recognizing the humanity of all people, by seizing the macrocosmic hour-glass, history, and selectively sifting through its innumerable grains to discover that transcendant path by which man can ultimately "rendezvous with God." Thus, in practicing the rites of the poet, the "logic of metaphor," he begins the inevitable trek toward American modernism, a trek which necessarily entails a confrontation with history and consciousness. So that in the context of Tolson's stylistic and philosophical evolution, the social realism of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* and *Rendezvous with America* yields to metaphysics in "E. & O. E," as discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter Two

End Notes


3 Tolson included Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen in his master's thesis, "The Harlem Group of Negro Writers." Moreover, Hughes and Tolson became life-long friends after their initial meeting in New York.

4 Williams, The Desolate Servitude, p. 25.


11 Wright, Richard Wright Reader, p. 44.


14 Farnsworth, Plain Talk, p. 67.

15 Melvin B. Tolson, Rendezvous with America, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1944), p. 29. All references to the text will hereafter be cited by page number.

16 Farnsworth, Plain Talk, p. 69.


21 Farnsworth, Plain Talk, p. 82.

22 Farnsworth, Plain Talk, p. 84.
CHAPTER THREE

"Tolson, the Initiate:

Period of Transition, 1944-53"

The eleven-year period between Rendezvous with America and Libretto for the Republic of Liberia represents a crucial transitional stage in the overall development of Tolson's aesthetic. During this period many changes on a personal as well as a professional level were taking place in the poet's life. In 1947, he was appointed poet laureate of Liberia by President V.S. Tubman. In the same year, he left Wiley College to become professor of English and drama at Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma. In 1951, he received Poetry magazine's Bess Hokim Award for the long psychological poem "E. & O.E." (Errors and Omissions Excepted). Besides beginning work on The Libretto for the Republic of Liberia (which Tolson revised many times between 1947 and 1953), Tolson wrote a number of poems during this period of transition: "The Negro Scholar" (Winter 1948), "Abraham Lincoln of Rock Springs"¹ (1944), "African China"² (1950), "E. & O.E." (1951), "A Long Head to a Round Head"³ (1952), and "The Man from Halicarnassus" (1952). These poems, written between 1944 and 1953, show the poet struggling to bridge the gap between his vision and his style. They are linked by their common concern with dissolution of identity and their partial dependence on elements of the hermetic tradition.

In Rendezvous Tolson attempted to reconcile what by now had become his staple themes (racial consciousness, class conflict, the role of the black artist in relation to society, and finally the problem of recovering history) with an
accommodating formal arrangement. As for his stylistic approach, Tolson's experimentation with varying metrics had led him to discard, for the most part, a strict adherence to traditional meter and rhyme, although one cannot discount the value of his experimentation. For as Ezra Pound and W.H. Auden discovered, such experimentation is a vital part of the poet's training. Pound observed, "I think the artist should master all known forms and systems of metric, and I have with some persistence set about doing this, searching particularly those periods wherein the systems came to birth or attained their maturity." However, Tolson's experiments with various "systems of metric and rhyme" made him all the more aware of their inappropriateness for the themes he wanted to explore.

With regard to his handling of theme, Tolson's concerns had shifted in emphasis. With experience and knowledge on his side, he could now distance himself enough from the issue of identity (more specifically the problem of cultural dualism) to treat it as a theme. And yet he refused to allow this particular theme to consume his poetry to the extent that it overshadowed all else. For Tolson had come to understand that history was his axial theme; all the others grew out of and were shaped by it. In Rendezvous, he stresses the importance of understanding the dynamics of history on the global level and man's inherent power to control history's outcome, to outwit fate. This idea is reiterated and reinforced in successive works. In "The Man from Halicarnassus," Herodotus, the narrator of the poem, voices Tolson's own views when he asserts:
these are the soul's upsurge to fetter change
that changes not . . . to smash the vial
of Tartarean hemlock that Time, the whole he gloats,
pours down the throats
of the triumvirs, Mineral and Vegetable and Animal$^5$

The poem closes with a suggestion that it is possible to "smash the vial of Tartarean hemlock"; our divine endowment of "free will" gives us the power of choices:

A people can be bat serpents flying
black abises dying,
or gods outwearing
Calpe and Abila tearing
Ne plus ultra asunder!$^6$

In succeeding works -- from "E. & O.E." to Harlem Gallery -- Tolson polishes and refines these two basic ideas; yet this clarity of vision was the result of years of hard won knowledge and experience.

In fact, Tolson had arrived at many of his ideas only after much soul searching and certainly after having educated himself in the trends in modernism and New Critical thought which had developed since the early part of the century. Moreover, having read some of the same books that his modernist contemporaries had read -- history, philosophy, and the hermetic tradition -- Tolson had begun to interpret and respond not only to Euro-American modernists but to their primary sources. Those sources included, among others, the Kabbalah, P.D. Ouspensky's In Search of the Miraculous, Sadhu Mouni's The Tarot, Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West, and Friedrich Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra.$^7$ Armed not only with an understanding of modernist technique but with considerable knowledge of the
primary works that his modernist contemporaries had turned to, Tolson was ready to figuratively "speak his mind."

Tolson’s poetry then is a reflection of the diverse texts that he read. It does not cleave to one aesthetic approach. If one views *Portraits in a Harlem Gallery* as largely representative of an Afro-American aesthetic and *Rendezvous with America* as largely representative of a Euro-American aesthetic approach with a Marxist orientation, then the poems from Tolson’s transition period and onward attempt to synthesize the best of both worlds: the modernist approach with its dependence on narrative discontinuity, allusiveness, and the foregrounding of the image; the esoterically-inspired practice of concealing knowledge from the uninitiated world and striving through the poem to raise the consciousness level of the initiate; and the Afro-modernist idea of righting history by "re-writing" it within the context of the black consciousness. Craig Werner’s comments reinforce this view; he asserts:

> Through the juxtaposition of diverse aesthetic sensibilities and his own synthetic prosody, Tolson attempts to develop an audience willing to support and/or participate in the creation of art capable of resisting the false dichotomies permeating the aesthetic and political context.8

Certainly, Tolson’s poetry maintains the continuity of his staple themes (race consciousness, class struggle, historicism, and black poetics). But on a more profound level, Tolson is speaking as a seer whose prophecies derive not only from his understanding of the hermetic tradition but from his insight on the workings of history. This chapter does not attempt to pigeon-hole the poet but rather to discover
the source of these varying aesthetic approaches and their effect on his poetry. One thing is sure, what unites these different aesthetic perspectives is the fact that they are, to quote Wallace Stevens, Tolson's "response to the daily necessity of getting the world right."9

Within the context of Afro-American and Euro-American literary trends of the period, this chapter will examine excerpts "The Negro Scholar" and "E. & O.E.," the material results of Tolson's changing poetics. Though traditional in meter and rhyme, the former poem posits the notion that the black scholar (and by extension, the black artist) must understand the necessity of recovering the past (meaning the world's history) as a prerequisite for interpreting the present and future. The latter poem, wholly written in the modernist mode, confronts history in the context of the protagonist's search for a unified identity and strategically exploits the powerful primordial symbols of the Tarot.

To begin with the general status of black writers, it would be inaccurate to say that they were unified by a coherent ideological vision, for such a statement does not even describe the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. And although many of the same socio-political constants still determined the lives of black writers and black people, there were some noticeable differences. As stated in the preceding chapter, black writers of the Harlem Renaissance consciously attempted to assert black cultural values. Whether they failed or succeeded is not at issue here. However, what is important about the movement is that it was "an attempt to isolate an imagery adequate to the task of self-definition."10 As for the major tendencies of the
period, there was, on the one hand, the school of thought followed by Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, and George Schuyler. These writers held with the notion that writers should cultivate black cultural resources in the form of music, folklore, and vernacular speech. Within this group was a sub-group which included Hughes and George Schuyler, whose works, in addition to adhering to the aforementioned practices, also leaned toward a socialist interpretation of reality. On the other hand were Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Georgia Douglas who appropriated traditional Euro-American forms to depict the black experience. Tolson was not a staunch member of any of these groups as evidenced by the fact that he is seldom, if ever, included in Harlem Renaissance anthologies. However, the poet selected certain qualities from each group. From Hughes he learned the importance of the Blues tradition or more precisely the oral tradition in the black aesthetic. From Hughes and Schuyler he came to understand the political implications of racism and class struggle and the necessity of confronting these issues in his work. And Tolson shared with McKay, Douglas, and Cullen a fondness for Euro-American verse forms, a result of his own training as a youth.

By the thirties, many of the original participants in the Harlem Renaissance were at the end of their careers. As C.W.E. Bigsby points out in The Second Renaissance, by the 1930's the Harlem Renaissance had ended, and there was a subtle change in literary priorities:

The old order was aging. In December 1934, Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman died; while James Weldon Johnson published no poetry and died in 1938. As
James Young points out in Black Writers of the Thirties, black writers produced less than one volume of poetry a year between 1929 and 1942. Claude McKay and Arna Bontemps were supported by the Federal Writers Project, and Langston Hughes turned largely to prose, giving poetry readings as a way of remaining financially solvent and publishing only three pamphlets of poetry throughout the decade. And the exigencies of economic collapse bred an inevitable shift in emphasis as the black man was seen as simply one example of exploitation.\textsuperscript{11}

Although many of the players had changed, black writers of the forties and fifties were still divided along the same socio-political lines. At one extreme were poets, Robert Hayden, author of the powerful modernist-influenced poem, "Middle Passage" (1944); Gwendolyn Brooks, who wrote A Street in Bronzeville (1945) and in 1951 won the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for Annie Allen; and novelist Ralph Ellison who wrote the existentialist-influenced The Invisible Man (1947). The work of these writers revealed an engagement with the "mainstream" culture. Bigsby’s comments on Hayden could very well apply to all four of the aforementioned writers. He says of Hayden:

\begin{quote}
Despite his authorship of some conventional committed poetry, a product of the previous decade [the 30’s], his new stance of social and aesthetic detachment was a natural reaction against that decade and seemed to mark, in some senses, an extreme perimeter to Negro art in the following decades. He declared that he was "opposed to the chauvinistic and the doctrinaire," and that he saw "no reason why a Negro poet should be limited to ‘racial utterance’ or to having his writings judged by standards different from those applied to the work of other poets."\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}
At the other extreme were writers like Margaret Walker, author of *For My People* and Langston Hughes who celebrated the oral tradition and considered it the mainstay of black literature. In a letter to a former Wiley student, Tolson once said that an artist must "use the technique of his time," a statement which shares Hayden's dim view of aesthetic allegiance. It is this attitude that led Tolson to study the "great Moderns" as he calls them with an objective eye, and to "absorb the Great Ideas of the Great White World, and interpret them in the melting-pot idiom of [his] people." Reminiscing on the years between the publication of *Rendezvous* and *Libretto*, Tolson remarked that he "read and absorbed the techniques of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Baudelaire, Pasternak . . . all the great Moderns" in addition to studying "much textual analysis of the New Critics." However, his brief observation does not fully explain the remarkable metamorphosis his poetry underwent between 1944 and 1953 or the specific modernist trends that became part of that stylistic transformation.

Monroe Spears offers a panoramic view of the Euro-American modernist trends in poetry that eventually influenced Tolson's stylistic transformation. According to Spears:

> The most obvious innovations in early modern poetry are free verse and rhetorical discontinuity, often found together. Perhaps the chief motive in the use of the former is the desire to break with the dominant forms of English verse since the Renaissance and to transcend the former limits of the art; in the use of the latter, there is the determination to distinguish poetry sharply from prose, the medium of rhetoric and opinion, and to gain intensity through ellipsis and economy.
Spears divides discontinuity in modern literature into four basic forms:

- **Metaphysical:** natural/human/supernatural
- **Aesthetic:** art/life, or mimesis/heterocosm
- **Rhetorical:** prose/poetry, or reason/imagination
- **Temporal:** past/present/future

Spears qualifies his definition by arguing that neither juxtaposition nor the use of ellipsis is "entirely innovational," citing Wordsworth's Lucy poems as "excellent examples of the structure of simple juxtaposition and occasional stark confrontation." He also observes that "free verse and discontinuity are characteristic of the modern only spasmodically and then only in degree not kind." However, he does cautiously admit:

> Perhaps the largest generalization that can be made is that there are two primary impulses in modern literature, both always present but one or the other dominating. The first is the drive toward aestheticism, toward the purification of form, its refinement and exploration, the development of those features that are most distinctive. The illusion becomes more convincing and self-sufficient; there is a tendency for the art-world to become separate and independent from life. This is countered by the opposing impulse, to break through art, destroy any possibility of escape to illusion, to insist that the immediate experience, the heightening of life is the important thing. Both elements co-exist from the beginning.

Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1968), and Richard Ellmann's and Charles Feidelson's *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (1965). Spears's definition most closely follows those of Ellman's and Kermode's as it outlines the major tendencies of the modernist movement. Commenting on Kermode's definition, Spears allows that:

Considering *The Waste Land* as primary example of the modern work, Kermode proposes the word "decreation" (which Wallace Stevens took from Simone Weil) as a "useful instrument for the discrimination of modernisms." Stevens said, "Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers." Decreation is not destruction, but a creative act of renunciation: "God could create only by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself," said Simone Weil. For men, decreation "implies the deliberate repudiation (not simply the destruction) of the naturally human and so naturally false 'set' of the world: "we participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves."  

For our purposes Spears's definition can serve as an adequate description of the major characteristics of the movement to which Tolson was reacting.

Clearly, Tolson was driven by the "first impulse," toward aestheticism, although he did not fully accept the critical rational that was the foundation for the kind of poetry that Eliot and Pound wrote. Therefore, an understanding of Tolson's shift to modernism is dependent upon two critical factors. First, he knew that he was entering the Anglo-European modernist tradition some twenty-five years after its initial impact on the literary world. He also knew, as Spears observes in his definition
of the modernist movement, that by the middle of the 40's many of the younger poets who had come after Eliot and Pound in America and Europe had refused to accept many of the tenets propounded by their predecessors. As Spears acknowledges in *Space Against Time in Modern American Poetry*, the reaction was against:

the concept of the poem as in any sense autonomous or self-sufficient, against any esoteric quality or unnecessary difficulty, against tight or elaborate forms, against irony; in short, against aestheticism or any other tendency to separate art from life. The qualities newly emphasized and valued [were] openness, simplicity, directness -- the accents of psychological truth as the poet reveals, or seems to reveal, the most intimate details of his life.\(^\text{19}\)

Tolson did not necessarily view the poem as "autonomous or self-sufficient," preferring instead to view it as a process or unfolding of an idea. On the other hand, he did not prize "openness, simplicity, [or] directness" as aesthetic virtues which suited his own purposes; he said as much in response to Saunders Redding’s criticism of *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*. Redding complained that "as a critic he had a fundamental objection to poetry which the author must himself interpret for his readers in an addendum of notes." Tolson responded:

Mr. Redding has a fetishism for "simple lines." He says that my section "Ti" has simple lines! My God, that section covers a hundred different books of the ages and two dozen lanaguages! The allusions are imbedded; it is, in some places, a surface simplicity only! Away with the simple Negro! This book is a book to be chewed and digested.\(^\text{20}\)
Hayden White's comment on Frank Kermode's "extensive inquiries into the nature of the language of secrecy" aptly explains Tolson's own preference for the esoteric or difficult poem. For Kermode as for Tolson, such languages of secrecy denote:

figures of speech and of thought . . . used not so much to distort the truth as, rather, to hide it and close it off to those who are not yet ready for or are deemed unworthy of it.  

Moreover, from the perspective of Afro-American modernism, Tolson discovered in modernist techniques a way to use his own encyclopaedic knowledge of literature and his thorough acquaintance with history to, in effect, "re-write" or "right" history within the confines of the poem, rather in the same spirit that W.E.B. Dubois "refigures the South as it appears in Up from Slavery."  

Indeed, Rendezvous was preoccupied with the problem of history, but at this point Tolson did not know exactly how to use history without being didactic as in "Tapestries of Time" where he writes lines like the following ones:

A people divided
Against itself
By the Idols of Race
And Caste and Pelf
Writes its own epitaph
With the fingers of doom:
"Here lies a nation
In a suicide's tomb." 

On the other hand, Tolson often verged on the rhapsodic as in the following passage from "Rendezvous with America":

In these midnight dawns
Of the Gethsemanes and the Golgothas of Peoples,
I put my ear to the common ground of America.
From the brows of mountains
And the flanks of prairies
And the wombs of valleys
Swells the Victory March of the Republic^{24}

Moreover, the poet had not yet perfected a technique that would obviate the need for narrative. But neither did he wish to abandon or exclude his own ideological beliefs altogether. "The Negro Scholar" shows Tolson beginning to deal with these problems, but it is when he gets to "E. & O.E.," "The Man From Halicarnassus," and "A Long to a Round Head," that he begins to resolve them. What he wanted, it seems, was to allow the image to speak for itself, to discard the narrative and the linear. In addition, Tolson saw the advantages of using juxtaposition and literary and historical allusions, although not in the same way or for the same reasons that Eliot or Pound used them. In fact, what Eliot perceived as the poet's "historical sense of the past,"^{25} Tolson preferred to call the "historical imagination,"^{26} largely because he had very definite opinions about history and man's relation to it. Furthermore, though Tolson did not necessarily accept all the tenets of Marxism (believing the Hegelian triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis was correct but philosophically incomplete), he did not entirely dismiss its relevance in accounting for global historical developments, a fact that distinguishes him from Eliot, who considered himself an Anglo-Catholic royalist.^{27} However, Tolson did share Pound's fear of "the relegation of poetry to a detached aesthetic sphere."^{28} Both Tolson and Pound
believed that there was a "causal relationship between economic corruption and cultural decay (a connection also implicit in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley").

The controversy over the poets' political or religious sentiments notwithstanding, Eliot believed that the poem was not a place to argue one's beliefs, a point he makes clear in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Tolson did not agree with this concept of poetry. As he asserts in "The Poet," the poet is "a champion of the people against kings." In other words, he did not believe the poet should exclude himself from the concerns of the people, whether social, political, or religious. It is no wonder, then, that in one passage of "Tapestries of Time" he ridicules those poets, presumably his modernist contemporaries, with the "qualified" exception of Ezra Pound, who "sonnetize a hothouse flower" while all about them the world is going to pieces. Tolson takes up some of these arguments in the poems which we will examine. It is not surprising that he is drawn to these issues, given the fact that they have, in various guises, always comprised his staple themes. So that, in fact, Tolson retains much the same vision in the transitional poems that he displays in preceding works. The important difference is that he abandons many of the rhetorical gestures of the orator, depending less on didacticism and narration and more on irony and imagistic presentation. Nevertheless, Tolson's new approach does not abandon ideology for high art; rather it uses the two in an ironic melding of form and content that Houston Baker would call a kind of "deformation of mastery." Baker defines "deformation of mastery" as follows:
The Afro-American who would perform a deformation of mastery shares the task of Sycorax's son [Caliban] insofar as he or she must transform an obscene situation, a cursed and tripled metastasis, into a signal self/cultural expression. The birth of such a self is never simply a coming into being, but always, also, a release from a BEING POSSESSED. The practice of a phaneric, diasporic expressivity is both metadiscourse on linguistic investiture and a lesson in the metaphorical "worm holing," as it were—the tunneling out of the black holes of possession and "tight places" of old clothes, into, perhaps, a new universe. Black writers, one might say, are always on 'display,' writing a black renaissance and righting a Western Renaissance that was, in the words of Ralph Ellison's preacher in Invisible Man, "most black, brother, most black. "The deformation of mastery refuses a master's nonsense. It returns—often transmuting "standard" syllables—to the common sense of the tribe. Its relationship to masks is radically different from that of the mastery of form. The spirit house occupying the deformer is not minstrelly, but the sound and space of an African ancestral past. For the Afro-American spokesperson, the most engaging repository for deformation's sounding work is the fluid and multiform mask of African ancestry.31

Baker's concept neatly articulates the philosophical foundation for the kind of writing produced by authors such as Charles Chestnutt and W.E.B. DuBois, in their time, and Melvin Tolson, Robert Hayden, and Ralph Ellison, in their time; but I would expand Baker's reference to the "sound and space of an African ancestral past" to include all Third World history, for Tolson's poetry, more than that of any other modern black writer, advocates cultural pluralism. In "The Black Scholar," but especially in "E. & O.E." and the poems written after 1948, his poetry is at times a brilliant "deformation of mastery"; though the poet himself might not have used Baker's term, he certainly would have understood the critic's intent.
In order to see Tolson's poetics in practice, let us look first at "The Negro Scholar," published in 1948, only four years after Rendezvous with America. Like "The Poet," this poem deals with definition. Tolson's penchant for definition, whether he's defining "America," or the "poet," or the "Negro scholar," or "Liberia" reveals a desire to set things straight, to give the definition from the perspective of the "other.

The poem at hand discusses, in stanzas 1-9, the prerequisites for being a black scholar. The speaker observes in stanzas 1 and 2:

The scholar is the ace of peers: he rules
With zero plus the sceptre of his pen.
Sometimes he wears the doctor's gown, sometimes
The peasant's jeans, sometimes the beggar's rags.

And he can eat with dignity out of
A garbage can, for intellect alone
Can riddle riddles in the flux of things
Without the grim cathedra (sic) of a god.32

Very much like the poet, the scholar must be a heroic figure of "Promethean will, imagination, [and] intellect," "blazing a trail for Black America." For Tolson, the black scholar must be a "genealogist," reconstucting culture for a race long confined to the margins of western civilization; as the speaker asserts, "A race that has no culture is a bastard/ Among the arrogant of blood and lucre" (p. 80). The scholar must also be a "surgeon" who cuts away the lies that "infect the truth of race." Stanzas 10-12 trace the cultural genealogy of black scholars back to Africa and the "University of Sankore/In Timbuctoo, a summit of the mind" (p. 81).
That Ghana knew, and Melle, and Ethiopia,
And Songhai: civilizations black men built
Before the Cambridge wits, the Oxford dons
Gave 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.

From Asia, Europe, Africa -- who made
A paradise of arts and sciences!
When Anglo-Saxons laud the Venerable Bede,
Let Africans remember Bagayogo. (p. 81)

The scholar-hero recovers black culture by recovering black history, retracing the middle passage, and "uproot[ing] the lies of ermine classes" (p. 80). He seeks the underlying truth "beneath the adust (sic) anarchy of things."

It is no accident that Tolson's ideas here resonate with the teachings of W.E.B. Dubois, for as Houston Baker asserts in Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, Dubois's writings, especially Souls of Black Folk, are a "cultural performance." Baker's comments on Dubois could well explain the rationale Tolson uses in the present poem when he says:

...for Dubois, the immanence of black folks resides in what he defines in "Of the Meaning of Progress" as a "shadow of an unconscious moral heroism that would willingly give all of life to make life broader, deeper, and fuller." "Immanent," indeed, one might say, since the trait, embodied by Josie, the heroine of the essay, is a "shadow" of something that is itself "unconscious." Yet Dubois transforms this immanence into tangible form. It shows most concretely as "the longing to know, to be a student in the great school [Fisk University] at Nashville." . . . "Culture" in Dubois's text is drawn in recognizable Western terms:
Baker quotes DuBois:

In the morning [at Atlanta University], when the sun is golden, the clang of the day-bell brings the hurry and laughter of three hundred young hearts from hall and street, and from the busy city below, -- children all dark and heavy-haired, -- to join their clear young voices in the music of the morning sacrifice. In a half-dozen classrooms they gather then, here to follow the love-song of Dido, here to listen to the tale of Troy divine; there to wander among the stars, there to wander among men and nations, -- and elsewhere other well-worn ways of knowing this queer world. Nothing new, no time-saving devices, simply old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth, and searching out the hidden beauties of life, and learning the good of living. The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs, that was taught in the groves by Plato, that formed the trivium and quadrivium, and is today laid before freedman's sons by Atlanta University.

Baker goes on to say:

Not only is "culture" a "curriculum" of the best that has been thought and known, but it is also an attitude of free inquiry, a free play of the mind about all ideas.

In the final analysis, however, DuBois realizes that such culture as the West projects must be energized by a sounding on, within, and beyond "culture" by "clear young voices in the music of the morning." Young, aspiring, melodious "moral heroism" from black "country districts" comprises the most achieved and potentially productive realization of a folk spirit in active operation. The university -- the black, southern university -- is not characterized by halls of ivy, but rather by "chapel[s] of melody." .... The folk not only come to the domain of culture but also refigure the very notion of "culture" for the modern world. Their immanent moral heroism and spirituality are best sounded among traditional Western masterpieces as a way of transforming such artifacts (and themselves) into resources for a world where mastery has been deformed.33
Thus, when Tolson offers up a black scholar in history, ("When Anglo-Saxons laud
the Venerable Bede,/Let Africans remember Bagayogo"), he is "refiguring" black
history. By the same token he is refiguring all of history; as Eliot has said, "the past
should be altered by the present" and so it is with Tolson. Stanzas 14-24 warn
against intellectual elitism and pedantry ("a scholar does not tabulate/ The split
infinitives in Hamlet, count/The empty bellies and the kinky heads/ Across the tracks
in Okay, Arkansas") and reiterate the notion that the scholar must be an innovator,
a trailblazer in such lines as these:

So Einstein laughs in Newton's face and runs
A red cross through his Laws; the unbent line
Is thus the longest space between two points;
The star we see is not there to be seen. (p. 82)

Implicit in this passage is the earlier posited notion that the scholar must be
"Promethean in will, imagination and intellect," in plainer words an iconoclast with
the "moral heroism" to know when to challenge tradition.

As to the poem's formal arrangement, it shares the major characteristics of
poems in Rendezvous, in that it adheres to the traditional in its 24 quatrains of blank
verse. Also, in this poem as in many of those in the former collection, Tolson
depends on parallel constructions. For example, declaratives such as "The scholar is," "A race is," and "The Negro scholar must," predominate, creating with their very
didactic thrust an atmosphere of oratorical fervor.

On the other hand, the poet's attempt to recover black culture by refiguring
black history, his "sounding" on culture in the form of black scholarship clearly
points to his approach in later poems. In this vein, the speaker describes the "lineage" of a scholar, as "a chain /Of syllogisms flung to bridge the peaks/ Of moments of the conscience of mankind." Not only does he use the same passage in Libretto, but in the latter poem he actually attempts to create the bridge through the process of the poem itself. In 1951, Tolson published "E. & O.E." in Poetry and won that magazine's Bess Hokim award of the year. Fourteen years later, Tolson included large excerpts from the poem in his epic, Harlem Gallery, which will be discussed in a later chapter. Therefore, the poem is doubly significant as an indication of Tolson's acceptance of modernist techniques, and as a signal of Tolson's acceptance as a modernist poet by American literati.

"E. & O.E." treats a traditional identity theme in black literature, "double consciousness," in a novel way. James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912), Jean Toomer's Cane (1923), Langston Hughes's Not Without Laughter (1930), Claude MacKay's Home to Harlem (1928), and Banjo (1929) have all broached this theme with varying degrees of emphasis. Moreover, Countee Cullen's "Heritage" and "Fruit of the Flower," Langston Hughes's "Cross" and "Mulatto" treat the same theme from the poetic perspective. Despite differing stylistic approaches, all of the aforementioned works share something of the same thematic vantage point; their protagonists struggle (consciously or unconsciously) with their cultural dualism, often choosing one over the other. To briefly cite, for an example, Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, Johnson's protagonist, after much inner debate, chooses to live his life as a white man, marrying a white
woman and raising a family with her. Although Tolson does indeed concede to black tradition by the very act of taking on this prickly theme, he concedes little else, as an examination of the poem will confirm.

"E. & O.E." explicates the historical dilemma of "double consciousness," and I use the term "explicate" as opposed to "articulate," for as the poem soon proves, Tolson does not view "double consciousness" as necessarily the real "dilemma"; nor is it the major focus of the poem. Tolson's real subject is prophecy, but for reasons that will be made clear later in the chapter, he veils these prophesies in a mock-Socratic dialogue, ostensibly with himself. However, the "overwhelming conclusion" at which he arrives suggests that the whole notion of "double consciousness" is misleading, that a rethinking of the problem is in order. The problem from the Tolsonian perspective is not that of "double consciousness" but that of "unconsciousness" of the interrelatedness of the universe and the interdependency of the forces at work in the universe. The only way man can attain such an understanding is to study history, its content and dynamics. "E. &. O.E." then is a Tolsonian re-definition or "rethinking" of the problem of identity in the context of history.

Certainly, Tolson maintains the same thematic concerns: the poet's role in the world and, in this case, the limitations of the poet's role; black consciousness and history. However, using history as the poem's foundation and prophecy as its major objective, Tolson masterfully combines these leitmotifs. The result of his efforts is more a meditation than a preaching; in this respect the poem lacks the homiletic
fervor of "The Negro Scholar." His notes (probably written during the composition of *Libretto*) reinforce this philosophical approach: "Negro poets face dilemma: Art vs Politics; poet as prophet vs. poet as artist; Literature as Art vs. Literature as propaganda." And yet "E. & O.E." differs from previous poems, as Robert Farnsworth says:

because it is a personal statement of doubt and a self-consciously deliberate scaling down of poetic ambition. It is not personal in the sense that the I closes off all matters social and historical, describing only a physical or psychological awareness. Tolson is almost never personal in that sense. ... "E. &. O.E." looks at a historical dilemma from the personal perspective of a poet. Where *Libretto* prophesies a collective human realization, "E. & O.E." dramatizes the dilemma of a particular black American poet given a Jonah-like commandment to deliver God's message to Ninevah in an apocalyptic moment in history. [36]

Farnsworth rightly views the poem as "a personal statement of doubt." However, when he asserts that it is a self-co "deliberate scaling down of poetic ambition," he runs the risk of being misinterpreted, because he does not qualify his assertion. One wonders if Farnsworth means that Tolson is scaling down his own poetic ambition, or that the poem's conclusion suggests deliberate self-deprecation that would temper any connotations of the mysterious afflatus which all poems that explore the great ontological questions are heir to. Craig Werner discusses "E. & O.E." in the context of *Harlem Gallery*, where the composition of "E. & O.E." is attributed to the character of Hideho Heights. However, Werner's assessment of the
poem aptly illustrates Tolson's synthetic inclinations, the leitmotif of the poem, and Tolson's own career as a modernist. States Werner:

The brilliance of Hideho's performance in "E. & O. E., ... stems from his ability to resolve the existential (to be or not to be) and racial (to be or not to be a Negro) dilemmas with a single gesture. The final stanza, ... articulates Hideho's decision not to articulate his modernist sense of alienation and despair. "I do not shake/ the Wailing Wall/ of Earth --/ nor quake/ the Gethsemane/ of Sea --/ nor tear/ the Big Top/ of Sky/ with Lear's prayer/ or Barabas' curse, or Job's cry." Ironically signifying on the words and heroes of the masters he seeks to join in the anthologies of world literature, Hideho determines both to go on living and speaking in his black voice. Tolson, of course, articulates both the despair and the refusal to despair, again testifying to his synthetic sensibility.37

When viewed in this context, the poem has multiple levels of meaning: the most immediate is the protagonist's struggle with the polemic which has arisen around the issue of double consciousness; on a deeper level the protagonist's inner debate on the cause and effect of his decision to synthesize the Afro-modernist and Euro-American modernist aesthetic approaches. The first level can be called Tolson's "mask" rather in the same sense that Howard Baker uses the term to mean a kind of "crafty madness,"38 because Tolson maintains and perpetuates, for the most part, his staple themes and polemics. In this respect the protagonist asks questions to which, ironically, the poet already knows the answer. On a more profound level the poet leads the protagonist through history's labyrinth in order that the protagonist may understand the "divine plot" or "the grand questions of election and suffering." "It
is not so much the plot of plots of human life as the effort to grasp some third alternative to the unrealistic option of a perfectly free will on the one side, and the depressing likelihood of an ironclad determinism on the other.\(^\text{39}\) Thus, if Tolson's protagonist queries history, puzzling over its implications, the poet (and essential persona) reveals the poem's true meaning.

For our purposes, we will look at excerpts from several sections that are crucial to the poems' developing argument, and, in their variety, offer excellent illustrations of the poem's contrasting moods, from the mocking jibes of section I to the self-doubt of Section VI to the calm assertion of Section XII. Section I, stanza 1 begins:

If, eyeless, in irony, to be is Scylla and not to be Charybdis, where is the dilemma?\(^\text{40}\)

Upon a first reading, the poet appears to be questioning the nature of the "double consciousness" dilemma. He seems to be questioning whether "to be or not to be [a Negro]" is not unlike a comparison of the dangers of "Scylla and Charybdis." And yet the question which ends the stanza -- "Where is the dilemma?" -- suggests that the crux of the ontological question may not lie with double consciousness but, as Tolson soon proves, with the successful achievement of synthesis on the ontological level and aesthetic level. In a world divided by the "idols of the tribe" -- caste, class, and race -
-- the protagonist's ultimate objective is to redeem himself by striving to attain a unified identity, a unified "I." The reference to "eyelessness" in the opening lines denotes the loss of sensory perception and connotes both the blindness of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and the lack of a "whole" identity. Moreover, Tolson's use of analogy, though not overtly didactic, nevertheless serves to teach from the very beginning of the poem and is in keeping with the esoteric practices of Symbolist poets who make use of veiled analogy and symbol for the purpose of revealing.

In the second stanza, the speaker's "vassalage to an Act of Poietes" obliges him, in the reincarnated role of Hamlet, to lead the reader through the poem/world even as he himself participates in this "tragédie humaine." Nor is this the first "tragédie humaine" (rather it is the "nth comedie"), a fact which suggests the cyclical nature of history in the sense that the poet is not the first, nor will he be the last to consider this protean ontological theme. To return to the opening lines, the poet/protagonist implies from the very beginning that the dilemma is not a choice between two cultures (black and white) but between fully "being" and "not being" a "whole man with one unified I." One of the poem's motifs lies in the idea of becoming, a notion that originated with Aristotle. In *The Greeks and Their Gods*, W.K.C. Guthrie explains the Aristotelian concept of immanent form and the notion of potential and actual being by making the following analogy:

Thus the function of an eye is to see. In Aristotelian terms, it has not fully realized its form and actuality unless it is seeing. If then an eye is blind, it is characterized by the *stereisis* of sight.
Ironically, Guthrie's eye analogy recalls Tolson's cryptic opening lines ("If, eyeless in irony, to be is Scylla and not to be Charybdis, where is the dilemma?"). The idea of process (the poem is also a process) is just as important for the reader as it is for the poet/protagonist. Indeed, the reader must experience the entire poem to understand its overall plan, but the poet drops clues along the way. Take, for example, the cryptic phrase in the second stanza of Section II where the speaker ironically states, "I think I am what I am not: if Nazarene by lot, if no Hellene in the Old Gadfly's sense, I am, perhaps, a Roman and no Roman, save among the dense." The allusions to Athens bring to mind the great philosophers of that day, namely Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and with them some of their seminal ontological concepts. In his the notes to the aforementioned lines, especially lines 34 and 35, respectively, Tolson has this to say:

This soi-distant nickname grew out of the maieutic "To ti?" The protagonist's words have frequently an ethnic twist.43

And the second note states,

This line from Paul, "debtor both to Greeks and Barbarians," illustrates the synecdochic thinking in minority groups, which often leads to Rome, Highgate, Tarshish, or Golgotha. (p.369)

The first note explicitly alludes to Socrates's method of questioning pupils, one which eventually led the pupils to figure out the errors in their own thinking, a method that Tolson loosely adopts in the development of the poem. Moreover, Tolson's implied
answer to the "maiutic "Tò tf" (What is it?) comprises the life of man on both the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels. Tolson also alludes to T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in which the protagonist says imperatively, "Do not ask, 'What is it?'" And to further complicate the issue, Tolson admits in the second statement of the note to line 34 that "The protagonist's words have frequently an ethnic twist", an idea whose implications we will discuss, shortly. The second note suggests the (Greek/barbarian) dichotomy which consciously or unconsciously dictates the thinking of certain minorities (minorities in the context of caste, class or race) whose attitudes are defined by the group to which they belong. It is this "synecdochic thinking" that "E. & O.E." attempts to transcend, if not correct. In this respect, the speaker promises that he will articulate the issues of the poetic argument "with an ethnic twist." However, "ethnic" is defined as,

Of or relating to the Gentiles or to nations not converted to Christianity; relating to community of physical and mental traits possessed by the members of a group as a product of their common heredity and cultural tradition; having or originating from racial, linguistic, and cultural ties with a specific group (Negroes, Irish, Italian, Germans, Poles.)

Tolson does not specify which ethnic group has contributed the "twist" to the protagonist’s speech. However, the poem argues for a multi-cultural mixture of accents, suggesting that Tolson ultimately confirms the inextricability of the protagonist’s cultural "selves." Harlem Gallery draws the similar conclusion that
The Negro is a dish in the white man's kitchen -
a potpourri,
an ola-podrida,
a mixie-maxie,
a hotchpotch of lineal ingredients;
with UN guests at his table,
the host finds himself a Hamlet on the spot,
for, in spite of his catholic pose,
the Negro dish is a dish nobody knows:
to some . . . tasty,
like an exotic condiment-
to others . . . unsavory
and inelegant. 45

It appears that the speaker talks in riddles, and indeed "E. & O.E." builds upon speculative riddles which, not unlike the protagonist's own "Tarshish odyssey," fling the reader "from perigee to apogee" while the poet/prophet/protagonist [daps] to Mt. Aetna's harpooned flesh below." "Dap" is used here both in the standard sense of "[fishing] by dropping bait gently on the water" and in the colloquial sense of "[stepping] sprightly in a purposely showy manner." 46 The latter usage is most characteristic of black vernacular speech. For Tolson's often cryptic questions with their "ethnic" twists are the subtle "bait" which he drops for the reader. The poet's objective is not only to figuratively "harpoon" the leviathan issue of "double consciousness" and expose this theme of protean dimensions as an illusion, but to concomitantly redefine the problem of identity in terms of the lack of a "unified I". So that initially, the poem appears to be moving in several directions at once, a matter which Tolson well understands and obliquely addresses in the following exchange between the King, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern from Shakespeare's Hamlet:
King: And can you, by no drift of confidence,
Get from him, why he puts on this confusion;
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?

Ros: He does confess, he feels himself distracted;
But from what cause he will by no means speak.

Guil: Nor do we find him forward to be sounded;
But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof,
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.47

In his notes to "E. & O.E." Tolson graciously refers the puzzled reader to the preceding scene. However, he leaves the reader to surmise what possible relation this reference could have to the poem. It is therefore with not a little trepidation that one sets out to interpret the allusion in the context of the poem. If, however, one views the poet/protagonist as a Hamlet figure, then the poem’s "confusion" can be interpreted as partly "put on." Let us turn to the notes to lines 30-31 and 34, respectively, to see how this assumption is reinforced. The former states:

In an attempt to establish his I-ness as a Negro--
a concept in itself a unity of opposites--the man combines the Cartesian definition with a variant of the Law of Synthetic Identity. This is the key to his allusions in the poem. (p. 369)

The latter states:

This soi-distant nickname ["Hellene"] grew out of the maieutic "Tò ti?" The protagonist’s words have frequently an ethnic twist. (p. 369)
Regarding the former note, the "Law of Synthetic Identity" is Tolson's own term for the elements which make up a man's identity, "biological, sociological, psychological." As Tolson specifically defines it:

The Law of Synthetic Identity is materialized in a man. The In-ness of a man globes his gens, his race, his class, his epoch, his X's of experience. The writer is the amanuensis of this "In-ness," this interior man.

This concept closely resembles the idea of the "unified I" propounded by G.I. Gurdjieff. The second note, in addition to suggesting the poem's mock-Socratic structural approach as previously suggested, is also a forewarning that the irony resides at a lingistic as well as a psychological level; so that the poem's "confusion" and the poet/protagonist's "crafty madness" are a kind of "Eshu-mask," to repeat the mask-analogy, one that allows the poet to avoid being "sounded" but which allows him to "sound" (in Baker's sense of a "cultural performance") upon the psychological labyrinth one enters in attempting to address the issue of "double consciousness."

Notwithstanding the speaker's initial query in Section I, Tolson's revelatory observation in the notes (that the Negro is "a concept in itself a unity of opposites") tends to negate the possibility of a resolution. This ironic situation is reinforced by the poet's admission in the first stanza of section II:

Though
I dot my i in this
and rend the horns
of tribal ecbasis,
the Great White World's
uncrossed t
pockets the skeleton key
to doors beyond
black chrysalis (p. 331)

Irony rules the first four lines of stanza two where the speaker says, "Though/ I dot my i in this/ and rend the horns/ of tribal ecbasis." One is tempted to interpret "i" as "eye" in this instance, because on one level, Tolson is broaching (or perhaps a better word is laying bare) a topic long sensitive to black writers. From the perspective of black vernacular speech, to "dot an eye" means to blacken a person's eye by the act of punching it. If one interprets the phrase from this perspective, Tolson could very well "dot" his own "eye" in the sense of attracting the wrath of black literati who would view his articulation of the problem of double consciousness (using the Euro-American modernist idiom) as a "cop-out." However, on a more profound level, the protagonist's act of "dotting [his] i" refers to the Gurdjieffian process of "completing" the "I," of synthesizing and controlling his different selves to create a "unified I". The "Great White World's uncrossed t" then represents the white world's blind "I" because of its inability or unwillingness to recognize the black world's (and by extension the Third World's) need to become fully self-determined. The white world thus prevents the possibility of regeneration for both the First and Third Worlds.

In Section III, the protagonist's search for "I-ness" leads him to confront western history with a flurry of queries. If the queries retain a rhetorical quality, it is because history, like the "phantom listeners" of de la Mare's "lone house", remains silent, though "awake". On another level, Tolson is speaking to the American
literary establishment which has blithely ignored black writers (as historically reflected in American anthologies and major criticism) or casually excluded black writers from the elite tier of high art. The literary establishment's silence or deliberate ignorance of black writing, for the most part, must have been galling to a man such as Tolson whose love of words had led him to, in effect, educate himself on modernist poetry and criticism. Thus, one senses that, taken altogether, the questions themselves, like the Socratic, "tō tē" build an implicit argument which will become clear in the following stanzas. As the speaker says in stanzas 1 and 2:

Tick, tock,
knock, knock:
no hand
can stop
the tick
of clock:
tick, tock,
Knock, KNOCK!

O forty days
of rain and night,
who's there?
O sightless listeners on
Abraxa's storm
cellar stair,
is it
Everyman
from the no man's land
of Everywhere? (p. 332)

The speaker's acknowledgment, in stanza one, of the inexorable movement of time serves as a kind submerged premise for the queries which follow. For the protagonist's questions suggest the possibility of apocalyptic change: "O forty days/
of rain and night,/ who's there?" (p. 332) and, "Is it, is it,/ Omega/ Knocking/on gopher wood?" (p. 333). But if there is to be a change, as suggested by the speaker's Biblical allusions, what kind will it be? The question, "Is it/Everyman/from the no man's land/ of Everywhere?" is provocative, because it has several possible meanings. Within the context of Christian morality, the question brings to mind humanity's inheritance of sin and guilt and the Christian route to redemption. However, if one views the passage from the perspective of "other," given the speaker's admission of a double heritage, it takes on another meaning: one can interpret "everyman" as the rise of the "disinherited," the "wretched of the earth," who have always occupied a kind of socio-economic "no-man's land." The latter interpretation is reinforced by the content of the questions in section IV:

is, is it,
the whited sepulcher's
dike capsizing
in the dolor
of the rising
tide of color? (p. 120)

O Kali Yuga,
is it, is it,
the ghost of the iron-monger's son
to barter
his Ilande sermon
for the key
to the Bastille
at Mt. Vernon? (p. 120-21)
The former passage images white historical dominance as a kind of living death which involuntarily yields to the "rising tide of color," the Third World. The latter passage suggests a proletariat uprising on a global level, as the speaker conflates the two symbolic images of freedom through revolution, the French Bastille and the home of the first American President. Also interesting is the speaker's apostrophe to "Kali Yuga," in itself an ominous foreshadowing of bloody catastrophe. For the speaker is asserting here the necessity of readiness for the ordeal of initiation. To this effect, the speaker foreshadows his own death, for in order to reach a higher consciousness one must first awaken, then die to be reborn, a process Eliot implies in The Waste Land and The Four Quartets.

Section IV ends with the protagonist's decision to confront the future despite the consequences, as he commands, "Open, locks,/ whoever knocks!" It is interesting to note that this stanza calls attention to itself, because it is set off as a separate stanza. The Tarot's Second Arcanum, whose scientific name is "Gnosis" (Knowledge) corresponds to the spirit of this passage, because occultist refer to the Second Arcanum as "The Door of the Sanctuary." In this sense, the Second Arcanum's meaning ("Knowledge of the future is possible for the man who is prepared to know") explains the poet's allusion to Aeschylus's Agamemnon in the apostrophe, "O adage ox", that opens Section IV. In Agamemnon the night watchman speaks the following lines:

May it only happen. May my King come home, and I take up within his hand the hand I love. The rest
I leave to silence; for an ox
stands huge upon my tongue, The house, itself, could it
take voice, might speak
aloud and plain. I speak to those who understand, but
if they fail, I have forgotten
everything.$^{54}$

In his analysis of *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, Jon Woodson makes the
similar observation:

At the end of the second movement of "Do," Tolson provides the answer "Ppt. knows" to the long series of
questions that begin with "Where is the glory of the
mestizo Pharaoh?" Note 574 explicates the answer thusly: "Ppt. knows. V. Swift, *Journal to Stella*, March
15, 1712." This is not a note that can be said to assist
the indifferent reader. An examination of Swift's *Journal
to Stella* shows that Swift employed, in his
communications with Stella, a private patois known
between them as the "little language." Tolson's line Ppt.
knows" is a contraction of what Swift actually entered in
his epistle: "ppt may understand me." ... Ppt. knows" is
equivalent to "I speak to those who understand", for so
hermetic is the *Libretto* that the very revelation that
there exists a key to the elucidation of the poem is
entrusted to an esoteric level of phraseology.$^{55}$

Thus, Tolson's underlying message is clear to those who are acquainted with the
hermetic tradition.

However, confronted by the knocker in the form of the "pursy times'/
Tartufean shill," the protagonist begins to doubt himself. The passage begins:

Inside the bowl
the marble sped
against the rhythms of the wheel
and round the numbered black and red
compartments, till
the pursy times'
Tartuean shill hazarded:

"Why place (sic)
an empty pail
before a well
of dry bones?
Why go to Ninevah to tell
the ailing that they ail?
Why lose the Golden Fleece
to gain the Holy Grail?" (p. 335)

Tolson's notes on this section are as puzzling as they are provocative. He explains:

In this section, confronted by the knocker, "the Tartuean shill," the man faces the dilemma of the bowls—the roulette wheel and the Holy Grail. The latter was derived from the Low Latin "gradale," and this in turn from "cratella," a bowl. Here, as in the Parzival of Wolfram von Eschenbach, the Grail is not merely the bowl that caught the blood of Christ at the Last Supper, but it is also

"a light to guide, a rod
To check the erring,"
a portent to those who find "a ship going to Tarshish." A shill is hired by a gambling house to draw customers to the table and create "a fine spirit"; yet the biggest problem of a casino is to protect itself from a crooked shill. (p. 370)

"Confronted with the dilemma of the bowls," the protagonist ponders a dilemma of ontological proportions. On the one hand is "chance," the capricious ruler of the wheel of fortune, and on the other is the traditional symbol of Christian salvation, "the holy grail." And yet these choices are as problematical as "Scylla and Charybdis," for the speaker who has no way of validating either. Moreover, in Tolson's note, the
allusions to the holy grail liken the protagonist's plight to the frequently depicted "povre sinner" confronted by the temptation of "despair." And in the very next section, the protagonist temporarily succumbs, having abandoned the mocking tone to replace it with a Prufrockian despair and spiritual timidity.

Why should I go
to Ninevah between
death-rattles out of Nowhere
into Nothing?

I have seen

the unlaid ghosts
of twenty sex-o'-clock cities along
the White Whale's Acheron
freeze the dog
days, make
the crow's-nest hog
like the spine of a dated truth:
hawk eyes
unspectacled by ruth
are not hawk-eyed enough
to pierce the winding sheet of fog
that turns hawk to quail . . .
to pierce the seascape's brambly night,
lopped rough,
sheared white,
by arc blades of the gale. (p. 336)

The speaker's feelings of futility have been prompted by the cynical queries of the "Tartufean shill." Thus, thrown back upon himself, the speaker ponders the wisdom of his decision to attempt to address the whole question of identity and the accompanying issues that it raises. Tolson's phrasing here ("I have seen the unlaid ghosts/of twenty sex-o'-clock cities") and the import of his message are reminiscent
of the lines that Eliot's Prufrock utters, ("For I have known them all already, known them all-/ Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons"). And, like Prufrock, who asks, "Do I dare disturb the universe," the speaker measures his own ability to interpret life's large questions with "hawk eyes/ unspectacled by ruth" against the insurmountable obstacles of time and space, ("the seascape's brambly night"). Tolson is deliberately addressing (albeit obliquely) his Euro-American modernist contemporaries. Just as Tolson "signifies" on Eliot in the preceding passage (with his reference to "sex-o'clock cities), he indirectly "signifies" on Pound's poem, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley and selected passages from his "Hell Cantos" that "paint a portrait of contemporary England." When the speaker in Section V questions his ability to "see" clearly enough to depict, comment on, and criticize society, he is, on one level, responding to and commenting on Pound's speaker in Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, who asserts in Section II:

The age demanded an image  
Of its accelerated grimace,  
Something for the modern stage,  
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries  
Of the inward gaze;  
Better mendacities  
Than the classics in paraphrase

The "age demanded" chiefly a mould in plaster,  
Made with no loss of time,  
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster  
Or the "sculpture" of rhyme.
In this section, Pound "portrays the antipathy of his age to serious art."\textsuperscript{61} Ironically, Tolson’s protagonist worries that he will not be able to "see" clearly enough to "pierce the winding sheet of fog", so that Tolson figuratively inverts Pound’s observation, while keeping his comment within the same context as Pound’s.

Moreover, on the level of style Pound, like Tolson plays on "sight, sound, and sense,"\textsuperscript{62} according to Tolson, the key ingredients to good poetry. To give but one example, the aforementioned section from \textit{Hugh Selwyn Mauberley}, like Tolson’s poem, contains disparate allusions whether to Henry James’s remark in \textit{A Little Tour in France}, "the pure style of ancient Attica," as well as autobiographical allusions to Pound’s own past work. Pound plays with sight and sound when he rhymes "kinema" and "sculpture" (in the last stanza of Section II) by using the Greek letter for "e", "chi", pronounced "k." So that Tolson’s sometimes comical, sometimes violent figurative elisions between foreign phrases, poly-syllabic words, and historical and literary allusions recall Pound’s often indecipherable verse.

In addition, the force of section IV is heightened by Tolson’s command of the language and his incisive use of imagery. He controls the rhythm of the stanza with such techniques as that of sporadic alternate rhyme, as in "dog," "make," "hog," truth," "eyes," "ruth"; and consonance as in "White Whale’s . . ./ freeze the dog/ days." Moreover, Tolson’s startling images vivify the abstract idea of the poet confronted by time, ("I have seen /the un laid ghosts/of twenty sex-o-clock cities"), and space ("lopped rough, sheared white,/ by the arc blades of the gale.") The animal imagery, on the other hand, is perversely complimentary to the initial reference to "sex-o’-
clock cities." For Tolson is alluding to a figurative "waste land" in the image of the "White Whale's Acheron"; the "whale" is white-dominated society and "Acheron" is a way of life that is as inherently "dead," as dead as Eliot's "Unreal City." And like the inhabitants of the "Unreal City," those of the "sex-o'-clock cities" are dead to belief in anything beyond their own animal instincts. Therefore, the poet's strategic placement of the declarative statement, "I have seen" at the beginning of the second stanza has the effect of a colon before an enumeration, except that this is not an enumeration but a metaphorical depiction of the frailty of the poet/protagonist's prophetic vision in the face of nature's (and by implication, the cosmos') ultimate inscrutability.

Moreover, it would not be far-fetched to take the speaker's reference to "sex o-clock cities" as the clue that confirms the stanza's correspondence to Arcanum XXI of the Tarot, for this particular arcanum is also known by the number 'O' (zero). The underlying message is that the majority of men do not see that their present path leads to destruction. It is this blindness which cosmic consciousness would alleviate.

The protagonist does not succumb to the negative environment that he depicts in Section VI. The initial pessimism of Section VI is tempered by the protagonist's observation, in section VII, that the "Tartufean shill/ hazarded" his cynical query, for it is important to remember here that the shill is gambling on whether the protagonist will take the bait and turn back from his intended course. As Tolson has warned the reader in his notes, a shill is sometimes crooked. Furthermore, the adjective "Tartufean" alludes to Moliere's comedy, Le Tartuffe, in which:
an odious hypocrite, who, under an assumption of piety, introduces himself into the household of the credulous Orgon, attempts to seduce his wife, and, being repulsed, endeavors to ruin the family.⁶³

It is not clear, nor does Tolson encourage a clear notion of whether the "Tartufean shill" is indeed a separate character or one of the protagonist's several "I's." The latter interpretation offers more dramatic possibilities, especially if one considers that on a figurative level, "Tartufean" suggests the protagonist's own "family" of conflicting selves. Nevertheless, one assumes, by the tone of Section VII, that the shill lost his bet, for the speaker exclaims:

'sdeath!
The tail
of doomsday struck
I-ness in me
between parentheses
of my eternity:
er e one could do the five steps of a phrase,
my Tarshish odyssey
died in the scarlet viva of
a geyser: flung,
from perigee
to apogee,
to the crackling of thorns
under a pot, I
a Momus scarecrow
with crossbones and horns,
dapped to Mt. Aetna's harpooned flesh below. (p. 337)

The protagonist's mocking mood returns, for he, "a Momus scarecrow" (Momus is the god of blame and ridicule), has eluded the Tartufean shill's trap of despair. Furthermore, if one considers the shill a "snake" in the connotative sense of betrayer
and hypocrite, then "its tail" did not kill the protagonist's resolve; on the contrary, it "struck [his] "I-ness." The Waste Land's protagonist reacted to the ominous signs of an apocalypse by "shoring fragments against [his] ruins." What Tolson's protagonist is trying to save are not necessarily ruins, but rather his own disparate and alienated "I's", in the denotative sense of "selves" and the connotative sense of "vision." In not succumbing to despair, in remaining true to his own convictions, the protagonist achieves a triumph of will over the negative forces of despair and self-pity.

In addition, the speaker's curious self-depiction ("I/ a Momus scarecrow/ with crossbones and horns") bears a strong resemblance to the Hierophant of the Tarot's Arcanum V, who is represented as "a seated man, in the robes of a high priest, his head crowned with the two horns of Isis." In the left hand of the Hierophant is a "sceptre topped with the Cross." Sadhu says of this card:

This is the sign of a blessing, sometimes considered a mute one and then it is a symbol of the initiatory Silence. Sometimes the Hierophant expresses the blessing in words. In any case, this gesture is a sign expressing WILL. One of the two kneeling figures is white and the other black.

Thus, the protagonist's "Tarshish odyssey [dies]," and he, "with crossbones and horns,/ [daps] to Mt. Aetna's harpooned flesh below." In other words, the poet/protagonist is now ready to face the real test of his intentions, as the following sections will reveal. It is no coincidence that the protagonist ends Section VII in mid-air, looking down on "Mt. Aetna's harpooned flesh below." One thinks of the poet (ever the
trickster) figuratively "dapping" to the reader's perpetual puzzlement at the poet's ironic logic.

Having survived this part of his trial, the protagonist is once again free to ponder the "overwhelming questions," or as Tolson comments on this passage in his notes:

"Adrift, he makes a last effort to strip Hamlet's dilemma of its False Stress--its equivocation and ethos--by contrasting the noun death and dying. (p. 370)

In "stripping Hamlet's dilemma of its False Stress -- its equivocation and ethos," the protagonist figuratively confronts his literary predecessor, Hamlet; and the poet, Tolson, confronts those other contemporary inheritors of Euro-American modernist tradition (Williams's *Paterson*, Eliot's protagonist in *The Waste Land*, and Yeats's protagonist in "Among School Children" or "The Second Coming"), who have posed Hamlet's question in divers forms. Tolson especially singles out Eliot, perhaps because he is considered by most to be the archetypal poet of the Euro-American modernism.

In Section VI, the allusions to Eliot's vision as projected in "The Lovesong of J.Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* unmistakably suggest the generic relation of Tolsons's text to Eliot's, the ambiguity of which allows Tolson to both parody and re-interpret Eliot's representation of life-in-death. Therefore, in comparing the noun, "death," and the gerund, "dying," in Section VII, Tolson is righting Eliot's vision by re-writing a definition (one of Tolson's favorite preoccupations) of both noun and gerund. As the second stanza of section VII states:
Death?
It's a jot less
than iota.
Dying
is the ogress
lying
in penumbra
wrying
identity to the dregs
with tentacles of
the seven plagues. (p. 337)

In distinguishing between death and dying, Tolson apparently distinguishes between
"living death"67 (a cultural and spiritual malaise) as projected in Eliot's The Waste Land and the painful process of dying (an "I-lessness" that damns the sufferer to "nothingness.") For, as the protagonist explains:

Dying
is the ogresss
lying
in penumbra
wrying
identity to the dregs
with tentacles of
the seven plagues. (p. 337)

Here again, Tolson reiterates the "Scylla and Charybdis" motif in the image of the "ogress/lying/ in penumbra." As the inheritor of two major cultures and possessor of neither, the protagonist suffers from the metaphorical "invisibility" that Ellison depicts in The Invisible Man, a negative kind of half-in-half-out existence in itself. Berndt Ostendorf's comments reiterate this notion when he observes:
In short, double consciousness has to be understood as a result of existential predispositions, reinforced and maintained by cultural and social factors. It refers to the schizogenic split between being and having a body, radicalized by the color stigma: a flourishing industry devoted to the elimination of the 'black body' in order to be 'somebody.' The black-is-beautiful campaign should not be taken as a cosmetic fad, but as a revaluation of deeply rooted American mainstream values which implicitly require this self-annihilation.  

However, on another level the speaker is saying something quite different. At this level, the protagonist refers to the half-in half-out status of being a "mechanical" man, one not fully awake to himself and the world.

In Sections VIII and XI, the protagonist prepares for "extinction," (a necessary act if he is to be "reborn" to a level of higher consciousness) by confronting his personal past as a black artist, "naked on/roller skates in Butte Montmartre" or "in Sorgue's studio/ with the Black Venus," and his racial past. Of the latter, he confesses:

Until  
my skin  
was blister copper,  
I have not stood within  
the free-soil gate,  
pole in hand,  
to knock off monkey hats  
exported to the hinterland. (p. 338)

Here, the protagonist's self-deprecating admission that he did not consider "knock[ing] off monkey hats," "symbols of submission to Europeans" (p. 371), "until/ [his] skin/ was blister-copper," reinforces is initial acknowledgement, in Section II, that
he has "dotted his i's"; for in "stripping "Hamlet's dilemma of its False Stress," the poet/protagonist ironically strips himself, also. This "figurative" stripping readies him for his descent into the whale in Section X.

The fall, in Section X, that takes the protagonist into the womb of the whale is, as Tolson himself allows in his notes, synchronously "descent and ascent" (p. 371). This fall takes the protagonist, like Jonah, into the womb of the whale, and, figuratively, into humanity's beginnings, both mythical and historical. The "paraclete Malebolgan" is, ironically, the protagonist's savior. As possessor of a double heritage, the protagonist has no other choice but to travel the "White Whale's Acheron way," if he is to be reborn. He must experience a kind of death, if he is to achieve life, if he is to ironically begin his "Adamic fall." In his discussion of this poem, Wilburn Williams asserts that the "whale is not the poet's salvation." However, Williams's refutation is unconvincing, because it under-estimates the significance of the renaissance metaphor. If, in one sense, the protagonist is ever to achieve his mission, to "deliver the gospel to Ninevah," then he must first understand and unite the conflicting selves that comprise his identity. At all levels of the self, biological, sociological, and psychological, there are a multiplicity of cultural and racial contradictions. The protagonist must explore and finally unite these conflicting selves, figuratively the First World and the Third World, if he is to become the creator of a New World (I have capitalized New World here to emphasize its connotative meaning of North America but also its implied reference to Revelations's New
Jerusalem). Thus, the protagonist must pass through the belly of the whale, if he is to attain a unified "I." The protagonist describes his journey in symbolic terms:

I slid like a sliver of ice through the gullet, I slid like the wraith of scintilla, between the jaws of Calpe and Abila, pursued by no apocalyptic Hound but by the Lasche of God . . . no Prometheus unbound, but a jod (p.342)

In the analogy of "Calpe and Abila," (also used in "The Man from Halicarnassus") the protagonist’s descent is likened to the final agony of Samson, for the protagonist brings down about him the misconceptions of Western history and myth. In this context, he likens himself to a "jod," which, according to Sadhu, is "positive, dynamic, active," "the acting element" which must be present before creation can begin.

If we return briefly to the Aristotelian concept of immanent form, we see here the speaker apparently coming full circle, except that he arrives (by the end of the poem) on a higher plane of consciousness. If, as the poet declares, "[he is] a jod," then by the end of his figurative "rite of passage" as poet and as human being, he is ready to join the ranks of Dante, Blake, Yeats, Eliot, and Pound as prophet-poet. And yet on another level, in writing the poem, Tolson paradoxically destroys certain misconceptions about history and about black people in history by imaginatively re-creating history (whether from the beginning or in "moments of the conscience of mankind"), and imaginatively re-placing the black person, the black artist in it. As he states in the beginning of the section, "[he] sought no Golden Fleece,/ no Holy
Grail." The poet's mission (an exploration of the identity dilemma, if not its resolution) is not "supernatural"; on the contrary, it is natural and, in some respects, ironically human.

Within the womb of the whale, the poet gives evidence that he has not resolved the dilemma that he initially set out to explore; nor does he fully accept the awesome task of going to Ninevah:

I cried, or I,  
across the Hanging Gardens of fat,  
seemed to cry,  
"Let this cup pass from me!" (p. 342)

And yet the poet/protagonist both chooses and is chosen by his destiny. As the protagonist describes his inward journey:

the fabulous fathomless fatty-tumorous canyon of the whale  
with the grind and the drag  
of the millstone  
sphinx of Why  
on my wry  
head and neck ...alone...alone...alone...  
to die  
gyrating into the wide, wide privacy  
of the Valley of Hinnom's By-and-By...  
down  
down  
down  
untouched by the witches' Sabbath of any wall  
until the maelstrom womb of the underworld swallowed my Adamic fall! (p. 343)

In one sense, the poet/protagonist must "die" if he is to live, know, and do at the highest level of human consciousness. In the context of literature, Tolson's notes on
this section are helpful. He comments, "In the case of the protagonist, descent and ascent are synchronous." Here, Tolson is rephrasing an old hypothesis in a new way, for on a simplistic level, the only way the black man (and by extension the Third World) will rise is by first understanding the past (which includes African and Anglo-European history) and his true role in it. On the literary level, Tolson is figuratively inaugurating this renaissance by placing it within the context of literature and history. The poet's conscious allusions to the famous "descents" of his literary and historical predecessors -- "Virgil's Aeneid, Dante's Inferno, Milton's Paradise Lost, Nietzsche's Also sprach Zarathustra, and Thompson's Hounds of Heaven (p.371) -- give him the opportunity to figuratively place himself among that number, just as surely as he "places" himself (in writing Rendezvous) in the company of American poets and thinkers, Whitman and Emerson. Finally, in this section Tolson implicitly declares that the protagonist's re-birth is both the act and consequence of the conflation of time and space, allowing the protagonist to begin the work that his "trial by fire and water" has prepared him to do (both as poet and as human being).

Having survived his initiatory descent not only into the self but into the esoteric underworld -- the whale -- the poet/protagonist is reborn "a shrunken jonah," whose final admission in Section XI serves as both explanation and justification for his attempts to articulate the historical dilemma of identity. He says simply:

I sought
in a Tarshish nook
neither the Golden Fleece
nor the Holy Grail
but a pruning hook (p. 344)
A return to Arcanum V ("The Great Hierophant") of the Tarot makes the preceding lines clearer, for the basic idea of the arcanum is the "element of enlightened will power . . . active authority." The hierophant is the "giver of initiation," a man who has achieved a "cosmic consciousness". As is the case in the entire poem, this declaration works on several levels. First, the poet/protagonist declares himself a "micro all-in-all," a "whole man" who is now ready, like Jonah, to deal with the Acheron Way, the way of the world. However, on the level of literary achievement, the poet has sought through his "cultural performance" to "re-member" history by using the "historical imagination." Moreover, he is now prepared to write what will become the best poems of his career.

In the final section, the protagonist, in disclaiming the grand, tragic gestures of his predecessors, whether fictional or historical, places himself among that number, while simultaneously distinguishing his literary efforts from those same predecessors. His is "no prayer, or curse, or cry," but a "barbaric yawp," as it were, or, in Baker's words, "a sounding" of cultural, historical, and finally, cosmic dimensions, whose reverberations will be felt and acted upon by those who come after him.

Beneath
the albatross,
the skull-and-bones,
the Skull and Cross,
the Seven Sins Dialectical,
I do not shake
the Wailing Wall
of Earth,
nor quake
the Gethsemane
    of Sea,
nor tear
the Big Top
    of Sky
with Lear's prayer,
or Barabas' curse,
or Job's cry! (p. 344)

The idea of re-birth is manifested through Tolson's strategic manipulation of sight, sound, and sense. There is the subtle and elusive abcb rhyme scheme that has weaved in and out of every section. Moreover, the poet's strategic placement of lines on the page, in this section as well as the others, is in contrast to the predominantly block stanzas of previous poems. Tolson's eclectic allusions from Homer to the Bible to Hamlet implicitly answer Eliot's challenge for poets to:

write not merely with [their] own generation in [their] bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [their] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.73

Tolson ends the poem without having "solved" his dilemma, but perhaps that, after all, was not his intention. Perhaps, as the speaker "avowed at starting," his intention was mainly to "rend the horns of tribal ecbasis," and in this he has succeeded. For in exploring the dilemma of "Negro being," he has incisively outlined the consequences of being a human being, not only for the black but for the non-black as well. "E. & O.E." is Tolson's first published effort in the modernist vein, and his first public pondering on the "identity" theme. In Harlem Gallery,
Tolson sharpens and refines his skill at recasting old definitions of "the Negro," by pointing out the multiplicity of his racial genes (and by implication all Americans' genes.) Moreover, the ending of "E. & O.E.", with references to a psychological "rebirth", reiterates the Nietzschean idea of "cyclical recurrence", an idea Tolson pursues in Libretto. However, he adds to Nietzsche's idea the possibility of the world's ascent to a higher plane of consciousness. Libretto for the Republic of Liberia reinforces the idea of attainment of higher consciousness, the prerequisite for inaugurating a new "Golden Age".

The poems of Rendezvous with America celebrate America as a symbol of freedom and democracy while placing Tolson in the literary company with the major shapers of American verse. Within Rendezvous with America, he "tallies" the land and its people, re-covering some of Whitman's ground: the divinity of man, the democratic faith, and the beauty and purpose of the natural world."74 On the other hand, the poems written during Tolson's transitional period are, in one sense, rites of passage in the modernist idioms. For his poems most assuredly reveal their affinities to his modernist contemporaries. Tolson shares with T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams a need to confront history, myth, and consciousness in the long poem and thus plunge into the leviathan issue of esoteric symbolism. He also shares with them the need to match his technical skill to his vision, "to include history, not only past history but the actualities of the present."75 Moreover, with Tolson as with Pound, "the very act and form of his writing [constitutes] an attempt to bring about social change. [Their poems] are not
'beautiful objects' but verbal wars against economic corruption, against literal wars, against materialism, against the habits of the mind that permit the perpetuation of political domination."

On the other hand, what makes Tolson unique is the fact that he takes the first decisive steps toward distinguishing his interpretation of modernist themes from those of his contemporaries. In boldly redefining the major issues (identity and its accompanying sub-themes) that have historically affected the lives of black people, he effectively serves notice on the greater literary world that he intends to reinterpret the modernist theme of history and consciousness, a promise that he ultimately fulfills in *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* and *Harlem Gallery*. However, Tolson does not abandon his thematic preoccupation with the "idols of the tribe" -- caste, class, and race. On the contrary, within the context of world history, these themes continue to define his work. For if *Rendezvous* celebrates the democratic ideal, then *Libretto*, published almost one decade later, recasts the democratic ideal in the shape of the Republic of Liberia. Equally important, it shows the poet making use of modernist techniques to "re-write" and thus "right" history from the perspective of the "other." Moreover, through adroit and selective adaptation of symbolist themes, especially the idea of raising the level of one consciousness. Tolson figuratively tries his hand at "redeeming the time" that Eliot so eloquently contemplates in *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets*. "E. & O.E." predicts the possibility of future destruction while simultaneously disclosing the basis of its authority. On the other hand, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* reveals the full force of Tolson’s prophetic power, explaining
the paradigm of history while simultaneously attempting to thwart its perpetuation of the "idols of the tribe". Chapter Four shows the poet-prophet at work as it explores his paradigm for history and his solution to "smash" Time's "vial of Tartarean hemlock."
End Notes

1 Robert Farnsworth, Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), p. 177. According to Farnsworth, Tolson wrote "Abraham Lincoln of Rock Springs" in 1944 as part of a series of poems. However, he did not publish it until 1964 when he published it as part of the anthology, Soon One Morning, edited by Herbert Hill.

2 Robert Farnsworth, Plain Talk, pp. 179-182. Tolson originally published "African China" in Gallery of Harlem Portraits. During his period of transition, he radically revised the poem and published it separately in Lincoln University Poets: Centennial Anthology, edited by Waring Cuney, Langston Hughes, and Bruce McM. Wright.


11 C.W.E. Bigsby, Second Black Renaissance, p. 266.


13 Robert Farnsworth, Plain Talk, p. 145.


17 Monroe Spears, Dionysus and the City, pp. 61-64.

18 Monroe Spears, Dionysus and the City, pp. 61-64.


26 Melvin Tolson, Box 9: Miscellaneous Notes, Melvin B. Tolson Papers, Library of Congress. This source will be hereafter abbreviated as MBTP, LC.


35 Melvin B. Tolson, *Box 9: Miscellaneous Notes*, MBTP, LC.


37 Craig Werner, "Blues," p. 15.


41 Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of G.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky* (London; Kitchen & Barratt Limited, 1949), p. 36. Nicoll gives the following explanation of "the one 'I'": "If a man supposes there is only one thing that acts, thinks and feels in him -- that is, one 'I'-- then he cannot understand that there should be one thing that commands and another that obeys. This means that if man regards himself as a unity, nothing can change in him."


43 Melvin B. Tolson, "Notes" from "E. & O.E." in *Poetry* 78: 7 (September 1951), p. 369. Hereafter, all quotations from this text will be cited by page number.

45 Melvin B. Tolson, Harlem Gallery, p. 145.


50 Houston Baker, Modernism, p. 69. Baker defines "cultural performance" as "a distinctively Afro-American sounding of events."


Henry Louis Gates, "The Signifying Monkey," *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1984), p. 286-288. In his definition of "signifying," Gates cites several definitions; however, the two following best fit my own assertions: "In black discourse 'signifying' means modes of figuration itself. When one signifies, as Kimberly W. Bentson puns, one 'tropes-a-dope.' The black rhetorical tropes subsumed under signifying would include 'marking,' 'loud-talking,' 'specifying,' 'testifying,' 'calling out' (of one's name), 'sounding,' 'rapping' and 'playing the dozens.'" Gates also cites Roger D. Abrahams's definition as follows: "... signifying is a 'technique of indirect argument or persuasion,' 'a language of implication,' 'to imply, goad, beg, boast, by indirect verbal or gestural means.' 'The name "signifying" ... shows the monkey to be a trickster, signifying being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures achieving Hamlet's "direction through indirection."

Christine Froula, p. 150.


Christine Froula, p. 84.

Paul Harvey, ed. The Oxford Companion to English Literature, p. 770.

T.S. Eliot, Selected Poems, p. 67.

Mouni Sadhu, The Tarot, p. 89.

Mouni Sadhu, The Tarot, p. 89.


Mouni Sadhu, The Tarot, p. 16.

Mouni Sadhu, The Tarot, p. 89.


75 Christine Froula, A Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Poems, p. 10.

CHAPTER FOUR
"Poetic Prophecy"

1953 marked the end of Tolson's transitional stage. It was also the year in which he published his longest modernist poem to date -- *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*. Although he was writing and publishing the shorter poems (including "E. & O.E."), these poems were, in a sense, practice pieces for the longer work that he was destined to write. In recounting how Tolson came to write the poem, Joy Flasch calls his appointment as poet Laureate of Liberia "the result of [a] Hardeian artistry of circumstances."¹ According to Flasch:

> When he was teaching in Marshall, Texas, one of his male students had dropped by with his girl friend one evening to chat with the Tolsons, and the young woman had mentioned that she was related to someone in the Liberian embassy. Tolson never knew how he was selected to be the poet laureate of Liberia, but the only connection he had ever had with the African Republic was his former student’s friend with whom he had talked briefly that one evening. After the invitation, Tolson immediately began work on a poem in honor of Liberia to celebrate the centennial of the founding of the little African republic; and he completed it within a year.²

Tolson actually completed a rough draft of the poem which he would drastically revise over the next six years.

The purpose of the present discussion of *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* is not solely explication; Robert Farnsworth and Jon S. Woodson have already written insightful and provocative analyses in their respective works, *Poetic Prophecy* and

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"Critical Analysis of the Poetry of Melvin B. Tolson." Rather, this chapter will focus on Tolson's handling of the axial theme of history for two reasons. First, although Tolson's preoccupation with history is evident in Rendezvous with America, "E. & O.E.," and "The Man from Halicarnassus," it is in Libretto that he demonstrates an understanding of its function and application. Secondly, history is an important thematic focus in Euro-American modernist works. T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, Hart Crane's The Bridge, Ezra Pound's Cantos, and several of Yeats's poems from the Mask period are to be counted among those modernist long poems which confront the chimera of history and consciousness. Among this group of poets, Pound, Eliot, and Yeats are Tolson's most significant models. Tolson's preoccupation with history as the focus of Euro-American modernism reveals the influence of Pound. However, Tolson's penchant for obscure allusions, symbolism, and esoterica reveal the influence of Eliot and Yeats. Tolson, Eliots and Yeats draw upon some of the same primary sources -- the great body of esoteric knowledge that includes gnostic doctrine, the Tarot, the Cabala, and the Upanishads. Moreover, Tolson shares with Yeats and Eliot the Nietzschean-influenced view of history as a cyclical recurrence. And yet for all these affinities, Tolson's theory of history, and his proposal of a solution to what he perceives as the problem of history markedly differs from that of Yeats and Eliot. Using excerpts from Libretto this chapter will focus on the ways in which Tolson's poem attempts to significantly revise the traditional views on history of its Euro-American counterparts and to escape the same fate as other major eschatological works of the period by making history the major focus.
Certainly, Tolson's attempt to clear his own "canonical space" involves a re-vision of Western interpretations of history. In offering an alternative interpretation of history's portent, Tolson follows in the Duboisian tradition of refiguring history, as revealed in Chapter 3. So that in signifying on previous Euro-American texts, Tolson challenges the cultural hegemony of the Western world as it is reflected in Euro-American literature; and he offers a new model of history for consideration, one that upholds democracy and re-places the black man in the cosmological scheme of things.

We should begin our discussion of Tolson's Libretto by first recalling T.S.Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," because Tolson responds to and acts upon some of Eliot's theories. Eliot argues that the mark of a good poet is his understanding of "tradition," his "historical sense." It is Tolson's "historical sense" (or in Tolson's mind, "historical imagination") that, in part, accounts for his attempt in Libretto to rewrite or refigure not only the the past but the future, a feat which makes this poem his most daring, if not his most successful deformation of mastery. Moreover, Tolson clearly admires Eliot's technical virtuosity and understanding of the problems as well as the responsibilities of the modern poet, a fact that makes Eliot's essay valuable for its instruction. According to Eliot:

"Tradition" involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that
the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

...what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.⁵

Tolson does "appreciate his relation to the dead poets and artists," not only those of Europe but those of Africa and Asia and America as well. More importantly, Tolson "appreciates" his relation (as black poet and black man) to world history itself and uses history to validate and confirm his poem's premise. However, to do so, he must re-figure history, because by most traditional or "revisionist" accounts, the black man's role in history, especially Africa's role as the mother of all continents, has been
erased, ignored, or distorted. In this regard, Tolson takes very seriously Eliot's assertion that "the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new ... work of art among them." Tolson's work attempts, then, to "alter" the "existing order," and in so doing he alters our perceptions of the past if not the past itself. Tolson hints at this indebtedness in "Re," the second ode in the poem when he says, "A man owes man to a man." To support his interpretation of history, Tolson uses a plethora of references, among them the Tarot, pre-Christian myth, Herodotus, Oswald Spengler, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

In his notes, Tolson only vaguely hints at his dissatisfaction with the long poems of his contemporaries -- Eliot, Crane, Pound, and Williams. However, his use of history as the leitmotif of Libretto suggests that he was particularly dissatisfied with what he perceived as Yeats's "disaffection" and Eliot's passive acceptance of history and his ascetic rejection of the spiritually barren world. In his analysis of "A Long Head to a Round Head," Robert Farnsworth articulates Tolson and Eliot's conflict. His criticism could well apply to Yeats. He states:

The argument of Tolson's poem is that the round head is too timorous to take the long view of history. He feeds the narcissistic vanity of those who identify with the traditions of the aristocratic power of the past. Inhibited by the repugnance he feels toward the vulgar modern world, he treats the frequent symptoms of the decay and death of the privileged world with which he identifies as historical aberrations rather than as inevitable prophecy. The round head (T.S.Eliot) is represented by Alcuin, who warned Charles that he should not heed those who are accustomed to say "vox populi, vox Dei," the voice of
the people is the voice of God, for the ragings of the mob are always near to madness. The longhead's, and Tolson's own, contrasting democratic view of history is made unmistakably clear in the concluding stanzas:

Salons may cheep
Odi profanum vulgus et arceo,

remembering not
anonymous thumbs and index fingers keep
the candelabra of the ermined aglow,
remembering not
the nameless tier
the ultimate Thule of a name,
just as a Hundred thousand hands
pyramided Cheops' fame.

A despot is to the people
as a dangling participle to a noun:
a sceptre's seal is an iota's scribble
upon the testament of a crown.7

While Farnsworth's discussion of "A Long Head to a Round Head" aptly deals with allusions to English history, Tolson could also have been thinking of the Cephalic Index used by early twentieth century anthropologists in defining race -- "round head" denoting Caucasian parentage and "lean head" denoting African parentage. However, Tolson clearly saw the role of the poet as that of upholding "universal brotherhood that makes a mockery of the divisive idols of the tribe of race, caste, and class."8 He sought to call attention to these crucial issues, not only because he viewed them as archetypal conflicts in the history of civilization, but because he believed poets of high modernism had not sufficiently mined these issues on a thematic level, but looked instead to the modern city for thematic fodder, much like Wordsworth and Coleridge had looked to the rural landscape in the nineteenth
century. Margaret Dickie’s criticism of the thematic ambivalence that pervaded the long poems of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Hart Crane reflects this position. She observes:

The Modernist long poem, as it was composed, never had an "entire pattern" that could be apprehended as a "unity at any point in its creation. Disunity, an inability to gather and order materials, a constant revision of purpose - these are the frustrations that hounded the poets as they wrote. They may have hoped that a "space-logic" would have taken over the poem, but they themselves remained unaided by it.

The sense of the whole -- the idea that the greatness of the poem lies in the greatness of its theme -- was a heritage of idealism that the American Modernist never abandoned. But the greatness of theme evaded the Modernist even as they aspired to it.

The long poem which seemed at the beginning of its composition an open and capacious form for a theme that remained to be developed, revealed not only its limits but the the inability of form to generate content.9

And certainly, Tolson believed he had found a theme sufficient to the requirements of his vision -- freedom which transcends the boundaries of race, caste, and class -- a theme broad enough and deep enough to sustain the weight of world history.

The poem is evidence of Tolson’s technical maturity as well as his broad acquaintance with history. It is his most ambitious poem to date and runs to 770 lines. The depth and breadth of his subject matter and his own stylistic approach are incompatible with the Whitmanian repetition of key lines or the parallel phrasing of whole passages as he uses in "Rendezvous with America" and "Tapestries of Time."
Tolson chooses instead a more rigid, orderly, and arbitrary form -- eight pindaric odes, each named after a note on the diatonic scale, ranging from "Do" to "Do." Within each section he makes use of varied accentual syllabic lines. The form, then, compliments the poem's content, which moves back and forth between Liberia's present, its past, and its future. Moreover, with its voluminous end notes (twenty-two pages, in all) the poem is both a parody of and a sincere response to The Waste Land. Certainly, on one level the poem is a celebration of Liberia's centennial and thus fulfills its intended purpose. However, in the process of its writing, the poem became for Tolson much more than an occasional piece. Tolson saw a chance to put what he had learned about modernism to practice, so that Libretto is a demonstration of Tolson's own aesthetic development, a continuation of some of his staple themes, and a continuation of the modernist dialogue with history and consciousness. Each ode is both descriptive and instructive, descriptive in its depiction of Liberia's history, instructive in its depiction of Liberia's part in history.¹⁰

The premise of "Do" is that Liberia is the city of the future. To this effect, the speaker calls for a unified Liberia, one which will become "Canaan's key," figuratively a land beyond time. The rest of the poem is about the process of getting there. This process, then, involves substantial work, not only for the protagonist, who must work through each successive ode, but also the reader who must work along with him to decipher the poem's hidden meaning.

With regard to the whole idea of "work," the word "libretto" is defined as a musical work or operatic text, and it is an appropriate title for this poem which is
arranged in eight sections named after notes on the diatonic scale. However, also apparent is the Gurdjieffian interpretation of "work" as a means of acquiring knowledge and self-control for the study of change of being. In this sense, Libretto reveals through the work of the protagonist and the reader an alternative way of being and of perceiving life and, by implication, an alternative way of perceiving past, present and future. Thus, the reader is cast in the role of the initiate who must master each level of knowledge before he attains the status of master, rather in the same way the ancient initiate endured initiation rituals in order to attain the level of Hierophant or seer.

"Do" lays the groundwork for the sections that follow by establishing "on the lowest note of the scale, where the oratorio begins, the "are's and ain'ts" of the African Republic." The poem opens with a question in the form of a single word, a technique Tolson briefly employs in "Rendezvous with America." In fact, each eight-line stanza in this section opens with a question which the speaker proceeds to answer, first in the negative and then in the affirmative. The overall effect of this section is that of a vigorous concatenation of declarations that confirm and affirm the poem's dialectical process. Thus, Liberia is:

No micro-footnote in a bunioned book
Homed by a pedant
With a gelded look:
No side-show barker's bio-incident,
No corpse of a soul's errand
To the Dark Continent:

No pimple on the chin of Africa,
No brass-lipped cicerone of Big Top democracy,
No lamb to tame a lion with a baa:

No waste land yet, nor yet a destooled elite,
No merry-andrew, an Ed-dehebi at heart,
With St. Paul's root and Breughal's cheat: (pp. 13-15)

"No waste land yet" alludes to Eliot's grim prophecy, contrasting the fate of Liberia to that of Eliot's "Unreal City." On another level, Tolson is here announcing his intention to try his hand at a "long poem," although not necessarily with the same thesis or conclusion as his predecessor. Thus, unlike the "Unreal City," Liberia is a symbol of hope. The poet addresses the tiny country in an ecstatic apostrophe:

You are
The ladder of survival dawn men saw
In the quicksilver sparrow that slips
The eagle's claw!

You are
The lightening rod of Europe, Canaan's key,
The rope across the abyss,
Mehr licht for the Africa-To-Be!

You are
Libertas flayed and naked by the road
To Jericho, for a people's five score years
Of bones for manna, for balm an alien goad!

You are
Black Lazarus risen from the White Man's grave,
Without a road to Downing Street,
Without a hemidemisemiquaver in an Oxford stave!

You are
The iron nerve of lame and halt and blind,
Liberia and not Liberia,
A moment of the conscience of mankind! (pp. 13-15)

Tolson's oratorical fervor matches that of a black Baptist preacher "stuntin' for disciples" as the preacher makes his point through the rhythm of repetition and parallel phrasing. However, unlike the preacher, Tolson "stunts" for a wider audience; for within these highly condensed lines, Tolson charts the past, present, and future of Liberia and, by implication, all people. Liberia is not only a symbol of the ultimate triumph of freedom for black people, but "a moment of the conscience of mankind."

It is no accident that nearly all the negations and affirmations of "Do" allude to literature or history. For example, the opening lines, "Liberia/ No micro-footnote in a bunioned book/ Homed by a pedant with a gelded look" are a rejoinder to the question, "What is Africa to me," a question posed by Countee Cullen's 1925 poem, "Heritage." Implicit in the poem's first stanza is a criticism of the romanticized notion of Africa that was disseminated during the Harlem Renaissance."14 Moreover, the
image of Liberia as the "ladder of survival dawn men saw in the quicksilver sparrow that slips the eagle's claw" derives from a passage in Dryden's *All for Love*. Tolson quotes the passage in his notes:

... upon my eagle's wings  
I bore this wren till I was tired of soaring,  
and now he mounts above me. (p. 58)

The image, though allusive, commands its own space and is invigorated through Tolson's use of it; Liberia as the "sparrow that slips/ the eagle's claw" suggests the relationship of Liberia to the United States, where the idea of Liberia was born. But just as Dryden's wren "mounts above" the eagle, so too will Liberia surpass America as an experiment in true democracy. Moreover, Liberia as "ladder" doubly connotes the dreams of its founders and the upward movement of the poem, from "Do" on a lower scale to "Do" on a higher scale. Most importantly, "Do" forms Tolson's organic thesis and in so doing defines "Liberia and not Liberia," a people, a place, a time, as an ongoing dialectical process, containing within itself all time.

"Re" recounts Africa's past, before Liberia was even a thought. By reenacting the past, the poet fills in the gaps in Africa's history which geographers and historians have heretofore distorted through ignorance or through the excuse of ignorance. His history lesson is punctuated by the warnings of "The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu."

The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu chanted:  
"Brow tron lo-eta ne a ne won oh gike!"
Before Liberia was, Songhai was: before
America set the raw foundling on Africa’s
Doorstep, before the Genoese diced west,
Burnt warriors and watermen of Songhai
Tore into bizarreries the uniforms of Portugal
And sewed an imperial quilt of tribes. (p. 15)

Tolson’s note for line 59 explains the necessity of this history lesson.

I am informed that variations of this eironia or mockery
may be found in scores of African languages. It means
here: "The world is too large -- that’s why we do not
hear everything." CF. Pliny, Historia Naturalis, II:
There is always something new from Africa." Also Swift:
So geographers, in Afric maps,
With savage pictures fill their gaps . . ." (p. 60)

Tolson’s penchant for teaching is evident in the foregoing note, as it is throughout the
poem, because he is, in effect, "filling in" the gaps in Africa’s history while correcting
the stereotypical view of Africa as a land overrun by "savages." Moreover, Tolson
is following his own directives as expressed in "The Negro Scholar" to "uproot the lies
of ermine classes." To this view, the speaker recalls Songhai’s role as a cultural
mecca under the rule of King Askia.

Black Askia’s fetish was his people’s health:
The world his world, he gave the Benghal light
Of Books the Inn of Court in Songhai. Beba mzigo!
The law of empathy set the market price,
Scaled the world and deed . . .

Solomon in all his glory had no Oxford,
Alfred the Great no University of Sankore:
Footloose professors, chimney sweeps of the skull,
From Europe and Asia; youths, souls in one skin . . .

(p. 17)
However, Songhai cannot withstand the repeated raids by European conquerors. These conquerors are likened to "savage" animals who eventually rip the life out of Songhai.

The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu chanted:
"Europe is an empty python in hiding grass!"

Lia! Lia! The river Wagadu, the river Bagana,
Became dusty metaphors where white ants ate canoes,
and the locust Portuguese raped the maiden crops,
And the sirocco Spaniard razed the city-states,
And the leopard Saracen bolted his scimitar into
The jugular vein of Timbuktu. Dieu seul est grand! (p. 18)

Having ignored the warnings of "the Good Gray Bard," Walt Whitman's black counterpart, the people pay the price with their lives and their land. Timbuktu becomes a literal home to members of the animal kingdom: "hooded cobras," "hoodless mambas," "puff adders," and hook scorpions whisper/ In the weedy corridors of Sankore. Lia! Lia! [weep]" Timbuktu, once a living place has become a "dusty metaphor." Tolson's emphasis on "bards" and "metaphors" also underlines the role of the poet as prophet in society and in so doing validates his own attempts to prophecy in Libretto.

"Re" ends with the death of Songhai; "Mi" begins the the birth of Liberia and lists the men -- "Lawyer Key," "Bishop Meade," and "Doctor Torrey," who "eagled/
The gospel for the wren Republic in/ Supreme Court Chambers." However, Tolson is quick to point out that their motives were hardly altruistic. "That decision's cash/
And credit bought a balm for conscience, verved/ Black Pilgrim Fathers to Cape
Mesurado,/ Where sun and fever, brute and vulture, spelled/ The idiom of their faith
in whited bones". The section ends with a prediction of Liberia’s role in World
War II:

The rubber from Liberia shall arm
Free peoples and her airport hinterlands
Let loose the winging grapes of wrath upon
The Desert Fox's cocained nietzscheans
A goosestep from the Gateway of the East! (p. 20)

"Fa" is a metaphorical study in the dialectics of history. The poet juxtaposes
images of aggression and death with the refrain, "in the interlude of peace." Thus,

The beaked and pouched assassin sags
on his corsair rock,
and from his talons swim the blood-
red feathers of a cock . . .

in the interlude of peace. (p. 21)

Images of the natural world conjure the associative images of man’s aggressive
nature, as one recalls the "locust Portuguese," the "sirocco Spaniard[s]," and the
"leopard Saracen" of "Re."

"Sol" focuses on the mental voyage of Elijah Johnson, who recalls the hell of
the Middle Passage, even as he travels in the "brig Elizabeth" to Liberia. Thus, as
he travels eastward, Johnson's memory moves westward from Africa to America.

This is the Middle Passage: here
Gehenna hatchways vomit up
The debits of pounds of flesh.
This is the Middle Passage: here
The sharks wax fattest and the stench
Goads God to hold His nose!

Elijah Johnson, his Tygers heart
In the whale's belly, flenses midnight:

The poet's allusions to William Shakespeare ("the debits of pounds of flesh") and
William Blake ("his Tyger's heart") suggest the disparity for black slaves between
justice and mercy while they amplify the inscrutability of God.

Having retraced the steps of the middle passage from East to West, Elijah
Johnson's mind returns East to meditate upon the wisdom of the "Griots," African
bards or, as Tolson refers to them in his notes, "living encyclopaedias." The second
half of "Sol" is taken up with their "cosmic deepi-talki."

"Africa is a rubber ball;
the harder you dash it to the ground,
the higher it will rise.

........................................

"Three steps put man one step ahead.
The rich man's weights are not the poor
man's scales. To each his coole.

........................................

"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. . .(pp. 25-26)
It is no coincidence that "Sol's" idiosyncratic proverbs convey the wisdom of the griots and thus reveal the "soul" of the African people. And although one saying follows another with no apparent order, all of the quotations reflect some part of the poet's thesis. "Africa is a rubber ball;/ the harder you dash it to the ground,/ the higher it will rise" reinforces the poet's own prophetic pronouncements about the future of Liberia. "The rich man's weights are not the poor/ man's scales" and "To each his coole" subtly allude to the home of Lady Gregory, an aristocratic patron and friend of W.B. Yeats. Tolson implicitly asserts here as he does throughout the poem that caste and class partially determine one's view of the world. Even Yeats's prophecies are tempered by his sympathy for the aristocracy. "The tide that ebbs will flow again" is a figurative rendering of the Nietzschean idea that time is cyclical. "Sol," then, speaks the wisdom of the griots and thus reveals the "soul" of the African people. However, Wilburn Williams criticizes Tolson's decision to include the griots' sayings at all. According to Williams:

At this juncture Tolson commits what can only be called an error. Tolson extends the bird imagery rather neatly when he has the parrots of line 170 chatter the charge that Africa has no history. The proverbs that Tolson offers as refutation are brilliant in their wit, but this entire phase of the poem is a misconception. The accusation of the parrots was implicit in the second line of "Re": "The world is too large--that's why we do not hear everything." The history of Songhai that followed was its refutation. The forty-two lines of proverbs in "Sol" needlessly repeat what has already been done.
Williams does not take into account the tone of the passages which precede the proverbs, nor does he take into account Tolson's rhetorical strategy. The tone of the passages which precede the proverbs are both grim and bitter in their indictment of history. In this respect, the griots are not necessarily responding to the parrots' chatter; rather, they are amplifying and specifying the wisdom of "The Good Gray Bard in Timbuktu," whose words have gone unheeded. Moreover, by condemning the image of the white conqueror, the griots create a metaphorical target for the inequities suffered by the slaves who cry, "Griots, the quick owe the quick and dead./ A man owes man to man." Therefore, the wit and occasional humor of the griots offset the intensity of the preceding passages. With regard to rhetorical strategy, the poet signifies on the white oppressors who laid waste the African empire of Songhai by figuratively "specifying" their transgressions. The proverbs are not intended to further the narrative or plot; rather their function is to "testify" in the best Afro-American tradition of signifying.16

"La" briefly explores prehistory in the movement of glaciers and the westward trek of "Northmen [who] brandished paws/ And shuffled Europe-ward,/ Gnashing Cerberean jaws." However, the poet quickly shifts from this image of Europe's barbarian beginnings to the arrival of a "white man spined with dreams," the "Prophet Jehudi Ashmun," who helped to found Liberia. Ashmun declares in the final stanza of the section:

. . .My Negro kinsmen,
America is my mother,
Liberia is my wife,
And Africa my brother. (lines 251-254)
Ashmun's declaration serves to metaphorically unite East and West, lending a kind of balance to the preceding "Fa" and "Sol" which image hostility and discord.

As next to the last section, "Ti" is one of the most challenging sections of the poem. It is at once a revelation of the workings of the historical process, an appeal to the reader-initiate to see through the "veil" of hypocrisy and deceit of the world leaders of the past, and a vision of the inevitable rise of the world's people ("O great White World, thou boy of tears, omega hounds/ lap up the alpha laugh and du-haut-en-bas curse"). Thus, the poet makes apostrophes to "time" -- "O Calendar of the Century" -- and place -- "O Africa, Mother of Science" or "O East . . . el grito de Dolores . . . O West" (pp. 30-32). Though "Ti" is complex, it is accessible if one understands that the poet layers binaries to create a dynamic tension: white-black, rich-poor, few-many, separation-unity, and art-reality. The poet does not seek to abolish or synthesize all of these binaries; rather, he seeks a solution to the most insidious and the most unjust dialectical processes: rich-poor and few-many.

Specifically, the speaker proposes that rulers have traditionally used race, caste, and class as artificial barriers, resulting in the perpetuation of the rise and fall of nations. Tolson uses history as a weapon or a tool (depending on one's perspective) to bear out his support of the Utopian alternative in the "merry-go-round" movement of history, as opposed to the "ferris wheel" movement of history. He explains this theory in detail in his Caviar and Cabbage column of 1940:

The history of man heretofore has been the history of the rise and fall of nations. I presume to call this the Ferris Wheel Theory of History. G.W.G. Ferris, hoping
to amuse us while he plucked the nickels from our pockets, invented a giant power-driven steel wheel which carried cars around its rim. However, before the birth of Mr. Ferris, Man had invented his theory of racial superiority.

Have you ever looked philosophically at a Ferris Wheel? The car-riders go up and come down. No particular car stays at the top. Why? Because the giant power-driven wheel is always turning. Now, follow me. The Ferris Wheel of History turns on the axis of Time. Rome was at the top 2,000 years ago; today Germany occupies the top seat in Europe. Tomorrow -- another conqueror, of course.

The vanity that makes a people think itself superior to another people is the vanity that leads to its defeat. Pride goeth before a great fall!

A ruling class never learns anything from the downfall of other ruling classes. Capitalists will learn nothing from the feudal lords whom the capitalists overthrew.

There can be no democracy without economic equality. Thomas Jefferson said that when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. There can be no brotherhood of man without a brotherhood of dollars. I have another theory. It is based on economic and racial brotherhood. I presume to call this the Merry-Go-Round of History. On the merry-go-round all seats are on the same level. Nobody goes up; therefore, nobody has to come down. That is democracy, as I see it. In a brotherhood, all members are equal.

The over-blown rhetoric of the Caviar and Cabbages column is, of course, in contrast to Libretto's highly condensed lines, reflecting the working class appeal of the former
column and the more learned appeal of the latter. However, the theory remains the same in both pieces.

In another sense, "Ti" is both a lament and an entreaty to the reader-initiate to break the old ferris-wheel pattern of history and to create a new, more compatible one that accommodates all the people. The poet would wrest the world from the hands of "Blind men cowled in azure" who lack the will to change. "Like the old men in the Chorus of Aeschylus's Agamemnon, they are useless in a crisis." They are merely:

Elders of Aga's House, keening
at the Eagle's feast, cringing
before the Red Slayer, shrinking
from the blood on Hubris' pall -- (p. 33)

The lesson of "Ti" is to see through the symbolic dividers of race and class, which are and have always been false distinctions. Throughout this section, the speaker questions historical divisions of race, class, and culture. The passage takes on the tone of a lament, a warning, and finally a prayer.

O Africa, Mother of Science
...lachen mit yastchekes...
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 Malebolganian isolation?
What dread elboga shoved your soul
into the tribulum of retardation?
melamim or melanin dies to the world and dies:
Rome casketed herself in Homeric hymns.
Man's culture in barb and Arab lies:

The Jordan flows into the Tiber,
the Yangtze into the Thames,
the Ganges into the Mississippi, the Niger
into the Seine.

Judge of the Nations, spare us: yet,
fool latins, alumni of one school,
on Clochan-na-n'all, say Phew
...Lest we forget! Lest we forget!
to dusky peers of Roman, Greek, and Jew.
Selah! (p. 32)

This passage outlines the psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects of human antagonism which are born of false distinctions. "The sundering of Gondwanaland" into three parts -- Africa, Eurasia, and America -- was beyond human agency; on the other hand, the "Malebolgean isolation" of Africa is the result of human greed and willful ignorance. Aggressive verbs such as "sundered," "crushed," "fouled," "shoved," and "casketed" underline the extent of Africa's decimation and recall "Re's" figurative rendering of an Africa which was "eaten," "raped," and "razed," by its marauding conquerors:

Lia! Lia! The river Wagadu, the river Bagana,
Became dusty metaphors where white ants ate canoes,
And the locust Portuguese raped the maiden crops,
And the sicocco Spaniards razed the city-states,
And the leopard Saracen bolted his scimitar into
The jugular vein of Timbuktu. Dieu seul est grand! (p. 18)

The speaker does not place blame; however, the question, "What dread hand," is an echo of Williams Blakes's irony when one recalls "Re's" description of one group of
human beings killing another in the name of God. The speaker implicitly marvels at the fact that this "chaos of chance and change" is paradoxically "natural." Neither is Tolson subtle in imaging the equal mortality of both races as when the speaker declares, "melamim or melanin dies to the world and dies." The metaphorical rendering of the conflicting hues is itself stark and unyielding. Melamine is "a white crystalline high-melting organic base made by heating dicyandiamide to high temperatures and that is chiefly used in making melamine resins." Melanin, on the other hand, is "any of various dark brown or black pigments of animal or plant structures (as skin, hair, the choroid coat, or raw potato when exposed to air." Tolson further complicates the line by punning on "die," because melamine is a dye, so that the poet implicitly furthers his argument that the races will eventually "mix" until the ethnic boundaries are indistinguishable.

On the other hand, literary and historical allusions to the effects of "sundering" abound in this ode. The speaker warns that the effect of judging people by false divisions or preserving such divisions, inevitably spells doom, as the following passages suggest:

Rome casketed herself in Homeric hymns,

All cultures crawl
  walk hard
  fall
  flout
under classes under
  lout,
enmesh in ethos, in masoreth, the poet's flesh
intone the Mass of the class as the requium of the mass. (p. 32)
These are but two references to the negative effects of cultural elitism. Others include "moats," "High-Heels" (an allusion to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*), walls, and the linguistic "paseq." The poet suggests that these false and insidious distinctions have permeated the living fabric of life, forcing "cultures [to] crawl/ walk hard/ fall/ flout" and ultimately to die. Tolson casts the life of a culture in Spenglerian terms, paralleling its rise and fall to an organism, which like any other living thing [goes] through a regular and predictable course of birth, growth, maturity, and decay. However, unlike Spengler, Tolson believes the seeds of a culture's decay to be its enslavement to "ethos," "isms, and "ologies." In this respect, the poet does not over-generalize about the causes of a society's demise; not content to ascribe its death to spiritual malaise, he follows the lead of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and locates the cause at the socio-economic and political level.

Neither does the poet spare the artist who fails the people and fails to fulfill his role in society if he "divorces" himself from reality.

Castle divorcee Art in a blue-blood moat,
read the flesh of grass
into bulls and bears,
let Brahmin pens kill
Everyman the Goat,

write Culture's epitaph in Notes upstairs. (p. 33)

The preceding passage is reminiscent of an earlier one in "Rendezvous with America" where a less subtle Tolson angrily declared:
To escape the waste land of the Doomsday hour,  
His poets scurry into the ivory tower.  
The ghosts of Milton and Whitman grieve without,  
While the moderns sonnetize a hothouse flower.24

The present passage is perhaps subtler and more ironic but no less biting. Of course, the reference to poets who write "culture's epitaph" is again Tolson's jape on Eliot's grim vision in The Waste Land. Tolson also gently pokes fun at Wallace Stevens when, in the midst of this tendentious section, he asserts that this is "Things-as-they-are-for-us." One gets the sense that Tolson is here calling attention to his own role as a "black" poet expressing the reality of the "other." Stevens' words give one a sense of one aspect of the Euro-American modernist perspective that Tolson is reacting against. Stevens asserts in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

Reality is things as they are. . . . This much ought to be said to make it a little clearer that in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive.

A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow.25

Tolson's allusion to Stevens suggests that good poetry does not always attempt to "escape the world," good poetry can also explore, if not define questions of morality. As a black poet, Tolson does not have the luxury of escaping the world or the world's
history. Rather, as the poet declares in "The Negro Scholar," his function is to cut away the lies that "infect the truth of race," to seek the underlying truth beneath the adust anarchy of things."

To defeat the ferris Wheel cycle of history and thereby cheat the "omega hounds" of the sweetness of victory, the speaker offers a solution which sounds at once as simple and as enigmatic as the griots' proverbs in "Sol." He asserts with the most compelling logic:

Man's culture in barb and Arab lies:
The Jordan flows into the Tiber,
the Yangtze into the Thames,
the Ganges into the Mississippi, the Niger into the Seine. (p. 32)

The first line of the preceding passage is taken from Arthur Christy's *The Asian Legacy and American Life*. Tolson makes the following reference to Christy in his notes:

This book contains vital facts on Oriental influences in the New Poetry. What I owe the late Professor Arthur E. Christy, a favorite teacher, is not limited to the concept of "the shuttle ceaselessly weaving the warp and weft of the world's cultural fabric."26

A "sabotaged world," the speaker asserts, does not recognize that that all cultures are inextricably bound "warp and weft": "O East, O West,/ on tenotomy bent,/ Chang's tissue is/ Eng's ligament!/ Selah!"
The poet ends each stanza with the phrase "Selah," reinforcing the poem's figurative likeness to a musical work-in-progress; and in fact, "Selah" is used at the end of Hebrew verse as a musical notation. In addition, it has the momentous effect of a refrain in the call-and-response mode of black vernacular speech or an "Amen" in the Christian vernacular. "Ti" ends with a triumphant paean to "The Höhere," the spirit, which will triumph over place and time.

The Höhere of Gaea's children
is beyond the dérèglement de tous les sens, is beyond
gold fished from cesspools, the galerie des rois,
the seeking of cows, apartheid, Sisyphus' despond,

The Höhere of God's stepchildren
is beyond the sabotaged world, is beyond
das Diktat der Menschenverachtung,
la muerte sobre el esqueleto de la nada,
the pelican's breast rent red to feed the young,
summer's third-class ticket, the Revue des morts,
the skulls trepanned to hold ideas plucked from dung,
Dives' crumbs in the church of the unchurched,
absurd life shaking its ass's ears among
the colors of vowels and Harrar blacks
with Nessus shirts from Europe on their backs

The Höhere of X's children
is beyond Herald's College, the filets d'Arachné, is beyond
maggot democracy, the Mal eternel, the Bells of Y's,
the doddering old brigades with aorist medicines of poetry,

the otototoi-in Crimson Tapestries-of the hoi polloi,
Euboean defeats

in the Sausage Maker's bout
the fool himself finds out
and in the cosmos of his chaos
repeats.
Selah! (pp. 38-39)

The speaker ecstatically declares that the "Hôhere" of all people will transcend the
catalogue of history's errors and aberrations. Thus, the lines are bouyed by prophecy
which is largely informed by hope. However, the poet images history's tragic errors
with a power that surpasses the same kind of compression of history he had
attempted in "Tapestries of Time." This power is fueled by the speaker's conviction
that humanity is imprisoned by time and its own sense of guilt.

Between Yesterday's wars
now hot now cold
the grief-in-grain of Man
dripping dripping dripping
from the Cross of Iron
dripping
drew jet vampires
of the Skull;
Between Yesterday's wills of Tanaka, between
golden goblets and truckling trull
and the ires
of rivers red with the reflexes of fires,
the ferris wheel
of races, of caste, of class
dumped and alped cadavers till the ground
fogged the Pleiades with Gila rot: Today the mass,
the Beast with a Maginot Line in its Brain,
the staircase Avengers of base alloy,
the vile canaille-Giriil!-the Bastard-rasse,
the uomo qualyque, the hoi barbaroi,
........................................

unparadised nobodies with maps of Nowhere
ride the merry-go-round!
Selah! (p. 41)
The rich texture of the preceding passage reflects time's shifting scenes. Moreover, the poem's relentless heteroglossia and its frequent historical allusions amplify its intentional universality. Nevertheless, throughout the passage one is reminded that the false barriers of class as symbolized by "the golden goblet and truckling trull," "the staircase Avengers of base alloy," "the Raw from the Coliseum of the Cooked" will crumble.

Toison, ever the Eshu-Elegbara trickster, cannot resist signifying, albeit obliquely, on Eliot's phrasing in *The Waste Land*. The passage, "the grief-in-grain of Man/ dripping dripping dripping," parallels the syntax of Eliot's "To Carthage then I came/ Burning burning burning burning," and implicitly responds to Eliot's lament, "O Lord thou pluckest me out" which is, for Toison, rather like Margaret's complaint in Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Spring and Fall to a Young Child." In the latter poem, the speaker gently reproves young "Margaret" for "grieving over Goldengrove unleaving," because it is finally herself she mourns for. The "grief-in-grain of Man" is his prefabricated guilt in the tradition of Christianity. This guilt constitutes the "jet vampires/of the Skull," who are contrasted to the "Chimney sweeps of the Skull" in "Re" who are Footloose professors,.../ From Europe and Asia; youths, souls in one skin."

"Do" is the eighth and final section of the poem; however, the nature of the diatonic scale is such that it simultaneously ends one octave and begins a new one, so that the last section is both a conclusion of the poem and a prophecy of the possibility of a new beginning. However, this section also dramatizes the poet's
preoccupation with the dialectics of history; because it shrewdly presents two possible interpretations of the future -- one that is negative and one that is positive. He wisely saves the positive prophecy for last, a move which would understandably insure the poem's welcome reception by the Liberian people, for whom it was written. However, Tolson's own knowledge and pragmatism compel him to outline the future for the Third World if it retains the same perverted values of the First World. Therefore, the final canto is divided into three movements, each of varying length.

The first movement, which contains sixty-five lines, ponders the unregenerative present and the ultimate inscrutability of humanity.

    a pelageya in as seccas the old she-fox today  
eyes dead letters mouth a hole in a privy  
taschunt a corpse's in a mud-walled troy of jaguncos (p. 42)

"The old she-fox today" is revealed to be "in as seccas," barren and unregenerative, "taschunt a corpse's," in much the same way that Eliot's "unreal city" is "a mud-walled troy of jaguncos (fanatics)," destined to fall. Tortured syntax and sequential mono-syllabic words ("eyes dead letters") contribute to the disturbing effect of the passage.

Humanity is largely responsible for the world's sorry present state of affairs. However, if the speaker is full of adjectives to describe the times, he is at a loss to define humanity.

    Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni what is man f.r.a.i.  tô tô  
a professor of metaphysicotheologicocosmonigology  
a tooth puller a pataphysicist in a cloaca of error  
a belly's wolf a skull's tabernacle a #13 with stars
In answer to Socrates’s "tò tì" (what is it), the speaker concludes that man is ultimately inscrutable, indecipherable for the very reason that he is paradoxically mortal ("a pataphysicist in a cloaca of error") and divine ("a skull’s tabernacle"). He is both inspiration "a muses’ darling" and nightmare "a walking hospital on the walk." It is no wonder, then, that man is capable of great good and great evil. These binaries create the tension that propels the stanzas of the first movement.

naïfs pray for a guido’s scale of good and evil to match
worldmusic’s sol-fa syllables ((o do de do de do de) (p. 44)

The first movement, with its ironic references to bombs ("today’s baby boys summon peace") and "blind men gibbering mboagan [death] in greek/ against Sodom’s pillars of salt" mirrors Eliot’s grim vision in "What the Thunder Said." On the other hand, the poet’s lengthy oxymoronic catalogue of surreal scenes, "o’s without figures," "pebbles let fall in the race of a night sea," "iotas of the yod of god in a rolls royce," eschews Eliot’s iambic control of the stanzas in "What the Thunder Said." Instead Tolson yields to the momentous energy of the passage and highlights its eschatological concerns in juxtapositional images which revolve around the idea of nuclear conflagration.

pin-pricks precede blitzkriegs mala’ oun el yom yomek
idiots carol happy dashes in st. innocent’s little acre
of rags and bones without brasses black and red
booby mouths looted of the irritating parenthesis
patrol skulls unhonored by cromwell’s pike
snaggleteeth glutted in sudori vultus alieni

o sweet chariot these aesop’s flies without mirth
these oh-mono without music in greed’s akeldama
are one with the great auk of the north star
mouldy rolls of noah’s ark and wall street
nuclei feed to demogorgon’s mill
alms for oblivion raindrops minus h₂o (p. 46)

o’s without figures on ice the sun licks
pebbles let fall in the race of a night sea
jockeyed by beaufort no. 12
iotas of the yod of god in a rolls royce
the seven trumpets of today’s baby boys summon peace
and the walls come tumblin’ down (christ sleeps)

Although the foregoing passage appears to be a rambling, heterogenous catalogue,
there is more method than madness. The poet returns to his previously stated idea
of the ferris wheel cycle of history, locating the seeds of corruption and discord in the
"idols of the tribe" of the Western world -- "ethos," "isms," and "ologies." These false
distinctions, "mouldy rolls of noah’s ark and wall street/ [are] nuclei fed to
demogorgon’s mill." If one interprets "demogorgon as "the primeval god of ancient
mythology" and his "mill" as the wheel of fortune, then the false distinctions
perpetuate the insidious ferris wheel of history.

Tucked among the foregoing images in this incongruous catalogue -- "o’s
without figures" and "o sweet chariot" -- subtly allude to black culture which has been
all but ignored in the world’s race toward oblivion. The first phrase recalls the black
folk rhyme:
An ought's an ought
A figure's a figure,
All for the white man
None for the nigger

And "o sweet chariot" further signifies on "the ways of white folks." "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was a "spiritual" often sung by American slaves as a code for intended escape. The literal and implied meanings of the word "spiritual" are implicitly contrasted to "these oh-mono," "high muck-amucks," as Tolson defines them in his notes, who are "without music in greed's akeldama," (p. 538) who are, as the poet implies, without "soul." As the analysis of the preceding passage reveals, behind Tolson's "deepi-talki" the reader comprehends the poet's articulation of the major causes of strife and division which eventually lead to war, so that there is reciprocity between symbol and statement. Moreover, here, as in Rendezvous with America and "A Long Head to a Round Head," the speaker locates the problem at the socio-economic and political level ("booby mouths looted of the irritating parenthesis/patrol skulls unhonored by Cromwell's pike"). Already, the reader has been alerted to this issue by the allusion to "blitzkriegs" and their associative images of Hitler's Third Reich with its notions of racial superiority. Again and again, the poet makes the point that history's lessons must be understood and heeded if there is to be a future at all, if we are to keep the walls from "tumbling down."

The second movement of "Do" is a mere twenty lines, curiously brief in comparison to the sixty-five lines of the first movement and the one hundred ninety-five lines of the final movement. Upon reading the section, however, one
suspects that the reason for its brevity is its deliberately negative portent. The inclusion of this section suggests that Tolson is "hedging his bet" against the glorious future he projects in the final movement of "Do." The penultimate movement, then, implicitly warns Liberia of the price of ignoring the lesson of the poem -- destroy the false idols of caste, class and race. The speaker frames his warning in the form of a series of leading questions:

Tomorrow... O ... Tomorrow,
Where is the glory of the mestizo Pharoah?
The Mahdi's tomb of the foul deed?
Black Clitus of the fatal verse and Hamlet's arras?
The cesspool of the reef of gold?

Tomorrow ... O . . . Tomorrow,
Where is Jugurtha the dark Iago?
The witches' Sabbath of sleeping sickness?
The Nye ke mi eyeless in the River of Blood?
The Tagus that imitates the Congo?
The Mein Kampf of kitab al sudan wa'lbidan?
The black albatross about the white man's neck? (p. 47)

Tolson's notes to lines 561 and 567 clarify his purpose in this section, in their suggestion that the newly risen Third World is not immune to prejudice and false pride. The first note states:

Cf. Xenophanes: "Men have always made their gods in their own images - the Greeks like Greeks, the Ethiopians like Ethiopians." Again Professor Christy's figure of "the world's cultural fabric" is evidenced in the statues of the Black Virgin Mary and Negro saints which were common in Germany and Latin Europe, as well as northern Africa, during the Middle Ages. The stained glass of the Cathedral at Chartres has portraits in ebony.
"Creation's Hell Hole": the name the Italians gave the Danakil Desert.

The second note states:

Kitab al sudan wa'lbidan: "the superiority of the black race over the white." Before the swastika gave Nordicism the Stuka, an Arab scholar, Al-Jahiz, issued his racist theory in reverse: another instance of similarity of dissimilarity. (pp. 77-78)

The speaker allows for the possibility that "Tomorrow" could be the repetition of "today" in blackface, that Yeats's "beast" could indeed be born into such a world. And yet the brevity of the movement in contrast to the length of the third and final celebratory movement suggests the poet's hope that this dreaded possibility does not become a reality, the poet's own Heraclitean pessimism notwithstanding.

The third and final movement of "Do" brings the poem to its "fantastic" conclusion as it heralds Khopiru (Africa-to-be) in the form of the "Parliament of African Peoples," "where free and joyful again, all mankind unites,/ without heralds of earth and water." The foregoing passage suggests that in the New Age apocalyptic occurrences will not be necessary to unite men, while on another level it attempts to negate the validity of Eliot's dire predictions in The Waste Land. Such apocalyptic occurrences will be unnecessary only if the historical cycle is broken. The speaker hails the coming of such a time:

The Parliament of African peoples, chains riven in an age luminous with alpha ray ideas, rives the cycle years
lean and fat, poises the scales of Head and Hand,
gives Science
dominion over Why and
Art over How.

The Parliament of African peoples
wipes out the zymotic zombi
cult of God's wounds. (p. 53)

The New Age abolishes false religions which perpetuate a kind of perennial guilt and
which serve to separate man from man. Paradoxically, when Futurafrique (Future
Africa) achieves its end, it trumpets the abolition of itself, because all will truly be all,
and the state, as such, will no longer exist in its authoritarian capacity.

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 heliaca as the emblem of
blut and boden; and the hyenas
whine no more among the bar¬
ren bones of the seventeen sun¬
set 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!" (p. 55)

Just as the first "Do" ends with the declaration that there is "Liberia and not Liberia,"
the final "Do" ends with Africa and not Africa on a level that evokes an age
unfettered by time or ignoble strife. Thus, "The Parliament of African Peoples . . .
rives the cycle of years lean and fat" (p. 53).
The final section of "Do" images "Khopiru" as the quintessence of speed and fluidity of movement in the form of machines -- from "Liberian motor[s] to "subways" "The United Nations Limited" to the "diesel-engined Bula Matadi." Says the speaker:

The Futurafrique, the chef d’oeuvre of Liberian Motors slips through the traffic swirl of axial Parsifal-Feirefiz Square, slithers past the golden statues of the half-brothers as brothers, with cest prace . . .

The Futurafrique, the accent on youth and speed and beauty, escalades the Mount Sinai of Tubman University, the vistas of which bloom with co-eds from seven times seven lands . . .

The Futurafrique, with but a scintilla of its Niagara power, slices Laubach Park eclipses the Silver Age Gibbet of Shikata-gai-nai, beyond the ars of Phidias; on and on, herds only blears of rotor masts rouletting, estates only rococo decks and sails swirling, the Futurafrique, the Oriens, the Auster, the Americus, the Europa, rend space, gut time, arrowing past tiering Nidaba, glissading side by side, into the cosmopolis of Höhere -- the bygone habitat of mumbo jumbo and blue tongue, of sasswood-bark jury and tsetse fly, aeons and aeons before the Unhappie Wight of the Question Mark crossed the Al Sirat! (pp. 48-49)
In an exuberant catalogue which gains its power through the accretion of juxtapositional images, the poet prophesies the rise of the Third World. Thus, the Futurafrique "slips through the traffic swirl," "slithers past the golden statues," "escalades the Mount Sinai of Tubman University," "strokes the thigh of Mount Barclay," "glitters past bronze Chomolungma," "vies with the sunflower magnificence of the Oriens," "slices Laubach Park,/ eclipses the Silver Age Gibbet/ of Shikata-gai-nai." However, this dizzying array of verbs does more than maintain the momentum of the stanza. It also reveals the very real object of the "Futurafrique" -- to "rend space" and "gut time." In this regard, the phrase, "The Futurafrique . . . eclipses the Silver Age Gibbet of Shikata-gai-nai, beyond the ars of Phidias" is especially fitting. Tolson defines "Shikata-gai-nai" in his notes as follows:

"It cannot be helped." This is the stoicism with which Japanese villagers meet the earth convulsions of sacred Fujiyama. In other lands, it is fate, kismet, predestination, artistries of Circumstance, economic determinism, necessitarianism-from Aeschylus' Nemesis to Chenié's filets d'Arachné. Sometimes it takes the form of the sophistry, "human nature does not change." As a hidden premise it blocks the kinetic; it confuses the feral with the societal and leads to petitio principi. History, then, remains a Heraclitean continuum of a world flaring up and dying down as "it always was, is, and shall be." Some moderns have turned this ancient seesaw figure of a crude dialectics into a locomotive of history. In this poem, however, the flux of men and things is set forth in symbols whose motions are vertical-circular, horizontal-circular, and rectilinear. In spite of the diversity of phenomena, the underlying unity of the past is represented by the ferris wheel; the present by the merry-go-round; and the future by the automobile, the train, the ship, and the aeroplane. I placed the ship image in the middle of the images of swifter vehicles
to indicate the contradiction in the essence of things, the
struggle of opposites, which mankind will face even in
Khopirū and Höhere. By the Law of Relativity, history
will always have its silver age as well as its golden, and
each age will contain some of the other's metal.
Because of these upward and onward lags and leaps, it
is not an accident that Liberia reaches her destination,
the Parliament of African Peoples, after the aerial
symbol. Cf, Meredith's The World's Advance, the figure
of the reeling spiral. (p. 79-80)

Although this note is by no means Tolson's Apology for the poem's symbolic
movement, it is something of a clarification of the poet's use of various symbols in
his attempt to explain his own paradigm for the movement of history and at the same
time to distinguish it from those of other modern poets. In this regard, T.S. Eliot
notwithstanding, the European modernist poet whose sense of "Shikata-gai-nai"
comes to mind in the reading of Tolson's note is W.B. Yeats, for if Libretto does
nothing else, it attempts to allay one's fears of the beast that "slouches toward
Bethlehem to be born." Certainly, Yeats and Tolson agree upon the Nietzschean
concept of cyclical history. What they don't agree upon is the interpretation of
history and the possibility or probability of breaking the cycle. Yeats's reactions to
the coming "antithetical age" range from the apprehension of "The Second Coming"
or the "great gloom" of "A Prayer for My Daughter" to the wished-for peace that
passeth understanding in "Sailing to Byzantium." "The Second Coming" best captures
Yeats's vision of the future. In it he solemnly declares:

    The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
    The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The speaker juxtaposes two images which nevertheless have a causal relationship. 

[When] "the blood-dimmed tide is loosed ... everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned." The speaker is describing here the political upheaval, chaos, and cynicism of modern society. Where there is no order, there can be no tradition. This passage, more than any other in the poem, underscores Yeats’s and Tolson’s contrasting interpretations of the meaning and effect of the apocalypse. If one interprets the aformentioned lines in the larger context of the Mask poems (especially those dealing with cyclical history), one discovers that for Yeats "the ceremony of innocence" refers to the tradition of aristocratic rule. As prophet/poet, Yeats clearly holds out little hope for the next 2000 year cycle, even if one takes into account his later poems’ philosophy of a kind of "tragic gaiety." Tolson, however, shares little if any of Yeats’s pessimism. In fact, it would not be overly subtle to interpret Tolson’s half-rhetorical question in "E. & O.E."

\[
\text{is it, is it,} \\
\text{the whited sepulcher's} \\
\text{dike capsizing / in the dolor} \\
\text{of the rising tide of color?}^{33}
\]

as both a reference to Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color* (1920) and as an inversion of Yeats’s own metaphor ("the blood dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere/ the ceremony of innocence is drowned"). To return, however, to Tolson’s note, Tolson concurs with Yeats’s view of history’s cyclical pattern; Yeats’s "gyres" are Tolson’s "reeling spirals." However, he does not see the coming age as necessarily worse than the passing one.
Tolson's inclusion of the final movement is imperative to the poem's progressive spiral. Wilburn Williams understands the strategic placement of the final movement of "Do" for its positive rhetorical effect. However, he agrees with Allen Tate that the section is "not ... quite successful as poetry." According to Williams:

The Whitmanesque prose-paragraphs Tate objects to can also, again in theory, be justified as a release from the dark, turgid language of conflict into the luminous clarity of vision. Certainly the climax of the Libretto is the least difficult part of the poem. Yet the fact remains that the rich implication of the complex passages are far more interesting as poetry than the declamations of "Do." However attractive one finds the social ideas of the Libretto's close, and we certainly do, they are presented in a form inferior to that of the opposing claims of the blind men and today. When it came to speaking the message of the Libretto Tolson forsook innovation and fell back upon the old style that gave us "Rendezvous with America."

Williams correctly assesses the technical lapses of the final section. Although it is "analogous to Hart Crane's The Bridge" in its attempt to unite past and present, the passage does not equal the power of the rest of the poem for the same reason "Rendezvous with America" does not -- overstatement and didacticism. However, the poet's strategy is, nevertheless, sound. The plan of the poem dictates that it end on a positive note, on a higher level. In pointing out the affinities of this prophetic section to Arthur Rimbaud's Illuminations, Woodson makes the same point.

For Tolson, as for Rimbaud, the difficulty of the operations of poetry was that the poem must in some way create the reality of the Golden Age at the end of cyclical time.
However, Woodson recognizes, as Williams perhaps does not, that Tolson is not "predicting" a Golden Age, but rather "promising" a Golden Age. In other words, Tolson is not, after all, a mystic, nor does he purport to be one. Therefore, if the final section of "Do" "promises" the end of cyclical time, it is implicitly aware of the possibility that the "Dark Iago" will not profit by the poet's warnings and will instead perpetuate the same kinds of conflicts of race, caste, and class in the future Third World that have been historically perpetuated in the First World. It is the poet's sad awareness of this fact which accounts for the ambivalence of the second movement of "Do" and the apparent forced gaiety of the third movement.

Like Eliot's _Waste Land_ and Pound's _Cantos, Libretto_ uses symbolism, juxtaposition of images, obscure allusions, and compression of the line. The difference lies in the poets' interpretations of history's portents. Tolson sees the future, whether it is in the form of a peaceful transition or in the form of a nuclear conflagration, as the chance for a new beginning where there is true democracy and the "state abolishes itself." Tolson's protagonist seeks "communion," social and political synthesis. If London symbolizes the "Unreal City," Liberia is its antithesis, it is "Canaan's key," representing the potential beginning of a new kind of time. In this sense, _Libretto_ is directed outward; it is a public pondering on the fate of the many. _The Waste Land_, on the other hand, depicts:

a conversion in which the dead land of one soul is reclaimed, and by fertilization not from the Word but from the Eternal Silence, which is too pure for words. It would invoke radical surgery for its own acute reaction to the crisis of heteroglossia in the hysteria-inducing,
Hieronymo is not in a position to view the torturing world about him with so much generosity. The protagonist is like the Hinayana Buddhist who goes apart from others to save his purity, as opposed to the Mahayana Buddhist who would establish a Pure Land for the many.\(^{38}\)

Moreover, Tolson does not disagree with Eliot’s and Yeats’s dismal depiction of modern life in *The Waste Land* and "The Second Coming," respectively. In *The Waste Land*, "the presence of sterile degeneration and of the necessity of regeneration and change is the general truth behind it and its central theme."\(^{39}\) Tolson has no problems with this imaging of the present, nor does he disagree entirely with Yeats’s vision of "the rough beast as a "monstrous Nietzschean spectre of apocalypse."\(^{40}\) What he disagrees with is Eliot’s and Yeats’s perception of the cause[s] of the failure of modern society as primarily a collapse of cultural traditions and spiritual degeneration. Tolson identifies the cause of modern societal failure as the corruption of those in power who have perpetuated traditional divisions of class, caste, and race. Only when these "idols of the tribe" are destroyed can history free itself. To return to the idea of re-vision discussed at the beginning of the chapter, Tolson revises Western interpretations of history to posit his own paradigm for history. To this end, *Libretto* is more than a celebration of the founding of the Liberian republic; it is Tolson’s "singing book." In the best Duboisian tradition, the poet attempts the metaphorical synthesis of East and West. He says it best in the third movement of "Do":

"..."
The Parliament of African Peoples pinnacles Novus Homo in the Ashmun International House, where, free and joyful again, all mankind unites, without heralds of earth and water . . . (lines 698-703)

In the political realm, Tolson was well aware of Liberia’s anomalous position as a democratically governed country on a continent which had traditionally been colonized and subjugated by dictators whose allegiance was to the country with the most military and economic power. In the metaphysical realm, he was also aware that the African concept of time, as opposed to that of the West, was two-dimensional, "anchored in the past and present." Thus, for a people who had no concept of future, Tolson compelled Africa to consider not only the past one hundred years but the next one hundred years. And for the Western world whose ethnocentricity blinded it to the potential power of the Third World, the poet compelled it to consider the possibility of its own eclipse.

Finally, despite its high modernist style, Libretto reveals Tolson to be a poet who ponders the fate of the many. As poet of the people, Tolson projects his will on the prospect of the future, just as surely as Eliot’s speaker in "What the Thunder Said" wills himself beyond the tumult and chaos of the city to a tentative place of peace where he fishes with his back to the horde.

For the reason of its own paradoxical nature, Libretto is all the more an experiment in the potential for reciprocity within the dialectical process. This fact is not surprising, when one understands that Tolson’s preoccupation with the idea of
synthesis has governed his aesthetic from the very beginning of his career. However, it is in his modernist texts that he demonstrates how a viable synthesis can be achieved on a political and an aesthetic level. Chapter Five explores Tolson's struggle in *Harlem Gallery* to synthesize Afro- and Euro-American aesthetic approaches to poetry even as he dramatizes the basis for this historical conflict. Using the double-consciousness dilemma as both the foundation and catalyst for his argument, Tolson returns to thematic concerns with the black artist's relation to the community and the black community's relation to the world. Moreover, the poet broadens his discussion of black artists to include the nature of art. So that in many ways *Harlem Gallery* brings Tolson full circle, but much like the diatonic movement of *Libretto*, the former poem reveals a more accomplished poet whose vision extends beyond the Marxist-oriented purview of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* and whose technical virtuosity comprehends and finally supercedes the early work.
Chapter Four
End Notes


8 Farnsworth, *Plain Talk*, p. 152.


A summarization of Liberia's historical relation to the United States is necessary to understand the numerous allusions Tolson makes within the poem. Flasch summarizes the history of Liberia in the following passage:
In 1818, the American Colonization Society, instituted by missionary groups and semiformally adopted by the legislatures of Maryland and Virginia, dispatched a ship and committee to negotiate for a colony site near Sierra Leone. The next year President James Monroe officially approved the purchase from natives of Sherbro Island a promontory which was to be the Liberian coast. Congress appropriated federal funds to "colonize and build huts for recaptured slaves and to provide the latter with farming utensils, teachers, arms, and ammunition." On February 6, 1820, the "Elizabeth" sailed from Philadelphia with eighty-six freed slaves aboard. At Sherbro Island, the group learned that the tribesmen would not sell the island site. After a siege of illness on shipboard which claimed thirty-one lives, the survivors were put ashore at the British settlement near Freetown in Sierra Leone.

The next year the society purchased a strip of land one hundred and thirty miles long and forty miles deep to be used for the settlement of American freed slaves. The little colony survived trials by hunger, fever, and native attacks. In 1822, a young clergyman, Jehudi Ashmun, and his wife sailed on the brig "Strong" with thirty-seven freed Afro-Americans for the newly founded commonwealth. When they arrived a few months later, they found that over one-third of the original settlers had died and that the others were ill. Native tribes were planning an attack on the survivors. Ashmun's wife died shortly after their arrival; though grief-stricken, he nevertheless directed the men in fortifying the settlement; and, when nine hundred tribesmen overran the camp in November, they were turned back repeatedly by the United States Navy cannon manned by Ashmun. After three weeks, the natives retired, leaving the ailing colonists to clear land, build fences, and plant crops. Ashmun remained in Liberia until 1828, when he returned to the United States and died a few days later at the age of thirty-five. Somehow, the commonwealth survived jungle disease, hunger, and attacks of hostile natives. On July 26, 1847, it established a constitutional government similar to that of the United States and became the Republic of Liberia.

England and France continued to make claims on Liberian lands, and between 1847 and 1910 Liberia lost 44 percent of her land. At this time, the United States recognized its moral commitment to the lone African republic and offered assistance in such areas as education, finance, military training, agronomy, and medicine. Since then Liberia has proved her worth to the United States and to the world. In 1918, she joined the Allies, and she was providing at least 97 percent of the rubber in use by the end of World War I and had established essential airfields and harbors for the Allies.


Woodson makes a substantial case for the protagonist and reader as "initiates." According to Woodson, it is the job of the protagonist (and by implication reader) to interpret the hidden meaning of the poem, whose impenetrability is in some ways analogous to the Secret Doctrine of pre-Christian texts such as the Kabala. Thus, according to Woodson:

The identity of the protagonist of the *Libretto* and its consequent unknowns concerning the poem's plan, thesis and ultimate meaning are soon eradicated once it is known that *the Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* is based on the Tarot in much the same way that *The Waste Land* found its inception in . . . Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend . . . Perhaps taking Eliot at his word, "I am not familiar with the exact constitution of the Tarot pack of cards," Tolson learned the proper constitution of not only the Tarot pack but of the esoteric symbology that stands behind the cards. This esoteric symbology, in the lore of hermeticists and occultists, protects, as well as expresses, a Secret Doctrine. However, partly by means of the impenetrability of the Tarot cards themselves and partly through some of the Secret Doctrine having remained confined to a secret oral tradition, this Secret Doctrine is "excogitated in the consciousness of an elect minority . . . perpetuated in secrecy from one to another and has been recorded in secret literature, like those of Alchemy and Kabalism . . . for those who can interpret its real meaning."

13 Edward F.J. Tucker, Notes, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, 10 May 1976.


18 Wilburn Williams, "Desolate Servitude," p. 150.


21 Babcock, ed., Webster's, p. 1406.

22 Tolson, "Notes," p. 67. In the note to line 367, Tolson curiously defines "pesiq" as follows:

Pesiq: "divided." V. Fuchs, Pesiq ein Glossenzeichen. It seems to me that this linguistic symbol gives us a concrete example of the teleological-perhaps the only one. By an accident of a priori probability, the sign in itself indicates both cause and effect, and the index of the relationship is served synchronously by either "paseq" or "pasiq." Of course the protagonist of the poem uses them for his own purpose on another level.


35 Wilburn Williams, *Desolate Servitude*, p. 186.
36 Woodson, Critical Analysis, p. 186.


40 Otto Bohlmann, Yeats and Nietzsche, p. 178.

CHAPTER FIVE

"... for, against, about/ This and That"

In many respects, *Harlem Gallery* brings the Tolson canon full-circle. The poet returns to Harlem, the setting of his first unpublished manuscript, *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, and, as Mariann Russell makes clear in *Harlem Gallery: A Literary Analysis*, he not only develops some of the same themes, but he also borrows some of the same characters and lines from the first work. Of course, Tolson was aware of the obvious affinities of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and early seventies; he published *Harlem Gallery* in the midst of the latter movement. Amiri Baraka comments in *Daggers and Javelins* on the similarities between the two literary movements:

The Black Arts Movement had an impact similar to the Harlem Renaissance: it influenced a whole generation of artists around the world. . . . . The emphasis was on a people-shaped, high-oral, intensely direct statement, in whatever medium. The BAM said the function of art is to reach and educate and move and unify and organize people, not to mystify them or offer dazzling support of the status quo. The mainstream of the Black Arts Movement was rooted in the revolutionary tradition of the Afro-American people. It spoke to the Afro-American people because it was consciously aimed at them.²

If on the one hand, *Harlem Gallery* explores, through dramatization, the intangible boundaries of "bicultural ambivalence" or "double consciousness;"³ on the other hand,
it reacts to writer-activists -- from Langston Hughes to Amiri Baraka -- "who wished to dictate, not only the content and tone of black art, but also the audience which would legitimately respond to it." For Tolson, the black literati are much like the Gallery Regents who plague the Curator and huddle in the cul-de-sac of opinion and argue over "what shade of black/ the villain Ultra should wear" (p. 36).

Certainly, with regard to Tolson's aesthetic development, the second book on Harlem is a better book, more richly textured, and more attuned to multiple layers of experience. Comparatively speaking, the second book returns to Harlem, but like Yeats's spiral and Tolson's diatonic scale, to higher ground. The aesthetics which ground the first unpublished manuscript are those of a poet who has not yet found his own voice among the many puissant voices of the Harlem Renaissance writers, and so borrows the structural frame of Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* and the blues-oriented rhythms of Langston Hughes and Vachel Lindsay. However, the voice of *Harlem Gallery* is that of a seasoned poet who has found his niche in the aesthetic weltanschauung of literature, and adroitly maneuvers between the antipodal strains of this literary environment to the extent that he at once articulates, comments upon, and finally dramatizes them. In *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, Tolson's careful alternation of the discursive stanzas of a poem like "Carrie Green" with stanzas which resonate with the rhythms and tones of spirituals and blues foreshadowed his life-long ambivalence toward aesthetic categorization. *Harlem Gallery* intentionally dramatizes this very same ambivalence in a meandering series of debates which ebb and flow between the Curator, Doctor Nkomo, Hideho Heights and the other
denizens of the Zulu Club. Harlem Gallery is just as surely a poetic debate as Tolson himself was the product of both black Baptist Protestantism and Euro-American educational training.

Harlem Gallery recasts Tolson's leitmotifs, his life-long preoccupation with race and class; the artist's role in and relation to the community; and the nature of art. However, it presents these themes as debates and plays them out against the setting of the Zulu Club and the Gallery, two fitting symbols of black cultural life, especially in light of their obvious anthithetical qualities. What makes this last book so compelling are its arguments, its narrative techniques, and its deliberate synthesis of Afro-American and Euro-American idioms. Moreover, the black artist's cultural duality serves as catalyst for all debates, whether the ostensible topic is the nature of art, the role of the black artist, or the fate of black people. Tolson does not attempt to resolve the conflicts; rather the poem itself is an enactment of the very argument for aesthetic synthesis which occupies much of the discussion in the poem. Michael Bérubé supports this view of the poem when he allows that "the struggle is waged between Curator's conception of the artist as lone-voice-in-the-wilderness . . . and Hideho Heights's claims for the artist as vox populi." Bérubé further contends that "in terms of poetic practice, the struggle takes place between the Curator's hyperallusive interior monologues and Hideho's accesible, declamatory, narrative ballads to Louis Armstrong and John Henry . . . a struggle between competing conceptions of poetry as either written or oral discourse." Lastly, in psycho-historical terms, the Curator struggles with himself and Nkomo, his alter ego, over ability of
black people to achieve self-realization to the extent that the "good ship 'Defineznegro' [sinks] the rock/ and disappears into the abyss/ (Vanitas vanitatum!)/ of white Charybdis" and black people go on about the business of living. The Curator's separatist tendencies and his fatalism are always countered by Doctor Nkomo's positive vision of a society invigorated by cultural pluralism.

This chapter will examine the central debates of Harlem Gallery in selective cantos of the poem to determine their relation to the whole of the Tolson canon and to discover how the poet ultimately resolves the aesthetic questions which have shaped and determined all his previous works. Tolson's final solution -- synthesis of Afro- and Euro-American modernist aesthetic approaches -- is the logical resolution of his own aesthetic dilemma and his most successful "deformation of mastery," because the work "sounds" the social, psychological, and aesthetic implications of the "blackness of blackness." Instead of arguing directly for aesthetic synthesis, the poet reveals his position through dramatization. As Craig Werner points out in "Blues for Langston Hughes and T.S. Eliot":

... ultimately Tolson demonstrates the potential power of an aesthetic synthesis by creating Harlem Gallery itself, a complex Afro-Modernist blues which signifies, sometimes with irony sometimes with sympathy, on the words of George Herbert and T.S. Eliot as well as those of Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois.

Werner's summarization of Tolson's purpose in Harlem Gallery aptly makes use of the Janus analogy. He observes:
Throughout *Harlem Gallery*, Tolson's two faces as elusive and inseparable as those of Hideho Heights and the Curator, or Mister Starks and John Laugart, gaze towards a re-vision of aesthetic perspectives which have typically been seen as incompatible, confronting a cultural context which assumes and at times enforces the reality of racial (black-white) and aesthetic (popular-high culture) distinctions, Tolson seeks to reveal the false dichotomies as at best simplistic and at worst destructive.\textsuperscript{10}

Using all that he has learned in his years as poet, professor, and debate coach, Tolson employs a variety of methods to dramatize the various levels of debate, whether it is a ballad within a poem as in the case of Hideho Heights's 'Louis Armstrong' rendition; a flashback, as in the case of Black Orchid's jail-house confession; or vignettes within the poem, as in the case of Mister Starks 'Harlem Vignettes,' poetical portraits of several of the poem's major characters. To accommodate the poem's heterogenous elements, *Harlem Gallery* is divided into twenty-four odes which correspond to the letters in the Greek alphabet -- from "Alpha" to "Omega." *Harlem Gallery, Book I: The Curator* is the first part of a proposed five-part poem delineating the odyssey of the black man in America. Book II: "Egypt Land," was to be a delineation of slavery; Book III, "The Red Sea," an analogy of the Civil War; Book IV, "The Wilderness," was to deal with Reconstruction; and Book V, "The Promised Land," "a gallery of highbrows and middlebrows and lowbrows against the ethnological panorama of contemporary America."\textsuperscript{11}
Tolson was able to complete only the first book, but his first book is a creditable performance and a fitting finale for a poet who had wrestled with the black artist's identity dilemma for his entire career. Tolson's love of debate goes back to his tenure as debate coach, first at Wiley College, in Marshall, Texas, and then at Langston University, in Langston, Oklahoma. According to Mariann Russell's account of his debate teams at Wiley College:

His extraordinarily successful teams had a ten-year winning streak, defeating two national champions as well as debators from Oxford University... Good speakers already, they were honed to an intellectual and verbal proficiency by debating with their coach and colleagues. The energy, inventiveness, and tenacity so characteristic of Tolson were exhibited in the polish of these teams from a small black college in the East Texas Black Belt.12

The "energy" that Russell speaks of is the evident fuel for the arguments of Harlem Gallery.

The initial cantos, "Alpha" through "Gamma," establish the identity of the major narrative voice, the Curator, and introduce the themes upon which the poem will turn. In addition, "Alpha" establishes the setting of the poet's milieu and introduces the Curator of the Gallery, who will ultimately assist the reader in maneuvering this labyrinthine poem:

The Harlem Gallery, an Afric pepper bird, awakes me at a people's dusk of dawn. The age altars its image, a dog's hind leg, and hazards the moment of truth in pawn. (p. 17)
The opening lines are characteristic of the poet who has always expressed his ideas in grand, if not idiosyncratic images. On one level, Tolson resumes the idea of cyclical time, the rise and fall of peoples and nations that he introduced in *Libretto*, only he brings his argument closer to home than the West Coast of Africa. In *Libretto*, Tolson predicted the rise of the Third World from the perspective of Liberia. *Harlem Gallery* studies up close the "brothers" of the Western Hemisphere who will be equally responsible with their African counterparts for the rise of black people from "chattel to Esquire" (p. 155). The Curator asserts that the "Harlem Gallery" "awakes [him] at a people's dusk of dawn," figuratively suggesting the darkness before the beginning of a new age, in the same vein as the "Futurafrique" of *Libretto*. In a book by the same title, W.E.B. Dubois defines "dusk of dawn" as "that subtle sense of coming day which one feels when mist and murk hang low." However, the future is not assured, as the next line reveals, for the present age "altars its image, a dog's hind leg,/ and hazards the moment of truth in pawn." Punning on "altar," the poet simultaneously suggests the vanity and the transitory nature of the present age. Moreover, the ambiguous reference to "a dog's hind leg" could doubly allude to the shape of Africa, the "mother land" of Afro-Americans or a question mark. If the "age hazards the moment of truth in pawn," the future is indeed questionable. *Harlem Gallery* is filled with such contradictions as the poet posits an idea on the one hand and suggests its opposite on the other hand, making use of such binary oppositions to set up the dialectical movement of the poem. Indeed, as Gordon Thompson has observed:
Not only is ambiguity and paradox encouraged, but the dubious nature of every image suggests that uncertainty is as much a force in this poem as the speaker's transformations.¹⁴

The Curator understands the difficulty of the task before him. As he prepares to plunge the reader into black Manhattan with its variegated cast, he comments:

As a Hambletonian gathers his legs for a leap,
I have mustered up from hands
now warm or cold: a full
rich Indies cargo;
but often I hear a dry husk-of-locust blues
descend the tone ladder of a laughing goose,
syncopating between
the faggot and the noose:
"Black Boy, O Black Boy,
is the port worth the cruise." (p. 17)

The speaker's easy elision from formal English, replete with arcane allusions and historical references, to informal English, streetwise idiom -- "Is the port worth the cruise" -- affirms the poet's own awareness of the inherent difficulties of determining and then articulating what he perceives as the specific problems as they pertain to the color line W.E.B. Dubois so named in *Souls of Black Folk*. For when all is said and done the poem will have maneuvered around, if not resolved, the "Scylla and Charybdis" dilemma that Tolson broached in "E. & O.E." -- the possibility of the unification of the self's disparate "I's," on both a psycho-historical and aesthetic level. Two other themes which stem from the first are that of the artist's relation to the community, and finally the nature of art itself. These issues ultimately mock or
prove the Curator's declaration in the final canto, "Omega," that "this allegro of the Harlem Gallery/ is not a chippy fire."

"Beta" is an important canto, because through the voice of the Curator, it presents the artist's view of himself and rejects academe, the generations of rebels -- rejects them as "lotus eaters" and aims to discover the deepest meanings and to probe the mysteries of life. Thus the Curator gives "Art" and the artist, "the ape of God," credit for coming closest to explaining life:

Who knows, without no,  
the archimedean pit and pith of a man?  
(Ask the Throttler at Giza!)  
But if one seeks the nth versimilar,  
go to Ars by the way of Pisgah:  
as the telescope of Galileo  
deserted the clod to read the engirdling idioms of stars  
to the ape of God,  
go!  (p. 19)

The oxymoronic "ape of God" is the artist who re-creates the world as he has come to understand it; he is at once a man of great arrogance and great humility.

As an "ex-professor of Art," the Curator figuratively scans past and present literary movements with the detachment and half-cynicism of one who has left the fray:

As a shoemaker  
translates a second-hand boot,  
each decade reshaped the dialects of the owl's hoot,  
the lamb's bleat,  
the wolf's cry,
the hyena's laugh.
   As serpents, sly,
   The Lost, The Bright, The Angry, The Beat
   (tongues that tanged bees in the head around the clock) (p. 22)

The Curator declares an intentional detachment from any particular "school" or movement and emphasizes art's essential mystery, as evidenced by the rise and fall of the various movements which lay claim to it. Moreover, his imperative, "Guy the ologists in effigy" (p. 19), summarizes his sentiments on "the pretentiousness of abstract systems of thought and even more the rigidity of social institutions, such as political parties or churches, that [are] based on abstract systems that do not adapt to change." The Curator's "heart/ nor [his] head/ turns a wheel of prayer/ when certified Yeas and Nays are saids/ by pilgrim academics in the Babel of Art" (p. 22). With seeming modesty, the Curator contrasts himself to "The Lost, The Bright, The Angry, The Beat," and concludes:

   I was not gilded, like them,
   with the gift of tongues.
   Absent like shadow in Byzantine paintings
   the upper rungs
   of my ladder are zeros. (p. 22)

Deliberately signifying on Libretto's cosmic ladder, the poet designates his "upper rungs" as "zeros." In the hermetic context of Libretto, the poet alludes to the arcanum, "O," which is symbolized by "The Fool." Tolson's allusion gains in significance when one understands that this particular arcanum is part of the process by which one achieves incarnation; this zero or "shin" is part of "that redeeming
fulcrum of humanity, the guarantee of the Reintegration of the Primordial, Perfect, and Cosmic Man.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, the Curator’s studied objectivity places him beyond the "gilded" aspirations of the literati, because it seeks to transcend these petty and transitory concerns. Tolson, then, consciously invokes the symbol of reintegration to underscore his own concerns in the poem with synthesis.

In "Gamma," the subject is "Art," and Tolson lays the groundwork for the dramatized debates which take up the majority of the poem. Some of the best lines of this canto have an aphoristic sting; the poet is always searching for just the right analogy, as evidenced by the innumerable lists of metaphors and analogies in his notebooks. On the other hand, the poet’s assertions are characteristically phrased as simple declarations -- "Art is . . ." -- which carry the same fervent conviction as the opening lines of \textit{Libretto}. Thus, "Art" represents a plethora of voices, perspectives, and possibilities:

\begin{quote}
The mecca Art is a babel city in the people’s Shinar
with a hundred gates
and busybody roads
that stretch beyond all dates,
where sweating pilgrims flesched in hallelujahs
jostle like cars in a bumping race;

... Art is a harbor of colors
(with a hundred mosaic sails)
like Joseph’s coat. (p. 24)
\end{quote}

Tolson makes clear, in the voice of the Curator, that "art" is "an organic outgrowth of specific social and psychological circumstances."\textsuperscript{17} "Just as the face/ of no man
escapes the common gable roof/ of this time, nor the lights and shadows in the
design of that place" (p. 132).

While "Gamma" focuses on Art, "Delta" and "Theta" focus on the artist and
the critics with whom he must contend. In "Delta," the Curator speaks to the critics:

Ye weeping monkeys of the Critic's Circus
(colorless as malic acid in a Black Hamburg grape),
what profit it to argue at the wake
(a hurrah’s nest of food and wine
with Auld Lang Syne
to cheer the dead),
if the artist wrought
(contrary to what black sanders said)
for Ars,
the Cathedra’s, or the Agora's sake? (p. 26)

For Tolson, the artist owes no allegiance to any group or institution and least of all
the critics. In this regard, the Curator makes the point which he and Doctor Nkomo
will make throughout the poem: art is irreducible. Its power lies in its resistance to
integration, its resistance to externally imposed rules or allegiances. To quote the
Curator:

Art
is not barrel copper easily separated
from the matrix;
 it is not fresh tissues
- for microscopic study -
one may fix:
unique as the white tiger's
pink paws and blue eyes,
Art
leaves her lover as a Komitas
deciphering intricate Armenian neums,
with a wild surmise (p. 29)
In justifying art's complexity, the poet justifies his own predilection for esoterica and the allusive image and the technical pageantry of Euro-American modernism. Like Keats's "On First Reading Chapman's Homer," the reader's reward for his diligence will be the thrill of the "wild surmise."

"Zeta" introduces the first of three major artist figures while establishing the artist's aesthetic position in relation to the community. The Curator relates his visit to the bleak "flat" of "John Laugart," the "half-blind painter" who lives in a filthy "catacomb Harlem flat." There is some irony in Laugart's blindness, because his painting, "Black Bourgeoisie," bares the soul of a people who have economically risen to the level of "esquire," but who have spiritually descended to the level of "Babbitts." On the other hand, Laugart's blindness figuratively reinforces his partially self-imposed exile from the Afro-American tradition. The Curator likens the modernist Laugart to such revolutionary artists as Daumier, Gropper, and Picasso, because of Laugart's courage in depicting the truth of his people. Though Laugart lives (and eventually dies) in isolation and drinks "bootleg liquor," which "eclipses his will," he is alive beyond the "bulls of brass," as the Curator refers to the bourgeoisie, especially the "Regents" of the Gallery. Tolson offers Laugart as the first of several models for the black artist. Laugart, like his prototype, Vergil Ragsdale, in Harlem Portraits, has refused to compromise his principles and has died unheralded by the very people whose lives his art interprets.

... out of Black Bourgeoisie came -
for John Laugart
a bottle of Schiedam gin
and Charon's grin
and infamy
the Siamese twin
of fame (p. 37)

Without preaching, Tolson implies here that Laugart's stance is heroic but lonely and ultimately psychologically debilitating. Not only does Laugart ultimately isolate himself from the community but from his peers, as well.

"Eta" introduces Doctor Obi Nkomo, "Bantu Africanist," "alter-ego of the Harlem Gallery." If the Curator's parentage is a heterogenous mixture of "Afoirishjewish" blood, Nkomo is pure African. If the Curator is somewhat aloof, as evidenced by his meditations in the opening cantos, Nkomo is friendly to everyone but kowtows to no one. Doctor Nkomo is no "Ulfilas," a character the Curator identifies with in "Zeta." Nkomo does not feel the need to compromise. However, like the Curator, he does believe in the sanctity of art and the integrity of the artist. Nkomo is a "black outsider with all his eggs but one/ in the White Man's basket."

Tolson puts in the mouth of Nkomo one of the poet's own Gurdjeffian-influenced concepts -- tridimensionality. Nkomo cites man's "biosocial identity" as proof that "no man,/ judged by his biosocial identity/ in toto/ can be,/ a Kiefekil or a Tartufe,/ an Iscariot or an Iago" (p. 40).

The implicit debate between the Curator and Doctor Obi Nkomo is perhaps the most subtle of all debates in the poem, because the two men are two sides of the same coin. Their relationship is aptly illustrated in "Iota"; as they await the arrival of the "black bourgeoisie," the "Cadillac Philistines," they stand "counterpoise beside
[the] ebony doors of the Harlem Gallery" (p. 51). According to Mister Starks, to understand "the differences between the Curator and Doctor Nkomo" is to "know the ebb and flow of tides of color" (p. 109). Where the Curator is reticent and even doubtful of the future of black people, Dr. Nkomo is philosophical. In "Eta," Nkomo warns his colleague: "You must see through the millstone,/ since you’re not like Julio Sigafoos and me - / an ex-savage" (p. 40). The reader's first glimpse of Nkomo, is in "Aunt Grindle's Chitterling Shop," "across an alp of chitterlings, pungent as epigrams," (p. 38).

Because nobody was a nobody to him,
when from his thin charcoal lips
irony escaped, it was malice toward none.
The therapy of his slips
by design into primitive objets d'art
humanized the patrons of the Harlem Gallery
as much as the masterworks
he salvaged from the Lethe
of the American Way in Black Manhattan. (p. 39)

Nkomo has confronted and overcome the obstacles of identity which plague the Curator. Commenting upon his life Nkomo says:

The golden mean
of the dark wayfarer's way between
black Scylla and white Charybdis, I
have traveled; subdued ifs in the way;
from vile-canaille balconies and niggerheavens, seen
day beasts and night beasts of prey
in the disemboweling pits of
Europe and America,
in the death-worming bowels of
Asia and Africa;
and, although a Dumb ox (like young Aquinas), I
have not forgot
the rainbows and the olive leaves against the
orient sky. (p. 47)

Nkomo is essentially an optimist, if not an idealist. Both the Curator and Dr. Nkomo believe in the artist's freedom to "make what he can" (p. 83), but the Curator's doomsday outlook often clouds his vision. Therefore, although it is the Curator who discovers John Laugart's "Black Bourgeoisie" masterpiece and brings it to the Gallery, it is Dr. Nkomo who soothes his anxious colleague about the painting's disturbing effect on the bourgeois regents who have come to view it. Nkomo explains to the Curator, who believes the Laugart painting has failed in its first exhibition, has "[run] aground/on the bars of the Harlem Blues," that Laugart's work, like all great works, will appeal to the audiences of future generations. Thus, Nkomo says of Laugart's work:

This work of art is the dry compound
fruit of the sand-box tree,
which bursts with a loud report,
but scatters its seed quietly. (p. 59)

On their views of art, the Curator and Dr. Nkomo differ mostly in degree, not perspective. It is the same with their differences in opinion on the matter of racial identity. In "Upsilon," which is narrated by Mister Starks, the composer, the argument revolves around the issue of the physical and psychological effects of racial dilution. "While the Curator sipped his cream/ and Doctor Nkomo swigged his homogenized milk,/ I tried to gin the secret of/ the mutuality of minds/ that moved
independently of each other - / like the eyeballs of a chameleon" (p. 110). In the heat of argument, Doctor Nkomo calls the Curator a "brainwashed, whitewashed son of bastard Afroamerica." The Curator's reply epitomizes his problematic aesthetic position. He says:

I remain a lactoscopist
fascinated by
the opacity of cream
the dusk of human nature,
'the light-between of the modernistic.' (p. 110)

Nkomo's disappointment in the Curator's lack of "stoic faith" is evident in his response:

... is not a hollow man who dares not paddle
the homogenized milk of multicultural,
in dead ends and on boulevards,
in green pastures and across valleys of dry bones. (p. 113)

"Doctor Nkomo, who freely drinks homogenized milk believes in the Stoic doctrine of universal brotherhood, without distinctions between Black man and White, free man and oppressed."  

In the informal atmosphere of the Zulu Club Nkomo presses the point to the Curator that it is "useless to grind in the dust and ashes" of cynicism and ethnocentrism. Says Nkomo, "God damns that tit for tat!" (p. 122) What Nkomo damns is the Curator's rejection of his mixed heritage and the ensuing splinterization of his identity, an issue Tolson articulated in "E. & O.E."
If the Curator's differences with Doctor Nkomo are subtle, his differences with Hideho Heights, "bard of Lenox Avenue," are more pronounced. Evidence of his position are the Curator's inner monologues as revealed in the initial cantos, "Alpha" through Zeta," which are spoken in the modernist idiom and reveal an Euro-American modernist turn of mind. On the other hand, Hideho Heights is the epitome of the Afro-American bard who upholds the oral tradition and glorifies black vernacular speech and rhythms in his own rhymes. Michael Bérubé likens the aesthetic dichotomy between the Curator and Hideho to the difference between "a model of poetry as gossip" in the case of Hideho and the Curator's model of poetry as "Scripture." The poem takes on a different tone when the characters move to the Zulu Club, in which many of the issues broached in the opening cantos are often loudly debated among the characters.

Indeed, the Curator/Hideho Heights debate is at the heart of the poem, with the other characters often implicitly or explicitly taking sides, according to their responses. Hideho Heights enters the poem in "Lambda" singing the praises of Louis Armstrong. His informal manner and hipster speech are reminiscent of Langston Hughes, after whom the character is patterned. Moreover, "Hideho" is part of a "hip" rhythmic exclamation often used by 1930's bandleader, Cab Calloway. After apologizing for his late arrival at the Gallery opening ("Sorry, Curator, I got here late:/ my black ma birthed me in the Whites' bottom drawer,/ and the Reds forgot to fish me out!") (p. 61), Heights baldly states his aesthetic sentiments: "'In the beginning was the Word,'" he challenges, 'not the brush!'" (p. 61) Heights's
declaration highlights the traditional differences which have marked Afro-American and Euro-American poetics. Craig Werner articulates this aesthetic dichotomy in "Blues for T.S. Eliot and Langston Hughes":

Just as he grants the Black Boy and White Boy of "Psi" and "Omega" distinct social identities while revealing the profound similarity of their psychological situations, so Tolson acknowledges the existence of a community-oriented oral aesthetic developed primarily by Afro-American artists and an individually oriented visual aesthetic developed primarily by Euro-American modernists in the midst of the poem which implicitly argues their interdependence.\(^{21}\)

Werner goes on to identify the specific elements which mark the contrast between Afro-American and Euro-American aesthetics.

Although rarely discussed openly, the perceived dichotomy between oral and visual aesthetics constitutes a basic element of the sometimes ascerbic arguments over the relative merits of Afro- and Euro-American poetry. . . . Even Harvey Gross in *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, a sensitive study of the music of Euro-American modernist poetry, observes that imagism developed an aesthetic in which "the poem's appearance on the page constitutes its chief prosodic feature." Highlighting the radical differences in Afro-American discourse, Stephen Henderson directly contradicts these visually oriented premises when he contends that, in analyzing Afro-American poetry, "the central problem is the printed page." Most analysts of Afro-American expression, including Amiri Baraka, Eugene Redmond, Sherley Williams and Houston Baker, would clearly agree with Henderson's assertion that black poetry "derives its form from two basic sources, Black speech and Black music." However undesirable or unnecessary, the divergence of Euro- and Afro-American aesthetic assumptions seems an unquestionable fact of modern literary politics.\(^{22}\)
Hideho's entrance into the poem is freighted with symbolism. First, there is the oral imagery — "From the mouth of the Harlem Gallery/ came a voice like a/ ferry horn in a river of fog" (p. 61). Also significant is the fact that Hideho's entrance coincides with a shift in the setting, from the Harlem Gallery to the Zulu Club. The contrasting qualities of the Gallery and the Zulu Club figuratively parallel the differences between Euro-American and Afro-American aesthetics. The Gallery suggests formality, reverential tones, and studied poses; on the other hand, the Zulu Club suggests informality, community, and the raucous give and take of a speakeasy. Where the Curator and Nkomo "stand poised" at the doors of the Gallery, they "slouch at a sepulchral table at the Zulu Club." Bérubé also suggests that the "Zulu Club scene ... marks the transition in Harlem Gallery from a written model of poetry to an oral model. Simultaneously, the poem moves ... out of a vacuum and out before an "audience."²³

However, Hideho's importance lies not only in the fact that he provides the opposing view to that of the Curator's, but also because he is the second model, after John Laugart, for the black artist. In "Mu," the smoky ambience of the Zulu Club compels the Curator to catalogue the essential people, places, and events of the twenties; at the center of this catalogue is Hideho Heights:

the Promethean bard of Lenox Avenue became a lost loose-leaf as memory vignette
t Rabelasian I's of the Boogie Woogie dynasty in barrel houses, at rent parties on riverboats, at wakes:
When Hideho says, "Listen Black Boy,/ Did the High Priestess of 27 rue de Fleurus assert, 'The Negro suffers from nothingness?'" (p. 67), the images of Harlem's heyday refute Gertrude Stein's facile assessment of the black man's psycho-historical dilemma. The "yanking fishing rod of Hideho's voice" is an antidote to the Curator's "bird's foot violet romanticism," as Hideho calls it.

He mixed Shakespeare's image with his own and caricatured me:
Yonder Curator has a lean and hungry look; he thinks too much.
Such blackamoors are dangerous to the Great White World! (p. 68)

And yet for all his good-natured chiding, Hideho, "the poet laureate of Lenox avenue," is not as secure in his identity as he might appear. As the Curator knows, there are two Hidehos. There is the public persona who improvises a recitation of "The Birth of John Henry" and enjoins his audience to participate in this Afro-American ritual of call and response; "each gears itself to please." Hideho's poem stirs "the creative impulse" of the Zulu Club as it flows from Hideho to the piano player, "Frog Legs' fingers,/ like the electric fire from the clouds/ that blued the gap between/ Franklin's key and his Leyden jar" (p. 74). On the other hand, there is the private Hideho Heights, the one who harbors a covert ambition to be included in the "anthologies" of the Euro-American literary establishment. The poet's inner conflict
is revealed when the Curator discovers Hideho's private manuscript. In "Chi," the Curator intimates his knowledge of the "split identity/ of the people's poet -/ the bifacial nature of his poetry/ the racial ballad in the public domain/ and the private poem in the modern vein" (p. 130). The Curator takes an inebriated Hideho home and discovers the latter's modernist manuscript. "As he lay on the sofa,/ ashy-black like a stiff on a slab/ in a Harlem morgue,/ I chanced to see,/ in the modern idiom,/ a poem called "E. & O.E." (p. 131). The Curator's discovery of Hideho's "Private poem in the modern vein" confirms what he already suspected:

For the Skeptic,
on Lenox Avenue,
for the goof/ on Peach-tree Street
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 confirm (p. 1)

Tolson uses excerpts from "E. & O.E." which best articulate Hideho's "existential (to be or not to be) and racial (to be or not to be a Negro) dilemmas." However, the final stanza of this poem within a poem "articulates Hideho's decision not to articulate his modernist sense of alienation and despair: "I do not shake/ the Wailing Wall/ of Earth--/ nor quake/ the Gethsemane/ of Sea--/ nor tear/ the Big Top/ of Sky/ with Lear's prayer/ or Barabas' curse, or job's cry." "Ironically signifying on the words and heroes of the masters he seeks to join in the anthologies of world literature, Hideho determines both to go on living and to go on living and speaking in his black
The Curator's concluding observation on Hideho's "bifacial nature" is an echo of Tolson's own opinion of the obstacles black artists face:

Poor Boy Blue,
the Great White World
and the Black Bourgeoisie,
have shoved the Negro Artist into
the white and not-white dichotomy,
the Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts,
the dialectic of
to be or not to be
a Negro (p. 131)

Werner's comments on Hideho's dilemma confirm Tolson's apprehension of Hideho's character.

. . . Hideho fears an irresolvable conflict. To achieve immortality, he must write in the forms acceptable to the Euro-American critical establishment. Even though he finds aspects of these forms congenial, he realizes that to accept them is to at least partially repudiate his connection with and commitment to the Afro-American community. As the only audience for Hideho's performance in each mode, the Curator recognizes the tragic dimension of the dilemma. Although Hideho's talent transcends the terms of the perceived dichotomies, he lives in a context where "the Color line as well as the party line, splits an artist's identity."26

Unlike John Laugart, who clearly chose American modernism and in so doing, isolated himself from the black community, Hideho participates in a figurative schizophrenia; he "wears the mask," to quote Paul Dunbar. In positing these two figures, Tolson implicitly argues against them both as possible choices, because, as Tolson's presentation proves, the price is too high. There is some irony in the fact
that Tolson ascribes to Hideho excerpts from his own earlier work, "E. & O.E." In one sense, Tolson is signifying upon himself. However, on another level, his decision to include "E. & O.E." measures the aesthetic terrain he has already covered, to the extent that he can use his own poetry to dramatize the whole issue of aesthetic allegiance, a hotly debated issue, during the Harlem Renaissance and again in the sixties. Tolson's answer is implicit in his own demonstration of the compatibility of ostensibly opposing idioms; by "juxtaposing a variety of performance styles, Tolson subverts the authority of any single approach."27

The Curator's ambivalence towards Hideho derives from his knowledge of the latter's private misgivings about his public stance, but perhaps more important, the Curator's ambivalence is reinforced by his own inability to wholly commit himself to the Euro-American modernist stance with which his inner monologues so readily identify him. Like Doctor Nkomo, the Curator also has "all his eggs but one in the white man's basket." "Xi" is a good example of the Curator's divided loyalties. In it, the Curator observes Hideho as he prepares to embark on an impromptu rendition of "John Henry" for the pleasure of the Zulu Club regulars. Commenting on Hideho's obvious rapport with the audience, the Curator calls the poet "a charcoal Piute/ at a ghetto ghost dance" (p. 71), then follows this observation with the question: "Does a Yeats or a beast or a Wovoka/ see and hear/ when our own faculties fail?" The aforementioned question is deliberately ambiguous and invites varying interpretations. Michael Bérubé views the passage as a confirmation of
Tolson's ultimate belief in the preeminence of Euro-American modernist poetry.

Bérubé asserts:

The implied answer to the Curator's rhetorical question, then, is that the poetry of Yeats is the poetry of a seer, whereas the poetry of the false prophet, Wovoka Heights, will prove no less than the self-destruction of black America.28

Bérubé's interpretation, though undoubtedly ingenious, does not take into account Tolson's differences with Yeats's prophetic powers and completely neglects the second item of the three items in the aforementioned series -- "beast."29 Of course, "beast" could allude to Yeats's "beast" which "slouches toward Bethlehem to be born," or to Shakespeare's Caliban, who was acquainted with the "caves, bogs, and dens," which, like "the Spirituals and the Blues, the Negro's manna in the Great White World," was a language or way of seeing unknown to white poetry. Viewed from this perspective, the Curator's question -- "Does a Yeats or a beast or a Wovoka..." reinforces the sense of his deep ambivalence about the powers of Euro-or Afro-American modernist poetry to have an impact on the world.

And yet, Tolson cannot help but admire the spirit of determination that has driven Hideho as it has driven most black people to survive, despite the tremendous creative obstacles that he must face. It is for this reason that Tolson gives to Hideho one of the more provocative interpretations of the black predicament, in the form of a beast fable. Hideho takes up an argument originally broached by Shadrack Martial Kilroy, "president of Afroamerican Freedom," in "XI." But unlike the pessimistic
Kilroy, Hideho does not conceive of black people as victims but as survivors. As the Zulu Club Wits "slouch at a sepulchered table in the Zulu Club," Kilroy offers a figurative rendering of race relations. He says accordingly, "The White Man is the serpent/ in Dolph Peeler's 'Ode to the South'" (p. 80). Lionel Matheus, another Zulu Club Wit, "[continues] the symbolism" with the following offering:

    your Afroamerican is the frog I saw
    in a newspaper illustration:
    the harder the frog tugged outward,
    the deeper it became impaled
    on the inward-pointing fangs of the snake. (p. 80)

Doctor Nkomo temporarily settles this symbolic hypothesizing by placing the argument in perspective rather in the same spirit as the speaker in Portraits who said, "Big fish swallow little fish and the color of the fish don't count." Nkomo's comments are more prosaic: "The little python would not let go/ the ass of the frog -- so the big python swallowed both" (p. 80). However, Kilroy resumes the race discussion in "Phi," again referring to the fictional Dolph Peeler's Ode to the South and equating "his symbol of the pig in the boa's coils," with the black man's relation to the white man. When the Curator readily agrees with Kilroy's views, Hideho condemns his position as "defeatist" and offers instead the metaphor of the "sea-turtle and the shark." When the shark swallows the sea-turtle, the latter:

    with ravenous jaws
    that can cut sheet scrap,
    the sea-turtle gnaws
    . . . and gnaws . . . and gnaws . . .
    his way in a way that appalls -
Even the Curator must allow that Hideho is right, that "his helm [is] in line with/ his keel/ as an artist's helm should be." Moreover, Hideho as well as Doctor Nkomo rejects the Curator's and Kilroy's pessimistic view of black people as victims incapable of controlling their own destiny.

"Sigma" through "Upsilon" focus on the third major artist figure in the poem, Mister Starks. "Sigma" introduces Starks as the "highbrow composer," "piano-modernist of the Harlem Renaissance," who, we learn from his wife, has committed suicide. In the complicated genealogy of the Harlem Gallery characters Starks was the composer husband of Hedda Starks ("Black Orchid"), a one-time kept woman and later illicit lover of Guy Delaporte, staunch member of the black bourgeoisie and one of the regents of the Gallery. Hedda, always something of a social climber, married Mister Starks and then resumed her affair with Delaporte. Hedda calls the Curator to tell him of Starks's "Harlem Vignettes" manuscript after she has been arrested on a marijuana charge. "Sigma" opens with a reference to Starks's will in which he states that Hedda is to turn over his "Vignettes" manuscript to the Curator. Significantly, "Harlem Vignettes" is a kind of composite Gallery of Harlem Portraits, a poem within a poem. Moreover, like Tolson, Mister Stark had published a volume of "imagistic verse" in his youth.
Tolson offers Mister Starks as the third and final model for the black artist; and Starks's characterization, like that of Laugart's and Hideho Heights's, is representative of the aesthetic choices or pitfalls that confront the black artist. For Starks is, like the preceding artists, ambivalent "toward the aesthetic dichotomies which condition his expression in both music and poetry."³⁰ "My talent was an Uptown whore; my wit a Downtown pimp" (p. 102). Although Starks's "boogie-woogie record, 'Pot Belly Papa,'/ by Alpha and Omega, Inc. sold a million discs," he considers his true masterpiece to be his "Black Orchid Suite," the musical composition eventually performed by the "Harlem Symphony Orchestra" and the one that "will forever stir [his] dust and bones/ like the strains of 'Ecco la marchia/ in the veins of a Mozartian" (p. 102). 'Vignettes' records Starks's insights on the major characters in Harlem Gallery, while it also reveals his own deepening sense of isolation and the reason for his eventual suicide. For Starks the reality is that:

Like all 100-p.c. Negroes,
I knew a white skin was the open
sesame to SUCCESS -
the touchstone of
Freedom, Justice, Equality.
Hadn't a white poet said when they cut off his lege,
'I am the master of my fate . . .?' (p. 115)

The following passage comprises Starks's overview of his fellow Zulu Club habitues: Hideho Heights was a "crab louse in the pubic region of [middle] Afroamerica"; Doctor Nkomo's "psyche was a half-breed,/ a bastard of Barbarus and Cultura"; the Curator was a "strange bird" in Harlem Gallery's "variegated aviary," a "radical and
a malcontent," but not unduly so; and John Laugart was "reviled but pot-valiant," though "his road was a hogback unfit for even/ a half-blind black son of Hagar." Starks ends his 'Vignettes' with his own brief apologia, the impulse that said to him, "Put the notes on the staff, Black Boy!" Commenting on the origin of the title of one of his first compositions, "Rhapsody in Black and White," Starks credits Nkomo with comparing integration to the "notes of white and black keys blended in the majestic tempo di marcia of Man." However, Starks reinterpretation of Nkomo's analogy as "staves of mutilated notes on/ the music rack of the Great White World's concert grand" (p. 117) reflects his own inability to accept Nkomo's idealistic vision of the black man's "place" in America and in the world.

The Curator is moved by Mister Starks's 'Vignettes,' especially the latter's characterization of the Curator:

That night in the Zulu Club  
the man who had already willed to die  
had seen in me  
the failure of nerve  
Harlem would never see -  
the character in the African  
that made  
him the better man. (p. 119)

It is also significat that the Curator is impressed by the fact that Mister Starks's 'Vignettes' were written "without any help or references to classic sources";31 "they were contrived without book" (p. 119). Here, Tolson reveals in the Curator the ability to respect, if not accept the contrary opinions of another character. For not only does Starks's assessment of the Curator's character coincide with those of
Hideho Heights but also Doctor Nkomo, who has continually chided the Curator for his pessimism. Moreover, the Curator momentarily reflects on the dead poet's avoidance of obscure allusion or foreign phrase. Here, if only briefly, Tolson reveals in the Curator the willingness to consider an alternate perspective; in so doing, Tolson tentatively suggests the possibility of commerce between two aesthetic perspectives -- Euro- and Afro-American modernism. The Curator's reflection opens the way for his acceptance, in "Phi," of Hideho's poetic rendering of the "sea turtle and the shark" analogy. Although Hideho's interpretation of the black man's tenacious will to survive and his resistance to the role of victim contradicts the Curator's less idealistic view of his black "brethren," the latter hopes his own assessment is wrong.

Tolson's presentation of all three artist figures -- John Laugart, Hideho Heights, and Mister Starks -- finally suggests that they are to some extent compromised by their choices. The redeeming quality of the poet's presentation is its acknowledgement of "the power inherent in both performance modes"[Afro-American modernist and Euro-American modernist] as they are manifested in the work of the artists. By showing the positive and negative effects of the aesthetic choices each artist must make, Tolson argues for an approach which does not unduly "rob Peter to pay Paul," one which utilizes the best aspects of both modernist idioms.

"Psi" and "Omega," the concluding cantos of the poem, summarize the major issues of the poem. The voice of the concluding cantos conflates the views of the Curator and Nkomo, as some passages repeat previous phrases of one or the other.
The speaker addresses the first half of "Psi" to "Black Boy" and the second half to "White Boy." Tolson's interweaving of black vernacular speech and formal language demonstrate the possibilities of synthesizing the Afro- and Euro-American modernist idioms. To "Black Boy," the speaker says with characteristic Tolsonian wit:

> let me gather the crumbs and cracklings
of this autobio-fragment,
before the curtain with the skull and bones descends. (p. 136)

Of course, Tolson is signifying on T.S. Eliot's "fragments which I have shored against my ruins." And yet, the allusion to Eliot is not merely an ethnic interpretation of Eliot's line, but a tacit acknowledgement of the common fate of all men. However, the Curator's brief assessment of Black Boy's still marginal relation to American life smacks of Mister Starks's pessimism. Says the speaker:

> Black Boy,
you stand before your heritage,
naked and agape; cheated like a mockingbird
pecking at a Zuxian grape, pressed like an awl to do
duty as a screw
driver, you ask the American Dilemma in you:
"If the trying plane
of Demos fail,
what will the trowel
of Uncle Tom avail?" (p. 136)

"The trying plane of Demos" means literally a democratizing process. Demos is the people; a trying plane is a carpenter's tool used to smooth boards about to be
The question is, of course, rhetorical, for democracy cannot be achieved or maintained in a racial or cultural vacuum.

In the process of summarizing the arguments of the poem, "Psi" attacks age-old myths which have long divided race, caste, and class. Returning to the "pig in the boas coils" debate in "Phi," the speaker puts this debate to rest once and for all when he asserts:

In spite of the pig in the python's coils  
in spite of Blake's lamb in the jaws of the tiger,  
Nature is kind, even in the raw: (p. 139)

The speaker goes on to enumerate the utilitarian nature of certain black characteristics; nature "gives the African fleecy canopy/ to protect the seven faculties of the brain/ from the burning convex lens of the sun." The speaker's judgment on those who would worship the great dividers of race, caste, and class is that the "wingless worms of blowflies shall grub,/ dry and clean,/ the stinking skeletons of these. . ." (p. 140) The poet's passionate prophecy is an echo of similar lines in Rendezvous with America.

The second half of "Psi" turns its attention to "White Boy," reprising on an ethnic level a question with which the Curator flirted in the opening cantos -- "What is man?" -- (p. 19) only to give vintage Tolson in a paradoxical, pluralist-leaning answer which defies definition, because ultimately, "the Negro dish is a dish nobody knows" (p. 144).
Who is a Negro?
(I am a White in deah ole Norfolk.)
I am a Negro in little old New York.)
Since my mongrelization is invisible
and my Negroness a state of mind conjured up
by Stereotypus, I am a chameleon
on that side of the Mason-Dixon
that a white man's conscience
is not on

'My skin is as white
as a Roman's toga when he sought an office on the sly;
my hair is as blond
as xanthein,
my eyes are as blue
as the hawk's eye. (p. 143)

The preceding passages resonate with Doctor Nkomo's pluralist theories and
recall his earlier observation:

. . . As regards the Negro, you
are a people in whose veins
poly-breeds
and
plural strains
mingle and run-
an Albert Ryder of many schools,
and none

Using a metaphor that recalls a phrase from Libretto's -- "the Yangtze flows into the
Thames" -- the speaker repeats Tolson's thesis of the inextricability of geneological
and cultural strains in America: . . . you are the wick that absorbs the oil in my lamp,
in all kinds of weather; and we are teeth in the pitch wheel/ that work together" (p. 144).
"Omega" addresses both "White Boy" and "Black Boy" as it returns to the question of art's inviolability and concludes that "freedom is the oxygen/ of the studio and gallery" (p. 151). Here again, the poet courts life's dialectical ebb and flow, giving on the one hand and taking back on the other. As for art, the speaker makes the rhetorical query:

'At the crossroads, does painting take,'
   as Lhote said,
"the direction of the merchant?"
Should the artist stand on his head
   in the middle of Main Street,
to get the coppers of the vulgar?
Paint an ignis fatuus of nawiht,
to win thirty pieces of silver from the elite? (p. 149)

Tolson intentionally gives this question a rhetorical slant, because the poem has already implicitly asserted that the answer is negative. Compare the opening stanza of "Epsilon":

   Again
   by the waters of Babylon we sit down and weep,
   for the pomp and power
   of the bulls of Bashan
serve Belshazzarian tables to artists and poets who
   serve the hour,
torn between two masters,
   God and Caesar -
this (for Conscience)
the Chomolungma of disasters. (p. 31)

Tolson reiterates the idea that art and the artist should not compromise themselves for either the "elite" or the vulgar "vox populi."
The poet also returns to the issue of the plurality of art. Recalling the Babel metaphor of "Gamma, "The mecca Art is a Babel City in the people's Shinar" (p. 24), he rephrases this idea in "Omega":

Many mouths empty their waters
into the Godavari of ART -
a river that flows across the Decan traps of the age
with its lava-scarred plateaux (p. 149)

The aforementioned passage reaffirms Tolson's support of poetry which combines the best aspects of conflicting aesthetic approaches. Just as the speaker "gathers the crumbs and crackling of [his] auto-biofragment," so he gathers the antithetical qualities of the visually oriented Euro-American modernism and the orally focused Afro-American modernism.

The Curator even returns to the milk metaphor; however, he phrases the passage in such a way that the only answer is a resounding "no." Ultimately, the artist cannot compromise his art for rich or poor, black or white. The Curator loads his question by prefacing it with the following premise:

the meander of a curator leads him by
the house where Illiteracy beds
with Ignorance and all her brats.

Should he
skim the milk of culture for the elite
and give the "lesser breeds"
a popular latex brand?
Should he (to increase digestibility)
break up
the fat globules and vitamins and casein shreds?
Tonic spasms of wind and wave
assail compass and lamp in the cabined night;
but the binnacle of imagination
steers the work of art aright- (p. 150)
Tolson does not make a case for any one aesthetic approach over another. He suggests that his own poetry, though largely dependent on Euro-American techniques, is not a mere advertisement for Euro-American modernism but his own stylistic apprehension of truth and beauty. Like Doctor Nkomo, Tolson is "a St. John who envisions/ a brush turkey that makes/ a mound of the Old World's decaying vegetables/ to generate heat and hatch eggs of the New" (p. 106). Thus, the speaker challenges:

What if a Chef-d'oeuvre is esoteric?
The cavernous By Room, with its unassignable variety
of ego-dwarfing stalactites and stalagmites,
makes my veins and arteries vibrate faster
as I study its magnificence and intricacy.
Is it amiss or odd
if the apes of God
take a cue from the Master? (p. 151)

The aforementioned passage allows for the complexity of art but, more importantly, it argues for the artist's right to choose how he will interpret the world, whether he opts for Afro- or Euro-American modernist techniques to aid him in his description. Certainly, given the creative outpouring of black writers of the sixties, it could very well have been the case that Tolson felt a need to respond to poets and critics -- from Saunders Redding to Don L.Lee to Larry Neal to Amiri Baraka -- who, at the time of Tolson's writing, were attempting to determine the critical premises for the "black" poem.
As "Omega" draws to a close, the Curator allows that his reach could very well exceed his grasp, that his power to effect change is limited by the provincial minds who control the "golden purse strings" whether those are the minds of the community, the critics, or the Regents.

I confess without regret
in this omega of my education:
I no longer have the force of a gilbert,
nor have I ever had the levitation
to sustain a work of art (p. 152)

Nor does the Curator have a "peak of Ararat to defy" the "dusky Regents who . . .
can knot the golden purse strings,/ while closeted in the Great Amen" (p. 155). The Curator's ambivalence is mitigated only by his hope, and it is with this hope that he closes the final canto, rather with the same spirit that fuels the forward-looking voyage of Libretto's "Futurafrique."

In the black ghetto
the white heather
and the white almond grow,
but the hyacinth
and asphodel blow
in the white metropolis!
O Cleobulus,
O Thales, Solon, Priander, Bias, Chilo,
O Pittacus,
unriddle the phoenix riddle of this?

Our public may possess in Art
a Mantegna figure's arctic rigidity;
yet - I hazard - yet,
this allegro of the Harlem Gallery
is not a chippy fire,
for here, in focus, are paintings that chronicle
a people's New World odyssey
from chattel to Esquire! (p. 155)
The poet's allusion to the "hyacinths and asphodel [that] blow in the white metropolis" signifies on the passage in "The Burial of the Dead" section of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, where the speaker recalls an epiphanic experience:

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago:
They called me the hyacinth girl."

-Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.  

If, in the aforementioned passage Eliot employs the "remembered" image of the hyacinth in contrast to the "heap of broken images" of the present, Tolson uses the images of "the white heather and the white almond" to symbolize his hope for the future. The poet's appeal to the seven sages --"O Cleous,/ Othales, Solon, Priander,
Bias, Chilo/ O Pittacus" -- is ironic in light of the symbolic significance of the flowers he invokes in his figurative rendering of the white and black metropolis. According to Robert Huot:

In this passage, Tolson himself said, "I say that the flowers representing decay and death are found in the white metropolis, but the flowers representing hope grow in the black belt. I speak here of the masses of poor people. They are on the move. Most American writers are cynical. But even in the violence of Richard Wright there is something that lifts you. There is no despair. . . . In Biblical lore and mythology white heather and white almonds are always associated with spring, virtue, new life, and production. In contrast, the hyacinth and asphodel are symbolic of death and woe."
Tolson's allusions deliberately invoke the power of the proletariat and express hope for their future. For those who would chide Tolson in his later years for abandoning his strong socialist stand, these lines suggest that the poet has abandoned propaganda but not his concern for the class struggle. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Arnold Rampersad's biography of Langston Hughes makes reference to the penultimate stanza of *Harlem Gallery*. Rampersad recalls how Hughes "privately mocked" some "typically allusive lines" in Tolson's latest opus. In fact, Hughes was "befuddled" by the lines. Rampersad goes on to deride Tolson as "the learned circus-monkey in the Battle Royal of Afro-American literature, with his ridiculous Allen Tate connections." Had Hughes or Rampersad for that matter bothered to look up the symbolic significance of Tolson's apostrophe or the very flowers to which the poet alluded, they would have discovered that Tolson was not figuratively lying supine before Anglophilic wisdom but rather mocking the apparent symbolic paradox of "white heather and white almond" growing in the "black ghetto." In fact, Langston Hughes, the people's poet, would probably have been quite happily surprised to learn that Tolson's passage celebrates the black, the poor, and the downtrodden. Hughes's reaction to Tolson's poem at least partially explains why Tolson felt the need to write a poem such as *Harlem Gallery* in the first place. Hughes's own antipathy for Euro-American modernism, like Shadrach Martial Kilroy's antipathy for all things white, prejudiced his view of any poet who would willingly adopt Euro-American modernist techniques for any purpose. For Hughes as for Hideho Heights, "In the beginning and [the end] was the Word!"
Finally, Harlem Gallery resists closure of most of the aesthetic or political debates that arise in the course of the poem, but then resolution was not his objective. "In the if-of-things- nothing is final/ but the death rattle" (p. 21). For Tolson as for Doctor Nkomo, "Dialectics is the midwife of reality" (p. 59). The poet poses questions which ultimately history will have to answer; and he leaves the job of interpretation to the "vertical audience." On the other hand, Tolson does implicitly answer the question Hideho Heights poses in the metapoem, "E. & O.E," regarding whether "to be or not to be" a black poet. Tolson's answer to this dilemma is his own poem which strives mightily to blend the best aspects of two apparently antithetical idioms -- Afro-American and Euro-American modernism. "At the people's dusk of dawn," like Eshu-Elegbara (Elegba), he sits "at the crossroads of history" and uses the poet's "áshe"38 to shape a true New World poetry. Or to repeat Craig Werner's observation, "Tolson seeks to reveal the false dichotomies as at best simplistic and at worst destructive."39 The poem ultimately reveals the interdependence of the "community-oriented oral aesthetic developed by Afro-American artists and the individually oriented visual aesthetic developed primarily by Euro-Americans."40 Though the Curator's "Afroirishjewish" heritage is as heterogeneous as Doctor Nkomo's heritage is pure, the two men share the task of managing the affairs of the Gallery, of shepherding its burgeoning exhibits, and of shaping its role in the community. This figurative "marriage of true minds" symbolizes the poet's own poetic intentions. The black poet who would go beyond meditation upon "the blackness of blackness" must first unify his own "selves," must
discover the common denominator upon which those selves converge. **Harlem Gallery** begins this arduous process. Certainly, the jury of critics have yet to decide whether Tolson has succeeded in achieving his goal of aesthetic synthesis. However, if the deliberately hybrid offerings of modern poets as diverse as Euro-American Allen Ginsberg and Afro-American Ishmael Reed are any indication of the direction of modern poetry, Tolson's work will not sink into oblivion, but like Africa, "the harder you dash it to the ground, the higher it will rise."
Chapter Five

End Notes


12 Mariann Russell, Melvin B. Tolson, p. 53.


21 Craig Werner, "Blues," p. 1


23 Michael Bérubé, "Avant-Gardes," p. 200
24 Craig Werner, "Blues," p. 15.


27 Craig Werner, "Blues," p. 15.


29 For a discussion of the differences between W.B. Yeats's and Melvin Tolson's eschatalogical perspectives, see Chapter 4.


"The Yoruba religion, the worship of various spirits under God, presents a limitless horizon of vivid moral beings, generous and intimidating. They are messengers and embodiments of áshe, spiritual command, the-power-to-make-things-happen, God's own enabling light rendered accessible to men and women."


AFTERWORD

The present discussion of Tolson's work has focused on the poet's aesthetic development, from the social realism of *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* to the hybrid modernism of *Harlem Gallery*, as it is reflected in his handling of language, theme, and style. However, the formal constraints of the discussion have disallowed the exploration of related questions which have arisen during the course of the discussion. Perhaps the most significant questions which bear a contiguous relation to the present discussion are those concerning Tolson's interpretation of the ontologically grounded impact of aesthetic polarization on the black artist. For Tolson, the black artist does have a choice in the continuing aesthetic and political polemic whose axial problem is identity: "To be or not to be a black" poet. By formulating the aesthetic position of the black artist in dialectical terms, the poet a priori divides black poetry into two distinct and antipodal camps: Afro-American modernists and Euro-American modernists. *Harlem Gallery* evidences Tolson's understanding of the implications of this issue to the extent that he concomitantly dramatizes and parodies it in his work.

As Ronald Walcott has aptly observed, *Harlem Gallery* is "an epic undertaking owing as much to Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Crane, and Stevens as it does to Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, Satchmo, Langston Hughes, and Ol' Red Taylor." For Tolson, dialectics and ambiguity are signs of "the complexity and versatility of human experience." Clearly, Tolson foresaw as did W.E.B. Dubois the long-term effects of the "color line" as it pervaded all aspects of American life, from the level of the social
to the political to the aesthetic. Contemporary critics have begun to examine the issues which Tolson outlined in his later works. Houston Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*, and Michael Awkward’s *Inspiriting Influences* are but three texts which have insightfully explored the complexities of the black aesthetic, the distinguishing characteristics of black texts, and the implicit and explicit effects of the aesthetic dichotomy which still exists in Afro-American letters. In this regard, perhaps Kimberly Bentson’s projection for the future of Afro-American letters best expresses the direction which a discussion of Tolson should take. In defining the parameters of the polemic which occupied so much of Tolson’s poetry, Bentson suggests that there are representatives of the "hermeneutics of blackness" and representatives of the "hermeneutics of recuperation." Using Haki Madhubuti’s *Dynamite Voices* as model of the former view and Blyden Jackson’s *Black Poetry in America* as a model for the latter, Bentson defines the terms as follows:

... for [Haki Madhubuti] poetry ranges on either side of the great divide of the Black arts movement, which created, in his view, the first thoroughly "Black" Afro-American poetry. While acknowledging the influence of earlier periods, especially of the Harlem Renaissance, upon the new black poet’s sense of purpose and seriousness, Madhubuti measures the "unique" status of the contemporary, originary black poem by a standard of didactic commitment, "concrete" subject matter, and orality, a standard that no earlier poetry had fully realized. Against Madhubuti, we place a representative of what I would call "hermeneutics of recuperation" -- Blyden Jackson, who, in his contribution to *Black Poetry in America* ... , sees likewise in the modern black poem "a world of blackness" where every utterance "sounds alike," a plainness which Jackson sees threatening the reduction of the poetic to "a cartoon quality." However, where Madhubuti sees in the modern discourse of blackness a salutary
disjunction, Jackson offers to reassimilate the era’s disharmonious outcries to the presumed continuity of a "synthetically American" tradition, allowing us to "think of recent black poetry at least as much in the context of poetry as of propaganda."  

Any discussion of Tolson’s poetry and especially his mature verse should take into account the degree to which it conforms to Blyden Jackson’s view of a "synthetically American" tradition which views "blackness" as "a mediated, socially constructed practice, a process in and not a product of discursive conditions of struggle." Tolson, as well as Ralph Ellison and Blyden Jackson, "refocuses attention on the verbal medium in which a rather more eclectic or ‘synthetic’ vision of blackness evolves from generation to generation."  

Indeed, Tolson’s aesthetic position resists the "various forms of closure" instigated by proponents of an Afro-American poetics which validates only that poetry which conforms to a "standard of didactic commitment, ‘concrete’ subject matter, and orality." However, with the same degree of intensity, the poet resists some of the most unpalatable assumptions of Euro-American literati -- for example, Pound’s modified version of Wordsworth’s edict against stilted, language; the confessional compulsions of the Beat poets, i.e., Allen Ginsberg’s Howl, to which Tolson unfavorably alludes in Harlem Gallery. Tolson’s question to "White Boy and Black Boy" in the last canto of Harlem Gallery images his resistance to aesthetic prescription. He questions:
What if a chef-d'oeuvre is esoteric?
The cavernous By Room, with its unassignable variety
of ego-dwarfing
stalactites and stalagmites,
makes my veins and arteries vibrate faster
as I study its magnificence and intricacy.\(^8\)

Like the freedom riders of the sixties, Tolson subscribes here to the figuratively
passive resistance of metaphor and irony. The poet "shall not be moved," except by
his own choosing.

Another issue which arises from the present discussion and deserves further
study is a comparative discussion of Tolson's, Robert Hayden's and Gwendolyn
Brooks's apprehension of modernism as it is reflected in their works; certainly,
Tolson was not the only black poet to explore the possibilities of combining the
Afro-American and the Euro-American modernist idioms. All of the aforementioned
poets struggled to shape voices which addressed black issues but which also explored
Euro-American modernist techniques. Toomer's *Cane*, Hayden's "Middle Passage"
and Brooks's *Annie Allen* are but three examples of texts which engage Euro-
Amerian modernist techniques in the service of elucidating the black experience.

To return, however, to Tolson's defense of the poet's right to be "esoteric," this
sentiment reflects on the poet's own fascination with symbolism and the occult. Like
W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and Hart Crane, Tolson was significantly influenced by
Symbolist writing. Certainly, Tolson's voracious and eclectic reading supports the
assumption that he was acquainted with esoteric texts. As early as 1939, twelve years
before he published "E. & O.E.," Tolson alludes to the writings of Freidrich
Nietzsche, W.B. Yeats, and the Armenian mystic, G. I. Gurdjieff. With regard to the last mentioned writer, Tolson's reference to "The Law of Synthetic Identity" has obvious affinities to G. I. Gurdjieff's unified "I." It is useful here to repeat a quotation that appears in Chapter Three. In a review of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Tolson observes:

The Law of Synthetic Identity is materialized in a man. The In-ness of a man globes his [genes], his race, his class, his epoch, his X's of experience. The writer is the amanuensis of [this] In-ness, this interior man.  

Of course, the present study has only touched upon the significance of the influence of Symbolism and the occult on Tolson's later poetry. Chapter Three examines the poet's interpretation of the Gurdjieffian concept of multiple "I's" and the necessity of "working on the self" to achieve a unified I." In this regard, Jon Stanton Woodson has suggested that much of Tolson's later poetry, especially *Libretto* and *Harlem Gallery*, is steeped in the occult to the extent that it attempts to conform in its construction to cosmic laws. As Woodson states in his forthcoming book:

Tolson's irony, then, stems from his comparatively superior mastery of esoteric knowledge: he has mastered the secrets of time and space.  

Woodson points to *libretto for the Republic of Liberia* as one of first long poems which were significantly influenced by Symbolism and the Occult. In his identification of the protagonist and speaker of the poems, Woodson further states:
The identity of the protagonist of the *Libretto* and the consequent unknowns concerning the poem’s plan, thesis and ultimate meaning are soon eradicated once it is known that the *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* is based on the Tarot in much the same way that *The Waste Land* found its inception in . . . Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend. . . .\(^{11}\)

The present study does not embark on an extended discussion of the extent of Tolson’s use of hieratic myth, the Kabala, or numerology. Nevertheless, this aspect of the poet’s work warrants further consideration; future studies should consider not only the extent of Tolson’s use of occult material in his poetry but also the implications of his actions for the poem and for the reader.

Of course, critical reactions to Tolson’s predilection for the Euro-American modernist idiom have run the gamut, from high praise to angry censure. For example, according to David Littlejohn, "*[The Libretto]* has poetry all over it, but it is so freighted with esoteric allusions as to require seventeen pages of footnotes. Except for Liberian patriots with plenty of time, the rewards of reading will probably seem incommensurate with the effort."\(^{12}\) One wonders if Littlejohn holds a similar view of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Paul Breman takes a similar stance toward Tolson’s modernist inclinations. According to Breman:

*Tolson postured for a white audience, and with an ill-omened grin and wicked sense of humor gave it just what it wanted: an entertaining darky using almost comically big words as the best WASP tradition demands of its educated house-niggers.\(^{13}\)*

In similar fashion, Sarah Webster Fabio, criticizes a work that even she admits she does not understand. Says Fabio;
Much of the dialogue in *Harlem Gallery* suggests a satirization of the one-dimensional and contradictory stereotypes of Negroes whipped up in the kitchens of the white man's fantasy world. Although I must admit to some difficulty in trying to establish a pattern of tone which would serve as a signpost to the degree of sincerity the poet had for his subject, in certain instances, Tolson's use of the grotesque, overstatement, excesses of diction at each end of the spectrum suggests that his language was very much a part of the parody.  

Fabio castigates Tolson for even attempting to "take part in the academic dialogue." On the other hand, consider Seldan Rodman, who comments positively *Harlem Gallery* is "not only by all odds the most considerable poem so far written by an American Negro, but a work of poetic synthesis in such poems as *The Waste Land*, *The Bridge*, and *Paterson*." In a similar vein, critic John Ciardi says that "one feels a force of language and of rhythm as breathtaking as anything in the range of American poetry." More recent critics have devoted considerably more time and effort to examining the Tolson canon, particularly the poet's modernist verse.

Among the growing number of writers who have begun to elucidate Tolson's texts, Joy Flasch can be credited with first bringing Tolson and his work to the attention of literati and lay readers alike. Flasch was the first to write her dissertation on Tolson's life, *Melvin B. Tolson: A Critical Biography* (1969). She later expanded her research into a book, *Melvin B. Tolson* (1972). Robert Huot's dissertation, *Melvin B. Tolson's 'Harlem Gallery: A Critical Edition'* (1971), traces the seemingly infinite and often obscure allusions of the work. Moreover, Huot's insightful explanations reveal the encyclopaedic scope of Tolson's knowledge as it is brought to bear on some of the most profound ideas of the century, namely time and
consciousness. Jon Stanton Woodson's dissertation, *A Critical Analysis of the Poetry of M.B. Tolson* (1978), is a study of Tolson's "world-historical system," meticulously worked out in *Libretto* and serving as a kind of implicit philosophical foundation for *Harlem Gallery*. Wilburn Williams' dissertation, *The Desolate Servitude of Language: A Reading of the Poetry of Melvin B. Tolson* (1979), explicates Tolson's poetry against the background of his cultural, political and social milieu. Marian Russell's book, *Harlem Gallery: A Literary Analysis* (1980) examines *Harlem Gallery*‘s thematic similarities to Tolson’s unpublished manuscript, *Portraits in a Harlem Gallery*, which has since been published through the efforts of Robert Farnsworth. In addition, Russell traces the origin of many of the images and characters to Tolson’s first major poetic effort. However, the most prolific critic and interpreter of Tolson’s canon has been Robert Farnsworth, who has written the critical biography, *Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy*, in addition to editing a collection of articles Tolson wrote for the *Washington Tribune* from October 9, 1937 to June 24, 1944 under the title "Caviar and Cabbages." Farnsworth uses the same title for the book, published in 1982. In addition to longer treatments of Tolson’s work, there have been several shorter critical pieces, most notably Ronald Walcott’s "Ellison, Gordon and Tolson: Some Notes on the Blues, Style and Space," (1972), and Gordon Thompson’s "Ambiguity in Tolson’s ‘Harlem Gallery,’" (1986). Walcott’s article views *Harlem Gallery* as a significant new development in the blues tradition and sees Tolson as one of the few artists who understands the exigencies of style as substance and the elision of space and time in the "New World" work of art. Thompson’s
focus, on the other hand, is on Harlem Gallery's "thematic and syntactic orientation."\(^\text{18}\)

Houston Baker's comments on the aesthetic conflicts experienced by black writers partially explains Tolson's still controversial position in American letters. Says Baker:

When one breaks the shell of contemporaneity by viewing history as a series of intrinsically related events, the problems of turn-of-the-century black authors do not seem too far removed from those faced by today's artists. Cataclysmic social, epistemological, and aesthetic changes do not occur with each passing decade. Paul Dunbar's "thee's" and "thou's," Countee Cullen's "albeit's" and "listeth's," Gwendolyn Brooks's polysyllabics, and Imamu Barakaa's tortured and allusive verses are all intelligible within a brief historical continuum. Cultural goals and descriptive vocabulary may alter, but a dilemma such as the black American's seldom disappears in seven or eight decades.\(^\text{19}\)

Baker's contextual assessment of the state of black letters equally applies to Tolson's own aesthetic predicament. However, Tolson is distinguished from the other black writers by his dramatization of the cause and effect of cultural duality, but more importantly by his refusal to succumb to the figurative schizophrenia engendered by cultural duality. Tolson's efforts to integrate Euro- and Afro-American aesthetic approaches ultimately transcends both approaches.

Tolson is finally an "identity expert", "a specialist in changing the joke and slipping the yoke."\(^\text{20}\) Despite the sometimes jarring reverberations resulting from the metamorphosis of his style, Tolson remained throughout "in possession of himself."\(^\text{21}\) And until critics, black and white, can come to terms with Tolson's poetry, they will continue to quibble in the straitjacket of "ologies" and "isms" over the question of
whether or not Tolson "writes in Negro," to quote Karl Shapiro. More to the point perhaps is Roy Basler's observation that when all is said and done, Tolson, like Walt Whitman, Paul Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and T.S. Eliot, writes like Tolson.
Afterword

End Notes


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15 Sarah Webster Fabio, "Who Speaks Negro?," p. 57.


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DISSERTATIONS


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On A Gallery of Harlem Portraits


On Caviar and Cabbage


On Harlem Gallery


On Libretto for the Republic of Liberia


Miscellaneous Articles


Miscellaneous Books


UNPUBLISHED WORKS
