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Grace Farrell
Sacred Heart University

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Mariann Russell, *Melvin B. Tolson's "Harlem Gallery": A Literary Analysis*. Columbia and London: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1980. 143 pp. $15.00.

Review by Grace Farrell Lee

With the publication of *Melvin B. Tolson's "Harlem Gallery": A Literary Analysis*, Dr. Mariann Russell, Professor of English at Sacred Heart University and developer of the English Department's Afro-American Literature courses, brings to fruition several years of research and writing. The book has already been lauded as extraordinary in the quality and scope of its research. Dr. Russell traveled to Washington, Texas, Oklahoma, and New York interviewing relatives, neighbors, and academic friends of Tolson and digging into the archives of both the Library of Congress and the home of Tolson's widow. In establishing the critical base for future literary analyses of Tolson and his milieu, Dr. Russell provides a fascinating excursion into the Harlem of the twenties and thirties, as well as an astute analysis of Tolson's major literary opus. Moreover, throughout her work, Russell tackles the difficult aesthetic and personal question of what it means to be black and an artist. Tolson defined the dilemma in *Harlem Gallery*:

> 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.

Melvin B. Tolson, over forty years a professor at small, predominantly black colleges in Texas and Oklahoma, began receiving recognition for his poetry in the late 1940s. He was named Poet Laureate of Liberia and appointed permanent Fellow in poetry

and drama at Breadloaf, Vermont. Following the publication of his masterpiece, *Harlem Gallery*, the year before his death in 1966, Tolson was invited to the White House, lectured at the Library of Congress, became poet-in-residence at Tuskegee Institute, and received the poetry award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Harlem Gallery*, which brought Tolson lasting recognition, is, at once, a series of portraits and a Harlem art gallery, a poem and a symbol of a poem. As Russell writes, it is about Harlem,

> some fictional and typical characters who dwelt there, their talk — talk and such talk! The words flowing from the Harlem background reveal an approach to Harlem and black America that is, in the best sense, idiosyncratic. And the talk itself becomes a symbolic reenactment of what Tolson saw as the significance of the lives of black folk.

With an engaging style and attention to detail which makes her writing as intriguing to the general reader as it is to the professional, Russell captures what she calls the "double image" of Harlem in the twenties and thirties; it was both cultural capital and vast slum. The ghettoized Harlem, where bathtubs were boarded over and rented as beds, where population density could reach to over 600 persons per acre, and where the local hospital was called "the morgue," this Harlem was autonomous only in its blackness; its economic control lay in the hands of whites. Blacks were segregated, discriminated against, excluded from all but a few unions, denied skilled jobs, paid less, and charged more. The other side of that double image, Harlem the cultural capital, like Earl "Snakehips" Tucker, provided a "shimmering, shifting spectacle" of nightlife, streetlife, and churchlife, of late-night cabarets and dancehalls, rent-raising parties and promenading, street speakers perched on ladders, Jelly Roll Morton and the Lindy Hop, Fats Waller, chitterlings, black-eyed peas and Father Divine, a flourish of serious black theater, of writers, of artists. This was the Harlem Renaissance!

Poets of this Renaissance, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman,

Countee Cullen, W.E.B. DuBois, Arna Bontemps, and others, attempted, in essays, in lectures, and in the substance of their poetry, to define a black aesthetic. How could Afro-American literature, so rooted in a particular ethnic context, vie for an equal aesthetic footing with literature which supposedly conforms to that standard aesthetic of universality, which dictates that great literature must transcend its particular origins? And if one were able to transcend those origins, would he be turning his back on his blackness? Indeed, "the Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts — / the dialectic of / to be or not to be / a Negro." While the "Great White World" might expect from the black artist the exotic treatment of "Negro Material," and while the "Black Bourgeoisie" might demand artistic propaganda for heightening racial consciousness, these conflicts "between black and white, between artist and middle class, between conflicting claims on the black artist" always became focused in the question "to be or not to be a Negro." For Countee Cullen, the dilemma of being a poet and being black presented the ultimate frustration. He ends his sonnet on the subject with a brutal irony — "To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" — suggesting that in his blackness a poet can never be fully a poet; yet neither can he escape his blackness, for in the injunction "bid" is heaped all the oppression of his history.

However, Russell points outs that for Tolson " 'to be or not to be a Negro' was a dialectic . . . meant to be resolved in a synthesis. . . . [He] saw such choices as logically false but existentially true, and he looked forward to each of the contradictions being worked out, perhaps through pain, surely with difficulty, to a dusk of dawn in which the old contradictions became irrelevant."

Dusk of Dawn was the title given by W.E.B. DuBois to his autobiography. There he explains that although there is a dusk before evening, there is also a dusk before dawn, and while the darkness of oppression may precede the end of civilization, it may also, or instead, herald a new beginning. For Melvin Tolson there was to be a new beginning, and ghetto laughter would destroy the old order "to release the energy of the new":

From nightingales of the old Old World,

O God, deliver us!
In the Harlem Gallery, pepper birds
clarion in the dusk of dawn
the flats and sharps of pigment-words —
quake the walls of Mr. Rockefeller's Jericho
with the new New Order of things,
as the ambivalence of dark dark laughter rings
in Harlem's immemorial winter.

The New Order was one in which blackness itself would become transcendent. As Russell explains in her central theoretical chapter:

> The role of the literary artist became a bardic one: "We are black magicians, black art/s we make in the black labs of the heart." The role of the poet, educating to blackness and celebrating blackness, put him in the position of a priest vis-ã-vis the community. Not only was he to mediate between the existent community and the coming spiritual nation, but through the arts he celebrated the rituals of blackness. He "lives blackly"; the world is to become a "black poem." . . . Thus, there came to be a new kind of universality. The old concept of universality was seen as a kind of windmill at which to tilt. The new universality was interpreted in terms of black consciousness reaching out to the nonwhite world and encompassing a metaphysics read into the African spiritualities. Blackness itself became transcendent.

Thus, *Harlem Gallery*, evoking Harlem as a symbolic landscape and exploring the inner landscapes of black poetic lives, becomes an epic not of black men, but of humankind in an age of transition. Harlem, "the black city within a city," where " 'flowers of hope' flourish" while flowers of death grow in the "Great White World,"

becomes the microcosm not of the black world, but of *the* world, the new world which is to be. And the black artist becomes "not merely . . . part of the universal brotherhood of the oppressed but . . . the epitome of manhood, the transitional man in a transitional era."

Truly, therefore, to make a poet black may be one way to make him sing. The beauty of Professor Russell's book lies in her transforming echo of Cullen's line which rings silently throughout her pages: "To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" Russell has rendered an analysis not only of Harlem and of Tolson's work, but also of what it means to be a black poet, and she has done so with such clarity and sophistication that she transforms the brutal irony of Cullen's cry of frustration into a song of sheer joy and power. She makes us know that to make a poet black is, in and of itself, to empower him with song.