

The Great Debaters: Looking for Tolson the Poet

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Early in the 2007 movie *The Great Debaters*, coach Melvin Tolson asks his debaters to speak about their fathers. His prize debater, Henry Lowe, feeling rebellious, answers by asking Tolson to speak about his father. After a slight exchange, Tolson says he will take the affirmative and begins speaking as he approaches the dais. He tells a vivid story of a man named Willie Lynch, a West Indian slave owner, who publicly and savagely punishes his slaves to instill fear in their hearts and gain control over their minds. The aim is simple and straightforward: control the black man's mind and develop his body for labor. Lynch becomes a famous authority among slave owners, and the terrible crime of lynching subsequently takes his name.

Tolson tells his debaters that he and their other teachers at Wiley College (Marshall, Texas) are determined to give back to their students the minds that decades of slavery have lost, and thus to give them their freedom. That is all they need to know about his family. He then walks out of the room.

Lynching plays a key role in the movie. On their way to debate Howard University, the debate team, traveling at

night, suddenly confronts a recent lynching, the frenzied mob still present. The debaters are sickened by the spectacle and shamed by their helplessness; they successfully flee the immediate danger only later to have to deal with the psychological trauma of what they have witnessed. They lose their only debate to Howard University when the inexperienced young James Farmer substitutes for Samantha Boone, who leaves the team in anger at Henry Lowe's escape from his psychological pain into drink and sex.

Fortunately, Harvard University already has sent an invitation to Tolson's home for Wiley to come to Cambridge and debate Harvard, the national champions. When the team arrives in Cambridge, without Tolson, to be explained later, they find that the body governing the debate has learned that Wiley has been using canned opening speeches prepared by Tolson. This is a common practice, even though it is against the rules. Because this debate is to be heard by a national radio audience, however, the rules now will be strictly applied. The topic for debate is changed. Both teams are given the same documentary sources and 24 hours to prepare. The new resolution to be debated is the morality of civil disobedience.

Tolson has placed Henry Lowe in charge of the team, and Lowe decides that Samantha Boone and James Farmer Jr. will be the debaters, despite, or maybe because of Farmer's having stunk up the debate with Howard. Young Farmer has the closing speech in the debate; he answers Harvard's claim that disrespect for the law can only result in social anarchy by telling of his team's encounter with the lynch mob and its victim. His scathing account of Texas law that fails to protect lynch victims ends with a statement to the audience that they ought to be happy if, in this instance, witnesses like him and his fellow debaters choose civil disobedience rather than other alternatives. Wiley triumphs over Harvard. James Farmer becomes a youthful hero.

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The movie makers publicly acknowledged that they changed history, substituting Harvard for the University of Southern California as the 1935 debate champion. That has puzzled some critics, but it seems clear that Harvard, with its associations with Henry David Thoreau and Boston, with its long association with abolitionism, offered a more compelling background to underscore the strong civil-rights theme of the movie.

In order to win sufficient financial support for making this movie, producer Denzel Washington had to do two things: (1) reluctantly become an actor in the movie, playing Melvin B. Tolson, and (2) sell the notion that a movie about debaters could be a "sports" movie. Thus, directorially, Washington tried to keep the movie focused on the young debaters and played up the competitive nature of debating. However, the emotional power of the movie comes not just from the competitive nature of debate but from the racial indignities these young debaters had to confront.

Thus James Farmer's later career as a civil-rights leader shapes much of the film's plot. Farmer for years was a notable advocate of nonviolent civil disobedience, first with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, later as Founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, and most dramatically as leader of the Freedom Rides, which challenged Jim Crow transportation in the Southern states during the 1960s.

Of all the debaters, we learn most about James Farmer's family life. His father, James Farmer Sr., is an earnest and learned professor of theology, who knows seven languages and insists that his son obey the strict rules he has established for his family. Early on a family outing, the father, however, is humiliated when the family car kills a pig that pops into the road, probably deliberately prodded. The white farmer forces the elder Farmer at gunpoint into a groveling performance before finally accepting his monthly paycheck of \$19.75 as compensation for the pig. Young

James is appalled to witness his father's humiliation, and later when the father confronts the son who returns home late in violation of house rules, lets his father know the shame he felt at witnessing his father's behavior.

That night young James had been following Melvin Tolson, whom he was surprised to see leaving his home in working-men's clothes. Tolson was on his way to a meeting of sharecroppers, whom he was trying to organize. When the meeting was raided by a vigilante group led by the local sheriff, Tolson spots young Farmer and drags him into flight; but before he separates from him, Tolson makes him swear he will not speak of what he has seen to anyone. Hence young Farmer is tongue tied when his father demands to know where he has been.

The plot of the movie works all this out neatly later when the sheriff arrests Tolson as an agitator, just before the debate team leaves for its contest with Harvard. The elder Farmer redeems his manhood in his son's eyes by confronting the sheriff, along with Tolson's lawyer, and with a mob of sharecroppers calling for Tolson's release outside the jail. The elder Farmer threatens the sheriff with exposing his illegal role in leading the vigilantes who raided the earlier meeting of the sharecroppers. The sheriff accepts a deal, releasing Tolson but keeping him on bail. That is the reason Tolson cannot leave the state and accompany his team to Cambridge. The father has regained his son's respect, and the son has had a significant lesson in how to fight for and achieve at least some element of social justice.

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This is a tight and powerful movie, and as a biographer of Melvin B. Tolson, I am happy to see him get such public and deserved recognition for activities that were significant in his life. But I wrote my biography because of Tolson's achievements as a poet, not as a debate coach

or as an organizer of sharecroppers, and I had to look hard in the film for any recognition of Tolson's later poetic achievements that were in any way comparable to the implicit recognition of the civil-rights achievements of his student James Farmer.

There is a promising opening when we first see Tolson in the classroom. He enters proclaiming a poem of Langston Hughes, and promptly asks his class to identify the poem and the year it was written. Then, he follows with a poem by Gwendolyn Bennett and the same question. Tolson makes it clear that he expects his students to read widely and to know those poets who speak directly to their experience. He also wants them to know new and distant worlds of experience. In later exchanges with his students, particularly with Henry Lowe, references to James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence are bandied about. James Farmer leans over to Samantha Boone to tell her how much he likes Lawrence, but that seems more a signal of his hormones than his literary imagination.

Tolson began writing poetry at an early age. He was chosen to write the class poem for his graduation from Kansas City's elite Lincoln High School. Its earnest social concern and high ambition have the fresh innocence of the young James Farmer in the movie:

Our hearts beat fast, our eyes flame with desire!
Our souls long for the battle-smoke of strife!
These very walls instill the eternal fire
That makes men winners in the race of life.
The maxims taught will make both mind and bones
Fit for the mighty trials we all must bear;
But out of them we'll fashion stepping stones,
In black misfortunes we shall not despair.

For the academic year 1930 and '31, Tolson was able to take leave of Wiley College and attend graduate school at Columbia University. He began a master's thesis on the Harlem Renaissance after becoming personally acquainted

with many of Harlem's writers. He found Hughes, "the idealistic wanderer and defender of the proletariat . . . the most glamorous figure in Negro literature."

In 1932, Hughes went with a group of Negro actors to Russia to make a film. While there, he wrote a poem, "Goodbye Christ," which, when published, evoked much criticism from religious leaders. Tolson defended Hughes in the pages of *The Pittsburgh Courier*. He argued that Hughes' satiric attack upon the irrelevance of a religion that failed to speak to man's dire economic needs was, in fact, an effort to revive the true message of Christ.

There is an echo of this in the movie when the senior Farmer confronts Tolson about whether his son was with Tolson when he attended the meeting of sharecroppers that was raided. Tolson tries to change the subject by engaging the senior Farmer in a discussion about how Christ was a radical. The senior Farmer and Tolson in fact probably had such discussions many times. It became a favorite subject in Tolson's writings.

In 1938, Oliver Cromwell Cox joined Wiley's faculty and made Tolson and Farmer's intellectual duo into a trio. Cox was a fresh Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and 10 years later published his impressive study *Caste, Class, and Race*. Cox also was a Marxist. Marxism was very much in fashion for earnest young black intellectuals in the '30s. Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, as well as Tolson, found it easy to see the racism they confronted daily as attributable to capitalistic exploitation. Willie Lynch spoke for property owners. Slavery reduced human beings to pieces of property.

But Tolson saw poetry not just as a weapon in class revolution. It was also part of an emancipating self-realization and introduction to a larger world community of cultures. He admired Hughes, not just for defending the proletariat but for his wandering the world and becoming acquainted with writers in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and

South America. When James Farmer came to write his autobiography, he paid tribute to Tolson in a chapter titled, "Tolson and Tolstoy." Tolson insisted over and over again to his students that the library was a valuable source of freedom.

Tolson's career as a debate coach at Wiley brought him considerable recognition, but there was never a doubt in his mind that his real profession was poetry. From his year at Columbia, he began writing a series of poems that were meant to be gathered under the title *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*. He was impressed with the exodus of black Americans from the South to the cities of the North, and he believed the future of black America was likely to be realized in cities. He understood that the Harlem of the Harlem Renaissance ushered in the prospect of a New Negro, and he wanted to be part of that cultural formation, even if he had to participate from afar, as a resident of Marshall, Texas.

Tolson placed a few of these poems for publication and won praise from V.F. Calverton, an influential critic at the time. But by 1940, Tolson gave up his efforts to publish them as a book. That same year, however, his poem "Dark Symphony" won first prize in the National Poetry Contest sponsored by the American Negro Exposition in Chicago. Edward Weeks elected to publish it in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Mary Lou Chamberlain, an *Atlantic* staff member, was impressed. When she left the *Atlantic* for Dodd, Mead and Company, she encouraged Tolson to submit a book-length manuscript. The result was the publication of *Rendezvous with America* in 1944. America was then at war.

Rendezvous brought Tolson considerable public recognition. From 1937 to 1944, he also wrote a popular weekly column for *The Washington Tribune*, colorfully titled *Caviar and Cabbage*. Meanwhile, one of his star Wiley debaters, Hobart Jarrett, had finished his Ph.D. and by 1947 had become chairman of the English department at Langston University, just north of Oklahoma City. It was Jarrett who

published the only vivid first-hand account of the Wiley debaters' experiences in *Crisis* in 1935. He persuaded Tolson to move from Wiley to Langston for better pay and more security in retirement.

That same year, Horace Mann Bond used his influence to get Tolson named Poet Laureate of the Liberian Centennial Commission. This title later became regularly shortened to Poet Laureate of Liberia. Bond had become president of Lincoln University in 1945. He was a classmate and fellow fraternity member of Tolson's at Lincoln and father to civil-rights leader Julian Bond.

By now Tolson's poetry had become more experimentally modernistic. While intensely scornful of T.S. Eliot's politics, he accepted the fact that Eliot had effected a poetic revolution. Tolson began shaping a new voice that was modernistic, but still expressed his deep-felt racial and democratic beliefs. He was excited by the prospect of African nations throwing off colonial rule following World War II, and in response to being named Poet Laureate of Liberia, he wrote the ambitiously prophetic *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*.

Allen Tate wrote an introduction to *Libretto*, which Tate clearly meant to be high praise, but his explanation of Tolson's achievement in racial terms attracted more controversial attention than the poem itself over the next few years. But *Libretto* was a testing ground for the kind of long, major modernist poem that challenged Tolson's imagination. He returned to his original concept of an art gallery in Harlem as symbolic of African-American achievement and struggle. *Harlem Gallery* was published 12 years later, in 1965.

The years between these publications were not all devoted exclusively to writing his major poem. He published several other poems, was knighted by the ambassador of Liberia, given a fellowship to Bread Loaf Writers Conference, where he became friends with Robert Frost, became mayor

of Langston, Okla., became an associate editor of Twayne Publishing Co., met Liberian President Tubman in New York as a representative of the state of Missouri, was invited by Tubman to his third inauguration in Monrovia, stopped in Paris on the way back from Monrovia to visit Melvin Jr., then studying at the Sorbonne to prepare for his own distinguished career as a professor of modern languages at the University of Oklahoma, wrote and directed plays at Langston University, lectured at Fisk University, read his poetry at the Library of Congress . . . and perhaps that partial list is enough to indicate his extraordinary breadth of interests and energy.

Harlem Gallery is clearly the capstone of Tolson's poetic career. He finished *Book 1, The Curator* soon after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer; and he continued to plan the next four books of his ambitious poem despite the ominous sentence of death. Honors and recognition poured in. Lincoln University gave him an honorary doctorate. He read his poetry at the Library of Congress under the auspices of the Gertrude Clark Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund. He was the mystery guest flown into New York City at James Farmer's retirement bash at Philharmonic Hall, joining Sammy Davis Jr., Harry Belafonte, Duke Ellington and others in tribute to Farmer. On May 25, 1966, he was honored with a \$2,500 award by the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters, George Kennan presiding. Other writers honored that evening included William Alfred, John Barth, James Dickey, H.E.F. Donahue, Shirley Hazzard, Josephine Herbst, Edwin Honig, and Gary Snyder. Tolson and Ralph Ellison were the only black writers present, and Tolson felt snubbed by Ellison. Arnold Rampersad's recent biography of Ellison makes it clear that Tolson did not suffer alone in that regard.

Race was a huge public issue in America when his book appeared, and there were young African-American writers and critics who were deeply suspicious of any

writer who had the approval of major white critics. Allen Tate's introduction to *Libretto for the Liberian Republic* and Karl Shapiro's introduction to *Harlem Gallery* were seen as minuses rather than pluses in their eyes. Tolson's huge and zesty ambition in his poem and the fact that he lived his entire adult life within the black communities of Wiley College and Langston University were all too readily dismissed by the new black militancy of the '60s.

It was an easy avoidance of the tough esthetic challenge of his poetry.

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I became interested in Tolson when Roy P. Basler, then chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and notable critic, sent an essay, "The Heart of Blackness—M.B. Tolson's Poetry," to *New Letters*, and editor David Ray asked my advice about whether he should publish it.

Basler wrote that "Tolson undertook . . . to liberate the allusive, scholarly poetry Eliot created from the service of Eliot's sterile tradition and philosophy." Basler illustrated his thesis by noting the distinction that Tolson drew between "Art, the woman Pleasure" and her distant cousin, Happiness. The passage below, from "Theta," in *The Harlem Gallery*, illustrates Tolson's integration of high literary style with street-smart references; it also contains a wise counsel of important choices to be made:

No guinea pig of a spouse
to be cuckolded in a mood indigo,
no gilded in-and-out beau
to crackle a *jeu de mots* about the house—
Art, the woman Pleasure, makes no blind dates,
but keeps the end of the tryst with one;
she is a distant cousin of serried Happiness
the lovebird seeks against the eye-wrying sun,
in spite of her fame,

dubious as Galen's sight
 of a human body dissected,
 in spite of the *hap* in her name,
 ominous as a red light.

The claw-thrust
 of a rutting tigress,
 the must
 of a rogue elephant—
 these con the bull of predictability,
 like Happiness,
 a *capriccio* bastard-daughter of Tyche.

KKK, the beatnik guitarist, used to say
 to High Yellah Baby
 (before he decided to rub
 out the light of his eyes
 in the alley of Hinnom behind the Haw-Haw Club):
 "The *belle dame*—Happiness—the goofy dream of
 is a bitch who plays with crooked dice
 the game of love.

Basler suggests, "However Eliotic the retrospective tradition may seem to those who understand only what they have been taught, the Tolsonian prospect lies certainly, and I think clearly, ahead." Basler insists that Tolson has "taken our white-black culture and imagined it into a new thing." He closed saying that he did not "expect Professors of American literature to accept it generally for perhaps a quarter century, but Tolson's recognition will come as surely as has Whitman's."

As Basler's article was being considered at *New Letters*, Joy Flasch, a colleague of Tolson's at Langston, published her Twayne Series critical biography on Tolson. Seven years later Mariann Russell published her book-length study *Harlem Gallery, A Literary Analysis*. I edited and published those poems Tolson originally hoped to publish as *A Gallery*

of *Harlem Portraits* (1979), and I edited a collection of his *Caviar and Cabbage* columns (1982). By that time I had come to know Tolson's surviving family well and so wrote a critical biography, *Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy* (1984). There were several Ph.D. theses over the years on Tolson as Tolson's works gradually fell out of print.

In 1999, the University of Virginia Press reissued a collection of Tolson's poetry, *Harlem Gallery and Other Poems*. Raymond Nelson, who edited the collection, published a critically eloquent evaluation of *Harlem Gallery* in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Rita Dove did a sharp-edged, appreciative introduction to the collection. Nelson's essay, "*Harlem Gallery: An Advertisement and User's Manual*," intentionally tried to ease the way for readers to penetrate Tolson's densely challenging verse, promising in the end the reader will discover "a monument of poetry at its most genial, humane, and entertaining."

Yet despite all this recognition, Tolson's achievement as a poet remains known only to a few. When the movie *The Great Debaters* ends, there is a terse attempt to explain what happened afterward to some of the main characters. It is remarked that Tolson went on to become "a world-renowned poet." But the brief statement hangs rather empty compared to the fuller tribute to James Farmer's later career as a civil rights leader.

I mentioned that at the end of the movie, Tolson makes his way to Cambridge in time to witness his debaters' triumph, from an obscure spot in the audience. Tolson stands alone in the corridor of the auditorium, but seated in the audience is the butler, Wilson, from Douglass Hall. Wilson serves the young Wiley debaters with easy dignity and exemplary diction. They don't know quite what to make of him when he refuses their tip and indicates they need not refer to him as Mr. Wilson. Just plain Wilson is quite sufficient. But in the midst of their research, he catches them struggling to pronounce *satyagraha*. He corrects them

and explains Gandhi's meaning, "the power of truth." This echoes Tolson's constant drilling for his debaters to respect the power of truth. Both Wilson and Tolson seem more than content to watch their students' triumph.

Tolson believed that poetry and truth were also related. Both were difficult and testing, but he believed true poetry would survive the prejudices and misconceptions of readers and ultimately win its way to recognition. I don't know how anyone could persuade potential financial backers that that struggle is really a sports contest and thus make a movie out of it. But I had a wistful sense of wishing it were so as I watched Tolson quietly walk away from the triumphal success of his young debaters.

Selected works discussed in this essay:

The Great Debaters (motion picture), directed by Denzel Washington. Screenplay written by Robert Eisele, based on a story by Robert Eisele and Jeffrey Porro, inspired by an article by Tony Scherman. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2007.

Harlem Gallery and Other Poems, by Melvin B. Tolson. Ed. Raymond Nelson. Introduction by Rita Dove. Charlottesville: U of Virginia Press, 1999.

"The Heart of Blackness—M.B. Tolson's Poetry," by Roy P. Basler, *New Letters* vol. 39 no. 3 (spring 1973), pp. 63 to 76. U of Missouri-Kansas City.

Melvin B. Tolson: 1898-1966, Plain Talk and Poetic Prophecy, by Robert M. Farnsworth. Columbia: U of Missouri Press, 1984; 2008 (reprint edition, U of Missouri Press).

A Gallery of Harlem Portraits, by Melvin B. Tolson. Ed. Robert M. Farnsworth. U of Missouri Press, 1979; 2008 (reprint edition, U of Missouri Press).

Caviar and Cabbage, Selected Columns by Melvin B. Tolson from The Washington Tribune, 1937-1944. Editor Robert M. Farnsworth. U of Missouri Press, 1982; 2008 (reprint edition, U of Missouri Press).