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Poetic Proverbs, African Advocacy, and Melvin B. Tolson

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*“Brow tron lo—eta ne a new won oh gike!”
“Seule de tous les continents...l’Afrique n’a pas di’histoire!”
“...maneno matupu”*

Words from Africa and Europe, Asia and the Americas fill the pages of a small volume. An excerpt from Shakespeare, allusions to Cullen, Dryden, and Raleigh, references to Nietzsche and Goethe wend their way through the first eighteen lines of an ode to a burgeoning African nation. *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, masterwork of Melvin B. Tolson, opens with a characteristic intellectual intensity that threatens to overwhelm its reader with a cacophony of voices, languages, and literatures. This poem, commissioned by the president of Liberia for the nation’s centennial celebration in 1947, elicits ceaseless comparisons with T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, with its myriad footnotes and use of languages such as Urdu, Egyptian, French, Swahili, and Japanese. Many have observed Tolson’s erudite and seemingly sophistic style, and have questioned his method of attaining his self-professed goal—that of speaking to his fellow

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* Excerpts taken from *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, lines 58, 170 and 171, and 496, respectively. Tolson’s translations read “The world is too large—that’s why we do not hear everything;” the French is a quote from Eugène Guernier that is translated “Of all the continents, Africa alone has no history!” and the Swahili replies “empty words.”

African Americans and encouraging them to unite against racial and class discrimination (Russell 3). Some critics have accused Tolson of sacrificing his goal in favor of garnering acclaim, pointing at *Libretto's* (and his other poems') voluminous footnotes and difficult vocabulary. This, they say, is a man writing for the "literary caviar" (Russell 9). This author would like to counter that argument by pointing at another device Tolson employs in *Libretto*: the African proverb. A comparison of the structure, usage, and purpose of the proverb and Tolson's poetry will show that Tolson is not writing for the elite; rather, this intellectual is ever-mindful of the masses and uses the common proverb as a model for his poetry, and also as a weapon against prejudice.

Libretto for the Republic of Liberia is divided into eight sections, each designated by one of the eight notes of the diatonic scale. Tolson devotes eighty-four lines of the section "Sol" to African proverbs, proverbs from various continental locations, proverbs with varied connotations. Proverbs such as "the white man solves between white sheets his black problem," and "an open door sees both in and out" come in rapid succession, seemingly without purpose (207-209, 197-198). Their presence in the poem seems to be a mere acknowledgment of their existence—nothing more. Tolson, however, had an admitted fascination with African proverbs. At his October 1965 poetry reading at the Library of Congress, he devoted nearly ten minutes to reading and explicating the proverbs found in *Libretto*, which constitutes roughly fifty percent of the time he discussed the poem in its entirety. The mere fact that he devoted a significant amount of time to the proverbs implies the wisdom Tolson found in them and their integral and inseparable role in *Libretto*. The presence of African proverbs in Tolson's poetry and lectures, however, does not provide an adequate basis for an argument regarding an ideological link between these adages and his poetry. Tolson's proposed observance of and respect for the relationship between proverb and poetry requires a more empirical examination of the proverb's properties to illustrate this relationship.

Neal R. Norrick conducted a study on the proverb's structural qualities that will provide the basis for this examination. In his book, *How Proverbs Mean*, Norrick defines the proverb as "self-contained, pithy, traditional expressions with didactic content and fixed, poetic form" (31). Each of these characteristics can be applied to Tolson's poetry as well, as they are either directly or indirectly displayed in verses such as *Libretto*.

The first attribute that Norrick mentions is that the proverb is self-contained. By this, he means that the words used in a proverb cannot be interchanged and that it is an integrated unit (32). For example, the

English proverb “where there’s a will, there’s a way,” could not be remade as “where a determined spirit is present, an individual can surely prevail.” Such a change does not retain the same elements of the original and would fall out of common usage quite quickly. Therefore, proverbs contain “kernels” (“will” and “way” in the previous example) that are immutable and can call forth the proverb with their mention (Norrick 45). Tolson uses the idea of “kernels” throughout the *Libretto*. Each time he makes an allusion to another literary work, he is exercising the principle that mentioning certain words will evoke a recollection or response from the reader. For example, line 261 reads “*Ecce homo!*” which calls forth the biblical account of Jesus’ crucifixion as Pilate declares, “Behold the man!” Tolson used this condensed reference to underscore the theme of human suffering that he follows in “Ti” (Brunner 435). Furthermore, Tolson firmly believed that the words themselves were integral parts of the poem. He appealed to the “3 S’s of Parnassus” as a framework for his word selection, which outlines the importance of sight, sound, and sense (Russell 5). Tolson emphasized the fact that the sound, scansion, and rhythm of the word are of utter importance to the poem’s overall integrity, and claimed at the Library of Congress that “the poet has double crossed you” if poem has words that are interchangeable. Thus, *Libretto* uses the idea of “word kernels” on two levels—they serve as ideological connections and as indispensable linguistic components.

The condensation of the “kernel” interplays with the second part of Norrick’s definition—pithiness. At his Library of Congress reading, as Tolson speaks about some of the African proverbs he uses in *Libretto*, he pauses to comment on the proverb “no fence’s legs are long enough.” Tolson explains that the African is referring to the fact that “foreign” ideas and peoples will encroach, regardless of how high the fence or wall. Both Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg, he says, addressed this same issue in their poems “Mending Wall” and “A Fence,” respectively. However, Tolson praises the proverb for its pithiness, as he says that it is able to encapsulate the essence of those two poems in merely six words. Tolson further comments, “What makes poetry *poetry* is its terrific power of condensation, concentration.” Interestingly, Tolson is indirectly dubbing the proverbs “poetry” and is praising the skill of the anonymous African above those revered figures of American poetry. The proverbs are assigned an elevated role as the pattern of purposeful condensed wisdom, which thereby suggests their seminal function in his pithy aesthetic.

Proverbs’ typical brevity and condensation does not disallow the presence of poetic elements, however. Norrick writes that proverbs can have alliterative, metaphorical, personifying elements (46). Alliteration,

rhyme, and rhythm indeed have importance in African proverbs and Tolson's poetry alike. For example, the Swahili proverb, "*haraka haraka haina baraka*" (the equivalent of "haste makes waste"), employs the poetic devices of both rhythm and rhyme, contributing to the auditory delight brought by the words themselves. Tolson was especially enamored with the sound and rhythm of African proverbs and words in general, as mentioned previously. This interest in the poetic aspect of language is found throughout *Libretto*, particularly in lines such as, "The tawny typhoon striped with black / torpors in grasses tan" and "...between / golden goblet and truckling trull / and the ires / of rivers red and the reflexes of fires" (135-140, 470-473). These poetic elements in both proverb and poem are not merely frivolous additions to be skimmed by the eyes; nay, proverbs are by nature lingual, and Tolson wanted his poems to be read aloud (Russell 5). This poet designed his verse so that people would feel them in their mouths while they "chew and digest" the poem (Farnsworth 167). Thus, the African and Tolson use alliteration, rhyme, and rhythm to delight the senses as the speaker and hearer ruminate on the proverb's implied and usually didactic message.

This discussion of structural elements of the proverb and their existing similarities with Tolson's poetry prompts the question of the significance of these findings. Why should one be intrigued or interested that Tolson's verse finds heavy parallels in the proverb? As previously mentioned, many critics found fault with Tolson's work. One such critic was J. Saunders Redding, who accused Tolson of deliberately confusing his audience to prove his intellectual superiority. Redding wrote a scathing attack on the *Libretto* and Tolson's supposed arrogant eruditeness:

[I have] a fundamental objection to poetry which the author must himself interpret for his readers in an addendum of notes. At best, such notes indicate one of two things, and at worst, both things: that the poet found his talents unequal to the full requirements of the particular necessary communication; or that he was deliberately uncommunicative and obscure—in which case his notes are a patronizing gesture to minds the poet assumes to be less recondite or subtle or appreciative than his own. (qtd. in Farnsworth 166)

Redding is outraged because he views Tolson's lines as "uncommunicative and obscure" instead of coded. If one views the difficulty of *Libretto* as analogous to the difficulty of *proverb*, the connotations which Redding ascribes to Tolson's poetry soon disappear. Proverbs, as mentioned in Norrick's definition are didactic (31). In addition to their traditional, conversational attributes, they are used in many cultures as a means to instruct and teach. "A louse that bites is in the inner shirt" is such a

proverb, for it warns for the suffering person to look to his closest associates as possible agitators (*Libretto* 196-197). Norrick adds that that “proverbs are ‘strongly coded’ or ‘overcoded’” (45). One could say, then, that the proverb necessitates two types of interpretation—literal and implied. The proverb “the lackey licks the guinea’s boot till holes wear in the tongue” (183-184), for example, requires the explanation of “lackey” and “guinea” to the ignorant, or a *literal* translation; then, the one being taught must learn the *implied* meaning of the proverb. This explanation by the speaker serves as an “auditory footnote” to the audience so that the didactic purpose of the proverb is fulfilled. In the same way, Tolson uses both simple mechanisms and more complex and in many cases uses footnotes to elucidate meaning for the reader. The proverb and *Libretto* are difficult not because of haughtiness or ostentation, but rather due to the constructive “dialogue” it promotes between audience and listener.

The proverbs within the *Libretto* function not only as an ideological pattern but also as a practical weapon for Tolson to use against prejudice: they provide the means for Tolson to elevate the estate of the African and African American peoples. As previously mentioned, Tolson devotes eighty-four lines of the “Sol” section of the *Libretto* to a mélange of African proverbs. The lines leading to the deposit of proverbs continue to compound the unconscionable evils of slavery and allow the reader to enter into the slaves’ sufferings. In the opening part of the section, Tolson reveals some of the horrors of the slave trade, specifically the treacherous Middle Passage—“This is the Middle Passage: here / Gehenna hatchways vomit up / The debit pounds of flesh” (149-151). The tension builds as the skulls of the murdered Africans themselves cry out, begging the griot to exact revenge: “*Griots*, the quick owe the quick and the dead. / A man owes man to man!” (168-169). Before the *griot* can respond, Europe, through the words of Eugène Guenier, obdurately denies African history and suffering with the derisive “*Suele de tous les continents...l’Afrique n’a pas d’histoire*” (170-171). Through the guise of the *griot*, the figure who Tolson regales as a “walking encyclopedia” and poet, the response comes to the suffering, the slave trade, the Middle Passage, and the European insult: proverbs. Eighty-four lines of proverbs. Unrelenting, metered, pithy proverbs. To Tolson, these proverbs are the poetry of the Africans—their art, their music, their culture. Because their original musicality was mangled by translation, Tolson restores their artistry and underscores their identity as poems by conforming them to poetic meter. There is history in Africa, and these compact African poems are Tolson’s proof. These proverbs are authorless, they are traditional, and they have history. Their mere existence and their utterance by the poet-warrior *griot* helps bolster

the estate of the African.

Just as the *griot* is a warrior and spokesperson for the common Africans, Tolson believed that poets in general, and he specifically, had a responsibility to act as a prophet or teacher to the masses (Russell 2). In a letter to a former student, he wrote the following:

Now, about the little people. Remember “ideas come from above.” If you went into the street and said to a ditchdigger in Chi, “Who is Shakespeare?” he’d say, “The greatest writer that ever lived.” Now, he wouldn’t know a damned thing about *Hamlet* but he might quote some of THE Bard’s sayings that he picked up from the boys in the ditch. Ideas sift down. (qtd. in Farnsworth 145-146)

Tolson uses this fabricated anecdote to illustrate his attitude toward the so-called “little people.” He was not minimizing their importance, but was rather identifying how ideas typically originate from a single source, and then are adapted by the majority for daily consumption. Thus, it is implied that he expected his poetry to provide ideas that, once sublimated, could arrive at their intended recipients: the repressed classes. To this poet, it is immaterial that the African American knows the Poet himself—what is most important is that they remember the empowering message of his poetry. Therefore, just as parents use proverbs to help their children to learn lessons and understand the effects of their actions more clearly, Tolson was using his poetry to instruct his audience how to view themselves, how to view their history, and how to view their potential as an empowered mass. As the estate of African Americans was quite dismal in the 1940s, Tolson did not necessarily expect that his message would be accepted during his lifetime (Farnsworth 112). Instead, in poems like *Libretto*, he writes for the African diaspora both present and future, working against discrimination and empowering his fellow African Americans through glorifying Africa and its culture.

The *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* itself celebrates the black experience and gives an ample serving of ideas to be sifted down to the masses. There are kernels of truth to be ingested and a people to be restored. Thus, these proverbs are not random occurrences, nor is Tolson’s aesthetic one of pretension or ostentation. In *Libretto*, one can observe proverb and poet working symbiotically, simultaneously borrowing from and reinforcing each other. After examining the structure, purpose, and usage of the proverb within and without Tolson’s poetry, it is possible to conclude that critics such as Redding cannot sustain their arguments of a snobbish, withdrawn Tolson. He was a man who was passionate about his self-assigned cause.

Evidence here presented suggests that his poetry acts as the com-

mon proverb: coded, yet parochial; philosophical, yet terrestrial. Tolson teaches his audience through a coded means and longs to bolster and encourage through his ideas, words that “trickle down” through social strata and through time. Mariann Russell writes that Tolson regarded his *words* as weapons against black oppression (1). They are also his weapon against colonial and neo-colonial ignorance and racism, these evils that were and are endemic worldwide. Thus, the proverb has a dual function—to provide a pattern for the simultaneously transcendent and immanent quality of Tolson’s poetry, and to act as a catalyst for teaching and empowering the African people while elevating them from post-colonial simians to artists in Western eyes.

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