

## **Moving Through Color: Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah***

published in *Kentucky Philological Review* 14 (1999): 27-31.

### **Abstract**

Dove's poetry, unlike that of many of her contemporaries, looks backward toward the period of high modernism for its techniques. She relies on methods like ellipsis, imagistic detail, and depth of symbolism to convey her meaning. Because of these methods, it is difficult to get a precise critical grip on her poetry, for these techniques are necessarily so subtle that they are easily missed. Perhaps this explains the relative dearth of critical attention given to her work. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning 1986 collection, *Thomas and Beulah*, is the poetic story of the lives of her grandparents. Dove's explicit instructions that these poems are to be experienced together in a certain order demonstrates her eagerness to control our interpretation of this volume, and makes this collection of lyrics read like a narrative. The poet's insistence on controlled interpretation also emphasizes two important gestures within the text: the idea of reading backwards to receive a code and apply it, and the idea of color, in all of its racial manifestations, as a progression to be lived through.

### **Article**

Rita Dove's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1986 collection, *Thomas and Beulah*, is the poetic story of the lives of her grandparents. After a dedication to her mother, on the dedication page, the reader is told in boldface type that, "These poems tell two sides of a story and are meant to be read in sequence." Dove's explicit instructions that these poems are to be experienced together in a certain order demonstrates her eagerness to control our interpretation of this volume, and makes this collection of lyrics read like a narrative. The collection itself is divided into two sections, "Mandolin," which tells the story of her grandfather, and "Canary in Bloom," which is the tale of her grandmother. The poet's insistence on controlled interpretation also emphasizes two important gestures within the text: the idea of reading backwards to receive a code and apply it, and the idea of color, in all of its racial manifestations, as a progression to be lived through.

Dove's poetry, unlike that of many of her contemporaries, looks backward toward the period of high modernism for its techniques. She relies on methods like ellipsis, imagistic detail, and depth of symbolism to convey her meaning. Because of these methods, it is difficult to get a precise critical grip on her poetry, for these techniques are necessarily so subtle that they are easily missed. Perhaps this explains the relative dearth of critical attention given to her work. While critics marvel at what she does, scholarship has yet to tell us exactly how she does what she does.<sup>1</sup>

Dove carefully balances colors in *Thomas and Beulah*. She is writing black history, a particular history of two individuals. This history, these people, are woven around events larger than themselves. Thomas and Beulah are the warp of the cloth, while national and international events are the woof. The first color to confront the reader in the initial poem, "The Event," is a racial identifier: "the two Negroes leaning" (4 All parenthetical references are to line numbers). But Dove does not linger on this color. Instead, three lines later, she presents a completely non-racial color: "Thomas' silver falsetto" (7). The next two colorful objects are yoked together, thereby signifying both themselves and a third color, the synthesis of the two. The paddlewheel churns both brown mud and white moonlight (10). After this, another striking color is conjured. The yellow of the bananas in the ship's hold stands like the silver of Thomas' voice, unable to be

pinned to a race (12). Lem speaks the brown of chestnuts (17), and this brown is associated with the green crown of the island (20).

At the end of the poem Dove mentions water twice (23 and 27). This water is interesting for what has already been said of it above in line 10, and for what happens to it in the final line of the poem. The water contains the two opposite colors of white and black. But these two are gently mixed together to create some color that is neither dark nor light, but rather gray. This color serves as a touchstone for the color imagery of the entire book that follows this crucial poem. Just as Lem's death sits like a specter above Thomas' life with Beulah, so too does gray sit behind all other colors. But this gray is not drab or tepid. Rather, it is a collection of opposites fused together. As such, it possesses the strengths of both black and white. Again and again throughout this book, Dove uses gray to show the dance between black and white.

One other color is, at first glance, oddly placed in this poem because it doesn't seem to have racial significance. The silver of Thomas' voice is usually seen on a color wheel as a gray with more reflective qualities. This silver/gray, however, possesses the strength of shirred black and white. But it also contains something extra, an ability to reflect on its own nature, and on the nature of those around it. This is the ultimate description of Thomas' voice, especially when, later in the volume, he produces reflective music with the mandolin. While this gray possesses the dynamism and self-consciousness that have characterized the relationship between black and white in the latter half of this century, Dove presents not the usual black/white tale, but a much more vivid one.

In doing so, she utilizes an oddity of coloration which must be discussed before proceeding. Transparent or translucent objects are mentioned 37 times in these poems, accounting for the third largest "color" group. These transparent or translucent images do not possess a color of their own. Rather, they show the color of objects behind them. Dove creates a color that has no color at all. Examples of such are bodies or glasses of water, windows, cellophane, Scotch tape, or other clear or slightly opaque objects. This color participates in the colors around it just as the silver/gray reflects the colors surrounding it.

A breakdown of the colors Dove uses shows, on a very literal level, how she reaches beyond stereotypical color usage. Her first three predominant colors, white (59 references), yellow (54 references), and transparent/translucent are three colors that are obvious, deliberate choices for her. Black and brown appear far less frequently in the poetry. If Dove were overtly concerned with racial overtones, we would expect some kind of juxtaposition between black and white. Instead, the reader gleans a concern for something beyond race, a rapprochement, a movement, as I will now discuss, toward clarity and understanding.

The main character of the first half of the volume is associated with a specific color. Dove continually presents Thomas' yellow scarf. Even when he is not wearing it, it is used as a strap for his mandolin hanging on the wall. Of course, he is portrayed as what he is, a black man. But his constant association with the color yellow casts a different light upon him. Dove carries this color throughout the first half of the collection, but it is not until this first half has ended that she gives us a way to decode the color. The first poem in the "Canary in Bloom" section, "Taking in Wash," gives us the code to read the colors of the first section.

This reading backward in order to interpret previous imagery is a fascinating exercise that Dove continually demands of her reader in order to gain a full understanding of the poems. For example, the reader does not learn of Lem's death, which occurs in "The Event," until much later in the volume. In the same way, the reader does not learn the code for interpretation of the yellow color symbolism in the "Mandolin" section until that section is over.

Understanding the way color is used in this poem is a first step to decoding the color of the “Mandolin” section. The first color in the poem is Beulah’s father’s nickname for her: “Pearl” (1). This color, appropriately enough, sets the tone for the rest of the poem. A black woman is called something white, not in some attempt to deny her race, but in a verbal embrace of affection, respect, and love. Beulah’s father’s coloration is then described. His skin paled in winter, moving from the brown of buckeyes to the yellow of ginger root (3-5). Beulah’s mother accounts for this through an appeal to his mixed racial heritage. It is the Cherokee in him that creates such a movement. Beulah’s father does not move toward whiteness on a metaphorical level, as his daughter does through his naming of her. Rather, he becomes paler in actuality. After showing white and green as seasonal images (10), the narrator claims that Beulah is “Papa’s girl,” even though she is black (11-12). This linking together of the two characters includes Beulah in this progression from black to yellow, from darkness to vibrancy. The white winter quickly countermands the blackness that precedes it (13). During the time when Beulah’s father turned yellow, Beulah herself turned to the silver/gray of a mirror, which reflected her blackness.

The final colors in the poem dance around one another in a symmetrical way that is reflected in the actions occurring in the poem at that time. Beulah’s mother and father are fighting, for he is drunk and she is doing someone else’s laundry, an act that infuriates him. There is obviously tension here, delicately understated by Dove, but manifested nonetheless in the battle between her colors. First we see the whiteness of the arctic and the hankies (18-19). The final two images are in opposition to this whiteness. Mama is a dark fist (23), and she unleashes her fury in a biblical allusion, swearing to defend her daughter by cutting Papa down like a brown cedar of Lebanon (26). These two colors, each reinforced through duplication, swirl around a central color. Mama stands upon an embroidered red rose, right in the middle of black and white. The clash of these two may produce blood, or it may produce beauty. Whichever they bring forth, one color does not overpower another. They mix together, like the shirred water of “The Event,” to create another color that possesses its own strength. Papa’s color does not move toward its opposite. Mama’s color does not move at all. Beulah’s blackness is called white by her father, and reflected back upon her by the silver/gray mixture of black and white. Black and white then dance together to create something different from both of them.

Here we see Thomas linked to Beulah’s father through the color yellow. At first, Thomas wears his yellow around his neck, either a sign of authority and favor or a yoke of burden. But then the mandolin moves to the wall; Thomas removes his yellow, which is more than Beulah’s father can do. While both are able to move beyond blackness, Thomas alone can control his movement. Beulah’s father is at the mercy of the winter, with its snow and harrowing white light. Thomas, on the other hand, can pick up or put down his new color. In some small way, then, he possesses more control over his destiny than any other significant male in the volume.

Moving backward again to the last poem which features Thomas, we can see his final color progression. “Thomas at the Wheel” is the typically understated description of Thomas’ death by heart attack. Here, in the grip of death, Thomas moves beyond the yellow of this life to the transparency of the next. Dove links the transparent/translucent rainstorm that Thomas encounters to the river that Lem drowned in (1). The black asphalt quickly gives way to the transparent glass doors of a drugstore (4-5). Then this transparency becomes a part of Thomas, as he feels his chest filling with water (9). He is a seed pod floating on a transparent sea (16). He sees writing on the transparent water, and the last thing he imagines is his wife opening a transparent window and missing him (21-23). Thomas’ movement toward yellow has now, in

death, gone beyond that particular color. He ends in a colorless state, as if he were purged of color. Thomas' movement toward the vibrancy and warmth of yellow is not invalidated. It is merely seen as a step in a larger progression toward completion, wherein he allows all colors to flow through him.

But we must also read forward from this midpoint of the volume. The "Canary in Bloom" section gives us its dominant color in its title. Throughout this section, the image of a yellow canary is associated with Beulah. "Taking in Wash," besides breaking the code of "Mandolin," also presents the starting point for Beulah's journey through color. As mentioned previously, she is her father's white pearl, even though she is black. These conflicting colors reach some sort of resolution in the poem through the silver/gray of the mirror that shows her herself. But this mirror does not possess the power of the paddlewheel to mix colors gently. This dichotomy is too much, and Beulah, with her "stricken eyes / scream[s] the house awake" (16-17). So she too moves toward yellow, the yellow of the canary, like her husband and her father. Her movement is encapsulated in the final poem of the volume, where once again we must read backwards in order to break the code of color.

The penultimate poem in the collection, "Company," contains a significant clue concerning the nature of this code of color. The poem begins with the color red, seen before as a sign of beauty or danger (3). This is quickly displaced by Beulah's own image, the yellow canary (4). The canary is pitted against Thomas's dominant symbol, the mandolin (4-5). Dove then brackets the green of spring, the silver of fish, and the red of sirens with two white images, moonlight and salt (6-11). But the most important passage in the poem follows, awash in the white light and flavor that precede it. Beulah makes a telling reference to her relationship with Thomas: "If this is code, / she tells him, listen: we were good, / though we never believed it" (11-13). Beulah validates their separate selves, their separate journeys and symbols, as well as their journey together. She encapsulates their lives, both apart and together, and calls them a code to be read and deciphered. The movement toward yellow can now be seen for what it truly is: a movement toward unity, toward strength, toward goodness.

However, this is not Dove's final color code in this volume. "The Oriental Ballerina," like the section that it closes, calls up its first color in its title. It is significant that this title occurs immediately after Beulah's last words, as the final poem in the volume. In it, we have the culmination of all the color imagery in the collection. Its title gives us Thomas' and Beulah's color. This ballerina is dancing on a white carnation (1). She is not yet bathed in the yellow glow of daylight (3), coming through the transparent windows (4), for the walls are still black with darkness (4). Yet even in their blackness they are tinged with white ghosts of red gardenias (5-6). The ballerina dances on the wallpaper's white carnations in pink slippers (10-11). The background for these carnations is the color of brown grease, brown teabags, and brown walnut veneer (18-19). Meanwhile, in the Orient, people are taking off robes bedecked with red roses (21). The yellow sun finally comes through the transparent windows, and they become translucent (23-24). The yellow sun shines upon the bed, the transparent glass with a yellow straw in it next to the bed, and then on the white pillow and a white handkerchief (26-38). Parenthetically, the yellow of the Orient is bracketed with a silver/gray of mist (35-36). The ballerina then dances in a tunnel of white light, while all around her is black shadow (43-45). Beulah, her head on the white pillow, notices nothing else but this play between white and black (46-47). This is the last thing she sees before she dies.

Dove presents here the interconnectedness of darkness and light, of black or brown and white. At first in the wallpaper, with its oppositional foreground and background, and finally in

Beulah's perception of the ballerina and her surroundings, Dove shows that, at the end of life, black or white does not matter. What remains from the poem is the yellow sun, still shining, and the yellow dancer, still giving order to chaos. Like the spinning paddlewheel of "The Event," the ballerina shirrs white and black to produce something new, with its own energy.

Beulah's death parallels her husband's. She can no longer see colors. Nevertheless, the walls are "exploding with shabby tutus. . ." (52). This explosion must be occurring within Beulah's mind, for she can no longer see the wallpaper. Dove cannot contain this riot of color with single descriptors, for it is all colors, fused together. It is many tutus, all colorful or colorless, exploding within Beulah. Thomas' death drained him of color. Beulah's death fills her with all colors. Dove presents a paradox that solves itself. The absence of color is equal to the possession of all colors, for both go beyond signifying just one thing. Both incorporate everything and nothing. It does not matter whether we call the experience positive or negative, a fulfillment or a purgation. In the final analysis, the result is the same. Thomas and Beulah represent two ways of arriving at the same reality. Both have gone beyond color. Thomas has moved from the Negro leaning on the rail of a riverboat to a man possessing the color of the sun to a transparent man lying on the front seat of a car. Beulah has moved from the juxtaposition of Pearl the black girl to a woman possessing the yellow of a canary to a woman filled with all colors, lying in her bed. Filled or drained, what is left of them is their progression toward universality. We are left with this: the movement beyond what both of these people were to what they become in death, icons of a private history that speaks in universal tones.

### Notes

1. Some of the most perceptive appreciations of Dove's poetry are: "Scars and Wings: Rita Dove's Grace Notes," by Bonnie Costello, in *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991): 434-38; "Crossing Boundaries," by Ekaterini Georgoudaki, in *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991): 419-33; "Four Salvagers Salvaging: New Work by Voigt, Olds, Dove, and McHugh," by Peter Harris, in *Virginia Quarterly Review* 64.2 (1988): 262-76; "The Assembling Vision of Rita Dove," by Robert McDowell, in *Callaloo* 9.1 (1986): 61-70; "The Poems of Rita Dove," by Arnold Rampersad, in *Callaloo* 9.1 (1986): 52-60; and "I and Ideology: Demystifying the Self of Contemporary Poetry," by Gary Waller, in *Denver Quarterly* 18.3: 123-138.

## The Poems

### The first poem in "Mandolin"

#### The Event

Ever since they'd left the Tennessee ridge  
with nothing to boast of  
but good looks and a mandolin,

The two Negroes leaning  
on the rail of a riverboat  
were inseparable: Lem plucked

to Thomas' silver falsetto.  
But the night was hot and they were drunk.  
The spat where the wheel

churned mud and moonlight,  
they called to the tarantulas  
down among the bananas

to come out and dance.  
You're so fine and mighty; let's see  
what you can do, said Thomas, pointing

to a tree capped island.  
Lem stripped, spoke easy: Them's chestnuts,  
I believe. Dove

quick as a gasp. Thomas, dry  
on deck, saw the green crown shake  
as the island slipped

under, dissolved  
in the thickening stream.  
At his feet

a stinking circle of rags,  
the half-shell mandolin.  
Where they wheel turned the water

gently shirred.

## **The first poem in “Canary in Bloom”**

### **Taking in Wash**

Papa called her Pearl when he came home drunk, swaying as if the wind touched only him. Towards winter his skin paled, buckeye to ginger root, cold drawing the yellow out. The Cherokee in him, Mama said. Mama never changed: when the dog crawled under the stove and the back gate slammed, Mama hid the laundry. Sheba barked as she barked in snow or clover, a spoiled and ornery bitch.

She was Papa’s girl, black though she was. Once, in winter, she walked through a dream all the way down the stairs to stop at a mirror, a beast with stricken eyes who screamed the house awake. Tonight

every light hums, the kitchen arctic with sheets. Papa is making the hankies sail. Her foot upon a silk stitched rose, she waits until he turns, his smile sliding all over. Mama a tight dark fist. Touch that child

and I’ll cut you down  
just like the cedar of Lebanon.

## **The final poem in “Mandolin”**

### **Thomas at the Wheel**

This, then, the river he had to swim.  
Through the wipers the drugstore  
shouted, lit up like a casino,  
neon script leering from the shuddering asphalt.

Then the glass doors flew apart  
and a man walked out to the curb  
to light a cigarette. Thomas thought  
the sky was emptying itself as fast  
as his chest was filling with water.

Should he honk? What a joke-  
he couldn't ungrip the steering wheel.  
The man looked him calmly in the eye  
and tossed the match away.

And now the street dark, not a soul  
nor its brother. He lay down across  
the seat, a pod set to sea,  
a kiss unpuckering. He watched  
the slit eye of the glove compartment,  
the prescription inside,

he laughed as he thought Oh  
the writing on the water. Thomas imagined  
his wife as she awoke missing him,  
cracking a window. He heard sirens  
rise as the keys swung, ticking.

## The penultimate poem in “Canary in Bloom”

### Company

No one can help him anymore  
Not the young thing next door  
in the red pedal pushers,  
not the canary he drove distracted

with his mandolin. There'll be  
no more trees waking him in moonlight,  
nor a single dry spring morning  
when the fish are lonely for company.

She's standing there telling him: give it up.  
She is weary of sirens and his face  
worn with salt. If this is code,

She tells him, listen: we were good,  
though we never believed it.  
And now he can't even touch her feet.

## **The final poem in “Canary in Bloom”**

### **The Oriental Ballerina**

twirls in the tips of a carnation  
while the radio scratches out a morning hymn,  
Daylight has not ventured as far

as the windows-the walls are still dark,  
shadowed with the ghosts  
of oversized gardenias. The ballerina

pirouettes to the wheeze of the old  
rugged cross, she lifts  
her shoulders past the edge

of the jewelbox lid. Two pink slippers  
touch the ragged petals, no one  
should have feet that small! In China

they do everything upside down:  
this ballerina has not risen but drilled  
a tunnel straight to America

where the bedrooms of the poor  
are papered in vulgar flowers  
on a background the color of grease, of

teabags of cracked imitation walnut veneer.  
On the other side of the world  
they are shedding robes sprigged with

roses, roses drifting with a hiss  
to the floor by the bed  
as here, the sun finally strikes the windows

suddenly opaque,  
noncommittal as shields. In this room  
is a bed where the sun has gone

walking. Where a straw nods over  
the lip of its glass and a hand  
reaches for a tissue, crumpling it to a flower.

The ballerina has been drilling all night!  
She flaunts her skirts like sails,

whirling in a disk so bright,

so rapidly she is standing still.

The sun walks the bed to the pillow  
and pauses for breath (in the Orient,

breath floats like mist  
in the fields), hesitating  
at a knotted handkerchief that has slid

on its string and has lodged beneath  
the right ear which discerns  
the most fragile music

where there is none. The ballerina dances  
at the end of a tunnel of light,  
she spins on her impossible toes-

the rest is shadow.

The head on the pillow sees nothing  
else, though it feels the sun warming

its cheeks. There is no China;  
no cross, just the papery kiss  
of a kleenex above the stink of camphor,

the walls exploding with shabby tutus. . . .