Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

140

Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 140

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

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Poetry Criticism

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (*NCLC*), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (*LC*), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (*CMLC*), *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism.* Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Rita Dove
1952-

American poet, essayist, novelist, playwright, and short story writer.

For further information on the life and career of Rita Dove, see *PC,* Volume 6.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important poets of her generation, Dove combines personal experiences and perceptions with social and historical concerns. She is best known for the 1986 volume *Thomas and Beulah,* which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry, and for her service as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993-1995; she was the youngest person to hold that position and the first African American to do so.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born on August 28, 1952, in Akron, Ohio, Dove is the daughter of Ray Dove, a research chemist, and Elvira Hord Dove, an avid reader who instilled a love of reading in her daughter. Dove was an outstanding student in high school and graduated in 1970 as a Presidential Scholar, honored as one of the top one hundred students in America. Dove attended Miami University of Ohio, earning a B.A., summa cum laude, in 1973; she studied in Germany the following year as a Fulbright Scholar, and then enrolled at the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, earning an M.F.A. in 1977. Dove married Fred Viebahn, a writer, in 1979; they have one child, Aviva Chantal Tamu Dove-Viebahn. In 1981 Dove published her first volume of poetry and a year later began teaching creative writing at Arizona State University. She remained there until 1989 when she took a teaching position at the University of Virginia; since 1993, she has held the position of Commonwealth Professor of English. She served as the Writer-in-Residence at the Tuskegee Institute in 1982, and has been a judge for numerous poetry contests, awards, and scholarships. Dove herself has won a great many awards for her writing, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Humanities Medal, the Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Medal, and most recently, the National Medal of Arts presented by President Obama in 2011. She has been awarded the Fulbright, the Guggenheim, the Mellon, and the Chubb fellowships, and has received twenty-two honorary doctorates from colleges and universities, including Boston College, the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, and Columbia University. Dove and her husband make their home in Charlottesville, Virginia.

MAJOR WORKS

Dove's poetry is characterized by highly controlled language and structure. Her subject matter includes African American history and racial issues, but in a way that addresses a broad audience across racial and ethnic boundaries. Elements of classical mythology are included in much of her poetry, as are references to contemporary political and social issues. The first of Dove's volumes to attract critical attention was *The Yellow House on the Corner,* published in 1980, featuring the individual poem "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee in a Dream," a piece that led to the charge that Dove was critical of the Black Arts movement. *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. Loosely based on members of Dove's own family—her maternal grandparents—the work sets their domestic life against the social and historical events of four decades in America—from the Great Depression to the Kennedy assassination. In 1989, *Grace Notes* was published, containing autobiographical elements involving Dove's personal and professional roles. It contains the individual poems "Pastoral" and "Poem in Which I Refuse Contemplation"; the former concerns Dove's role as a mother and the latter involves her position as a daughter. Relationships between mothers and daughters are also featured in the 1995 collection, *Mother Love,* beginning with the Demeter/Persephone myth. Dove's most recent volume of poetry is the 2009 work, *Sonata Mulattica.*

Dove served as editor of *The Best American Poetry 2000* and of *The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry* in 2011, a post that generated a fair amount of controversy over her choice of which poets to include (and which to exclude). In addition to her poetry, Dove has published two collections of short stories, a novel, a verse play, and an essay collection.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Dove has always resisted critical attempts to make her work conform to expectations, either in terms of race or in terms of literary genres. In an interview with William Walsh (see Further Reading), the poet reports that early in her career "editors and reviewers would ask—What is this poem about?—meaning this poem doesn't sound black." Malin Pereira also reports that "Dove's culturally mixed subjectivity and desire . . . do not always mesh with the black nationalist protocols of race in place in the 1970s, when she first defined herself as a poet." N. S. Boone compares Dove's work to that of her poetic predecessor Audre Lorde and finds that "Dove's poetry fails politically where . . . Lorde's succeeds." According to Boone, "since Dove's political consciousness valorizes pragmatic political individualism, she is unable to clearly align herself with or against important political movements, leaving her readers wondering, at times, which side she is on."

Dove experienced similar difficulties regarding the crossing of generic boundaries and has also been criticized for her use of traditional forms, such as the sonnet, which is considered outdated and even patriarchal by some modern women writers. However, Dove rejects such claims, according to Therese Steffen, who believes that in Dove's work, the sonnet's "charmed structure . . . acts like a talisman against the vicissitudes of fortune and serves as a sanctuary while chaos reigns outside." Dove's response to her detractors has been to keep writing according to her own expectations rather than those of critics and reviewers.

Steffen also discusses Dove's use of classical mythology in her poetry, particularly in the sonnet cycle *Mother Love,* in which "Dove uses and recharges the sovereignty of two significant structures: the theme of myth and the form of the sonnet." The poet employed the classical Oedipus story as the basis of her verse drama about a slave plantation in South Carolina, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994). Pat Righelato examines Dove's use of history and mythology, contending that the poet's "expression of history," which references figures from Medusa to Rosa Parks, "is the most diverse in form and range of subject in contemporary American poetry." In addition to mythology and history, another source for Dove's poetry has been the work of William Shakespeare. Two of her poems, "Shakespeare Say" and "In the Old Neighborhood" are discussed by Peter Erickson, who believes that the two different images of the Bard offered in these poems "need to be read in [the] larger context of the history of African-American responses to Shakespeare" from W. E. B. Du Bois, who found connections between Shakespeare and himself, to James Baldwin, who did not. According to Erickson, Dove's poems demonstrate "the extraordinary range that Dove encompasses and, in particular, her capacity to embrace both sides of the Baldwin-Du Bois opposition." Ultimately, however, Erickson contends that "in both poems the allusion to Shakespeare prompts not an occasion for simple celebration but rather an exploration of a problematic inheritance."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Ten Poems 1977
The Only Dark Spot in the Sky 1980
The Yellow House on the Corner 1980
Mandolin 1982
Museum 1983
Thomas and Beulah 1986
The Other Side of the House 1988
Grace Notes 1989
Selected Poems 1993
Mother Love 1995
On the Bus with Rosa Parks 1999
Sonata Mulattica 2009

Other Major Works

Fifth Sunday (short stories) 1985
Through the Ivory Gate (novel) 1992
The Darker Face of the Earth: A Verse Play in Fourteen Scenes (verse play) 1994
The Poet's World (essays) 1995
American Smooth (short stories) 2004

CRITICISM

Rita Dove and Malin Pereira (interview date 1999)

SOURCE: Dove, Rita, and Pereira, Malin. "Going Up Is a Place of Great Loneliness." In *Conversations with Rita Dove,* edited by Earl G. Ingersoll, pp. 148-73. Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2003.

[*In the following interview, Dove and Pereira discuss Dove's poetry, fiction, and drama, as well as her relationship to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.*]

[*Pereira*]: *There's been a lot of excitement recently about your play* The Darker Face of the Earth *being performed at the Kennedy Center. I understand that you have made several revisions to the play and Story Line Press has issued a revised edition. What kinds of changes did you make? How substantial are they?*

[Dove]: Well, the ending is different. The revision actually came about after I saw some of the scenes put on their feet, as they say in the theater, which means having actors read the lines and try to walk through them. The history of the play is very strange. I wrote it without knowing what the theater world was like, and there were other things happening in my life, so I finally decided, No one will do this play because it's too big, etc., and I put it away. It's only because my husband kept bugging me every five years or so to do something that I finally rewrote it, and Story Line Press published it in 1994. At that point I really did assume that the play was going to be on the page and that was it, and maybe someday when I was dead someone would do it out of pity or whatever.

When the Oregon Shakespeare Festival was interested in the play, I realized I had an opportunity to see if what I thought would work on stage would indeed work on stage. A lot of the revisions came about from my just not feeling comfortable with some of the scenes and the pacing. I did add a couple of scenes as I realized that certain characters were more stock than essential, and that we needed to feel that they had a full life, even if we didn't know what the life was. These are complicated human beings who are bringing everything from their past to the pressure of that moment. For instance, there is now a scene between Phebe and Augustus, because Phebe became embittered over being left, and I actually liked her as a character.

I was exhausted by the time I finished that version. I thought, OK, that's enough. Also, I did change the ending. It's essentially the same tragedy, except that Augustus does live at the end of the new version; it's just not a life worth living. With this version what happens is that Amalia kills herself; also Phebe is now in there too because I thought it was essential to have her there. As the three of them piece together, in this moment of craziness, what exactly the story is, that indeed Amalia is Augustus's mother, each reacts in a different way, and Amalia then kills herself to try to save Augustus, which means that the revolutionaries think that he did what he was supposed to do and he's a hero. But what kind of hero is that, who's just realized that he's lost everything that could make him happy?

That change came about because of my daughter, who had participated in all of the sessions at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She loved it and would sit through all these rehearsals and make suggestions. It was great. One night I was still perturbed at the ending. I had put Phebe in it, but I still didn't like the way the insurrectionists came in—bang, bang, everyone was dead. So I was fiddling with it, and she came down (she was supposed to be in bed), and I said to her, "I was just messing around with this ending." And she said, "You know, I think he should live. There are worse things than death." This is a twelve year old who really doesn't know what she's saying, but I suddenly realized, Yes, that's even worse.

It was interesting that in some of the workshops, that was one of the questions that was presented to me, because in the original Oedipus, of course, he does live. People asked, "Why didn't you follow the myth exactly?" I don't follow it exactly because I didn't want the play to be a kind of checklist against a Greek myth. I couldn't find the right way I could make it believable that he could live. I hadn't found the plot that would make him live and why that would be worth it for him, not just to fulfill the myth. And that was the moment that did it. So those are the major changes. Hector's part also has been deepened. I didn't want him to be merely a crazy man in the swamp; I really wanted everything that he said to make eminent sense if you knew the whole story. So he does have a couple of monologues, but the basic story is still the same. And that all came about working with these wonderful actors.

So it was the putting the play into production that offered these realizations—it became apparent that certain things needed to be changed. I guess that's typical in theater.

Yes, it is very typical in theater, from what I understand. I found it really exciting, because as a poet, someone who's used to doing everything in one circle of lamplight, this was exhilarating. It was also exasperating sometimes—too many voices. I can really understand now how people can lose perspective in the theater, because there are a thousand things to think about. Most of the time I had to simply forget everything everyone said and go back out to my cabin and make my decision. It was a fascinating experience. As a poet (because I really think of myself as a poet), one of the things that I learned artistically in rewriting the play was how much power in theater a silence or gesture can make. It's very close to poetry and how what you don't say has to be contained in those white spaces, but also in the sound of the word. That's one of the essences of poetry that always thrills me and keeps me going back to it.

Your earlier poetry often dealt with the historical past, but in **Grace Notes** *and* **Mother Love** *you seem to*

have moved more into the personal present, and you've commented in other interviews about your willingness to now come into the personal a bit more. You called it at one point coming home, writing your way back home. How does The Darker Face of the Earth, *which I read as a play about the historical foundations of American culture, relate to that?*

Well, that's a great question. There are two parts to my answer. First of all, because *Darker Face of the Earth* has such a long history; in a very interesting way it's an early work that I came back to. I began working on that play about the same time that I finished my first book, ***The Yellow House on the Corner.*** So in that sense, all of the themes of *Darker Face* were very close to the slave narratives of ***Yellow House on the Corner,*** filling in the past, trying to get into the past as a person and to humanize it so that eventually I could get to my own past without being self-indulgent. However, trying to go back to the play and rewrite it for production felt like another kind of coming home, because now I had to inject a lot of my own emotions and takes on things in characters to make sure they were alive and not just mythic representations walking around saying their lines and getting off the stage.

The first version of the play is clean, but it's very quick, and it's more pageant than personalized. There's a little bit of me in every one of those characters that wasn't necessarily there in the first version, particularly Amalia, and it was very important to allow her to speak. In the end, I didn't want any easy answers: I didn't want anyone in the audience coming away thinking, These are the bad guys, these are the good guys; slavery is bad, slave owners are bad, look at the noble savage, and all that. I wanted all the characters to be fighting for their own individual realizations against the system. The big bad guy is the system, obviously. But that's all the kind of stuff I learned by finally coming around, coming home in the previous volumes.

Interesting. So do you think that in some way the personal present and national history end up being connected for you?

They've always been.

Why or how?

I think they both have something to do, a lot to do, with being female and being Black. From as early as I can remember, I always felt that there was a world with lots of "historical" events going on, and that my viewpoint was not a direct one, but I was looking at it from the side. I'm talking about when I was small. First it started out as a female issue, because I think for most kids there's a point when if they're in a minority, they realize they're a minority. It's very strange: "Oh, really, I'm not like you?" It usually comes from the outside somehow. But as a girl, growing up in a really traditional family, with a mother who was a housekeeper and a father who was a chemist, I always felt that there was this view of how the world should run, and then I was supposed to fit into this somehow, and I didn't think all the rules were quite right. Both my parents would say, "Education is the key," and "You can be anything you want to be," and then I'd look at the magazines and think, I can't be everything I want to be unless something's going to change. So that meant that I didn't take the historical at face value. Ever. Of course, W. E. B. Du Bois talks about the double vision when you're a minority. You see what the mainstream is immersed in, which is reality, but you also see the other reality. He talks about what advantage this kind of binocular vision gives you: it gives you perspective, it gives you depth.

As I grew up, I felt enormously lucky that, because of my circumstances, I had this vision. I never believed that the newspapers were true necessarily: that was just one version of the truth, and it's interesting, it's pretty good, but I'll wait to see what judgment is going to come in. So that's why the personal present and the historical past have always been connected for me.

On the other hand, language was always fascinating to me even from a young age. I think with most children it's fascinating at an existential level; the sounds that you make are wonderful, regardless of whether they make sense. There were several kinds of ways in which language was stylized in my life. I'm talking about storytellers in the family, the good ones, the ones who could tell the story you've heard three thousand times and suddenly it's a good story, from those to the kind of oral games you play on the street as a Black kid, from the dozens to what that implies and how the language becomes plastic, all of that and then also the literature. To read someone like Shakespeare and think, This language is part of the emotion, and there are all these different levels to language and different tones and qualities.

All of that, too, was experience which is perceived directly as one part of life, but if you're going to be a writer or are going to be an artisan, you choose a medium. The trick is to use this essentially artificial, made-up medium to try to imitate that immediacy, which it can never do because it's never immediate, but you give the illusion of immediacy. I was fascinated by that from a very young age. It was probably part of the reason why when I was in second grade I wrote this silly novel called "Chaos" where I took my

spelling words and wrote chapter by chapter according to the list of spelling words. Part of the fascination with that was to see how the words themselves, the language, these symbols would build the reality.

So in some ways writing your personal present is rewriting national history, adding the version that wasn't represented, or writing from the center that was marginalized.

That's one part of it. That's absolutely one part of it, with the understanding that my personal history is only one personal history. Also, I think that because I was acutely aware, even at a young age, that my perception of an "official" historical event was very different from that "official" version, I thought that that must be the same for every person, if they stopped to think about it. There's a war, and people can talk about casualties in the war, but if you've had someone die in the war, it takes on a completely different cast, and if you're a refugee from that war it takes on a completely different cast. All these kinds of things I think are fascinating, and in the end, unless you have a writer, or artist, or an oral history, the only version left is the one that is the official version, and I really resist that. I feel that all of us cannot ever forget that the official version is merely a construct that we may need to order our time line, but there are human beings, all sorts of individual human beings, to punctuate it.

Which of course is what you're doing in **Museum,** *writing poems of "unofficial" history. It reminds me of James Baldwin when he talks about how the sad thing about white America is that it often believes its own myths, believes the official version of history, and I find that somewhat true when I teach. So many of my students just hang on to those official versions of history.*

And they can be utterly devastated when they realize that they're not true. I think that's why Vietnam and the '60s were so explosive and powerful. It was the moment when we realized that the myth didn't hold. Then the '70s and '80s became this retreat to "It's just me and I'm going to do this."

How does it feel now not to have all of those responsibilities of being Poet Laureate?

It feels wonderful, actually. That's a terrible thing to say. It does feel wonderful. It also is not completely over, either, and I think that one of the hardest periods of time for me was right after it was over, because I naively assumed that when Bob Haas took it over I could go back to my life. But I couldn't go back to my life. There are residuals, and the letters and the requests keep coming, but I don't have the outside justification to say, "Well, I'm going to go on a half-time teaching load." So it took me, and it's still taking me, a lot of time to figure out how to conduct my life so that I have one. Since I was raised to be a dutiful daughter, I am someone who answers letters; I think Toni Morrison is the same way. We're Midwestern. We know how our parents raised us. In a way you get raised to try to fit into the Northern world. The Southern roots are very close: my grandparents came from the South. They came to the North and went into these factories and then had to build a new neighborhood, a new home, and the rules of social behavior were fairly rigorous. They say to the children, "This is how you have to be," and you do it because you honor yourself as well as your community, which really puts a double whammy on you. So there I was, trying to answer these letters and finally—I really think it took until about last year—I realized I don't have to answer all of these letters. I can actually just not answer, and they'll write again.

It's apparent that music, your training in classical music, has been important for your work. It comes up thematically in so many ways. One thing that I'm curious about is how that training influences your work structurally. Have you thought about that at all?

Oh, I've thought about it. I haven't thought about it in any kind of critical way. First of all, at a very basic level, I believe that language sings, has its own music, and I'm very conscious of the way something sounds, and that goes from a lyric poem all the way to an essay or to the novel, that it has a structure of sound which I think of more in symphonic terms for the larger pieces. I really do think that sonnets to me are like art songs. That's one thing. I also think that resolution of notes, the way that a chord will resolve itself, is something that applies to my poems—the way that, if it works, the last line of the poem, or the last word, will resolve something that's been hanging for a while. And I think musical structure affects even how the poems are ordered in a book. Each of the poems plays a role: sometimes it's an instrument, sometimes several of them are a section, and it all comes together that way too.

What we were considering in my class on your work, and I think we were applying this to **Yellow House on the Corner** *and then to* **Museum,** *was that you often have five-sectioned works, and we were wondering if you were structuring them along the idea of five movements for longer symphonies. You have moved away from that, of course, in more recent volumes, but especially since those were your two first times structuring a longer piece like that, I was wondering if you just went to that structure.*

This is fascinating, because the book I'm working on now has five sections, and I remember feeling, Oh, I like these five sections.

Yes, comfy.

Really comfy. I think that three-sectioned books put too much emphasis on that middle section being solid and holding on to the ends, and when you have five sections it takes the edge off putting such great importance into the beginning. One of the things I do when I'm ordering and structuring the books is to try to thwart readers' notions that the first poem is going to give them the key and now here we go! But all it is is just an opening.

I teach it that way.

There's also this sense that if you take it as the key, then what doors does it open further down? It's more like, Here's an opening motif, and then it's going to be embellished, and then it may change, and then it may go minor, and then it does all these things, so it isn't like this is the truth, but this is *one* truth.

Very true of **Museum,** *too. You play with the opening motifs along the way. It's really diverse; it's not like the answer is at the beginning. Well, you've published a lot besides poetry—short stories, essays, plays, and a novel—and I know from other interviews that you feel that crossing genres is very necessary and a good thing for a writer. I've wondered whether you find that there is a specific relationship between your poetry and your non-poetry that you'd be able to articulate. Do you think, for example, that certain subjects are inappropriate for poetry, and that then you turn to other venues?*

When an idea occurs to me, sometimes it's an idea, sometimes it's a line, sometimes it's a word, sometimes it's a character, but at the moment when a piece begins, gets its genesis, and I feel that something is going to happen and become a piece of writing, I know what form it's in already. I can't think of an instance where I've tried it out as a poem and said, "Oh no, this should be a short story," or something like that. The only case I can think of where there are almost duplicates is the scene in the novel on a beach with guitar-playing, and then also in the poem **"Summit Beach,"** but I deliberately decided to try it both ways. It was willed. The story came first, and then I thought I really would like to try this from a different angle, just that moment. There hasn't been that kind of crossover where I've said, "Oh, this didn't work, or that didn't work."

I think it must happen further back in the brain, in a series of thought processes, so that by the time it comes to my consciousness, all those decisions have been made. I think that has something to do with the way that the language itself gets used in various genres, the weight of each word, too. Because I remember when I was working on the novel, at first—and I knew it was going to be a novel—I thought, Oh, I don't want to write a novel—too big, too many words, it's such a waste. This is just how you think as a poet. Then, until I could figure out how the weight of each word and the weight of each sentence wove the story, I was just writing a lot of verbiage.

Once I figured out two things, the key signature and the time, then it became much easier. I figured out how each individual note—you've got me talking in musical terms!—how much weight each different note had and what kind of time signature I was going to have in this piece. All artists can fall into the traps of whatever we do well, and that for me is to write a poem. To write in other genres offers stretch and a counterbalance to that trap. The other genres help remind me that there's a value to length, there's a value to overload, there's something to lushness, too, and the work can be just as powerful as something austere.

Which is mostly your aesthetic in your poetry.

It is.

You don't tend to go on and on and on.

No, I don't, but someday. . . . If you go on and on, it has to have a purpose. I get really frustrated with poems that go on, but the words can be sloughed away. I think there's a way to go on and on and still have it—the intent. But I do find, in relationships between the genres, that when I'm writing poetry, I very often read prose, and vice versa.

You don't want to be influenced by the poets when you're writing poetry.

It's not just that I don't want to be influenced, because when writing a poem I will go to the bookshelf and get a book because I know there's something in there that I need to read again. But I don't want to sit down and read lots of poetry books while writing poetry. It muddies the water. It must have something to do with the musical training, because when I'm in another country I can pick up languages fairly quickly; I do it mostly, I think, through imitation and the intonation of the language, the way it falls. For example, I speak German fluently, but I have great difficulty if we go somewhere and someone speaks German with an accent, like a Swiss German. Or if someone speaks English with an accent, after an hour, I start to talk like that, and I have to go away! Wales and Ireland