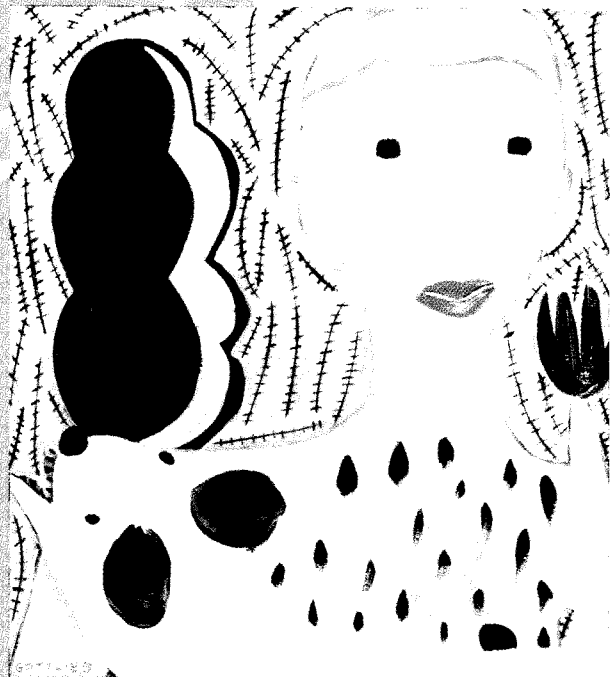


Bellingham Review

volume XXIX
no.2 issue 58



Fall 2006

\$ 7 US \$ 9 Canada

“TAKING THE CARDS YOU’RE DEALT AND BUILDING A HOUSE”: AN INTERVIEW WITH RITA DOVE

Robb St. Lawrence

*D*uring the week preceding Halloween of 2005, Rita Dove—former US poet laureate and current poet laureate of the Commonwealth of Virginia—visited the campus of Western Washington University. On the evening of October 27th—two days following the death of civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks—Ms. Dove read from *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, selections from her last collection, *American Smooth*, and a new prose poem, “Prose in a Small Space.” The audience was the largest I’ve seen at a poetry reading, and a palpable charge filled the room. The troughs of quiet that followed each poem held fathoms. The following afternoon, I attended a Q & A session with Ms. Dove, held in conjunction with an undergraduate class at Western—the same attentiveness, the same charge, held the air in that space. Ms. Dove was a thoroughly engaged and entertaining speaker, and afterwards we drove to the Fairhaven district of Bellingham, where we settled in at the Harris Avenue Café. In a cozy window seat, we set up shop and spoke for an hour before walking down the street to Ms. Dove’s hotel and departing.

Rita Dove has published more than seven collections of poetry, a book of short stories, a novel, a book of essays, a play, and a song cycle for soprano. Her most recent poetry collection, *American Smooth*, was published in September 2004 by Norton.

Robb St. Lawrence: The epigraphs to the sections in *American Smooth*—can you talk a little bit about those?

Rita Dove: The epigraphs are all remarks made by Tuvok the Vulcan in the TV series *Star Trek Voyager*. I am a Trekkie, I admit it freely—mostly *Next Generation*, but I did watch *Voyager* and *Enterprise*. I admire the *Star Trek* universe for the way it has always encapsulated our social structures and put them on spaceships, and I love the way

they disregard race and other "differences." There are all sorts of inter-species love affairs; you can even have a black Vulcan—so what?—they don't make a big deal out of it. It's fascinating how easily that goes over with the American public. When I was putting together *American Smooth*, I wanted epigraphs. I like using epigraphs; I like leading the reader into a new section not by direct proclamation, but by casting the mood. It started with just one Tuvok quote, something that had been in my notebook. Then I thought: Why not have all the quotations be from Tuvok? For me, the character of Tuvok embodies another aspect of what I consider to be *American Smooth*—that is, the way the Voyager series was able to knit the idea of a dispassionate, black Vulcan into the Star Trek universe. After all, he runs against type—I mean, normally one would not automatically associate a dispassionate temperament with a black man.

RS: Like the Klingons...

RD: Ah, the Klingons, who are dark and violent—though they do have sharp noses! Then there are the Ferengis—they are more problematic, I agree...But Tuvok was an inspired bit of casting. And because he's supposed to be objective and logical, he's allowed to say things that no one else can say. His is this voice of wisdom tinged with irony, but irony that has no malice in it. That tone of voice is what I wanted to introduce each section. I did not credit Tuvok on the section page because I didn't want the reader to leap up at the first whiff of Popular Culture as if to say, what's this doing here? I didn't want the distraction of PC-belles lettre stuff like that—just listen to what he says, OK? And yet I wanted to pique your interest, to have you wonder: "Where are these quotes coming from? They don't sound like the poet." So I put the acknowledgments and notes at the end of the book.

RS: Coming from a similar place of surprise and interest, I have to ask about "Meditation at Fifty Yards, Moving Target," which is a poem dealing with our relationship to guns. There's this great line: "You could wound the burglar and kill your child / sleeping in the next room all with one shot," which has that fantastic enjambment on "You could wound the burglar and kill your child." I'm curious about what motivated the placement of that poem in the manuscript?

RD: It was a very difficult poem to position in the book, for several reasons. Primarily because of rather common reactions to the topic, of course—many people register revulsion. "What is this doing in a poetry book?" they want to know. They don't want to hear about guns in an artistic context. And then, once you've read the poem, it's very hard to

leave it behind. So it put me in a tough spot. One thing I knew for certain: I did not want this to be the last poem read, even in a section. Its placement was determined mostly by what I didn't want it to do: I did not want to give its impact a chance to settle; I wanted that discomfort to carry over into the next poem, to keep niggling at you. Interestingly enough, it was always in the first section of the book; I felt that the sooner it appeared, the more time would remain to let its politics inform the rest of the book. Nowhere in the collection did I want complacency to develop: "Look what we do in America, we laugh, we dance, we make our own music called jazz; isn't it wonderful?" The guns had to appear before the World War I soldiers and as closely as possible to the Charlton Heston poem—that was my little joke. Actually, "Meditation" needed to appear after "Two for the Montrose Drive-In" and not beforehand, otherwise one would be thinking only of Heston as the NRA guy. He's another paradox, along with Tuvok. Even the Good is laced with a touch of Evil. In "Two for the Montrose Drive-In," I wanted readers to encounter Charlton Heston as he was in those great Biblical movies, young and valiant and righteous—followed by the guns of "Meditation at Fifty Yards, Moving Target" to remind you that the NRA is waiting on the far end of the trajectory...yet again, guns and warfare are part of our social identity. That's what *American Smooth* is all about—our social identity.

At this point, the interview is interrupted while the waitress comes to take our order. I order a blueberry muffin, and Rita Dove orders a tuna melt. We each ask for some coffee as well. On the tape, a great clatter sounds from the background, as a small child cries out and pans rattle in the kitchen. While all this is going on, we discuss the use of sectioning in the construction of her manuscripts, and this leads into conversation about a specific section of American Smooth.

RS: I do want to talk about the "Not Welcome Here" section, the section with the soldiers. What draws you to World War I?

RD: The initial pull was occasioned by something quite small, a detail—in a library book a photograph of the 369th, the legendary black regiment, marching in the 1919 victory parade in New York City. Well, my father had been a soldier in World War II and had had some pretty weird experiences in the segregated U.S. Armed Forces—yet here was this photo of black soldiers taken a quarter century earlier...and it was a startling picture because they were so absolutely erect and rigid in

their finery. The caption read, "The Harlem Hellfighters Jazz Band," and I thought: Well, look at them, they're in perfect sync! That's how it started. The more I read up on them, the more insane it got: how the U.S. Armed Forces refused to deploy black troops because of the segregation laws, so they were finally put under French command and earned French commendations, etc. No one could have predicted, least of all me, that I would end up writing about war—it certainly wasn't a topic I felt predisposed to explore. But their situation intrigued me: What did one soldier feel, I wondered, marching out there to fight for this country that didn't even want him, to fight for an ideal his country claimed to espouse, a claim he knew to be blatantly false—what could that have been like? Then the first poems began to emerge. I read more about World War I and these soldiers: I found some wonderful testimonies, actual accounts in their own words. The project grew on me, impressed itself upon me. I started out with one poem, I wrote another, which led to the next and before long...

RS: There is a great moment of collision, between Lieutenant James Reese Europe—the band leader—and this dance troupe... Which seems so fortuitous, but just a lovely moment in history where we have these stuffed coats, basically, having a ragtime orchestra playing for them, and you have that line, "...who don't know how to hear us."

RD: Yeah, who don't know how to hear.

RS: Stumbling upon it in research would be such a fantastic moment.

RD: Oh, yes it was. These soldier poems had been a long time in the making—it had been at least fifteen years since I wrote the first of them: then, after a flurry of ideas and inspirations, I had several poems, just sitting there... "What am I going to do with these?" I thought; eventually I turned to other, unrelated poems, all the while painfully aware of these soldier poems in the background. It wasn't until I started dancing that things began to cohere. When the title of the manuscript materialized—*American Smooth* not just as a dance term but as an umbrella concept, what it means to smooth over disjunctures and create something more beautiful than the isolated parts—the soldiers found their home.

Because of my dancing I knew of Irene and Vernon Castle: when I researched further, I discovered that James Europe—whom I had written about as a military band leader—had played for them in the prewar years. What a weird kind of rightness: to start with the World War I soldiers but abandon the project, then take up a terribly frivolous hobby years later, only to find that I'd circled back to encounter one of

the soldiers on the dance floor. It was fabulous, a great moment.

RS: You're an avid ballroom dancer. Has an attention to dance at all changed the attention you bring to poems, or made anything differently explicit?

RD: I'm quite sure it has influenced my relationship to poetry and the way language works in poetry, although I prefer to avoid delving too deeply or intellectually into specifics here—I'll leave that up to scholars. The poems in *American Smooth* are more playful than most of my earlier work; there's looser syntactical cohesion. Not that they are falling apart at the seams—there's just a rangier line. And that comes from dance, an actual physical appreciation of trying to express oneself. Let me put it this way: Verbal expression engages the intellect; musical expression engages the ear and breath; it's physical to some extent, though taste and sight are not involved. But when you dance, the whole body is engaged; you have to breathe, move in time to the music that you embody...and it's visual as well, because you are creating a *movie*, so to speak. Dancers talk about striking your line: if someone were to snap a photo at a given instant, will you have good leg lines, shoulder-to-fingertip extension, torso torque, head pose: will it be a picture moment? Picture moments are sort of like having images in poetry: wanting your image to be gorgeous and piercing, to strike the reader breathless—and at the same time, knowing that the poem has to keep moving, *legato*: it has to move on. I don't know quite how, but this concept has affected the way the lines lilt in my work.

RS: There also seems to be a different attention to the form of the dance poems themselves, especially "Bolero" or "Rhumba."

RD: In those poems I was trying to render the essence of each particular dance form. Rhumba, for instance, is called the dance of love, and my poem "Rhumba" is supposed to be a love story, a drama between a man and a woman, opposites who keep bouncing off of each other only to come together again, the push and the pull—it's a seduction, but it's a seduction that's quite serious, serious and intense. Well, you can't tell a love story in third person omniscient! Let's look at the two people dancing: Wouldn't it be great if we could be in each of their heads, inside their thoughts, dancing back and forth? So I opted for two points of view, side-by-side—a difficult form, not least because it looks so clever on the page. Which is one reason for the epigraph from Compay Segundo—to remind the reader that this is all about love.

But I also decided you should be able to read the poem across the voices—that is, each line from the left-hand poem should make sense

when linked up with its right-hand counterpart—even as each voice has its own narrative so that you can read the poem differently each time. You might decide that you don't want to do all that jumping around, so you opt to read just the left-hand side to see how the female develops—or perhaps try seeing it from the male point of view, running down the right half of the page—so each side has to make its own sense. Hopefully, after navigating one side, the reader might be compelled to go back and read the other side, then try jumping back and forth.

The food arrives, to our great happiness. As we begin to eat, we chat for a while about travel, how Ms. Dove first came upon Bellingham, and the difference between Northwestern food and food in other parts of the country. As we finish up, we return to her work, and I ask her to speak about the relationship she sees between drama and poetry.

RD: Quite a few of my poems are almost dramatic monologues. I say "almost" because the poem may not be spoken by the protagonist—in the case of *Thomas and Beulah*, for example, even though every poem is written in third person, there's a first-person feel about the book, a sense that you are in their skin, utterly. I guess it's just something I tend to do. I haven't analyzed it; I haven't stopped to question why I like that trope, though I do feel there's nothing more convincing than hearing something from a character's own lips. But I also believe in the old model of a poem not being heard but overheard. This is the nature of the compromise the dramatic monologue makes—even while you listen to the speaker's declaration, there is a sense that you are overhearing their thoughts, and that's the edge, the tightrope I delight in walking quite a bit of the time. It's just what I am, who I am; but it's not a simple equation. Although I have lyric elements in my poems and they can be very lyrical, I'm not a lyric poet; conversely, I don't consider myself a narrative poet even though there are very strong narrative lines in my poems.

My play "The Darker Face of the Earth" is written in lines, as a poem: a verse drama. I found the transition from poetry to drama quite easy—which suggests that my poems are, on some level, quite dramatic. I can't provide a clearer answer except to add that drama is a genre where I feel strong, I won't say comfortable; just strong, as in: I can do this. After all, I believe that a poem has to have the human voice moving through it. You need to hear that voice—in your head or talking aloud, confessing or whispering or proclaiming—the voice has

to be there.

RS: You've talked about finding the music in language. Is there a relationship do you think between the spoken word, between language, and instrumental music? A lot is made of blues poetry, or jazz poetry, and that strikes me as almost a false analog, in a lot of ways, between music and words. I wonder where you find the music in language?

RD: If I'm looking for the music in language, I can never forget that I'm dealing with language, and not music. Language has its own music. I agree that there's something intrinsically false about categories like "blues poems" or "jazz poems." These so-called blues poems—most of them just sit there on the page looking like something trying to imitate a blues song. Why? Because they don't have the music behind them, and for a blues to work you need that guitar wailing, you need the three-line repetition and the final line to extend the image...and that type of litany is extremely difficult to render on the page without the reader becoming impatient. The musical backdrop and the vocal inflection provide variations on the line that poetry cannot chart. This is so intrinsic to the blues, and poems seeking to emulate the precise form of the song lyric always seem spurious.

On the other hand there's a way of incorporating into a poem the rhythms of speech, which are a source for both music and poetry. I'm thinking in particular of Langston Hughes, who could pull out the flavor of bebop and render it linguistically. You know: "Good morning, Daddy! / Ain't you heard / The boogie-woogie rumble / Of a dream deferred?" He didn't try to make the poem into music; rather, he took the rhythms of a particular musical style, found the equivalent rhythms in the language spoken in his neighborhood, and made it into poetry. Now that's the way to do it.

Because I've been a musician since I was 10, music has formed a large part of the way that I relate to the world. I mean relate to the world in terms of structure. Until I took up the cello and began to see how music was put together—what a measure was, how triads resonated as opposed to augmented chords, what kinds of emotions were aroused by a dominant chord or minor chord—until then, music was something I enjoyed passively; but when I began to participate in music, I became privy to the ways in which music affects us viscerally. Now: Poetry has an element of musicality, but it is not music. Poetry has language, it is made of words—and the history of words, and the texture of those words, and the way the syntax moves to create balance under the rhythms—all that is being played against our perception of what lan-

guage is and how we receive it...and **that's** where the effect of poetry comes in. That's the difference between poetry and music.

For our final few questions. Ms. Dove and I speak briefly in an abandoned café attached to her hotel's lobby. We sit in an empty room, on chairs that had hours ago been placed onto table-tops, and work through a few last questions. In summary, I ask her about the way that people have taken up talking to her about American Smooth, the kinds of questions people ask.

RS: Being such a public poet, you've definitely talked to a lot of people about this book. My question would be, are there questions that you don't get asked when you write a manuscript like this, that you feel should be asked?

RD: You've already touched upon them. What exactly is 'American' about the subjects of the book? The way our melting pot works, how jazz works—both very different amalgamations, but both so very American—that's what I wanted to address in the book. We don't talk about these things much. The target practice in "Meditation at Fifty Yards, Moving Target" is a piece of pure Americana, but at the same time there's Lieutenant James Reese Europe and his ragtime band bringing jazz to Europe, and how cool is it that this black man's name is Europe?—you just go with the flow until you make it into something; no matter what ironies you encounter along the way, you make do until you can make it sing. You can find a remarkable flexibility sometimes—I emphasize the "sometimes"—in this country, a kind of joyous aptitude for adaptation, for taking something and bending it to make it work for you. The best examples are in music—the way jazz came out of blues came out of country music came out of spirituals and a few other things thrown in, until we end up with several brands of uniquely American music, just by pulling and stretching and tucking and pinning. That's the acid test of improvisation—taking the cards you're dealt and building a house.
