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Movements of a Marriage or, Looking Awry at U.S. History: Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*

Therese Steffen

"I think that all poetry is political. Poetry fires the soul. That can easily turn into something political"

— Rita Dove in conversation with Susan Stemberg
(Library of Congress video production, 1993)

"Ever since black people were taken out of Africa they have had to be on the run, in flight from injustice, in search of wholeness, of community, of home . . . the pieces themselves, the fragments of hope, have been their destination"

— Calvin Hernton, "The Tradition."
(*Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 1985)

"Family" in an African-American historical and literary perspective is still an encumbered social concept rooted in the trauma of slavery which deprived black people of the hallmarks of identity: a birth date, a name, a family structure, and legal rights. While the poet Haki Madhubuti, the critic Houston A. Baker, Jr., or the historian Andrew Billingsley try to redeem the image of the black male and the black family,¹ a legion of literary voices testifies to the fragmentation of this same black family. In the "peculiar institution" and its aftermath, rape, incest, exploitation and separation abound, most notably in Toni Morrison's interpretation.

¹ See "Works Cited;" cf. also Deborah E. McDowell. Claudia Tate highlights the value attributed to marriage in the antebellum South: "To vote and to marry, then, were two civil responsibilities that nineteenth-century black people elected to perform; they were twin indexes for measuring how black people collectively valued their civil liberties" (103).

With *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), Rita Dove counteracts this stereotype of black family disruption. Her Pulitzer prize winning double-sequence of forty-four poems (twenty-three for Thomas, twenty-one for Beulah) is a story twice-told, symbolizing an unspeakable third element, a lifelong bond. Albeit lived in colour, it is not marked by race, class and gender. I shall not only trace Thomas' and Beulah's development through their signature poems but also Rita Dove's rethinking of the poet's relation to the history of colour and of the United States. Dove allows the successive facts of life to become pieces in a jigsaw puzzle for a reader to assemble towards a series of his and her stories that depict and illuminate History from a marginalized perspective. Text meets countertext. To Rita Dove,

history with a small *h* consists of a billion stories. History with a capital *H* is a construct, a grid you have to fit over the significant events in ordinary lives. Great historians, those who can make history "come alive," realize that all the battles lost or won are only a kind of net, and we are caught in that net. Because there are other interstices in that large web. Whereas History is a chart of decisions and alternatives, history is like larding the roast: you stick in a little garlic and add some fat, and the meat tastes better. (Bellin 19)

Thomas' and Beulah's time, as the chronology added to her work demonstrates, extends from 1900 to 1969. All poems are linked through a place: Akron, Ohio. Yet the "two sides" also suggest the claims of history and literature, fact and fiction. Such "a contradictory conjunction of the self-reflexive and the documentary is precisely what characterizes the postmodern return to story in poetry," as Linda Hutcheon observes (64). In her illuminating chapter on "Re-presenting the past" Hutcheon acknowledges the fact that postmodern poetry opens up to material once excluded from the genre as impure: things political, ethical, historical, philosophical.

Thomas and Beulah is a couple's journey which brings into being the life of Rita Dove's maternal grandparents, Thomas and Georgianna Hurd. A multilayered framing relates their cover photo(s), posing as Thomas and Beulah in front of a new car, to their granddaughter's portrait of an artist as a young woman on the book's back. Rita Dove's use of photographs instantly initiates an ingenious dialogue between documentary fact and historic metafiction. To Linda Hutcheon this "typically postmodern border tension between inscription and subversion, construction and deconstruction – within the art itself – " (119) presents photography in its apparent transparency. Hutcheon, however, keeps warning that "the photographic

semblance of eternal, universal Truth and innocent, uncomplicated pleasure [. . .] always potentially links the medium to institutional power" (123), a power Rita Dove challenges in her text. Within this outer visual parenthesis, the poetic essence of forty-four lyrical snapshots is again bracketed by a linearity-enhancing epigraph, *These poems tell two sides of a story and are meant to be read in sequence*, and a chronology. A carefully wrapped centre thus holds the author's own recreated sense of family and history.

When Bill Moyers asked her to comment on *Thomas and Beulah*, Rita Dove related the private and public spheres as follows:

I think we understand history through the family around the table, and those who aren't there anymore but who are called in through the past. For example, in *Thomas and Beulah* I call my grandparents in to show how grand historical events can be happening around us but we remember them only in relation to what was happening to us as individuals at that particular moment. How we act in our lives is how we memorize ourselves in the past. (1995: 124)

Family history, an ongoing process of how we felt and will feel in a certain way, allows Dove to resonate between past, present and future and to trace "eternity in a grain of sand" (*ibid.*). If we admit Hayden White's observation that history is the collection of narratives we tell ourselves in order to create a past from which we would like to be descended (293ff.), we can say that Rita Dove is not only fictionalizing her past but forging her own history.

Rita Dove's reclamation of her ancestors' lives represents both an aesthetic and an eth(n)ic act of historical recovery. "The 'confrontation' might be described as a 'daughter's story and the father's law,' (Christine Froula)," to borrow from Deborah E. McDowell (78). Only the granddaughter no longer needs to return to the slave narratives, the inaugural texts of the African-American literary tradition at the crossroads of history and literature, but – as *Thomas and Beulah*'s appended Chronology testifies – to the Great Migration of Southern Blacks northward to find work and a modicum of peace in the post-slavery U.S. The mass movement of "30,000 workers [who] migrate to Akron" in 1916 punctuates the individual journeys of "Beulah's family" from Rockmart, Georgia, in 1906, and Thomas' riverboat life between his leaving Wartrace, Tennessee, in 1919, and his arrival in Akron in 1921. The occupations of the two million blacks who migrated from the South to the North between 1890 and 1920 were, according to Houston A. Baker, Jr., labeled as twofold: "In the North, the Afro-American world of works splits into '[black women] domestics' and

‘[black men] laborers’” (1991: 115). Thomas’ and Beulah’s lives reflect not only this particular division but also the couple’s varying backgrounds: her Georgia slavery past and his free Tennessee travelling musician’s past.

Nonetheless, the second displacement after the “peculiar institution” that went largely unrecorded, for the first time offered black people a chance of pursuing “the American dream” (Schneider 116-17). The black migration northward – counter to the white infiltration of the antebellum South – also enacts, in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s words, a “tropological revision:” “The vertical ‘ascent’ from South to North, [. . .] and especially double consciousness” recur “with surprising frequency in the Afro-American literary tradition” (1988: xxv). *Thomas and Beulah*’s initial reversal of direction² with “1916: 30,000 workers migrate to Akron” (after three personal entries) finds its parallel towards the end (before three personal entries) in “1963: August: The March on Washington.” The chronology recurrently juxtaposes the individual and the collective, often by means of a suggestively ironic “double consciousness:” In “1922: Completion of viaduct spanning the Little Cuyahoga River” and “1924: December wedding,” the couple’s marriage will, viaduct-like, span a lifetime of hope. Only, in “1928: New car bought for the trip to Tennessee” and “1930: Lose car due to the Depression. Second child born” (Agnes), the journey back to Tennessee in a sky-blue Chandler, the American dream fulfilled and ready to be shown off, comes to a sudden end. The car was even repossessed. At least the birth of a daughter makes up for the loss. Private and public grand designs are, however, equally destroyed. In “1929: The Goodyear Zeppelin Airdock is built – the largest building in the world without interior supports.” But hope and glory end in “1931-[33]: The airship Akron disaster.” While official entries mark the first part of their marriage, their absence in the second signifies Thomas’ and Beulah’s retreat into their private sphere.

Within this larger historical context, the narrative poems string imaginative moments of history like beads on a necklace, as if a strict sequence could reconstruct the sweep of time. However, the subjection of story time to historical time also lends “a tragic linearity, a growing sense that what is done cannot be undone and that what is not done but only regretted or deferred cannot be redeemed by telling” (Shoptaw 374).

The sequence with its opening and closing events, the Great Migration and The March on Washington, visualizes the tension between two time

² Thomas as a reversal of Mark Twain’s Tom moving south in *Huckleberry Finn* is a likely twist.

schemes: a narrational linearity competes with an individual and collective circularity: Life's cyclic principle that punctuates the sequential movement of history is palpable not only in the chronology's span of three generations, reflected in the verbs "born, move, migrate, leave, arrive, marry, take up, quit, marry off, born, die," but in the gripping symbolism of the circle. Hour-glass-like and with equal textual weight, Thomas' and Beulah's life stories are rounded from birth to death. Following each other, they form two separate circles that intersect but at the threshold of his death and her childhood, linked by an "and." An ampersand, that small figure eight at his life's closure and her life's beginning, mirrors but the big eight of their double circle, that, lying, suggests infinity. Finiteness resides in eternity.³

The figure of the circle in fact reoccurs not only in both sequences but also in the opening and closing poem of each section: Thomas begins and ends "at the wheel" ("The Event," "Thomas at the Wheel"); Beulah starts out as her father's "Pearl" ("Taking in Wash") and dies in the company of a paltry angel of death, a mechanical "Oriental Ballerina" whose pirouettes are drilling through the globe "a tunnel straight to America."

In his *Shibboleth* Jacques Derrida poignantly pictures the shibboleth, the mystery of the creative act, as a circle, a wedding band:

Elle a la forme de l'anneau. [.] la date commémorante et la date commémorée tendent à se rejoindre ou à se rejoindre dans un anniversaire secret. Le poème est cet anniversaire secret. (79)

(It has the form of a ring. [.] the date of commemoration and the date commemorized tend to rejoin or to join each other in a secret anniversary. The poem is this secret anniversary)

What is the circular shibboleth-turned-wedlock-poem to denote and to connote if not a mystery? A poetic password to innermost feelings, or lack of feelings, hypostasized in varied circumscriptions? A loss whose devastating presence even governs in absence? The lack has its place. Yet if one could exactly locate it, it would lose its impact. In fact the figure of the

³ The seemingly disparate spheres of Thomas' wheel and Beulah's canary find a striking equation in Gaston Bachelard's *La poétique de l'espace*, X: "La phénoménologie du rond": 208-214. Bachelard quotes Jules Michelet (*L'Oiseau*) as saying: "L'oiseau, presque tout sphérique, est certainement le sommet, sublime et divin, de concentration vivante. On ne peut voir, ni imaginer même un plus haut degré d'unité. Excès de concentration qui fait la grande force personnelle de l'oiseau, mais qui implique son extrême individualité, son isolement, sa faiblesse sociale." (The bird, almost spherical, is certainly the culmination, sublime and divine, of living concentration. One can neither see nor even imagine a higher degree of unity. Excess of concentration which constitutes the great personal strength of the bird, but also implies its extreme individuality, its isolation, its social weakness.)

circle in *Thomas and Beulah* is highly ambivalent: it denotes an infinite union but connotes a world impenetrable for the partner. Because a death of the other cannot be known in itself, it is a difference, a lack known only in its effects and sustained by displacement as titles such as "Variation on Pain" and "Variation on Guilt" suggest.

Thomas and Beulah's marriage cycle is indeed framed by a double loss and a double lyric commemoration: "The Event" and "Variation on Pain" mark Lem's fatal dive, "Company" and "The Oriental Ballerina" Thomas' and Beulah's exit. Death, the great leveller, doubly brackets his and her stories. A prosodic parenthesis, however, counterbalances loss and decay: Both the first and final poem in *Thomas and Beulah* are singled out by barely punctuated cadences of tercets (with a single closing line), as if to formally mirror and hold a third element that determines their union: his love for Lem and his mandolin; hers for dreams deferred and referred to a caged singing canary. Thomas and Beulah speak *about* each other rather than *to* each other, as Kevin Stein notes (65), and their stories told in the third person refuse the intimacy of a first person or a dialogic "you." Nevertheless, even their symbols for *ersatz*-music complement each other: his "half-shell mandolin" and her "canary's cage" bring two orphic hemispheres to full circle.

"The Event" and "Variation on Pain" that drove the other poems into existence are Thomas' signature poems:

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.

Already the first stanza thwarts the reader's expectations: tercets, not couplets open a sequence of marriage poems, and "they" does not refer to husband and wife. Inseparable were two riverboat musicians. Lem played the mandolin to "Thomas' silver falsetto," until he took a dare and, drunk, "Dove/quick as a gasp" upon Thomas' request:

*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 [...]

Why dive for chestnuts? On their way to Ohio, the Buckeye State, Lem and Thomas are ready to become "buckeyes," i.e. horse-chestnuts, as the natives or inhabitants of Ohio are nicknamed. The poet who inscribes herself as "Diving into the Wreck" (Adrienne Rich) salvages a story her grandmother told her:

my grandfather had said to his friend whose name was Lem, "Why don't you swim across the river and see if you can get some chestnuts?" There was an island there, and his friend took the dare, dove in the river and drowned (Cavalieri 12).

Dove renders the dramatic turn as a sequence of increasingly void circles:

[...] Thomas, dry
on deck, saw the *green crown* shake
as the *island* slipped

under, dissolved
into the thickening stream.
At his feet

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

Thomas sees "the green crown" of the chestnut tree on "the island" drowning. Two solid bodies (a third one unmentioned) liquefy before his drunken eye whereas an empty "stinking circle of rags" and "the half-shell mandolin" mark the gap of a lifetime at his feet. "Where the wheel turned the water/gently stirred." The water, contracted object of the penultimate and subject of the final line, linguistically corroborates the maelstrom in which Lem disappeared. On and off the boat, the circular gap is marked and from now on will proteus-like draw memorial circles in Thomas' imagination. Lem's drowning, for which Thomas feels responsible for the rest of his life, creates psychic chasms closed to Beulah.

Two strings, one pierced cry,
So many ways to imitate
The ringing in his ears.

Thomas bewails Lem's fate in "Variation on Pain" while learning to play his mandolin. Following the primordial "Event," "Variation on Pain" marks Thomas' decision to survive and carry on and to transform loss, guilt, sorrow and loneliness by means of music.

He lay on the bunk, mandolin
 In his arms. Two strings
 For each note and seventeen
 Frets; ridged sound
 Humming beneath calloused
 Fingertips.

The first part of the poem, one tercet and this sestet, is formally mirrored across a symmetrical axis containing the most powerful imagery for Thomas' pain and its artistic remedy:

There was a needle
 In his head but nothing
 Fit through it. Sound quivered
 Like a rope stretched clear
 To land, tensed and brimming,
 A man gurgling air.

The final line confirms Lem's disappearance, whereas Thomas' mandolin sound seems to tie and rescue rope-like both the dead and the surviving members of the team. Only the needle in his head – echoing the globe drilled through in Beulah's final poem "The Oriental Ballerina" – remains without a fitting thread. The final tercet resonates in the poem's pervasive piercing [i] sounds of "strings, pierced, imitate, ringing in his ears, ridged, Fingertips, needle . . . Fit through it, quivered, clear, brimming."

Two greased strings
 For *each* pierced lobe:
 So *is* the past forgiven.

Thomas' initial pain "Two strings [for Lem's mandolin], one pierced cry [for Thomas' pain]" is balanced in the end – on the surface at least – by two pierced earlobes. "The past is forgiven" but not forgotten until the final poem "Thomas at the Wheel" confronts him again with "the river he had to swim," when "his chest was filling with water" due to congestive heart failure. His own "drowning" reminds him of "the writing on the water," of

Lem's drowning. His cycle, however, closes not on Lem but with his imagining "his wife as she awoke missing, / cracking a window."

In Beulah's life there is no loss equal to Lem's death. Her canary's music seems insignificant compared to Thomas' mandolin. However, as John Shoptaw pointed out, "the gap in Beulah's side is not an unrecovered loss but an unfulfilled promise. Beulah misses what she never knew" (378). She enlivens her routine marked by poverty and hopelessness with bittersweet daydreams of a better life. Poems like "Magic," "Dusting," and "The Great Palaces of Versailles" depict a sanctuary of feelings Thomas cannot penetrate. Her artful inventing of a "second world" keeps her alive. Early on "she rehearsed deception / until ice cubes / dangled willingly / from a plain white string. [. . .] Like all art / useless and beautiful, like / sailing in air, / things happened / to her." And when "the Sunday paper / showed the Eiffel Tower / soaring through clouds. / It was a sign / she would make it to Paris one day" ("Magic"). "Extravagance redeems," remarks Beulah as a milliner in "Headdress." Only in her final poem, "The Oriental Ballerina," the dying Beulah knows: "*There is no China*" beyond.

Their respective sequences present the couple as capable in their own right and united in coping with pain and despair but beyond a symbiotic equation. Beulah's section II "Canary in Bloom" recalls the bird's various functions: "Canaries [. . .] have a beautiful song; it's also a term that musicians use for the female vocalist. And the canary is the type of bird that miners take down to the mines to test for poison gas leaks" (Cavalieri 15). The canary's singing as well as testing and probing abilities in vital matters seem to be essential in any companionship.

Beulah's signature poem "Dusting" testifies to her ability to fuse good memories into her daily drudgery presented as a "wilderness" bathed in raging light:

Every day a wilderness – no
shade in sight. Beulah
patient among knicknacks,
the solarium a rage
of light, a grainstorm
as her gray cloth brings
dark wood to life.

Each gesture of dusting among "knicknacks" unearths layers of remembrances as if Beulah's "gray cloth" – gray contains all colours – could produce a "grainstorm," a fruitful nonce-transformation of dust into grains

of hope. Between the extremes of “a rage of light” and the “dark wood [...] gleaming darker still” under her hand bringing into relief wood pattern and ornaments, a range of wavy memories are unlocked. They bear a young man’s name:

Not Michael –
 something finer. Each dust
 stroke a deep breath and
 the canary in bloom.
 Wavy memory: home
 from a dance, the front door
 blown open and the parlor
 in snow, she rushed
 the bowl to the stove, watched
 as the locket of ice
 dissolved and he
 swam free.

Dusting in the first stanza, “diving” in the second (into “the clear bowl with one bright / fish”), and “thawing out memories” in the third “as the locket of ice dissolved” are three states of remembering that gradually revive deep layers of buried emotions. Whereas Thomas’ watery circle of longing revolves around the absence of his drowned friend, Beulah’s is a well-contained “clear bowl with one bright fish,” a bowl “she rushed / . . . to the stove, watched / as the locket of ice / dissolved and he / swam free.” At this point the embodiment of her dreams also changes the element and turns from “bright fish” to “canary in bloom.” Yet Beulah’s longing in the beginning of her cycle ties in with the “China” of her final poem “The Oriental Ballerina:” “Bright fish,” most likely carps in a bowl, a pond or a lake are typical Chinese mascots Beulah sets free to swim until she finally realizes “*There is no China*,” no daydreaming beyond dying. In her youthful years, however, the unfettered dream answered a name:

That was years before
 Father gave her up
 with her name, years before
 her name grew to mean
 Promise, then
 Desert-in-Peace.
 Long before the shadow and
 sun’s accomplice, the tree.
 Maurice.

Maurice, the “chevalier servant” memorized – materializes later as Thomas in “Straw Hat” – recalls “Paris” in Beulah’s “Magic” and surfaces earlier in the assonances of “ice,” “Promise,” “Peace,” “accomplice.” Beulah’s intense [i] sound of longing echoes Thomas’ “Variation on Pain” with its “pierced cry” and “greased strings.” This is the hidden beauty and musical truth of their seemingly separate cycles. Maurice emerges as a cipher for memory, “Not Michael – / something finer” as if the tip of her tongue would try out various shades of Mnemosyne.

Rita Dove’s “signifyin(g)” on the myths of such perennial characters as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom lends *Thomas and Beulah* additional historical dimensions (Werner Sollors, personal communication). Rita Dove, however, twists the stereotypes of a trustworthy but sexless Tom, who at the dropping of his title “Uncle,” could turn into a violent, sullen and crafty menace to any white woman and a Jemima who was forbearing, strong, pious, wise and loyal yet at the same time weak, faithless and immoral. Nonetheless, as James Baldwin emphasizes the stock traits of Tom and Jemima in “Many Thousands Gone:”

They prepared our feast tables and our burial clothes; and, if we could boast that we understood them, it was far more to the point and far more true that they understood us. [...] Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, our creations, at last evaded us; they had a life – their own, perhaps a better life than ours – and they would never tell us what it was. (28)

Rita Dove not only indirectly retells their lives but presents us with a virile but guilt-ridden Tom and a subdued and daydreaming Beulah. Her name oscillates between hope and renunciation, between the African-American type of the suffering slave-servant and the biblical persona: In *Isaiah* 62.4 and in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Beulah is the name for the Promised Land, and in Hebrew it means “married” (Shoptaw 380). But Beulah gradually grows into “Desert-in-Peace.” In its figurative lighting, the beginning of the poem with a secretly blooming grey between “a rage of light” and “dark wood” brought forth by means of dusting finds itself mirrored in the end where “the tree” is “the shadow and / sun’s accomplice.” Imagination, connoting “love” and “fantasy,” turns a grain of dust, a dead piece of dark furniture, back into a living tree.

Thomas’ realm of longing is art (“Jiving,” “Straw Hat”), hers has not yet been discovered: Beulah. Beside the wish of names of equal length, it was this longing open sound and biblical plus popular ring that caused the poet

to turn the factual Georgianna, which “seemed too male based” into the fictitious Beulah (Cavalieri 12).

The penultimate poem “Company,” the only sonnet in the sequence, stands as the couple’s signature poem of Beulah’s telling. As Thomas heads the entire sequence, he heads the octave, followed by her sestet:

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 to wake 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.

Reiterated negative particles (“No one,” “not,” “no more”) enhance Thomas’ fatal impasse. Neither human beings or animals in the first stanza, nor nature in the second, can prevent him from dying. Hostilities and disaffection, represented by the couple’s ersatz-music at war, are not glossed over. Despite dissonances, the half-shell of his mandolin and the caged canary do keep the potential to come full circle. Ultimately she, whose canary was driven distracted by his mandolin, finds her own voice in “telling him: give it up.” Both parts feature music as a cornerstone. Though no joyous love song was at stake, frictions and tensions are forgiven in her telling him: “*Listen: we were good, though we never believed it.*” Perhaps this detached respect and fondness is at the core of their communion devoid of suspense, passion, rape, murder, or incest.

Thomas and Beulah is unified, if not in time, in its action and location: Akron, Ohio,⁴ in Greek: “the highest point,” the spirit of place represents

⁴ Toni Morrison, herself from Lorain, Ohio, testifies to the geographic and demographic mediating role of her native state: “Ohio is right on the Kentucky border, so there’s not much difference between it and the ‘South.’ It’s an interesting state from the point of view of black people because it is right there by the Ohio River, in the south, and at its northern tip is

both the ground and vanishing point as the couple's hometown and the embodiment of a collective dream: the Goodyear zeppelin USS "Akron," built to scout naval movements from the air, acquires traits of an omniscient narrator and develops into a complex artistic symbol.

Thomas and Beulah is not a place, Rita Dove writes (1995: 15), but "the two names establish a condition – these two protagonists are to be regarded as a unit [.] that becomes irrevocably wedded to a defined and also *confined* place, Akron, Ohio – much in the same way other famous moniker-teams evoke specific milieus – Barnum and Bailey [.] Adam and Eve," or Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima revisited.

Initially planned as a third part, Akron, the city, is indeed present throughout, conspicuously in the airship USS "Akron" featured in both sections: Whereas Thomas' "The Zeppelin Factory" links a public disaster to his private loss and death – the airship turns into Lem's grave –, Beulah's "Weathering Out" compares the gas-filled body with her pregnant belly and life, mirrored in far-reaching lines. "Akron" to him is a tomb, to her a womb.

"The Zeppelin Factory"

[.]
That spring the third
largest airship was dubbed

the biggest joke
in town, though they all

turned out for the launch.
Wind caught,
"The Akron" floated
out of control.
Three men in tow --
one dropped
to safety, one
hung on but the third,
muscles and adrenalin
failing, fell
clawing
six hundred feet.

"Weathering Out"

[.]
Last week they had taken a bus at dawn
to the new airdock. The hangar slid open in
segments

and the zeppelin nosed forward in its silver
envelope.
The men walked it out gingerly, like a poodle,

then tied it to a mast and went back inside.
Beulah felt just that large and placid, a lake;

Canada. And there were these fantastic abolitionists there, and also the Ku Klux Klan lived there. And there is only really one large city. There are hundreds of small towns and that's where most black people live" (215).

[. . .]

Thomas [. . .] eying
the Goodyear blimp overhead:
*Big boy I know
you're in there.*

In spite of the USS “Akron’s” disasters – in 1932 and 1933 – her cross section marks yet another empty circle to be filled according to the couple’s psychic needs, or rather to the poet’s artistic crafting. “Poetry communicates to the silences in all of us,” Rita Dove states (Miller 33). In its high floating yet ambivalent and fragile state, the airship grows into a symbol of the American dream, only temporally deferred due to the Great Depression. The zeppelin’s rigid aluminum structure to be filled with gas might as well represent the art of poetry, the shaping and framing of dreams and disasters, the rising above Akron in the “Akron,” in the name of art. Fluctuating between materiality and spirituality, between presence and sudden absence, the zeppelin indeed marks the precarious borderline between grandiosity and ridicule, between the elements of water, earth, air and fire, and between the male and female principles. Stored in its airdock known as the largest self-supportive structure at that time, the womb-like zeppelin grows into a phallic symbol as well. With its multifarious semantic layers, Akron, the town, the airship in the shed, symbol of social, erotic and artistic aspirations, perfectly embodies Thomas’ and Beulah’s post-epithalamium.

As for the *genius loci* of her home town Rita Dove does not hesitate to testify that she is safely moored in her native ground:

All of my beginning memories come out of my experiences in Akron. It’s not true to write about some place that doesn’t have that emotional resonance for you. I’m not going to write about Paris and try to make it my own. Akron is my own. (Brazaitis 14-17)

These roots ultimately allow her to rise above ground, to step out in order to explore the uncanny in-between spaces in “one’s storehouse of memories,” as Rita Dove explains her poetic expansion in *The Poet’s World* :

I am in two places at once and yet, curiously, not there at all. It is the moment of ultimate possibility, and of ultimate irresponsibility. Of course there is no absolute demarcation of the moment when *in* becomes *out*; indeed, one passes through a delicious sliding moment when one is *neither* in nor out but *floating*, suspended above in the interior and exterior ground. (24)

Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* encodes the conscious recorded as well as the unwritten or underwritten text of history and culture. Still, if History and history are present in all of her works, in *Thomas and Beulah* the recorded past becomes the object of reinterpretation and reconstruction.

As Thomas is separated from Lem and music, Beulah is separated from herself: "things happened / to her" ("Magic"). Though both spouses revolve around their respective worlds, his is an empty space, a gap he knows defined by loss, pain and variations of guilt, symbolized by the ship's and car's wheel: a spirituality revolving around absence. Hers, as the initial symbol Pearl ("Taking in Wash") and the final "drilled tunnel to the other side of the world" ("The Oriental Ballerina") make believe, is a solid unexplored planet on whose surface she travels in her daydreams: to Paris ("Magic," "Dusting"), to some "Turkish minarets against / a sky wrenched blue" until "She feels / herself slowly rolling down the sides of the earth" ("Pomade"). The sequence comes full circle in harking back to the outset of the journey: The fatal treasure hunting for chestnuts that symbolize the shining and well rounded promise of the Buckeye state ("The Event") falls equally flat in the "cracked imitation walnut veneer" of Beulah's death chamber. Yet only now Beulah comes to realize that there is no Promised Land:

. . . *There is no China;*
 no cross, just the papery kiss
 of a kleenex above the stink of camphor,
 the walls exploding with shabby tutus.

"*No China*, no cross:" no religious answer, but no escapist one either. Rita Dove refuses to do (or is incapable of doing) for Beulah what Beulah offers Thomas: absolution at the grave: "*We were good, though we never believed it.*" No myth, no symbol will survive Beulah's death, except the very poem which performs this final refusal. Paul Celan's "singbarer Rest" [singable rest] and Jacques Derrida's prophesy of the shibboleth (79), the mystery of the creative act as a circle, a wedding band, are fulfilled: art is the ultimate homeplace for the displaced.

Though Beulah's individual struggle for a better life is rounded in death, public hope prevails in the linearity of the March on Washington. With Thomas and Beulah, fusing myth and historical facts, Dove moves beyond the apparent "ahistorical" dimension of a lyric sequence. History's lesson, private and public, teaches "that we must be each other's allies, even when

we most disagree" (Gates 1987: 353). This holds true for a couple as well as for a nation.

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