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Coming Home: An Interview with Rita Dove · *Steven Schneider*

Rita Dove won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1987 for her book *Thomas and Beulah*.

SS: How does it feel to be the first black woman poet since Gwendolyn Brooks to win the Pulitzer Prize?

RD: My first reaction was quite simply disbelief. Disbelief that first of all there hasn't been another black person since Gwendolyn Brooks in 1950 to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry, though there certainly have been some outstanding black poets in that period. On a public level, it says something about the nature of cultural politics in this country. It's a shame actually. On a personal level, it's overwhelming.

SS: Did you feel you had written something special when you completed *Thomas and Beulah*?

RD: I felt I had written something larger than myself, larger than what I had hoped for it to be. I did not begin this sequence as a book; it began as a poem. The book grew poem by poem, and it wasn't until I was about a third of the way through that I realized it would have to be a book. So I grew with it and I had to rise to it. I started with the Thomas poems because I wanted to understand my grandfather more—what he was like as a young man, how he grew up and became the man I knew. To do that though, I realized pretty early on that I could rely neither on my memories of him nor on the memories of my mother or her sisters or brothers, but I had to get to know the town he lived in. What was Akron, Ohio like in the '20s and '30s? It was different from the Akron I knew. That meant I had to go to the library and read a whole bunch of stuff I never counted on researching to try to get a sense of that period of time in the industrial Midwest. On other levels, I had to enter male consciousness in a way which was—well, I knew I could do it for one or two poems but this was an extended effort. I was really, at a certain point, very very driven to be as honest as I could possibly be. Also, I didn't want to impose my language or my sensibility upon their lives. And things got—

SS: Things got very complicated?

RD: That's right.

SS: Did you have a different kind of satisfaction about finishing this book than your other two books?

RD: It was different. I am not going to say I was more satisfied; I don't think I have a favorite book of mine. But there was a feeling of relief because I had made it through.

SS: How long did it take you to write *Thomas and Beulah*?

RD: About five years. I was working on the *Museum* poems in the middle of that, too. So, altogether five years.

SS: You've mentioned to me that your life has been quite hectic since you won the Pulitzer. How does this affect your life and your writing?

RD: First of all, the act of writing is such a private, basic matter. It's you and the poem, you and the pencil and the paper in a room under a circle of lamplight. And that is the essence of writing. A public life, then, becomes schizophrenic; on the one hand, you have to extend yourself and talk to people about your writing, an experience which you cannot really articulate. To talk about private experience to total strangers is very schizophrenic. Once in a while it's good to get out and do readings because the shadows on the wall grow large when you are writing. But in this past year and a half, I sometimes feel I have been a little too public — or let's just say I feel the public encroaching on the private time.

SS: Are things getting back to normal now? Do you find you are able to work on a regular schedule?

RD: Things are getting back to normal for several reasons. One of them is that I think I've learned a little bit how to live with the public life and not let it affect the private sector. Also how not to feel guilty about saying "No."

SS: For some writers, winning such a prize so young can block their creative output for years to come. How do you respond creatively to the pressures of fame?

RD: I remember when I first got the Pulitzer, the question that came up in every interview was: "Does this put pressure on you now for your next book?" And in those first weeks afterward, the question always hit me out of left field. What did they mean?

SS: You didn't feel pressured until they started asking you.

RD: Exactly. I didn't feel it at all. So in a way, it is an artificial pressure. It's particularly artificial if one really sits down and thinks about the number of people who have gotten Pulitzers and how many of them stayed

“famous.” If you look at the list, it’s very interesting. Nothing’s guaranteed.

SS: So some Pulitzer winners have declined in reputation?

RD: Sure, some Nobel Laureates as well.

SS: So that takes some pressure off?

RD: Right. And taking that further, what does it mean? I mean it’s wonderful, but in the end, what is important to me? When I go into the room and try to write a poem, the Pulitzer doesn’t mean a thing. I am still just as challenged by the blank page.

SS: Much has been said about the number of black writers who seem to have been ignored by the literary establishment. This surfaced again recently when James Baldwin died. Do you think the literary establishment has been unfair to black writers?

RD: Of course it has been unfair — this is true not only for black writers, but for other minorities as well. It is outrageous that James Baldwin never got a Pulitzer Prize. It’s outrageous that Ralph Ellison didn’t get every literary award around for *Invisible Man*.

SS: There have been recent attempts to revise the canon and to give more attention to women writers and to minority writers in America. Are you gratified by these attempts? Are they going far enough?

RD: I think they are absolutely necessary. I can’t say whether they are going far enough: it depends where, in what context. But it’s important to try to round those things out. Let’s face it: if Gwendolyn Brooks or Toni Morrison are not on the reading lists for Ph.D. dissertations, students aren’t going to read them.

SS: So what do you think your winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry means to other young black American writers?

RD: When I was growing up it would have meant a lot to me to know that a black person had been recognized for his or her writing. *Thomas and Beulah* is a book about black Americans, and two very ordinary ones at that. Nothing spectacular happens in their life. And yet this “non-sensational” double portrait is awarded a prize. That’s what is important.

SS: You mentioned you talked recently with some South African writers. Does winning the Pulitzer Prize give you more political leverage and visibility?

RD: The Pulitzer does carry international credentials. In the past year and a half I have had increased opportunities to talk and to meet with writers of

other countries and to see how they live. Because of the Pulitzer, I got the chance to do a conversation via satellite with some South African writers. I may have the chance of going there, which is certainly not going to be a pleasure trip. I feel the need to see the situation there for myself if it's possible.

SS: Let's talk about *Thomas and Beulah*. Your interest in these characters resulted from a story your grandmother told you as a child. Is that right?

RD: Yes. That story actually became the first poem in the book. I was about ten or twelve when she told me about my grandfather coming north on a river boat; it seems he had dared his best friend to swim the river, and the friend drowned. This was, for me, a phenomenal event. My grandfather had been a very gentle and quiet man. Frankly, I couldn't see how he could have carried that kind of guilt around all those years. I found it incredible that I had never heard the story before. In the writing, I had to confront several problems: How could he have borne it? How does anyone bear guilt that is irretrievable?

SS: Did you set out consciously on a quest to reclaim your roots?

RD: No. Not consciously. Though it was a conscious attempt to understand someone who had meant a lot to me, who was part of me. And in doing that I got drawn more and more into my family history which was perfectly fine and kind of wonderful. It gave me a doorway into my history. I had a hinge, something that I could work on and through. I ended up talking to a lot of people about my grandparents; I learned a lot about my roots that doesn't even appear in the book.

SS: Certainly that knowledge becomes meaningful to you and who you are today.

RD: Yes, exactly. I think I was always working toward that. Now, when I look back on the three books that I have done and see how they move, I understand that old adage about coming back to your own backyard. But it is almost as if I started out in *The Yellow House on the Corner* with a very domestic scene, a real neighborhood. The second book, *Museum*, was much more about art and artifact, and attempts to register personal human experience against the larger context of history.

SS: There are some family poems in *Museum* too.

RD: Yes—but the family poems in that book constitute one section only; the overwhelming majority are portraits of individuals in their particular historical context.

SS: How did you go about recreating the era of Thomas and Beulah's migration?

RD: I read everything I could get my hands on about the migration from the rural south to the industrial north. The WPA books that were done on each state were especially invaluable.

SS: So there were lots of details you had to track down.

RD: Exactly the stuff that will drop out of the next edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, right? I was trying to get that feeling, that ambiance, so I talked to my mother an awful lot about what it was like growing up at that time. She was remarkable. At first she asked, "What do you want to hear?" But I didn't know what I wanted to hear. I just wanted her to talk, and that's what she did. I amassed so much material; then I had to kind of forget it all in order to write the poems.

SS: You have said of *Thomas and Beulah* that "less and less did it become based on my grandparents because after a while I was after a different kind of truth." What is the larger truth you were after?

RD: I was after the essence of my grandparents' existence and their survival, not necessarily the facts of their survival. That's the distinction I'm trying to make. So when I said it became less and less about them, I meant I was not so concerned about whether Thomas in the book was born the same year as my grandfather (he wasn't, incidentally) or whether in fact it was a yellow scarf he gave Beulah or not. What's important is the gesture of that scarf. One appropriates certain gestures from the factual life to reinforce a larger sense of truth that is not, strictly speaking, reality.

SS: Is there something especially significant about a generation like Thomas and Beulah's which had to uproot itself—in this case, from the South, in order to work in northern cities?

RD: Yes, of course. Only very recently have historians begun to explore that entire era in any depth and what impact the great migration, as they call it now, had on not only southern communities and northern communities but a host of other things. So much has been done or talked about the uprooting of the black family through slavery, but this was a second uprooting and displacement. It's the first time that blacks in this country had any chance, however stifled, of pursuing "the American dream." Obviously not with the same advantages as whites, not even as the otherwise ostracized European immigrants, and so it is a very poignant era. I never heard very much about it when I was a child. I wondered why my cousins

from Cleveland spoke with a southern accent, but we didn't. It wasn't that unusual that entire communities were brought up and resettled around each other. It's a major population movement in our country that just went largely unrecorded.

SS: Did you begin with the notion of writing such a closely knit sequence where many of the poems depend upon previous ones?

RD: As I said earlier, when I started out I did not think in terms of a book. I did start out with a single poem. Then I thought, "This isn't enough," and I went on. I thought I was going to have a suite of poems, a group of six or seven. At that point I did want them narrative; I thought there must be a way to get back into poetry the grandness that narrative can give, plus the sweep of time. Lyric poetry does not have that sweep of time. Lyrics are discrete moments. On the other hand, a lot of narrative poems can tend to bog down in the prosier transitional moments. I didn't see very many long narrative poems that really weren't smaller poems linked together. So one of the things I was trying to do was string moments as beads on a necklace. In other words, I have lyric poems which, when placed one after the other, reconstruct the sweep of time. I wanted it all. I wanted a narrative and I wanted lyric poems, so I tried to do them both.

SS: Some of the poems seem more capable of standing alone than others—"Jiving" and "Lightning Blues" for example. Many others depend on our reading of the previous ones.

RD: At the beginning of the book I warn that these poems are meant to be read in sequence. I put that in there because the poems make most sense when read in order. But even though some of the poems are absolutely dependent on others, in the writing I was still trying very hard to make each poem wholly self-sufficient, of a piece. In other words, a particular poem may be dependent on an earlier poem for its maximum meaning, but in itself it is a complete poem. It just happens to need another beat to make the best connection.

SS: A few of the poems have italicized song-like rhymes that sound like they might derive from southern minstrels or gospels. I am especially thinking of "Refrain." Let me just read you a few of these. This is the one I really love.

*Take a gourd and string it
Take a banana and peel it*

*Buy a baby blue Nash and wheel and deal it.
Count your kisses sweet as honey
Count your boss' dirty money.*

What's the origin of those lyrics?

RD: I made them up. They are in the spirit of country blues. They are also influenced by spirituals and gospels. The poem "Gospel" begins as a take-off on "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." It starts off: "Swing low so I / can step inside." Both "Refrain" and "Gospel" are written in quatrains, and I think there's quite a kinship between them. The roots—no, let's say the connections—between gospel and blues are very close.

SS: Were you listening to recent blues recordings?

RD: No. Mostly older blues recordings though I have listened to recent ones too. While I was writing this book I was playing a lot of music, everything from Lightnin' Hopkins to older ones like Larry Jackson or some of the recordings that Al Lomax made of musicians, all the way up to Billie Holliday, stopping about in the '50s. It seemed to be the music for the book.

SS: Let's talk about Akron, Ohio, the town where Thomas and Beulah lived. Your book serves as a commentary and history of that place with its zeppelin factory and Satisfaction Coal Company, and its impoverishment during the Depression. This kind of social realism in your work seems striking and in some ways a departure from your earlier work.

RD: At some point in the writing, I knew the poems needed background; I realized that I had to give a history of the town. I can't say I approached this task with joy. After all, Akron is not a tourist attraction. Let's face it: few of us were born in beautiful places. Yet I remember Akron, Ohio as a place of beauty. Rilke says in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, that if you cannot recount the riches of a place do not blame the place—blame yourself, because you are not rich enough to recall its riches. When I read that again, I realized that I'd be doing Akron an injustice if I would just dwell on its industrial ugliness, and if I could not explain or bring across some of its magic or make it come alive to others, then it was my problem, certainly not Akron's.

SS: Does *Thomas and Beulah* feel like a different book from your earlier ones?

RD: I think it is a departure from my other work—rather, I came home.

And, rather than a collection of poems, each working out a discrete universe, *Thomas and Beulah* is a string of moments that work together to define a universe much in the way a necklace defines the neck and shoulders. In my first book, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, there was an entire section dealing with aspects of slavery; *Museum* is somewhat of a hodgepodge of various social and political realities and how individuals work within them. *Thomas and Beulah* is the first sustained effort at sequence.

SS: It seemed to me that especially in *Yellow House* and in places in *Museum* there is more of a surrealistic feeling to some of the poems. In *Thomas and Beulah* we don't get as much of that. It seems much more grounded in the place and in the time and in the people.

RD: The word "surrealistic" has been used quite often in describing my work, and I must say I have always been amazed by it. I never thought of myself as being surrealistic.

SS: Maybe "deep image."

RD: No. Obviously, though, this is what people think of it. So now I kind of smile; I'm not going to escape this world. I mean, I accept it as a fair judgment. To me magic, or the existence of an unexplainable occurrence, is something I grew up with. One shouldn't try to explain everything. I learned to live with paradox, to accept strange happenings. I listened to older people talking about, for example, a person who refused to die easy and came back to haunt. In terms of memory and guilt, that makes a lot of sense to me. Now I'm not talking about ghost stories; I'm talking about how to live with strangeness. And for a minority, particularly black people growing up in America, a lot of surreal things are going on all the time.

SS: One interesting thing about the Thomas section of the book is that Lem really haunts Thomas throughout. I find that very moving. Is this based on the story you referred to earlier from your grandmother?

RD: Yes, yes. And you know the only facts that I had in the story were that my grandfather had come up the river with a good friend and that the friend had died. I knew nothing about the man. In fact, my grandfather never mentioned the story to us as children. The idea of Lem haunting him grew out of the poems—it actually grew out of the character of Thomas and what I felt he would have done.

SS: Another question about Thomas. He comes across in some ways as a real lady's man. How did Beulah tie him down?

RD: I don't know! I mean I think that . . . he might come across that

way, but his being a lady's man was constrained by the death of his friend. In a way, he is trying to play his way out of hell.

SS: Of course, the other side of it is he is very dedicated to his family.

RD: He's a classic case in that he mourns the youth he had, but he can't get back to it anyway. I think it would be untrue for any of us to say we haven't felt that at some point. You feel you want to let go of all the stuff that starts attaching itself to you as you grow up, but you can't do it anymore.

SS: The bills have to be paid. What is it that you admire about Beulah? And what is it you would like to honor in her?

RD: I think of Beulah as being a very strong woman who still has no way of showing how strong she could be. She is the one who really wants to travel, to see the world. She is curious; she is intelligent; and her situation in life does not allow her to pursue her curiosity. If there is anything I want to honor in her, it is that spirit.

SS: The sense of sacrifice?

RD: Certainly that too, but lots of people make sacrifices. It's the way one handles sacrifice that's crucial.

SS: She did it gracefully.

RD: She did it gracefully, but not too gracefully—that is, not without spunk. It's important that people know there's a struggle involved, that the sacrifice is being made. You have to learn not to be crushed by what you can't do.

SS: Both Thomas and Beulah seem relatively free of gnawing bitterness towards their environment, towards whites, despite some difficult circumstances, very difficult circumstances. Is there a lesson in this?

RD: A lesson? Let me take a different tack. We tend to forget that there were generations upon generations of black Americans who did not have the luxury of bitterness. I don't mean to suggest that there was no bitterness, just that you had enough to do with surviving. You had to eat first. This drive for survival above all else could lead to a certain autism; one's personality freezes.

The civil rights movement and the rise of black consciousness in the 1960s made the release of emotion—anger, elation, fury, righteousness—possible. One could get emotions out without being poisonous and so still be able to go on with life. But Thomas and Beulah came from a different generation, from an era when there was no point in talking about what white

people had and black people did not. That was a fact of life—it didn't mean they liked it, it didn't mean they thought it was right. But there were a few more pressing matters to talk about. Inequality was a given. I know how impatient we became with our grandparents in the '60s and our great aunts, when we would call ourselves Afro-Americans or black and they would continue to say "colored" and we'd go: "AHHHHH, come on." The impatience of youth. Why aren't Thomas and Beulah furious? Well, they were, but they had a different way of expressing it.

SS: Both Beulah and Thomas grow old together, and sadness overtakes the readers as we read of their health problems and their demise. But they stick together and support each other. Is there a commentary on aging here for a society which is accused of neglecting its elderly?

RD: Yes. Certainly one of the things I learned in writing *Thomas and Beulah* is that all of us are guilty at one time or another of not assigning other people their full human worth, for whatever reasons—men having preconceived ideas of women or vice versa, racial prejudice, misconceptions about the young and the old. In order to be able to understand my grandfather, or how my grandmother could be the woman she was, I had to go back and revision their youth. It was a humbling experience for me. And there are certain satisfactions with age that we tend not to think about.

SS: Thomas and Beulah are there for each other to the very end. That kind of commitment through thick and thin, as sappy as it may sound, is a striking part of the book.

RD: I received essays written in the form of letters from students at Brown University. One student thought Thomas and Beulah didn't like each other at all, that the marriage was very sad. I was absolutely amazed at that notion. It must have something to do with our concept of love—that if we are young it is going to be romantic all the way through. In the poem "Company" Beulah said: "Listen: we were good, / though we never believed it." I remember that absolutely calm feeling that my grandparents had, a sense of belonging together. Today I see young lovers struggling to find earth-shattering ecstasy in every second. That's a part of love, but it's a small part.

SS: There is a kind of ripeness about their love that is unusual and that only comes with age.

RD: Absolutely.

SS: What does the future hold for Rita Dove? Do you plan on writing more poetry or trying a novel?

RD: More poems, of course, and I definitely plan to write more fiction. I'm writing a novel right now. Why not?

SS: Will you be doing a lot more teaching? Or traveling in the next couple of years?

RD: I have this year off, but I will be going back to teaching in the fall. I enjoy teaching. Travel is always in my life. I'm always traveling, it seems.

SS: We mentioned fiction and you do have that one book of short stories (*Fifth Sunday*). Do you find the two activities—writing fiction, writing poetry—mutually supportive or do you think of them as separate, unrelated activities? Is there any kind of schizophrenia about it? Or is it just natural?

RD: I think that they are part of the same process. It's all writing; there are just different ways of going about it. I don't find them compatible in the sense that when I am writing poetry I am not usually going to start a story. If I'm writing a story I am in a slightly different mode. I can't explain what it is—it's not as severe as speaking another language. Still, I think the notion of prose writing and poetry writing as separate entities has been artificially created, partly as a result of fitting writing into the academic curriculum where it is easiest to teach them separately. That's valid pedagogical methodology, but there is no reason for them to exist separately outside the workshop. One of the things I deplored when I was in graduate school was just how separate the two were kept; fiction writers and the poetry writers didn't even go to the same parties.

SS: This is the final question. It's actually two. Does writing poetry enable you to be more fully aware of who you are? Is it the bliss of writing that attracts you?

RD: (after some hesitation) No. It isn't the bliss of writing but the bliss of unfolding. I was hesitating with the question because I wanted to consider how to go about making my answer clear without making it sound corny. I don't think poetry is going to make anyone a better person, and it is not going to save you. But writing is a constant for me. There's an edge that needs to be explored, the edge between being unconscious and then suddenly being so aware that the skin tingles. Let me be more precise. There is that moment in the writing of a poem when things start to come together, coalesce into a discovery. This is sheer bliss, and has something to do with discovering something about myself. It doesn't mean I understand myself;

in fact, the more I write the less I know of myself. But I also learn more. Territory is being covered—excursions into the interior. I write for those moments of discovery really, but there are two steps in this process: one is the intimate revelation, and the second step is to take that revelation and to make it visible—palpable—for others.

It's one thing to experience strong emotion; it's another thing to communicate it to others. I do believe that an experience inarticulated will be lost; part of my task as a writer, one of the things I take on and want to do, is to articulate those moments so they won't be lost. I think there is no greater joy than to have someone else say, "I know what you mean." That's real corny, but it's what literature does for all of us, the reader as well as the writer. An active reader longs to be pulled into another's world and to comprehend that world, to get into another's skin utterly and yet understand what's happening at the same time. That's an immensely exciting thing. And that's what I work for.