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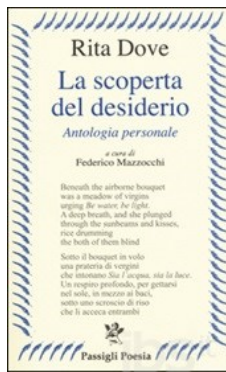
CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Rita Dove: the exact Grace

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DOVE R., *La scoperta del desiderio. Antologia personale*, a cura di Federico Mazzocchi, Passigli, Bagno a Ripoli (Fi) 2015, pp.157, Euro 18,50.

The Rita Dove's poem (1952) has the deep nature of experiences that sweep the depth of the past. In the radicalism of existence, her poetry marks, in a complementary way, the integrity and dimension of the possibility, as a category that establishes the existence, shapes it remaining in the affirmation of the human being, enriches it for the profoundness and plasticity of perception, «through the overlapping points of view: that of the “official” history and, indeed, the counterpoint of another story, more lateral. For Rita Dove the identity is the personal access to the experience, but an experience that is immediately halved between the need to know and outdo herself, towed along by a force recasting every social and cultural value, and in that discovery and free apprenticeship of the world of which carrier is the poem, “*language at its most distilled and most powerful*”, according to the definition of the poet», as claimed by Federico Mazzocchi.

II

Born in Akron, Ohio, the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1987, for a collection of poems *Thomas and Beulah*, in 1993 and until 1995 was named Poet Laureate of the United States by the Library of Congress, and was the first African American and Poet Laureate the second to receive the Pulitzer, with the addition, in 1999, the post of Special Consultant in Poetry to the bicentenary of the Library of Congress.



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The poetry of Rita Dove, therefore, doesn't confine itself only to the verticality of the original roots, but rather explores the world as a confrontation and openness, poetic habit and substance of redemption. The ineliminable evidence of the reality is the result of the keynote of human music which it transmits, perception, dream-like vision of the layout that sounds the everyday miracle through the accuracy of a union: between memory and imagination, unveiling of belonging and detail achieved by the proportion and rigor, between individual and collective destiny that join the wide range of historic element and private memory, negotiating, as claimed by Pat Righelato, «her artistic space with grace and determination».

Today it's possible to learn about her magnetic and vertiginous poetry, with her personal choice, published by Passigli, entitled *The discovery of desire. Personal Anthology*, edited by Frederick Mazzocchi, that gives back to us her shiny minimum threshold and her intense journey chasing its imaginative filament to understand, reconstruct and discover the human tension to ultimateness, understood as meaning and sense of wonder.

Roberto Galaverni writes: «The nature of her commitment is indeed deep, never one-sided. The sacrosanct claims of ethnic equality, social, sexual, in her verses there are only because there is initially the reality, and not vice versa. She starts from the reality, not from the need for redemption; looks and recognizes the sanctity of life, for this she knows what are human rights and freedom».

III

Her debut collection, *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), draws the bow of the lived «more domestic and natural, indeed the “yellow house on the corner”»; it's in this minimum lab of emotions that the poet ripens her sense of identity. A debut book but already in the border: the house is on the corner, ready to temptation of the journey. They are, in fact, the years of the first stay in Germany (in Tübingen, from 1973 to 1975, for a scholarship) and the meeting with the German writer Fred Viebahn, whom she married in 1979 "(F.Mazzocchi).

The heart of her endeavour overlaps two alternate and juxtaposed universes, whose crevices of meeting mess the imaginative dispositions in a contemporary intimacy of roots and speculative itinerary, substantiated in the focused imagination of experience, and in which



the intensity of the expressive forms discloses the curtains of childhood, adolescence and the present life through a symbolic expressive geometry.

The expanded dilation of reality hinges in color ellipse of destinations and dyes drifting up, proposes in an abstract and figurative transparency which frees the score of spirit.

«Nature and mind are in harmonious abstraction», Pat Righelato says, «even the scent of flowers would be an encumbrance to this transparency, the clearing and expansion of space. The transcendence, the sense of open space, takes place *within* the space of the room: «jerked free, hinged into butterflies», transformed and expanded yet remain incisively angled»:

«I prove a theorem and the house expands: / the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling, / the ceiling floats away with a sigh. / As the walls clear themselves of everything / but transparency, the scent of carnations / leaves with them. I am out in the open / and above the windows have hinged into butterflies, / sunlight glinting where they've intersected. / They are going to some point true and unproven».

The sorrowful memorial density that seeks the fullness of a refuge, the meeting-clash of cultures, the wound of urban geography as resilient spasm of unfortunate and afflicted sounds destine the living matter of rolled up memory in an hook of sky and agonal and detailed metaphor, as «split / pod of quartz and lemon», where there isn't consolation but is found the weight of the re-harvested memory moving: «When morning is still a frozen / tear in the brain, they come / from the east, trunk to tail / clumsy ballerinas. / How to tell them all evening / I refused consolation? Five umbrellas, five / willows, five bridges and their shadows! / They lift their trunks, hooking the sky / I would rush into, split / pod of quartz and lemon. I could say / cthey are five memories, but / that would be unfair. / Rathers pebbles seeking refuge in the heart. / They move past me. I turn and follow, / and for hours we meet no one else» (*Five elephants*).

The last poem of the book “Ö”, vocalic expression of awe and wonder, also becomes the word in Swedish means “island” and that «has changed the whole neighborhood»,



transforming and revealing the estrangement of ordinary in acute portion of elsewhere («When I look up, the yellow house on the corner / is galleon stranded in flowers. Around it / the wind. Even the high roar of a leaf-mulcher / could be the horn-blast from a ship / a sit skirts to the misted shoals»), trespassing and adhering to the exact word that trembles in an extensive and precise pleasure («the present extends its glass forehead to sea / (backyard breezes, scattered cardinals)»).

At the height of precision, the measure gives form to boundless: it's the artistic rigor to give vitality to the exploration, is the power of word to shape the language, such as outstanding flow which provides a new language to the things: «and if, one evening, the house on the corner / took off over the marshland, / neither I nor my neighbour / would be amazed. Sometimes / a word is found so right it trembles / at the slightest explanation. / You start out with one thing, end / up with another, and nothing's / like it used to be, not even the future».

Museum (1983) innervates all the facts of history in a sort of raised relief. Here, says Federico Mazzocchi, «Rita Dove seems to look beyond their own experience, but seemingly distant and remote events are still interrogated and in a sense “authenticated” by her own experience».

The history of the submerged smallest details provides the fiber of an emblem fixed in consciousness, individual and collective narration that makes up the silence of a museum recalling that, on the one hand, welds the event in a meticulous detail line, and on the other outlines figures (Catherine of Alexandria, Catherine of Siena, the greek subject, Shakespeare, Boccaccio and Fiammetta, Nestor, Christian Schad, the pianist Champion Jack Dupree) in confined conditions, in a figurative and old context as evidence of life, to enter, sympathetically, in a perfect game of dialogues and vitality.

Here too, the memory doesn't cover with dust but returns, with care, the outcome of a regenerated time, the temporary projection of a consciousness bud and cramp shining. The memory of grape sherbet, that her father was preparing for Memorial Day, is the held reminiscence that transpires in his «gelled light» of losts, in the taste of lavender and in the

V



grassed-over mounds, like the miracle of enjoyed existence that illuminate its presence and its clarity of gelatin and grace: «After the grill / Dad appears with his masterpiece - / swirled snow, gelled light. / We cheer. The recipe's / a secret and he fights / a smile, his cap turned up / so the bib resembles a duck. / That morning we galloped / through the grassed-over mounds / and named each stone / for a lost milk tooth. Each dollop / of serbe, later,/ is a miracle, / like salt on a melon that makes it sweeter. [...] We thought no one was lying / there under our feet, / we thought it / was a joke. I've been trying / to remember the taste, / but it doesn't exist. / Now I see why / you bothered, / father».

Parsley commemorates the massacre of twenty thousand blacks, by order of the dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo, because they cannot pronounce the letter "r" in *perejil*, the Spanish word for parsley. Rita Dove performs here a choral drama with image precision, alternating the perspectives and points of view: from the scurrilous pronunciation of the executioners, embodied in their disquieting abyss of compulsion and obsession, to the innocence of the victims in the rain that punches the cane fields: «For every drop of blood / there is a parrot imitating the spring. / Out of the swamp the cane appears».

The Rita Dove's imaginative symbolism even reveals its uncensored opposite of death sentence, as stated Therese Steffen, describing the abyss of colorless crumbs of a blackened language that contrasts with the outside landscape. The parrot and dismayed tear of the general for a dark memory like black light that kills the shattered human rim and sweets dusted with sugar on a bed of lace. So the language follows the image, takes possession of horror and drama in an original perception, as claimed by Helen Vendler, but turns at the point where the poem «widens the reality from within, finding its measure in this "sense more wide", that is what animates it and with flatters it. That's how Rita Dove shows us how the historical duration can be perfectly combined with the perception of individuality, and how the time can suddenly move to a plan that certainly doesn't transcend, but that reveals the real hidden face» (Federico Mazzocchi).



The story of *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) is dramatized and reformulated, inlaid rebuilding the life of grandparents to trace «the essence of my grandparent's existence and their survival, not necessarily the facts of their survival. [...] One appropriates certain gestures from the factual life to reinforce a larger sense of truth that is not, strictly speaking, reality». (*Conversation with Rita Dove*, edited by INGERSOLL E. G, University Press of Mississippi, 2003, p. 66).

The fusion of the lyrical moment with the broader narration comprises the stage of history, under different perspective angles which act as glue between the experiences. The depth and symbolic density connect the color scent of a universal point to interstitial of a story, in which «Thomas and Beulah are the warp of the cloth, while national and international events are the woof» (*Moving Through Color: Rita Dove's Thomas and Beulah in Kentucky Philological Review* 14 (1999): 27-31).

Dove joins in a chromatic consistency situations and actions. The act of an individual becomes the universal matrix and contrast of existence: the transparent objectivity, mandolin and straw hat, two Negroes leaning and silver falsetto, the mud and the moon, the yellow bananas and still the Thomas' ruffled silver and his yellow scarf, the Beulah's loving blanket and pearly, the brown chestnuts and green island gathered in a torrid night of thickening and gently shirred waters describe the fullness which is announced in the drama that finds the desire and it generates unfinished gestures, until then the halo of poetry enters modifying history, lightening it, and the note of pain could be brushed.

The epiphany of the promises of love beneath the airborne bouquet, «was a meadow of virgins / urging *Be water, be light.* / A deep breath, and she plunged / through sunbeams and kisses, / rice drumming / the both of them blind», the dusted everyday life, the morning saturated by beauty and dream of eyes, the death that huddles, stroke and recovery («She stands by the davenport, / obedient among her trinkets, / secret like birdsong in the air»), the engraved clearness of memory awaken the time of the lacks, figures and and the tragic distances and reveal the sudden and fragmented height of being.



The rapid and relational imagination of *Grace Notes* (1989), (the musical notes that embellish and adorn the main melodic line), underscores the warning of grace in the freedom of every detail and extensive collection of expectations, every embellishment underlying the hidden and secret rhythm of real that leads back to a live event: the singular stars and trees like horses in their ascent and bright lymph, the women of the islands that move through Paris and inventing their destinations, the evening of the bees fled in a old folk's home in Jerusalem, where in the minimum air "a needlepoint / with raw moon as signature. / In this desert the question's not / *Can you see?* but *How far off?* / Valley settlements put on their lights / like armor; there's finch chit and / my sandal's, / inconsequential crunch. / Everyone waiting here was once in love».

The love that pervades and bedews *Mother Love* (1995), in which is transposed a modern version of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, involves and keeps the myth waiting hanging around for a symbolic and pervasive sense, places the autobiography (the relationship with her daughter Aviva) in a incited suggestion of protection, freedom and achieved destiny.

Counterpoint the memory of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the poet made his circumnavigation of salvation of vital fragments from disintegration and the violation: It's the charm that protects days, the door that transforms the myth in a contemporary presence of breath and punctuation that aligns the images.

VIII

The parenthetical voice of the mother warns her daughter to go straight to school and not to talk to strangers but when Persephone picks up a narcissus, sees the earth opening up in its source of kidnapping and terrible abyss of light, «as a knife easing into / the humblest crevice».

The violence of the trauma («Who can tell / what penetrates?»), the shutdown of the dark, lost brilliance that becomes the phrase-abuse and terrified gloss of dark sheen («It was as if / I had been traveling all these years / without a body, / until his hands found me - / and then there was just/ the two of us forever: / one who wounded / and one who served»), change of points of view, Persephone's estrangement, in her footfall that hovers pass the Demeter



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nuclear relationship crossed by a rich and inconsolable tension as dispersed harvest, «Nothing can console me. You may bring silk / to make skin sigh, dispense yellow roses / in the manner of ripened dignitaries. / You can tell me repeatedly / I am unbearable (and I know this): / still, nothing turns the gold to corn, / nothing is sweet to the tooth crushing in. / I'll no task for the impossibile; / one learns to walk by walking. / In time I'll forget this empty brimming, / I may laugh again at / a bird, perhaps, chucking the nest - / but it will not be happiness, / for I have known that» (*Demeter mourning*).

Often it happens that myth streghe out in the sunken story of daily epic, as becomes in *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999), in which it's faced «a cameo of characters and events» where, as stated Federico Mazzocchi, «Rita Dove points some joints of the battle for civil rights of black people, but to prevail are still the invention and drama; not a claim perspective, but rather a “meditation on the history and the individual”, an approach that well frames the phrase of Simon Schama that opens the eponymous section: “All *history is a negotiation* between familiarity and strangeness”. Rosa Parks is the woman that in 1955 she refused to give up her seat to a white man on the bus and therefore she was arrested, triggering the reaction of the Martin Luther King community. Yet the inspiration of the book seems to be of a different kind: "We are on the bus with Rosa Parks" is the phrase said for fun by the daughter of the poet during a move. No contradiction, because to investigate what is out of history also means for Rita Dove take an interest in the primordial and innocent look in which the nature is not yet the culture».

IX

Her poetry seems to bring out, once again, two proportions and disproportions, as if the single time, the call of the past and return, the ghosts, the Rosa's simple flame, the portrait of childhood at the time when «the earth was new / and heaven just a whisper, / back when the names of things / hadn't had time to stick; / back when the smallest breezes / melted summer into autumn / when all the poplars quivered / sweetly in rank and file ...», can be revisiting the dawn of glorious shadows on the open blank page, as in a his sweet and profound poetry, for «If you don't look back, / the future never happens. / How good to rise in sunlight, / in the



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prodigal smell of biscuits - / eggs and sausages on the grill. / The whole sky is yours / to write on, blown open / to a blank page».

It's the everyday life calling, the cutting of landscape glimpsed from this bus of affection and history, with all its ellipses and expansions, which allows the minutiae of detail to discover the secret and universal side of reality, its motion hidden , its belonging and the intensive relationship between music and words: «I was pirouette and flourish, / I was filigree and flame. / How could I count my blessings / when I didn't know their names? / Back when everything was still to come, / luck the leaked out everywhere. / I gave my promise to the world, / and the world followed me here».

The Edenic scene of the *All Souls'*, taken from *American Smooth* (2004), shows Adam and Eve held out to appoint the voices of animals and the time of paradise and, from that moment, Mazzocchi said, «the words break the “music” of silence, leaving man and woman in a kind of perennial nostalgic dance»: «Before them, a silence / larger than all their ignorance / yawned, and this key walked into / until it was all they knew. In time / they hunkered down to business, / filling the world with sighs - this anonymous, / pompous creatures, / heads tilted as if straining / to make out the words to a song / played long ago, in a foreign land».

X

The American Smooth is a form of ballroom dancing in which the partners are free to be released each other and allow improvisation and individual expression. Therefore, Rita Dove performs its dance of nostalgia and elevation, kneading and doing live the lyricism with a new rhythm, a new piece of history that is revealed, such as the Hattie McDaniel's black moon crossed, the first African American actress to win an Oscar .

The thin line of verses moves through this polyphony of grace and form, independence, opposition and soft sinuosity of spells, which are absorbed by the dance, from the face and gestures. The gesture of the dance is proportional to the poetic gesture, following both the dance of things, which are modeled in the air of «achieved flight» and «that swift and serene / magnificence, / before the earth / remembered who we were / and brought us down».



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The *Sonata Mulattica* (2009), centered about the figure of the mulatto violinist George Bridgetower, remembered for being the first performer and the initial dedicatee («the lunatic mulatto») of the *Kreutzer Sonata* by Beethoven, that he revoked and attributed the dedication to Rodolphe Kreutzer, presumably to a dispute concerning a woman.

The Rita Dove's work chases omitted existence, plumbing the inner fold of the removed Other and his exotic childhood («I am the Dark Interior, / that Other, mysterious and lost; / Dread Destiny, riven with vine and tuber, / satiny prowler slithering up behind / his dorme and clueless prey»), the monologue and muster intimacy of the characters (as in *Haydn leaves London*: «I close my eyes / and I feel it, a bass string plucked at intervals / dragging our bilge out to the turgid sea - / a drone that thrums the blood, that agitates / for more and more...») and animated and living symbology of reality through the nature of public and private memory, such as cropping plush green and the squandered score in the fury of *Beethoven's Eroica*, transcribed in the air and breathed in the cool of pure sound. Here too, the human gesture is the gesture of the book, as the Billy Waters' crippled angle («Crippled as a crab sugary as sassafras») or the symbolic and living gesture of the Moor sculpture with emeralds.

Humanizing and dramatizing her material footprint, the author aligns unusual and rare pictures, blends, in five movements, the genres, touching the precariousness in the note that prevails, and creating another time in the time, she opens continuously rhythmic cracks to the forgotten sounds and finally, drawing the unspeakable in a collection of targeted grace and primitive syllables. Accurate.



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