IN AN ERA of splintered factions and increasingly local, specialized poetries, Rita Dove has had great success in inspiring something near to a critical consensus on her work. A poet whose name emerged only in the 1980s, Dove pleases both the technicians and the politicians among contemporary readers, and although her poetry is not avant-garde, its occasional surrealism and sound play might interest even the experimental margin of the present poetry scene. As a consequence of this broad appeal and of the quality and complexity of her work, Dove has been recognized as one of the foremost poets of her generation.

However, Rita Dove's style, as polished, straightforward, or experimental as it can be, is not her chief achievement. Instead, readers attend with interest to her intelligent treatment of two related subjects, identity and home. Dove's writing is preoccupied with homecoming: she approaches, defines, and scrutinizes ideas of home repeatedly, while equally concerned with the impossibility of arriving there. Dove has most often been described in terms of that impossibility; her writing often charts a sense of displacement. As an African American woman with Cherokee and Blackfoot ancestors, as a poet and professor in an often anti-intellectual culture, as a "serious traveler" and student of the unfamiliar, Dove's perspective is that of an outsider in more than one sense. The speakers of her poems are rarely comfortable in their surroundings, and tend to regard scenes of home with a distant and dispassionate eye. The poem "In the Old Neighborhood," for example, which begins her Selected Poems (1993), travels backward to view her childhood home newly as a shifting and surreal location:

Let me go back to the white rock
on the black lawn, the number
stenciled in negative light.
Let me return to the shadow
of a house moored in the moonlight,
gables pitched bright above
the extinguished grass,
and stalk the hushed perimeter,
roses closed around their scent,
azaleas dissembling behind the garage
and the bugeyed pansies
leaning over, inquisitive,
in their picketed beds.

Even ordinary backyard flowers become estranged voyeurs as the suburban homestead, a site so associated in the United States with stability and comfortable familiarity, is seen skeptically, from the outside, at night. The fact that this image suggests a photographic negative perhaps emphasizes race as an alienating factor: Dove is black, whereas the stereotypical inhabitant of that American photograph is not.

On the other hand, many of Dove's works of poetry, fiction, and drama manifest her persistent interest in exploring what home might mean. She often dips into her personal history to write about her hometown of Akron (as in her novel *Through the Ivory Gate* [1992]), the middle-class suburbs and mores she knows so well, her own family (most famously in *Thomas and Beulah*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987), and the ordinary details of girlhood, motherhood, and life as a teacher and writer. Her work records both her "serious travel" · which she defines for Mohamed Taleb-Khyar (1991) as "trying to understand a place and not just passing through, taking pictures" · and her many homecomings.

Dove's formal choices reflect a similar tension between a striving for accessibility and a deep attraction to what she feels is the essential foreignness of poetry. Appointed poet laureate of the United States in 1993 and again in 1994, Dove declared that her mission was to demystify poetry for the American public, to make it less intimidating to skeptical potential readers. Her own poetry, especially *Thomas and Beulah*, can be characterized as aspiring toward what Marianne Moore in "England" dryly calls "plain American which cats and dogs can read"; her syntax is unambiguous, and her characters are recognizable and sympathetically drawn. She certainly owes at least part of her popularity to this accessibility.

Within a perfectly user-friendly poem, however, Dove is very capable of exercising contradictory impulses. Her comments about her own writing process illumine her opposite drive toward indeterminacy. As she writes poetry, she says, "I try not to know what I'm doing," often composing in the eeriness of the very early morning; to interviewers like Judith Kitchen and Stan Sanvel Rubin she can cite intuition as her ordering principle, and her desire to remain unpredictable to her readers. Even the most ordinary realities of her poems can swerve into magic, as "seal men" appear in a bathroom in "Adolescence II"; Dove has a knack for identifying the bizarre embedded in the familiar. She accuses herself further of a cryptic economy of language; some of her stranger images do refuse to unravel and be perfectly coherent.

Dove apparently feels that this tautness can be a weakness of her poetry. She told William Walsh (1994): "I also fear making the poem snap shut so tightly that the click of the final line drowns out the poem's subtleties." In fact, Dove frequently avoids closure in her poetry and fiction, preferring to end even an entire novel on a moment of lyrical, rather than narrative, intensity. She ends the violent and tragic poem "The Event," upon whose meaning the entire story of *Thomas and Beulah* hinges, on a peaceful, highly inconclusive detail: the river water "gently shir[s]," smoothing over the terrible scene of Lem's death. While her writing itself, then, is usually perfect in its clarity, Dove prefers to leave the ultimate meanings of her works open, for her readers as well as herself, as if too much conclusion could break the trance of reading.
Dove's refusal to succumb to the familiar is deeply interwoven with her insistence on individual vision and identity. As she established herself as a poet in the late 1970s and early 1980s, she drew clear lines between her own project and the kind of writing that she felt was expected of her; with each book she tries to branch off in an untried direction, working in a new line length or from a different psychological perspective. Similarly, Dove rejects what she feels is a too-rigid separation between genres in American letters, preferring to identify herself as a writer rather than simply as a poet, although it is in that genre that she is known best. To date she has tried her hand at short fiction, the novel, and drama as well as at lyric poems and poem sequences. Dove is an experimenter who yet manages to place and keep herself squarely within the American literary mainstream.

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Rita Frances Dove was born in Akron, Ohio, on August 28, 1952. Her mother was Elvira Elizabeth Hord. Her father, Ray Dove, worked as an elevator operator at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company until he was finally hired as that company's first black chemist. The one child in a family of ten children sent to college, Dove's father had returned from Italy after World War II and received a master's degree in chemistry, graduating at the top of his class. Dove was therefore raised in, as she calls it in her interview with Taleb-Khyar, "a fairly traditional upwardly mobile Black family · upwardly mobile in the second generation." Her parents expected her to achieve a high level of professional success, and strove to put her in the position to do so.

Dove describes her childhood self as shy and bookish; her introduction to the Selected Poems recounts her voracious reading of everything from Langston Hughes to Shakespeare to science fiction · her earliest surviving manuscript is "a novel called Chaos, which was about robots taking over the earth," written from third or fourth grade spelling lists. Mostly, however, the young Dove discarded her stories and plays, unaware that she could choose writing as a serious passion, much less as a potential occupation. This changed when an eleventh-grade English teacher, Margaret Oechsner, took Dove to meet John Ciardi at a book-signing; suddenly the teenager made the connection between her own productions and "literature," and began to write out of that new awareness.

Equally important in Dove's life at this time was music. Her parents made a wide range of music available to their four children (Dove was the second), and Dove did not abandon this interest as she pursued her education; she still plays the cello as well as the bass viol and the rarer viola da gamba. At Miami University, Dove studied German language and literature but concentrated on English, telling her family that she was majoring in pre-law while she became increasingly committed to the work she was doing in creative writing workshops. Finally Dove decided, she told Walsh, that

I would try to become a writer while I was still young and could afford to be poor. I went home for Thanksgiving and told my parents that I was going to be a poet. To their credit, they didn't flinch. My father simply said, "Well, I don't understand poetry, so don't be upset if I don't read it."
In Dove's novel, *Through the Ivory Gate*, which centers on a young woman artist returning to Akron after college, the protagonist's parents are somewhat closer to appalled that their daughter rejects the stable, respectable professions toward which her entire upbringing was to have steered her.

Elected to Phi Beta Kappa and graduating summa cum laude, Dove received her B.A. from Miami University (Ohio) in 1973. Dove would go on to earn an M.F.A. in 1977 from the University of Iowa, where she was a teaching/writing fellow in the Writers' Workshop, but before that she spent an important year as a Fulbright scholar studying modern European literature at the University of Tubingen in Germany. Dove explained to Taleb-Khyar how powerfully she was influenced by her immersion there in the German language:

> In German the verbs often come at the end of a sentence, so in an argument you can sustain your energy until the very end and then throw in the verb that will suddenly make the sentence coalesce. At one point, that might have had an effect on my writing · I began to try to do that in English.

As exciting as her encounters with that language and culture often were, however, in many ways Dove found that first stay in Germany disturbing. In particular, as a black woman in a small German town, Dove was often startled and offended to be the object of blatant stares, pointed fingers, and rude questions. In fact, Dove claimed to Taleb-Khyar that she has never become accustomed to this behavior: "Once I told a group of children that I was actually a witch and their eyes would dry up like corn flakes when they went to sleep that night; that was a terrible thing to do, but I was so fed up with being on constant display." Further, her experiences in Germany made the United States seem like a foreign country, an unreal place impossibly isolated from the rest of the world. This study abroad was one of the many times Dove deliberately embarked on an unexpected path or attempted "serious travel": choosing a challenging and marginalizing career, sojourning in an environment that could be hostile but was at the least profoundly foreign, she seems to have thrived on jarring experiences of difference.

The first major document of these experiences · subsequent to two chapbooks, *Ten Poems* (1977) and *The Only Dark Spot in the Sky* (1980) · is the collection of poetry *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980). Her first full-length collection is based on her master's thesis at Iowa, and carefully positions the young poet in a critical relationship to recent movements in African American poetry. Dove self-consciously writes in the wake of the black arts movement, a flowering of black poetry in the late 1960s and early 1970s associated with black nationalism and promoted by poets such as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee). She discusses this movement at some length in a history of African American poetry written with Marilyn Nelson Waniek, referring to writing associated with the new black aesthetic as "the poetics of rage." In this piece, "A Black Rainbow: Modern Afro-American Poetry," Dove and Waniek reserve strongest praise for those contemporary poets who emphasize a "central humanity" over racial difference; they comment about Gwendolyn Brooks, for example, that "her career took a sudden turn in the Sixties and fell under the detrimental influence of younger, more militant poets," and assert about the adherents of the black arts movement that "this new Black poet, however, turns out to be as manipulated as his accommodating predecessor,
fashioned in the forge of the times but a pawn of the reigning literary politics.... It was time now to move forward, to explore deeper.

In her first volume, Dove most clearly distinguishes herself from the African American poetry of the immediate past in "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, in a Dream." In this encounter, her powerful predecessor is depicted as impotent and weeping, his hair falling out in clumps, his fists helplessly clenched. Dove verbally "cut[s] him off" to insist on his present irrelevancy: "Those years are gone · / What is there now?" Arnold Rampersad notes Dove's "eagerness, perhaps even an anxiety, to transcend · if not actually to repudiate · black cultural nationalism in the name of a more inclusive sensibility.... Dove must be acutely aware of herself as a poetic reformer." Her poetic meeting with Lee depicts this violent repudiation; the black women singers in this dream, whether they are muses or a new generation of poets, leave the fallen precursor behind.

Rampersad goes on to note that the dream context has something of a neutralizing effect on the encounter. After all, no one is responsible for the content of her dreams; the delight that this poem takes in stripping Lee of his potency and its highly sexual violence are mitigated by the poem's apparent fidelity to images generated by the subconscious. The dream context is a recurring one not always made explicit in The Yellow House on the Corner. Many poems throughout the book are infused with the surreality of dreams; Dove's poetics of intuition derives some of its power from them, as well as from an angle of vision that combines the freshness of a child's perception with the influence of magic realism. "Five Elephants" and "Adolescence II," for example, depict impossible or nonsensical scenes with eerie clarity; these poems are emotionally highly charged while maintaining an intense reserve about their ultimate referents.

This reserve also marks Dove's distance from the confessional zeal that dominates the work of so many of her contemporaries. Her poems are often monologues by characters distinct from herself, as in "Belinda's Petition" and "Someone's Blood," from the book's third section (its least successful), about slavery; when she speaks more personally, her voice can be defamiliarized by these forays into the subconscious as well as by her traveler's distance from domestic or ordinary settings. Her stay in Germany, for instance, and her interest in that culture result in poems like "The Bird Frau" and "The Son." Dove closes the book with "Ô," a poem in which "One word of Swedish has changed the whole neighborhood." In this poem, the yellow house on the corner, permanently dislodged from stable centrality by its encounter with an alien language and the new knowledge associated with that language, "[takes] off over the marshland."

Finally, Dove's first volume introduces her completely unreserved and abiding interest in writing frankly about sexuality. If clearing ground for the next generation of African American poets is part of her poetic project, so is articulating black female sexuality, long mystified and exoticized by literature, from a subject position. The three "Adolescence" poems as well as "A Suite for Augustus" depict the transition from girlhood to a fully sexualized womanhood with none of the anguish of other explorers of this territory, such as Anne Sexton: the speaker in "Suite" tells us how "Then tapwater rinsed orange through my underwear" matter-of-factly, menstruation thus becoming a marker of personal history as plainly recounted as John F. Kennedy's assassination. In The Yellow House on the Corner, sexuality is less a site of conflict or confusion than one of fascination, strangeness, and even magic. Dove is keenly critical, nonetheless, of fairy-tale romance and its distortions of female sexuality. The speaker of "Beauty and the Beast" (Beauty
herself) warns her "sisters" to eschew mercy and let their beastly suitors die before they marry blindly. Dove maintains this forthright attitude through her most recent poetry, in which she approaches motherhood with similar straightforwardness.

In an interview with Helen Vendler, Dove describes the differences between her first and second books in terms of the shift in titles. *The Yellow House on the Corner* is, as she puts it, a title "on the edge of domesticity," whereas *Museum* provides "the wide angle, the zoom back," in order to ask the question, "How do you retain culture and make it available to another generation; what gets chosen and what doesn't?" *Museum* is in some ways a more public book than its predecessor · its first section, for example, is archaeological in its approach, beginning with a fossil in "The Fish in the Stone" · but it continues to intermingle public with private history. One of its most powerful sequences, indeed, centers on Dove's own father.

Dove discusses this book in some detail, especially its closing poem, "Parsley," in a 1985 interview with Kitchen and Rubin. Her overall project centers, as does much of her other work, on the issue of memory:

I suppose what I was trying to do in *Museum* was
to deal with certain artifacts that we have in life, not the ordinary
artifacts, the ones that you'd expect to find in a museum, but
anything that becomes frozen by memory, or by circumstance or by
history.... The other thing was to get the underside of the story, not
to tell the big historical events, but in fact to talk about things
which no one will remember but which are just as important in shaping
our concept of ourselves and the world we live in.

Again, having begun this book while in Europe, Dove approaches these subjects from a clinical distance that often resembles Marianne Moore's zoological perspective; her range of reference is characteristically wide, from prehistory to the last section, "Primer for the Nuclear Age," from ancient China to her own backyard. This volume contains a page of notes at the end, to contextualize some of the more obscure historical references.

The telescope in the third section, "My Father's Telescope," signals both this distant, at times nearly scientific, viewpoint and the potential for that gap between the writer and the story she tells to collapse. The relationship Dove depicts in this sequence between herself and her father is richly complex: the father nurtures his daughter with miraculous food in "Grape Sherbet," terrifies and initiates her in "Centipede" and "Roses," becomes an inaccessible object of longing to her in "A Father out Walking on the Lawn." "Anti-Father" epitomizes this tension between confessional and cooler public voices; stargazing, it claims that the stars
draw
closer together
with years.
And houses
shrink, un-lost,
and porches sag:
neighbors phone
to report cracks
in the cellar floor,
roots of the willow
coming up. Stars
speak to a child.
The past
is silent. ...
Just between
me and you,
woman to man,
outer space is
inconceivably
intimate.

"Anti-Father" finds intimacy in the most paradoxical places: between isolated neighbors joined
by phone wires, and among impossibly distant stars. This poem is also a good example of Dove's
interest, in this volume, in working with a shorter line, in creating what she has called a "slim
silhouette"; in this case the abbreviated lines that evoke William Carlos Williams and the use of
white space mimic the patterns of stars in a mostly empty night sky.

Museum also develops Dove's compulsion, in her poems, to tell stories lyrically. Both "Parsley"
and "Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove" experiment with narrative. "Parsley" is
a poem Dove often includes in readings; it revolves around a massacre she recounts in the
"Notes": "On October 2, 1957, Rafael Trujillo (1891-1961), dictator of the Dominican Republic,
ordered 20,000 blacks killed because they could not pronounce the letter ‘r’ in perejil, the
Spanish word for parsley." The first section, a villanelle, is from the perspective of the Haitians,
circling around the images of cane fields and the general's parrot. The second section, loosely
based on the obsessive sestina, tells the story from Trujillo's perspective, interweaving his
decision-making process with his memories of his mother. "Parsley" is a culmination, then, of
the different kinds of history that concern Dove; it also closes with a meditation on the historical
and personal power of language, even of a single sound (here the rolled "r"), repeating the way
The Yellow House on the Corner
closes with that reverberating, transformative "ö."

Of "Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove," Dove remarks to Walsh:

For the first time I was able to approach narrative in
a way that did not merely tell a story from beginning to end as in
most of the slave narratives in my first book. . . . The bare bones
of Agosta and Rasha's stories come at you in a starburst fashion;
little bits of information pop up here and there.

The poem refers to a portrait of two sideshow entertainers painted by Christian Schad in Berlin
in 1929; the painting is the cover of Museum. The poem looks over Schad's shoulder, following
his thoughts as he waits for his subjects to arrive, and considers how he might pose them.
Agosta's rib cage is deformed into "crests and fins," whereas Rasha's "only freakishness (in the
Berlin of 1929) was that she was black," as Vendler points out in "Rita Dove: Identity Markers." They gaze back at the painter, as Dove says, "merciless," determined to be subjects and not objects of a titillated stare. Dove always encodes her last name somewhere into each volume of poetry, and here, the similarity between her own name and "Rasha the Black Dove" emphasizes her identification with that character, whose portrait even bears a passing resemblance to Dove, gazing calmly at us from the cover.

*Museum* opens with "Dusting," a poem which later was incorporated into Dove's third and most famous book of poetry, *Thomas and Beulah*. The latter, which won Dove the Pulitzer Prize in 1987, is based (although not explicitly) on the lives of Dove's maternal grandparents; it is dedicated to the poet's mother and takes place in their hometown. Dove takes no overt role in the telling of these stories, although she may be present in the third person as one of the granddaughters on Thomas' lap in "Roast Possum." Nonetheless, her third volume functions to counter or at least modify the dispassion of her previous work in its accessible, sympathetic, highly novelistic focus on two parallel lives; Dove herself claims (to Taleb-Khyar) to be somewhat "suspicious" of the book's popularity because, as she puts it, "It may be the easiest of my books to understand, especially for someone who isn't a regular reader of contemporary poetry."

*Thomas and Beulah* divides neatly into halves, chronicling the life of each figure in the order given by the title. As John Shoptaw notes, "the lives of Thomas and Beulah rarely intersect: There are few common events in their stories and no Faulknerian climax in which their worlds collide." Only the chronology at the end of the work finally integrates the two existences; Thomas and Beulah occasionally include each other in their reflections, but even the major events they share, including the Great Depression and the births of their four daughters, mean different things to each. This is a tragedy in the sense that Thomas and Beulah, each netted in his or her own losses, never find any solace in union.

Thomas' section, "Mandolin," begins with an experience of grief that profoundly alters the rest of his life. In "The Event," Thomas and his friend Lem, from whom he has been inseparable, set out from Tennessee on a riverboat. Their Mississippi idyll, as apparently poor but untroubled as raft life in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is destroyed early by a dare: Lem dives off the rail toward an illusory island and disappears forever under the wheel.

Lem stripped, spoke easy: *Them's chestnuts, I believe*. Dove
quick as a gasp. Thomas, dry
on deck, saw the green crown shake
as the island slipped
under, dissolved
in the thickening stream.
At his feet
the stinking circle of rags,
the half-shell mandolin.
Where the wheel turned the water
gently shirred.
This is, importantly, the poem in this volume in which Dove leaves her signature: her name becomes the moment, hanging at the cliff edge of the sixth stanza, when hope shifts to hopelessness, the very "event" that informs this first sequence. Crucially, the dive happens before Thomas meets Beulah; he is defined by an experience prior and exterior to their relationship.

Certainly Thomas continues to revisit that brief moment of union, and to seek forgiveness for his part in destroying it. Piercing his ears in "Variation on Pain" becomes an act of violent penance; he searches for understanding from a grandson in "Roast Possum" and aches with sympathy for his son-in-law in "Variation on Gaining a Son." In "Courtship" Thomas finds himself, as if by accident, wooing Beulah in her family's shiplike parlor; that image and the title echo Thomas' prelapsarian existence on the riverboat, but Thomas never finds a second love with Beulah. He dies alone in the final poem of the section, "Thomas at the Wheel," in which he "drowns" toward Lem at the wheel of his car, unable to reach his medicine in the glove compartment.

The image of the mandolin in the first section is a touchstone, paralleled by the canary in Beulah's story, "Canary in Bloom." The mandolin becomes the symbol of Thomas' secret life of mourning, a life Beulah seeks to bury as she coaxes its player into the choir, or rejects as she wishes for a pianola and a bottle of perfume rather than a mandolin and a bright yellow scarf in "Courtship, Diligence." Thomas, likewise, resents Beulah's canary, "usurper / of his wife's affections," as he resents the dominance in his life of women: he lists his four children by gender in "Compendium" as a monotony of failures, "Girl girl / girl girl." The canary, to Thomas, is an interloper whose small sweet songs cannot rival his remembered music.

To Beulah, the canary stands in place of romantic dreams of which she has had even less taste than Thomas. Beulah's fantasies consist of a Paris she never reaches, or the magical name "Maurice" she attributes to a half-remembered boy at the fair in her childhood in "Dusting." "Weathering Out" shows Beulah disappearing from herself in pregnancy, although the poem ends on a green note, clover persisting between cobblestones; the labors of children and housework do drown out Beulah and her hopes almost entirely, or narrow them down to a mere wish for a room to think in, until her visions literally fade away with glaucoma at the end of the sequence. Beulah, like Thomas, never seems to look for the satisfaction of her longing in her spouse, although her affection for him is enduring. Late in the section, during Thomas' "Recovery" from a stroke, she thinks, "He was lovely then, a pigeon / whose pulse could be seen when the moment / was perfectly still." Here we get a glimpse of what Beulah's loss has been: Thomas was no domestic bird and never really fit into his wife's fantasies, but her nostalgia offers an unrealized possibility, a belated recognition of Thomas' loveliness.

In her early work, Dove writes more powerfully of fathers than mothers; Thomas is ultimately a more compelling character than Beulah, just as the section "My Father's Telescope" goes unmatched by a parallel exploration of the poet's relationship with her mother in Museum. In Grace Notes (1989), this changes. Dove, with her husband, Fred Viebahn, a German writer she married March 23, 1979, has a daughter, Aviva; her fourth and fifth books of poetry concern themselves more overtly with Dove's own motherhood and daughterhood. In Grace Notes, she also allows experience to infiltrate her poetry from her career in academics, first at Arizona State University (whose faculty she joined in 1981 as the only black professor in the seventy-member English department) and at the University of Virginia (where she moved in 1989 and where she
became Commonwealth Professor of English in 1993). Grace Notes is in these ways Dove's most personal volume of poetry, perhaps because within it, she told Walsh, she tries "to get back to the lyric - more and more relentlessly lyric poems," countering by the authority of her own intimate voice the occluded narrator of her family epic, Thomas and Beulah.

Dove explained to Helen Vendler, as she was working on her fourth collection, how Thomas and Beulah led her to write more immediately about her own maternity:

I realized I was in fact feeding some of my own experiences as a young mother into Beulah and I was feeling incredibly uncomfortable about it until I realized that I was harboring an unspoken notion that poems about children and mothers are mushy and you just don't write those things.

Characteristically, sensing a self-imposed limit on her writing, Dove deliberately began work articulating this facet of herself in a collaborative project with a woman photographer at Arizona State University. The central section of Grace Notes, in fact, succeeds in depicting mother and child in a non-“mushy” or unsentimental way. Breast-feeding is the subject of "Pastoral"; "Genetic Expedition" observes the apparent racial difference between Dove and her blonde daughter, Dove comparing her own breasts to "the spiked fruits / dangling from natives in the National Geographic / my father forbade us to read," in a possible allusion to another poem about identity, gender, and race, Elizabeth Bishop’s "In the Waiting Room." In "After Reading Mickey in the Night Kitchen for the Third Time before Bed," Dove is quintessentially the late-twentieth-century mother, giving her daughter the now-standard lesson about how to respond to inappropriate touching, and simultaneously receiving a lesson on what divides and unites mother and daughter:

My daughter spreads her legs to find her vagina: hairless, this mistaken bit of nomenclature is what a stranger cannot touch without her yelling. She demands to see mine and momentarily we’re a lopsided star among the spilled toys, my prodigious scallops exposed to her neat cameo. And yet the same glazed tunnel, layered sequences. She is three; that makes this innocent. We’re pink! she shrieks, and bounds off.

In preparation for violence, mother and daughter form a star, a protected space, exposing to each other what defines them and what they define as vulnerable. Color, knowledge, and sheer scale
make the star lopsided, but what the daughter observes is an inner sameness, the link of sex overriding the differences of race and age. Dove concludes the poem by punning on the children's book she alludes to in the poem's title: "we're in the pink / and the pink's in us." She concurs with her daughter's conclusion, emphasizing each one's healthiness, safety, even perfection, as well as exclaiming over the soundness of their connection.

*Grace Notes* is full of darker poems in which secrets are not named, but it keeps returning to affirm the strength or state of grace found in that mother-daughter relationship: the young woman's golden self-possession in "Summit Beach, 1921," for example, is grace, as is her descendant's defiant readiness in "Crab-Boil." Dove told Vendler that "with *Grace Notes* I had several things in mind: every possible meaning of grace, and of notes, and of grace notes." A grace note is ornamental, not essential to the melody; Dove's lyric returns to its fragmentary solitude after *Thomas and Beulah*, taking its leave from a sustained sequence. The collection features an emphasis on musical imagery as well as a profusion of verbal notes: a letter from mother to daughter whose gaps Dove only barely sketches in "Poem in Which I Refuse Contemplation," scribblings between teacher and student in "Arrow," notes for study in "Flashcards," mental notes or even poems themselves as notes to a lost parent (possibly Dove's father) in "Your Death" and "The Wake." The emphasis is on partial communication: distances nearly overwhelm these written efforts, but the efforts stand as testaments of Dove's commitment to exchange and expression. Grace as beauty, blessedness, and mercy unites the incomplete pieces, but unobtrusively, momentarily.

The strain of maintaining grace shows in a distinctive feature of the verse itself. Metaphors and similes are often put in the foreground in this volume, nearly to the point of awkwardness, as in "Turning Thirty, I Contemplate Students Bicycling Home." Here the very title marks a forcedness in the act of interpreting that milestone birthday. The pathetic fallacy thunders in and images verge on cliché ("Evening rustles / her skirts of sulky / organza"). In *Grace Notes*, Dove occasionally violates the naturalness of her lyric voice and deliberately undercuts its expected effect of a minor epiphany. In "Ars Poetica" she works similarly, wishing her poem to be a ghost town, in which she is penciled in as a hawk, "a traveling x-marks-the-spot." Even in her most personal collection of poetry to date, Dove insists on "traveling," not wishing to be pinned down into stable identity with that powerful lyric "I." Impermanently marked in pencil, not reliably the truth-confessing speaker of her own poems, Dove persistently refuses to be an easy poet to understand.

Finally, there is in *Grace Notes* the same tension between travel and home that began her poetic career. Despite her ambition to be a traveling "x," shiftly and secretive, Dove poetically returns to her Akron childhood; the first section of the book concerns family and reminiscence. It is opened by a quote from Toni Morrison, to whom Dove elsewhere refers as a "personal savior": "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was." Before Dove's great success as a Pulitzer Prize winner and poet laureate, Arnold Rampersad predicted that "she may yet gain her greatest strength by returning to some place closer to her old neighborhood.... she may yet as a poet redefine for all of us what 'home' means." Dove's 1993 *Selected Poems*, bringing together her first three volumes in a new publication by a larger press, reminds us how her "perfect memory," her ability to see the world in an uncanny way as a child does, keeps
sending her back to that question of home; it is unclear whether she would ever wish to "settle" it.

Dove's *Mother Love* (1995) addresses the darker side of the mother- daughter relationship by recasting the story of Demeter and Persephone. In her introduction, Dove writes that the Greek seasonal myth represents "a modern dilemma as well - there comes a point when a mother can no longer protect her child, when the daughter must go her own way into womanhood." Dove meets this separation from both directions. As Demeter, she is "blown apart by loss," obsessed with her kidnapped child beyond consolation; Dove invokes the photographs of missing children on milk cartons to modernize Demeter's trauma. In "Persephone in Hell," that child is a young woman in Paris, unmindful of her mother's anxiety, who drinks chartreuse with Hades at a chic party. Her fall into the earth is a seduction, not a rape as in her mother's nightmares. Persephone, like the speakers of so many of Dove's earlier poems, is the traveling daughter who can never really return home.

The most poignant moment of mother- daughter contact occurs in the fourth and middle section of *Mother Love*. In "The Bistro Styx," Demeter takes her daughter out to dinner. Persephone, acclimated to Hades - Paris, has grown thin and taken up with a painter. Demeter disapproves of her "aristocratic mole," dressed all in gray, and asks silently, "Are you content to conduct your life / as a cliché and, what's worse, / an anachronism, the brooding artist's demimonde?" She watches her daughter eat ravenously, Persephone partaking of the fruit that will bind her forever to this underworld, also the forbidden fruit that initiates Eve's sexual awakening and turns her out of the garden:

Nothing seemed to fill
her up: She swallowed, sliced into a pear,
spear each tear-shaped lavaliere
and popped the dripping mess into her pretty mouth.
Nowhere the bright tufted fields, weighted vines and sun poured down out of the south.
"But are you happy?" Fearing, I whispered it quickly. "What? You know, Mother" -
she bit into the starry rose of a fig -
"one really should try the fruit here."
*I've lost her*, I thought, and called for the bill.

The book itself ends with the speaker and her husband traveling in Sicily, driving the racetrack that has been built around the lake where Persephone disappeared; they endlessly circle this still, dark site of that mother - daughter rift but are unable to reach it, as Persephone and Demeter keep missing each other. This image also signals seasonal and generational cycles: images of pregnancy in the second half of the book indicate that Persephone is poised to repeat history.

The formal motif of *Mother Love* is the sonnet; as Gwendolyn Brooks does in her sequence "the children of the poor," Dove converts this form associated with romantic love into a forum for maternal passion. For Brooks, the sonnet represents both the sweetness and the uncertainty of the mother - child relationship; Dove echoes this when she writes in her introduction:
I like how the sonnet comforts even while its prim borders (but what a pretty fence!) are stultifying; one is constantly bumping up against Order. The Demeter/Persephone cycle of betrayal and regeneration is ideally suited for this form since all three · mother · goddess, daughter · consort and poet · are struggling to sing in their chains.

Dove's very language here · "(but what a pretty fence!)")picketed by parentheses · continues to domesticate this form.

Never at home anywhere, however, Dove creates poems that are not truly sonnets, even if they participate in the spirit of the form. Her poems are fourteen lines long, but line length and rhyme are erratic. Further, she interweaves two sonnets in the title poem, strings several in succession in "Persephone in Hell," and ends the book with a densely cyclical poem in eleven sonnetlike sections: there are violations within violations. For Dove this formal deviance has two sides; it "represents a world gone awry," yet is simultaneously "a talisman against disintegration." The sonnet, like the Demeter myth, helps to unify and order the volume more than any of Dove's collections since Thomas and Beulah. However, as the quintessential love poem transgressed, the dominant form of Mother Love emphasizes the damaged unity of mother and daughter, their disharmony. Dove's future poetry may well continue to zero in on the "perfect ellipse" of black water at the center of this book; the relationship she depicts is certainly far from resolution.

Rita Dove's two published works of fiction, the collection Fifth Sunday (1985) and the novel Through the Ivory Gate (1992), spring from the same autobiographical sources as much of the poetry, sometimes reworking the same material in different contexts. Dove's talent with character blossoms more largely within them, but otherwise the continuities between the two bodies of work are more striking: Dove is concerned with identity and its racial and sexual components, the meanings of family and home, and the transition from girlhood to sexual maturity; she has the same tendency in her fiction as in her poetry to end inconclusively, avoiding as a great peril that last line that "snaps shut too tightly."

Dove herself emphasizes the continuity between her fiction and poetry rather than their dissimilarities. In an interview with William Walsh, she cites successful practitioners of both genres, such as Canadians Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje, and insists,

I am a writer. I am neither a poet who has tasted the financial fruits of fiction and abandoned poetry, nor am I a poet who has toyed with fiction and decided to ‘come back to the fold,’ whatever that means. I'd like the genres to embrace each other, rather than be exclusive.

In addition, Dove is conscious of her place within an African American storytelling tradition, and emphasizes that her literary efforts began in short fiction; it is not surprising that she should return to that form. Dove is certainly best known as a poet, and her strongest work to date is in that genre, but she does not intend to limit herself to the "relentlessly lyric" scope of Grace Notes anytime soon.
"Fifth Sunday" is a collection of eight stories, two of which later were incorporated into *Through the Ivory Gate*. Dove experiments in these pieces with different modes of narration: she uses both first and third person, bases one story on journal entries, and in "Damon and Vandalia" tells a story about the attraction between a gay British man who grew up in Japan and a black midwestern woman in alternating first-person narration. Despite this stylistic diversity, however, there is a unity to the kinds of characters Dove portrays and the situations in which they find themselves. Most of the protagonists are women, as in the lead and title story, "Fifth Sunday." The church of Dove's childhood gave over the service, excepting the sermon, on the rare fifth Sunday of the month to the youth of the congregation. In using this title for the book, Dove wishes to bring forward "the idea of being in control only occasionally, and in strict accordance with the social rules," as she told Kitchen and Rubin: her characters are in conflict with these rules to varying degrees.

"Fifth Sunday" looks over the shoulder of a very proper teenage girl, on such a Sunday, in her small-town church. Valerie, menstruating and more than ready for her first kiss from the minister's son, fiercely desires to manipulate how others see her, but she is "in control only occasionally." She faints in the overheated church, and a woman whom Valerie never identifies suggests that the swooning young woman, who won't even sing in the choir lest she be called "fast," might be pregnant. The story ends with Valerie's unresolved rage, throwing the focus away from the external events of the narrative toward the inner tension between sexuality (connected to her desire to sing) and her cherished public identity as a good girl.

The most successful story in *Fifth Sunday* takes place worlds away from a midwestern small town but grapples with the same questions of identity and expression. "The Spray Paint King" comprises journal entries written by a teenage German boy in a detention home for youthful offenders, for eventual consumption by Dr. Severin, the psychiatrist in charge of his case. The unnamed protagonist describes himself as a "quadroon"; in her interview with Kitchen and Rubin, Dove calls him a "brown baby" growing up in Cologne, the result of a World War II encounter between an African American soldier and a German woman, and emphasizes that it was "this friction between individual artistic protest and social regulations that prompted that story." The protagonist is incarcerated for having spraypainted black art on white walls all over the city, provoking rave reviews from art critics:

The young artist's style is reminiscent of Picasso in austerity of line, of Matisse in fantasy and social comment. The bitterness, however, the relentless scrutiny of what we so vainly call civilization, the hopelessness which pervades his work, without coquetterie nor call for pathos · these qualities are all his own. He is, so to speak, his generation's appointed messenger.

The young artist, although he enjoys these commentaries enough to cite them, produces his own analysis of his graffiti, precociously anticipating Dr. Severin's interpretation of his work as a defiant assertion of blackness: "I put the stain back on the wall."

The "stain" the narrator wants to reestablish on the whitewashed town is both a mark of black presence in the omnipresent whiteness of Cologne and a sign of that city's guilt. Specifically, he
condemns by his painting his father's contribution to the accidental deaths of five men in the building of Severin Bridge. More generally, he means to remind the townspeople that their city is built on the backs of innocent people—in this case, five hapless construction workers literally become part of the town's foundation while the drive to production continues relentlessly. Overlaying and magnifying his father's betrayal is the guilty absence of his grandfather, the American who left his own mark in Germany and then refused responsibility for his creation. The protagonist of "The Spray Paint King" is abandoned to negotiate his black and white, American and German heritage according to his own methods, and his graffiti become explosive but profoundly positive self-assertions.

The main character in Through the Ivory Gate, Dove's first full-length novel, is Virginia King, an African American woman not long out of college in Madison, Wisconsin, where she studied drama and mime. She is not unlike "The Spray Paint King," although her own family secrets are different: she, too, keeps an ambivalent distance from her family and community while attempting to carve out a place for herself. The book's action takes place a year or two after Nixon's resignation, when Virginia is an artist-in-residence in her hometown of Akron for the month of October, teaching puppetry to fourth-grade children. The homecoming, told in a linear fashion, is an occasion for flashbacks to her childhood and along the way solves the mysterious crisis that drove the Kings to Arizona during her own fourth-grade year. Meanwhile, Virginia struggles for self-definition and copes with the series of romantic disappointments of her adolescence and adult life.

We are given Virginia's conflicts with her mother, Belle, and her maternal grandmother and namesake, Virginia Evans, in pieces. The book begins with Virginia's childhood contest with these mothers over dolls. Virginia adores a paleskinned, red-haired doll:

Then there was Penelope, Penelope with the long red hair and plump good looks of Brenda Starr, Penelope of the creamy skin and dimpling cheeks.... As many as five hairstyles a day · Penelope the Model, Penelope the God-Fearing Nurse, Penelope the Prize-Winning Journalist ... Penelope Had a Man and He Loved Her So.

The doll's streaming red hair represents freedom and possibility for Virginia. Dove reverses a similar scene in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, in which that narrator deplores the gift of a fair baby doll, to the outrage of her parents; Virginia, paradoxically, frustrates her mother and grandmother by repudiating an "ugly" black baby doll with painted-on hair, preferring either a brightly dressed Sambo or a white doll to whom she bears no resemblance. Dove pays tribute to Morrison while marking their generational difference and insisting that, however illogically, a black girl can find identification with a white doll empowering.

Like Dove, Virginia plays the cello, although she does not pursue music as her primary artistic outlet, claiming not to have the will to practice sufficiently. Nevertheless, more than puppetry, the cello seems to be an outlet for passionate self-expression; Virginia's mastery of a series of Bach suites parallels her emotional growth. Further, she calls her instrument a substitute mother: "No wonder she'd chosen this monstrosity, this womanly shape she could wrap herself around after her mother had retreated into unexplained grief and intransigent resentment." Virginia's
relationship with the cello shapes the novel, but it is a displaced one, a result of her mother's apparent failure to nurture her daughter sufficiently. In *Through the Ivory Gate*, Dove begins to write from the position of a daughter about her mother in a sustained way, anticipating *Mother Love*.

Keeping her music private, Virginia finds a more public artistic role in staging a puppet show with her racially mixed class. During production of the student-written love story including fairy godparents and a talking football, Virginia is wooed by Terry, the divorced father of one of the children. The novel chronicles Virginia's disappointments in dating African American men; persistently, and finally with Terry, Virginia finds herself too educated for the men to whom she is attracted. Her music, her German, her interest in mime set her apart from her race · none of her passions are the prescribed ones. Her thoughts circle obsessively back to Clayton, a hopeless college romance with the one black man with whom she felt a full sympathetic understanding, who leaves Virginia for a man.

Consistently, Virginia refuses to be black according to anyone else's definition; her maverick tastes echo Dove's own eclecticism in *The Yellow House on the Corner*. She eventually moves away from Terry, deciding that she will not marry a man merely because he is eligible and black, thus beginning to take charge of her choices and to understand her past. The novel ends inconclusively but lyrically, at Halloween:

> There were devils and fairies, butterflies and cheetahs, Casper the Friendly Ghost and the Tin Man and princesses and bionic Six Million Dollar men. They came from all directions and proceeded from porch to porch. Every now and then an astronaut or a Frankenstein would stop to execute his own rapturous little jig, while from the sidelines the grownups watched and waited.

This passage combines many of the story's threads: the empowerment Virginia and her students find through masks, disguising themselves and sampling different identities, is interwoven with the related joy young Virginia found in her red-haired doll. Virginia is at a turning point, and Dove does not map out what is on the other side of the gate, but does emphasize the enormity of possibility her literary double is facing.

Dove told Helen Vendler she wrote *Through the Ivory Gate* "mainly because it's a story I've wanted to tell; it wouldn't leave me alone. But another part of me · the dutiful daughter or something · was always told that if you don't understand something you should study it." Her first novel, like her poetry, does not give over whatever Dove learned easily; in fact, the economy which worries Dove in relation to her poetry is more of a problem in this extended work of fiction. Virginia's key relationships with her grandmother and her mother are frustratingly underdeveloped. Also, the plot of repressed memory in operation here is already a commonplace in contemporary fiction, and Dove is not the best practitioner of it. Still, as always, she writes compellingly of the story's father figure, of Virginia's sexuality, of her struggle for identity intertwined with an ambivalent homecoming: this first novel is a central piece of Dove's expanding canon.
Dove has made excursions into a drama, her third major genre. Although she said, in her interview with William Walsh, that "I don't think I'll ever be a true playwright because to do that I would have to learn the theater scene and work at establishing contacts" - an enterprise the post-Pulitzer and poet laureate writer does not have time to undertake - she does intend to continue practicing this genre. Her two plays published to date are a one-act titled *The Siberian Village* (1991) and a verse play, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994).

*The Siberian Village* engages in a debate that recurs in Dove's writing over the intersections of language and race, challenging the idea that race defines the language one may employ. Robert, the focal character and an ex-convict recently released from eleven years of incarceration, accuses his black female psychiatrist of "shrink talk": to his mind, she has too much to say, and too large and refined a vocabulary with which to make her point. He demands, "Where'd you leave your nigger talk? Back in the maze with the white rats?" Robert later runs into the same trouble with his old friend, intimidating Eddie with his prison-acquired literacy.

Robert is not a sympathetic character at the opening of the drama because of his hostility toward and attempt to silence Dr. Swanson; the final scene of the play goes some way toward illuminating his state of mind. Robert overlays reality with scenes from *The Siberian Village*, a novel bequeathed to him by a cellmate. In scene four the cliché of realist drama, the living room of Robert's new apartment, falls into abrupt darkness; then Robert and the other characters begin to act out the fictional scenes. Robert becomes Sergei Petrovich, the son of a railroad worker in the remote village of Kibirsk, near the Arctic Circle and on the edge of a swamp. Sergei is "born of a Tartar peasant girl, built like a bull": he is well adapted to this life of brutal winters and reeking, mosquito-filled summers. Eddie and Dr. Swanson double as Alexi and Galina, a couple newly arrived at the camp, their crime unknown except for Alexi's frustrated explanation that "I opened my mouth."

Again, speech and language come to the forefront as the central issue. Galina does not speak except repeatedly to utter one sound, "Shh," as if to reproach her too-open husband. Sergei attributes her near-silence to "the trauma of exile," and is so fascinated by it that he impregnates Galina with "a small blue bull" of a son that kills her in childbirth:

"But I loved Galina's word; I ached to hear her say it. I pushed it out, I eased it out, I sucked it from her tongue. She was not ungrateful. (pause) While you shriveled in righteous anger, she grew plump and brown as a bug, only you didn't notice! She honed her living down to a word and lived like an animal in that word. With the word growing in her."

Galina's silence is the opposite of Dr. Swanson's verbosity, yet both are self-willed exiles, Galina choosing to leave her homeland with her husband and enter this frigid, wordless space, Dr. Swanson voluntarily abandoning what Robert assumes is her homeland, her natural "black" language.

Robert clearly prefers this female character silent; her one "word" is barely even that, and death finalizes the gradual quieting of the play's one female voice. The play also consummates the
sexual tensions not only between Robert and Swanson but also between Robert and Eddie: Alexi rests in Sergei's arms as Sergei, the survivor, sings the other man a lullaby. Intimacy is interwoven with treachery - it is intimated, further, that both Robert and his deceased cellmate had been imprisoned for murdering their unfaithful lovers. The Siberian Village circles warily around these betrayals, interwoven as they are with the power of language, and resulting always in the loss of home forever.

Dove continues this exploration of language, sex, and power in The Darker Face of the Earth. A play one reviewer describes as in "blank verse," it is actually written in prosaic, unrhymed lines of varying length; its verse form is nearly unobtrusive enough to be nonexistent. Dove retells the Oedipus story in the context of a South Carolina plantation: the identity confusion that moves the action of the classical tragedy is here a result of miscegenation, two white owners having children by their slaves. Race, class, education, and free/slave status become hopelessly mixed through the corrupting environment of the American slave economy.

The owners of the plantation in question, doubles for Jocasta and her husband, are Amalia and Louis Jennings. Frustrated by Louis' frequent visits to the slave cabins, Amalia defiantly conducts a relationship with one of the slaves and produces a son. She agrees to sell the offspring of the affair, pretending her baby was white and died in childbirth, while her enraged husband and the attending doctor devise a way to kill the child indirectly, placing the newborn in a basket with a pair of spurs for the doctor's long ride back to town. Augustus, of course, does not die, but falls into relatively fortunate circumstances: he is taken up by an English sea captain who treats him well, educates him, and promises to set Augustus free in his will. The estate's executor betrays the will to sell the valuable slave, and Augustus subsequently becomes notorious for his acts of rebellion. Amalia, proud of her heritage as the daughter of a slave breaker, full of bitter confidence from years of running the estate in Louis' effective absence, decides to purchase Augustus, against the advice of her overseer.

Augustus fascinates Amalia, who does not know his real identity, and, following the plot of the original tragedy, he enters into an affair with her and accidentally kills his slave father, Hector, before he learns the full story. He becomes involved with a group of slaves and free blacks that is planning a revolt, and is eventually ordered to kill Louis and Amalia. In this last visit to the great house his history is revealed to both Augustus and Amalia; he is found dithering by the other revolutionaries, and both are killed.

Dove brilliantly resets this familiar story in a circumstance in which lineage did get impossibly mixed, children commonly separated from parents, power sharply divided. The parallels she finds for the individual characters, too, are apt and suggestive. The slaves become the chorus, site of comment, judgment, and song; Tiresias is transformed into Scylla, a manipulative conjure woman. Scylla is, in fact, depicted as another enslaver, whose superstitions govern the other slaves until Augustus ridicules their fears; she is not a sympathetic character, but her predictions about Augustus are always reliable:

Your Augustus is a pretty clever nigger -
been lots of places and knows
the meanings of words and things like that.
But something's foul in his blood.
He may 'pear to be a budding flower,
but there's a worm
eating away at the root.
What's festering inside him
nothing this side of the living
can heal. And when a body's
hurting that bad, a person lose sight of
what's good or evil. They do anything
to get relief · anything.

What's festering inside Augustus is hate, as Phebe, who supports Augustus and is more loyal to him than to the revolt, points out. The system of slavery here is a substitute for fate or preordained forces: its peculiar pressures distort people, even or especially compellingly intelligent characters like Amalia and Augustus, beyond recognition or healing. There is no real freedom possible, Dove seems to assert, within this system.

*The Darker Face of the Earth* attributes power to language not in the way *The Siberian Village* does so much as in the way Frederick Douglass does: education, the ability to read and write, cast Augustus' fate in making him aware enough of the world and his personal worth that slavery becomes intolerable to him. Interestingly, Dove makes the choice to "mostly standardize" the slave dialect within the play, "in order to facilitate reading of the script." This decision does bring the play closer to classicism in its language, and probably does make it more accessible to readers, although probably not significantly so: educated readers have managed well with American literature in various southern vernaculars, from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the stories of Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Faulkner. In any case, this choice reflects Dove's insistence on the universal in all her work: her literary interests and attempts consistently cross national, racial, and generic boundaries.

Rita Dove does not belong to any movement or literary circle. To repeat what she has made so clear, she separated herself from the black arts movement at the very beginning of her career, although race informs a great deal of her writing, whether it is about antebellum South Carolina or her daughter. (Vendler, in "Rita Dove: Identity Markers," celebrates Dove for making "this important discovery · that blackness need not be one's central subject, but equally need not be omitted," perhaps missing the point that blackness is inseparably implicated in Dove's self-positioning as an outsider looking homeward.) Dove disavows the influence of magical realism in her poetry, countering William Walsh's question on this subject by exclaiming, "all I can think is: isn't reality magic?" She is neither new formalist nor avant-garde in her style, although she is capable of play in either field; even her literary Americanness is complicated by her strong German ties and her tendency to eye the United States with an outsider's skepticism.

One borough of contemporary American writing in which she is often at home might be a women's literary tradition. Dove herself stresses her early attraction to the work of Toni Morrison; some of her works also seem to allude to the poems of Marianne Moore ("Fish in a Stone") and Elizabeth Bishop ("Genetic Expedition"); Gwendolyn Brooks is an obvious precursor with her vivid depictions of life in her own hometown, as well as the economy of her
language and the technical expertise that characterize the first half of Brooks's career; Dove begins "In the Old Neighborhood" with a quote from the feminist poet Adrienne Rich’s "Shooting Script."

These are diverse references, and Dove does refer, probably as often, to male writers and artists whose works have captured her imagination. Yet Dove's angle of vision is solidly feminist. She draws clear lines here, too, declaring herself to Taleb-Khyar as "politically ... a feminist," but separating politics from her literary efforts: "when I walk into my room to write, I don't think of myself in political terms.... I would find it a breach of my integrity as a writer to create a character for didactic or propaganda purposes." Whatever intentions in this case divide art from politics, much of the work Dove produces invites feminist interpretation. She depicts women's lives with authority and insight, often articulating women's sexuality and motherhood from a subject position; she is fascinated by the relationship between language, gender, and identity; she reworks domestic space in her poetry with a decidedly critical eye; she writes movingly of women's artistic, intellectual, and personal ambitions. Even her insistence on completely free range as an artist, unhindered by anyone's ideas of what or how it might be appropriate for her to write, can be understood as a feminist stance.

Further, the economy and personal reserve of her poetic style strongly recall preconfessional American poets like Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and H.D. Each of these writers mimicked feminine modesty in order to enter masculine turf, rejecting a sentimental mode then associated with women's poetry; their strategy was initially self-protective but became vastly influential, taken up by mainstream modernism as the new aesthetic of the twentieth century. Dove is much more forward than these poets, more empowered, more public in her mission, yet her approach to the lyric resonates with this tradition. In fact, it advances it, adapting a great lyric mode to contemporary concerns.

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