

## LYN GRAHAM BARZILAI

### On the Brink: Rita Dove's "Kentucky 1833"

Rita Dove's "Kentucky 1833," from *The Yellow House on the Corner*,<sup>1</sup> presents a cameo portrait of a group of slaves on Sunday, enjoying their day off as they lie in the sun, the younger ones indulging in energetic horseplay while their Massa comes to heighten the entertainment. There are games and music and stories here. There are also overt images of the master and the mastered; it appears on a first reading that this short prose poem perpetrates the commonplace and overworked theme of victimage. Commenting on this theme in a review of Dove's poem "Parsley," Helen Vendler says:

Poems of victimage, told from the viewpoint of the victim alone, are the stock-in-trade of mediocre protest writing, and they appear regularly in African-American literature. The position of victimage, and victimage alone, seems imaginatively insufficient to Dove, since it takes in only one half of the poem's world.<sup>2</sup>

If this is so, why does Dove choose to present the "position of victimage" in "Kentucky 1833," speaking exclusively through the voice of the slaves and writing out of their viewpoint alone? Does the slave speaker in this text argue solely for the victimised position of African-American slaves at that time? And if so, does this text then become just one more exposition of "mediocre protest writing"? For the text does appear to set up, and then undermine, the white slave-owner's perception of his African-American

slaves; below the apparently stereotyped portrayal of the master-slave relationship runs a counter-current which subverts white colonial culture and the mastery of the white man over his black servants, raising the age-old and exhausted question of whether the powerful are also the just. Dove's concerns, however, are not only with the issue of the victims' proper rights, nor with the mishandling of power. This text engages, ultimately, with the question of self-realisation and how it is attained. Embedded in the text are the implications of the title: 1833 was the year in which Kentucky passed an amendment to the laws of the state, prohibiting the importation of slaves into Kentucky—implications not fully realised at the time, but already stirring into life.

The text begins, beguilingly, in an overtly positioned manner: "It is Sunday, day of roughhousing," perhaps borrowing the slave-owner's term for what the slaves do on their day off. The loud, unbridled connotations of "roughhousing" appear to be borne out in the next line, as the "young boys wrestle and butt their heads like sheep," validating the reason for the slaves being "let out in the woods." In the ensuing wrestling match, betted on by "Massa and his gentlemen friends" (we hear the slaves' artlessly respectful voice in this phrase), the reader finds "more kicking, butting and scuffling." One of the young slave boys is "bucking and prancing about." Throughout this whole scene, the slaves are depicted in animal terms, befitting their nature, perhaps, in the eyes of their Massa; as he would almost certainly phrase it, slaves are untamed by culture, and lack the refinement of their white owners. Still, for all their uncontrolled energy, they are described as "butting their heads together *like sheep*" (my italics); surely we would expect this behaviour of goats or rams rather than sheep? There is something docile and domesticated about sheep which counteracts the image of the wild friskiness of the youngsters. In fact, their animal-like energy is an innocent expression of the joy of release from the tethers of their hard everyday lives. In

contrast, the behaviour of Massa and his “gentlemen friends” carries more sinister undertones: *they* “guffaw and shout, taking sides, red-faced” as they urge the young slaves to display their prowess at wrestling. Then, in an apparently magnanimous gesture, Massa not only rewards but also reinforces this display of unbridled behaviour by offering a shot of whisky to the winner, as long as he can down it in one gulp. Thus the white owner introduces into the young slaves’ eager enjoyment of freedom his own rather degenerate patterns of behaviour, belying his self-perception as a role-model of culture and refinement for the slaves. This control over the slaves by their master is reinforced by the description of the weather as “an odd monkey,” one who is “on [the slaves’] back, his cotton eye everywhere.” The slaves’ lives, it seems, are to be regulated by the harsh realities not only of master, but also of nature. Yet they themselves relax peacefully on this day of rest, the women “brown and glossy” like beautiful antique wood, their legs tucked gracefully under them.

The last section of “Kentucky 1833” introduces the Greek myth of Jason, linking back to the motif of the sheep in the first part of the text. We read:

Jason is bucking and prancing about—Massa said his name reminded him of some sailor, a hero who crossed an ocean, looking for a golden cotton field. Jason thinks he’s been born to great things—a suit with gold threads, vest and all.

The slaves cannot read—they have only “old woman Acker,” who is “the only one who could read to us from the Bible, before Massa forbade it”—but interpret the myth of Jason as a text of fulfilment. Massa sees only the physical aspects of Jason’s voyage, the plot narrative, whereas the slaves see a story of self-realisation: slave-Jason feels “he’s been born to great things.” The text itself parallels these two different approaches to the myth of Jason: while Massa is engaged in actions, the “doings” of the story, the slaves are occupied in introspection about their situation, with a view to understanding

their circumstances and interpreting their future. Through this introspection on the part of the slaves, Dove invigorates the culture and heritage of African-Americans. Their hesitant wonder—“it’s a crazy feeling that carries through the night; as if the sky were an omen we could not understand, the book that, if we could read, would change our lives”—leads them to an enlightenment about themselves that Massa and his company lack. Dove seems to imply here that enlightenment comes about not always as a result of *action*, but as a result of self-reflection and introspection.

The paradox of this text is that while Massa and his friends use language primarily to make bets and toss off casual references to “some sailor” (Jason), or to urge on the wrestling match with shouts and guffaws, the slaves, although unable to read, are capable of expressing themselves both lyrically and figuratively: the weather is “an odd monkey,” the sun “that weary tambourine” which “hesitates at the rim of the sky’s green light.” The culmination of the African-American literary self is superbly manifested in this paradox, as Dove herself articulates the fulfilment, through her writing, of the African-American potential, the slaves’ potential, their unarticulated dreams and visions for themselves. Dove, in an interview with Grace Cavalieri, says about *Thomas and Beulah*:

I began to think, how do we remember our lives? How do we think of our lives or shape our lives in our own consciousness, and I realize that we don’t actually think of our lives in very cohesive strands but we remember as beads on a necklace, moments that matter to us....<sup>3</sup>

In “Kentucky 1833” Dove brings us a collective memory of a moment that matters, a moment of introspection and an understanding by the slaves of what is needed in order to give shape to their lives.

Later in the same interview with Cavalieri, Dove calls Beulah “a dreamer, an introspective person with longings and yearnings that are never realized.” Perhaps,

ultimately, *this* text is about the realisation of one's "longings and yearnings" and how one goes about attaining the dream and the vision. If there is criticism here of the white colonial figure and culture, it derives from the inability of those in power to consider (or reconsider) their position, to look inward rather than outward. Eventually, both the slaves and Massa are victims: the slaves are victims of circumstance, Massa and his fellow-men are slaves to, and victims of, their own self-image. Dove implies that release from victimage comes about through introspection and self-reflection, without which action is meaningless. The choral speaker, the "we" of "Kentucky 1833" represents voices which, in Kirkland Jones' words, "move in and out of the centuries as they transcend the local and the mundane, becoming, as a result, decidedly inclusive in their view of the universe and of humanity."<sup>4</sup> This transcendence, epitomised in Dove's lyrical text, derives from a self-awareness and its potential. The text implies that the way out of all victimage is through a perception of one's circumstances and limitations and the subsequent enlightenment that enables self-realisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Dove, *The Yellow House on the Corner* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> See "Rita Dove: Identity Markers" (chapter 3) in Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> *The American Poetry Review* vol. 24, March-April 1995, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of Literary Biography* vol. 120: American Poets Since World War II, Third Series, ed. R. S. Gwyn (Lamar University: Brucoli Clark, 1992), 47-51.