Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys

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This book is for Ben.

Divinity must live within herself
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

—From Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning,"
Typescript copy included among Jean Rhys's
personal papers, McFarlin Library,
University of Tulsa

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Contents

1. Introductory: Jean Rhys and the Landscape of Emotion

The big idea—well I'm blowed if I can be sure what it is. Something to do with time being an illusion I think. I mean that the past exists—side by side with the present, not behind it; that what was—is.

—Jean Rhys, *letter of February 18, 1934*

Jean Rhys wrote four of her five novels in the period between the two world wars; she lived for some time as an expatriate in London and Paris; and her fiction is notable for its stylistic experimentation on multiple levels. Until recently, however, she has not garnered the critical attention or the reverent following accorded other Modernists of her day. Despite the perspicacity with which all of her narratives record the lives of the disenfranchised and interrogate the conditions of subjectivity, even readers who have become Rhys enthusiasts tend to privilege her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which was published almost three decades after the others and is usually celebrated at the expense of her earlier works.

It is not surprising that *Wide Sargasso Sea* would appeal to contemporary audiences, for its positioning as self-aware "prequel" to Charlotte Brontë's nineteenth-century narrative *Jane Eyre* offers up a bouquet of poststructuralist delights. Rhys's most famous work depends upon and yet forever alters the prior text—*Jane Eyre* is never the same upon rereading, after one experiences the critique of imperialism mounted by *Wide Sargasso Sea*—for Rhys's novel problematizes the hierarchies of "originary" and "secondary," "colonizer" and "colonized," "subject" and "object" in modes of analysis that resonate in the current critical climate. Yet the novels that Rhys wrote at mid-century make powerful and unforgettable claims as they evoke the primitive states of emotional life. These narratives, in turn, place *Wide Sargasso Sea* within a new kind of interpretive frame.[1] The span of Rhys's development shows her continuous reworking of preoccupations that were

with her from the start. Over many years, in the painstaking refinement of her aesthetic, she summoned again and again a vision of the psychic terrain as a wild and frightening place whose borders were uncertain and where time stood still. How she came to this vision, and her achievement in finding ways to communicate it in her sparingly selected words and in the spaces between those words, are the subjects of this study.

In spite of her dedication to mapping her perceptions and sharing these with the others who read her work, Rhys thought of herself, in her personal life, as someone who would always be misunderstood. This conception informed her bearing in the successive environments that she felt she always bordered. Born in 1890 in Dominica, a small island in the West Indies, Rhys felt marginalized on several counts: because she was living in a multiracial population marked by strong antagonism toward the lingering imperialist presence, and she was white; because she was brought up in a late-Victorian culture shaped by powerfully masculine values, and she was a woman. Most intimately, she felt isolated within her own family; she was distrustful of her rivalrous siblings, attached just tenuously to her depressed father, and both afraid of and alienated from her punitive, unavailable mother.

The autobiographical sketches in *Smile Please* in addition to the fuller biographical treatment in Carole Angier's *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* clarify that Rhys was adrift in the world from the start. She had been conceived to compensate for the loss of a little girl who had died nine months previously (Angier 11), and so she was born into an atmosphere of mourning—a depressed domestic environment that did not really change, as Rhys recollected, through her childhood and early youth. In a telling vignette that describes the feelings of loneliness and self-hatred, and also the defiance, that were with her from an early age, Rhys recalled the arrival of two dolls from England, gifts from a relative, and of how she longed for the dark rather than the fair one (Rhys herself was fair; the rest of her family, dark). Her younger sister, however, appropriated the dark doll and Rhys was told, over protests, that she ought not begrudge her sister her happiness and should feel content with the fair doll that had been allotted to her by default. Instead Rhys took this fair doll into the shadows and smashed its face with a stone; in the ensuing domestic upset she herself didn't understand why she had done what she had done, "Only I was sure that I must do it and for me it was right" (*Smile* 40). Later, after sobbing about it in the arms of a great-aunt, Rhys began to mourn for the doll and made plans to bury it ceremoniously. This episode models in miniature Rhys's lifelong sense of the insignificance of her own needs as measured against others' wishes; her ensuing envy, jealousy, and rivalry; her inarticulate and terrific

rage; her remorse over the reflexively alienating behavior that was to characterize so many of her interactions; and yet, despite it all, her compassion for herself and her determination that whatever she did, "I must do it and for me it was right."

Her accounts of her family reveal a culture of sadness and a tendency to hold intimacies at a distance. Her father came from a deprived emotional background, the son of an Anglican clergyman who had neglected him and favored his elder brother (Angier 8). When he traveled from Wales to Dominica and set up practice as a doctor, he adopted a way of life that kept him busy but also remote, as he dispensed a sort of distracted kindness toward his children, flirted playfully with women other than his wife, and spent money improvidently, without regard for the anxiety this provoked in everyone around him. The coral brooch that he gave young Rhys and that was a favorite among her things was crushed in their last embrace, as she boarded a boat bound for England. Rhys's response was characteristic: "I had been very fond of it; now I took it off and put it away without any particular feeling" (*Smile* 93–94). This cutting-off of feelings in the attempt to disavow painful connection with others would characterize Rhys throughout her life whenever confronted by wrenching loss; it was a defensive mechanism that she recognized when she saw it in herself and other people, and she could write about it with disarming perceptiveness.

Of her mother Rhys recollected a woman of mixed background, the descendant of a Scottish slave-owner and his Hispanic wife; she was a white Creole who loved babies, particularly black ones, but apparently not the little girl who was growing up before her eyes. Rhys mused, "Was this the reason why I prayed so ardently to be black [. . .]?," voicing her early sense of her own hopeless inadequacy (42). She came to find her mother frigidly inaccessible. She was unreceptive to kisses and generally disapproved of Rhys's behavior, sometimes resorting to physical punishment. From early in life Rhys made a despairing conflation of her mother, God, and books: she imagined that God "was a large book standing upright and half open and I could see the print inside but it made no sense to me. Other times the book was smaller and inside were sharp flashing things. The smaller book was, I am sure now, my mother's needle-book, and the sharp flashing things were her needles with the sun on them" (27). Both books, of God and mother, excluded Rhys, and thus she was kept away from the sources of power; further, the mother's sharp, flashing book suggests the mother's sharp, flashing look, the critical, wounding gaze that is trained on an unloved child. Rhys experienced her mother as so distant emotionally that eventually she came to seem like someone with whom Rhys could have virtually no connection and, characteristically, she retaliated with her own

withdrawal. In *Smile Please*, she reports, "I stopped imagining what she felt or what she thought" (46). The stern, principled distrust of the weak that her mother voiced would be countermanded by Rhys's ever more determined alignment with the vulnerable as against those who hold the power. Other than setting herself up in opposition to her mother, she had for all intents and purposes done with conscious affiliation with her by the time that she left Dominica. She had adopted a sense of her own liminal status that was to shape both her self-awareness and her work for succeeding decades as she became the author of her own books and found power, of a kind, in this way.

When Rhys moved to England at sixteen, to pursue her education first in a regular secondary school setting (as was not unusual for white children from the colonies) and later in an acting academy, she carried with her the conviction, as she expressed this once in an interview, that she never managed to "get into the sacred circle. I was always outside, shivering" (Vreeland 221). She eked out an existence in England in the semi-disreputable occupation of a chorus girl after her schooling abruptly ended, apparently because of her lack of conventional talent as an actress as well as her family's dwindling funds. Later she occupied a similarly uncertain social placement in Paris, her loneliness intensified when her first husband was arrested and extradited for a series of petty crimes. It was her attunement to the experience of marginalization that so impressed her first literary mentor, the influential reviewer and critic Ford Madox Ford, when he was shown Rhys's work by a mutual acquaintance in Paris who had seen and liked Rhys's manuscript-diary (the narrative that came to be entitled *Triple Sec* and that would form the nucleus of her later novel, *Voyage in the Dark*). Describing the impact of her fiction, Ford noted "her profound knowledge of the life of the Left Bank—of many of the Left Banks of the world," places delineated more by psychology than topography, by an atmosphere of sadness and deprivation that distinguished the inhabitants (Preface 23). Ford had edited both *The English Review* and *the transatlantic review*, which made a point of publishing diverse, up-and-coming talents who had been unrecognized previously but came to light in literary circles thanks to Ford's support. His patronage of young writers was consistent and perceptive, and he tutored Rhys in paring down her prose, illustrating but not editorializing, imitating French models, and eschewing melodrama (Angier 131–35). A piece of her manuscript-diary was published in the *review*'s last issue; and it was Ford who devised for the former Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams the pseudonym Jean Rhys—the two names adopted, respectively, from her first husband, who used the nickname Jean; and her father, whose middle name of Rees was restored to its Welsh spelling. She was thus positioned within

a line of masculine influence that she would learn to modify as she began to claim her own voice.[2]

By this time Rhys and Ford were sexually enmeshed in a complicated situation that reverberated in both their marriages, as documented by Rhys's fictionalized account of the situation in her first published novel, *Quartet*. Most pertinently, however, despite Ford's support and advice, and despite the presence of the many other aspiring writers who circled around him, Rhys continued to think of herself as alone. She barely knew Hemingway and chose successive, one-on-one intimacies that almost always ended badly over inclusion in the group life of the literati in postwar Paris. In a letter written in 1964, Rhys dismissively recalled the expatriate milieu: "The 'Paris' all these people write about, Henry Miller, even Hemingway etc was not 'Paris' at all—it was 'America in Paris' or 'England in Paris'. The real Paris had nothing to do with that lot—As soon as the tourists came the *real* Montparnos packed up and left" (*Letters* 280).[3]

As the defensive tone of her statement suggests, Rhys had a far-ranging suspicion of social circles; this was accompanied by a keen awareness of how conventions of every kind exert pressure on the individual to mask genuine feelings with contrived forms of outer display. From the first, her fiction demonstrated her concern with inner states of experience as this paralleled, always, her distrust for external show. The phoniness of much outward presentation, the unforgivable sin of socially conditioned behavior, formed the target for her most scathing attacks. Her protagonists characteristically respond to the vicissitudes of human relations by learning to distrust the mouthings of conventional expression and feel, as their sharpest reality, how deeply other people can wound them. Their habituated expressions of suspicion and their sometimes more stark demonstrations of fear create resonances at the heart of Rhys's work. These are complicated, however, by her unfailingly honest perception: that a grim take on life's offerings may not make an unparalleled claim of truth but rather invite further scrutiny precisely because it is a response to having been badly hurt.

Rhys's candor in accepting that a profound legacy of pain may cause the self to misperceive aspects of others does not diminish the power of her vision, which presents, with compassion, how the warping of individuals' lives connects with the warping of their outlooks and expectations. Her sense of the characters' self-imposed alienation as well as their alienating activities is offset by her awareness of their tragic loneliness and reflects Rhys's own self-identifications, which shaped, on the one hand, her wary and hostile interactions with the people she met and, on the other, their readiness to exclude her from communities of various kinds. By the time she published her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in the 1960s, she was living

reclusively in a remote corner of Devonshire, her old age characterized by successive days of drinking and hangovers (Athill, Introduction xiii). In these final years, despite the growing critical recognition of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the unaccustomed financial success it brought her, and the concern of those who considered themselves her friends, Rhys felt in her darker moments, of which there were many, that she was existing as she had throughout her life—as the consummate outsider. "My Day," a brief autobiographical account of this period, records the wish for self-enclosure that served as one well-worn strategy of response: "Wouldn't it be marvelous," she suggests to herself, "if I had room for several trees and at last could live in a forest, which has always been one of my ambitions." The memoir goes on to capture with evocative indirection the feeling of isolation shadowing her in a singular, paradoxical, and stubborn companionship. Recalling a "very frightening ghost story" of a "solitary woman," she describes its chilling moment of truth when, having "just turned the key and shot the bolt for the night [. . .] she hears a voice behind her saying: 'Now we are alone together' " (*My* n. page).

In the insistence throughout her oeuvre on the unassailability of her protagonists' union with unhappiness, Rhys offers finely honed portraits of individuals who are accompanied by a persistent sense of grievance that can never be assuaged. The aggrieved mood and Rhys's sense of life are closely linked, for it is when they are acknowledging the feeling of pain that her characters live their selfhood fully. Underscoring the power of her own melancholy, she establishes that she is committed to finding a way to give sadness a voice, to let it speak without compromise, in her most memorable creative work.

* * *

Rhys's ability to evoke the depths of emotional experience in her writing was not the product of any academic understanding of the theories of Freud, which, insofar as she was exposed to these, she disputed. In her Black Exercise Book, one of several unpublished notebooks in which she kept memoirs, observations, first ideas, and preliminary drafts for some of her fiction and poetry, she recorded her encounter in adolescence with a family friend who introduced her to sexual life by narrating a series of increasingly explicit sadomasochistic adventures in which she functioned, in fantasy, as his sexual slave (Thomas 65–66)—an experience that would form the kernel of her story "Good-bye Marcus, Good-bye Rose," to be discussed below. As an adult, browsing in Sylvia Beach's bookstore in Paris, she came across a psychoanalytic study that disputed claims by women of a

certain kind (presumably sexual hysterics) that they were victims when younger of seduction by older, fatherly figures. The limited insight and failure of vision in such analytic positioning were patently clear to Rhys on this occasion. Although it seems likely that she had seen some variant of Freud's refutation of the seduction theory,[4] there is no evidence that she read Freud himself and certainly no sign that she had any strong grounding in his work or that of his successors. When her fiction does directly reference analysis, it is to serve the purpose of ridicule: for example, Sasha Jensen of *Good Morning, Midnight* recalls a former employer whose discourse style was rambling and irrational and who moved mindlessly from topics like pricey restaurants to the treatment of one's social inferiors to psychoanalysis and such comments as "Adler is more wholesome than Freud, don't you think?" (168). Freud is thus offered up as fodder for the small-talk of the socially banal. Aside from using psychoanalysis to show the superficiality of characters she disdained, Rhys apparently found Freud irrelevant. Although later in life she was under court order to see mental health practitioners because of her increasingly antisocial behavior—and she experienced them as sympathetic and understanding (Angier 446)—her formal exposure to psychoanalytic premises appears to have been almost nonexistent. Nevertheless her fiction reveals an interest, always, in sharpening her focus to reveal the emotional core of her characters, the inner lives that determine their perceptions and responses to the others they encounter.

Rhys's work reflected a different kind of interest in emotional life than that offered by the more forceful personalities in European aesthetics of the 1920s and 1930s who were documenting the blasted lives of disaffected individuals. The metaphors that were deployed by influential Modernists to describe the wounds suffered by the generation that survived World War I did not engage Rhys's imagination. Jake Barnes of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* carries his castration as a trophy, signifier of the failure of a young, heroic striver to compete with the brutal machinery of Euro-American warmongers. In a classical psychoanalytic frame of reference, as determined by Freudian concerns with male development, Jake stands as the Oedipal son of the infamous filial rivalry, thwarted in his efforts to surpass those who are stronger, and therefore cut to the quick, the thematics of castration anxiety literalized in his broken body. This masculinist rendition of the trauma suffered by modern individuals was widely appealing to the readership of Hemingway's day and to successive generations of audiences who have been conditioned to think via the patriarchy, with a consciousness shaped by male perception. This mode of awareness elides the recognition of another kind of wounding, one implicated deeply in more primitive experiences of alienation. It was to the vexed dyad of mother and child that Rhys