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Avoiding the Soul-Destroying Middle: The Four Early Novels
of Jean Rhys

by

Shelagh Ord
(Honours B.A.)

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and
Research in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree of

(Master of Arts)

Department of English

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

April 15, 1991

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submitted by: Shelagh Ord B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Thesis Supervisor

Chair, Department

Carleton University
1991

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It is interesting to experience minor contentions as one reads, disagreeing, then agreeing, partially agreeing, or partially disagreeing, occupying one's mind in dispassionate endeavour. How much more interesting it is to agree passionately and suddenly, without any warning, to disagree passionately.

In Chapter Two of A Room Of One's Own, Woolf notes anger, "the black snake" (48) lurking among the many emotions she experiences while researching her subject, women and fiction, in the British Museum. She opines that the books she has looked at were written in "the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth" (49); and are best returned to the shelf. Woolf resumes her discussion of anger, in Chapter Six, noting the anger which she perceived had tampered with Brontë's telling of her story. Woolf speaks first, however, in quite adulatory terms, of Jane Austen, her life and work: "Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely." (102) At this point she turns her attention to Brontë: "But I doubt whether that was true of Charlotte Brontë, I said, opening Jane Eyre and laying it beside Pride and Prejudice." (102)

Woolf opens to a lengthy quotation from Jane Eyre, which begins with Jane's solitary reflections as she paces the third floor of Thornfield Hall. "Anybody may blame me who likes" (102), Jane begins, and Woolf continues:

What were they blaming Charlotte Brontë for? I wondered...and it was for this that they blamed her - that "then I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the

Abstract

Virginia Woolf stated that a woman must have a room of her own and five hundred pounds per year if she were to write fiction. Woolf used the fictional example of Judith Shakespeare to illustrate a gifted woman's prospects for success, in the absence of a room and money.

Jean Rhys, who was a contemporary of Woolf's, was a woman whose life contained experiences similar to those Woolf projected for Judith Shakespeare. Rhys was also, frequently, without a room and money. In spite of these material disadvantages, she wrote four novels in the years 1928 to 1939 - Quartet (1928), After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (1930), Voyage In The Dark (1934), and Good Morning, Midnight (1939). This body of work is unusual for its unsentimental portrayal of a woman's felt experience of her life.

The eye which Rhys turned on the middle-class society around her was acutely sensitive to the machinery of intimidation and exploitation that women were subjected to, especially young, unpropertied women who did not subscribe to the prevailing middle-class values of the time.

Quartet showed Rhys grappling with her own experiences of being down and out in Paris, but doing it in a way that showed a sharp novelistic eye operating inside the passivity of the woman undergoing the experiences. What Rhys's novelistic eye began to uncover from the emotional subjectivities of her life was a cultural rite of sacrifice, a female rite of sexual sacrifice. By the time Rhys came to write Good Morning, Midnight, she was in possession of the full implications of this disclosed rite, and in that novel she provided a new model for women who resist

rite, and in that novel she provided a new model for women who resist the draw and pull of middle-class conventions for women.

Good Morning, Midnight concluded the process of self-reflection that had begun with Quartet, and did so with an act not just of self-discovery, but of challenge to other women. Rather than call for women to demand rooms and money, Rhys implicitly challenged women to risk losing the security of familiar restraints in favour of new identities that await them outside of rooms, five hundred pounds a year, and established values.

Preface

Jean Rhys wrote four novels prior to the Second World War: Quartet, After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Voyage In The Dark, and Good Morning, Midnight. These novels make up a comprehensive whole in which Jean Rhys discovered and developed a way of transforming her experiences as a woman into an innovative body of fiction.

Her first collection of stories, The Left Bank and Other Stories, was much admired by Ford Madox Ford, who wrote a Preface for it. Her first novel, Quartet, addressed, in large part, the emotional complexities of her life in Paris, especially her period as Ford's mistress. Rhys always acknowledged that Quartet was written out of anger towards Ford. The combination of anger and unabashed honesty which characterized the fictionalized confrontation of her experience with Ford would always inform her writing. This capacity to confront her emotions, and the emotional aftermath of her experiences with men and women, without distortion or sentimentality, was crucial to her ability to articulate the female experience in her novels. The Rhys heroines are constantly confronting and being confronted by a status quo which is middle-class, propertied, and often very English.

This activity of confrontation developed gradually over the course of her novels. In Quartet, Rhys's attack on the middle class, exemplified by the Heidlers, lacked the sureness of voice and style that she subsequently achieved in Good Morning, Midnight. Quartet challenged an authoritative, conformist society, but neither the heroine nor the writer were

yet in control of themselves. The novel actually concluded with an unconscious heroine. Rhys made her literary breakthrough in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie. In that novel, Julia's move from Paris to London opened a way to a world of experiences beyond the Heidler-Ford sphere of influence and familiarity. At this point, Rhys as a person and as a writer, developed her ability to resist the draw and pull of convention. The third person narratives of Quartet and After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie gave way to the first person narratives of Voyage In The Dark and Good Morning, Midnight, and Rhys became something of a bricoleur, fashioning vital novels from the different aspects of her life. Her confidence as a writer came to full realization in Voyage In The Dark. In this novel, Rhys brought into focus the previously concealed face of the middle-class, middle-aged female, an important character in the social milieu in which younger women, as Rhys had been in the early years of the twentieth century, had had to live their lives. With the full emergence of this figure in her fiction Jean Rhys articulated an important insight: these ominous women were in a ritual relationship to younger women growing into womanhood, and the ritual was one of sacrifice. Quartet, After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie and Voyage In The Dark charted a fascinating literary voyage in which Rhys explored what it meant for her to be female, and the perception of that femaleness by other, older women, who often embodied the disapproving mother. The first three novels took Rhys from a middle-class society presided over by a middle-class male, to one less highly visible as class but more visible in the form of its middle-aged orchestrators. In Good Morning, Midnight, Rhys entered the world of the middle-aged, middle-

class woman, becoming, in the character of Sasha Jensen, what she had most feared and dreaded in her earlier novels. Sasha Jensen manages to disengage herself from the roles that society assigns to women no longer in the bloom of youth and, in her exploration of this character, Rhys found herself also exploring the potential for women to become visionary stewards of their own lives, rather than guardians of the status quo. It is my view that this was a significant achievement by Jean Rhys.

What I wanted to do in this thesis was, first of all, to engage as directly as possible with the novels, to see how they evolved as a body of work and what they revealed about her process of writing her kind of fiction, about her kind of life, in that early point of the twentieth century. Critical work on Jean Rhys generally regards Wide Sargasso Sea as her crowning achievement, a view that affects the critical assessment of the earlier novels. I see Wide Sargasso Sea as a retreat from the unique blend of fictional style and autobiographical reflection that Rhys developed masterfully in the four early novels. The introduction of the historical dimension of her Caribbean life and the use of Jane Eyre as a background text, does something quite different to what Jean Rhys set out to do with her life and her fiction before that novel. The early novels map out new possibilities for women writing fiction about themselves, from their own perspectives as women, not from the roles that society had programmed for them. This is the aspect of Jean Rhys's novels that engaged my intense interest.

Although I do not mention many other critics or writers, I do mention her famous contemporary, Virginia Woolf. I was

struck by Woolf's appeal to women, in A Room Of One's Own, to fill the empty shelves of the British Museum and the way she connected this possibility to the necessity of women writers possessing five hundred pounds and a room of one's own. I take up Virginia Woolf's proposals in my Introduction and point out the assumptions of class and empire that lay behind them for her. I put forward Jean Rhys as a writer who was, even then, filling the empty shelves and doing it without the money or the room. In my view, the kind of work being done by Rhys was achieved precisely because she lacked these securities. Her sexual exploitation by the English middle class, her exclusion from it, left her without any social protections beyond her capacity to write. But without the material advantage of Virginia Woolf, and with many of the disadvantages that Woolf depicted in her figure of Judith Shakespeare, Jean Rhys survived to write some of the best novels in English.

Chapter One

The Catalyst: A Room Of One's Own

... a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction...

Virginia Woolf recorded these words in her highly regarded manifesto, A Room Of One's Own. And as all good books are wont to do, A Room Of One's Own drew a complex of responses from me, responses that emanate from personal as well as intellectual concerns, responses that are informed by the works of other writers, male and female. For the purposes of the present work, Woolf's declaration provides a useful starting point for myself as a woman writing in the very late twentieth century. At the very least Woolf's tract became a kind of catalyst for my own troubled thoughts about women and writing. And so I return to Woolf's words, the words I have recorded above, and to a few simply phrased questions which came to mind in the course of my reading and rereading A Room Of One's Own.

'What is a room?' I found myself thinking. Is it not but one part of a house, of a building, perhaps a schoolroom, a room in a house of parliament or a hospital? And as an after-math to the whats and wheres of rooms, a more difficult question began to emerge, the question of underpinnings and foundations, for, after all, it is the foundation of a building which ensures the durability and stability of rooms. So it made sense to look at rooms not only as they appear, but as to their underpinnings, the assumptions, as it were, implicit and explicit, which uphold rooms, and by implication, this business of a room of one's own.

In truth, this larger question did not attend my first reading of A Room Of One's Own. Quite the contrary; Woolf's style is too engaging. It is far more pleasurable to be rocked like a child in the ebb and flow of image and insight, and marvel at Woolf's unhurried reflections, wherein the writer infuses each idea with mass and motion as it is released, seemingly without effort, onto the page. The following illustrates this:

To the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson, glowed with the colour, even it seemed burnt with the heat, of fire. On the further bank the willows wept in perpetual lamentation, their hair about their shoulders. The river reflected whatever it chose of sky and bridge and burning tree, and when the undergraduate had oared his boat through the reflections they closed again, completely, as if he had never been. There one might have sat the clock round lost in thought. Thought - to call it by a prouder name than it deserved - had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it, until - you know the little tug - the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts

back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating. I will not trouble you with that thought now, though if you look carefully you may find it for yourselves in the course of what I am going to say.

That fishing is frequently thought of as a solitary endeavour does not preclude the possibility of two fishermen, or fisherwomen, casting their lines from separate points on the bank into the same muddied or crystal clear water and waiting in mutual silence for a tug from below. For this is indeed how I felt as I read through Chapters One, Two, and Three. Here was I, in close proximity to her. We were standing on the bank, or in a boat, or on a bridge, our lines mingling in the watery depths. But instead of feeling the tug, then drawing in the little fish, I felt the tug and at the same time our lines twisted and knotted together. The only sensible course open to me was to take hold of both lines, draw in the catch and patiently separate the tangled mess. And what was the snag, or the tangle which gave rise to spontaneous anger and frustration on my part? It was Chapter Four. Or to be more specific, it was Woolf's assessment of Charlotte Brontë and her novel Jane Eyre. According to Woolf, Charlotte Brontë had misunderstood the work of Jane Austen. 'Well,' I found myself thinking after I had read through all that Virginia Woolf says about Brontë and her first novel, 'It is clear that you have misunderstood Charlotte Brontë. And this middle section of A Room Of One's Own sat like an enormous weight in my mind.

It is interesting to experience minor contentions as one reads, disagreeing, then agreeing, partially agreeing, or partially disagreeing, occupying one's mind in dispassionate endeavour. How much more interesting it is to agree passionately and suddenly, without any warning, to disagree passionately.

In Chapter Two of A Room Of One's Own, Woolf notes anger, "the black snake" (48) lurking among the many emotions she experiences while researching her subject, women and fiction, in the British Museum. She opines that the books she has looked at were written in "the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth" (49); and are best returned to the shelf. Woolf resumes her discussion of anger, in Chapter Six, noting the anger which she perceived had tampered with Brontë's telling of her story. Woolf speaks first, however, in quite adulatory terms, of Jane Austen, her life and work: "Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely." (102) At this point she turns her attention to Brontë: "But I doubt whether that was true of Charlotte Brontë, I said, opening Jane Eyre and laying it beside Pride and Prejudice." (102)

Woolf opens to a lengthy quotation from Jane Eyre, which begins with Jane's solitary reflections as she paces the third floor of Thornfield Hall. "Anybody may blame me who likes" (102), Jane begins, and Woolf continues:

What were they blaming Charlotte Brontë for? I wondered...and it was for this that they blamed her - that "then I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the

busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen: that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character than was here within my reach..."

"Who blames me? Many, no doubt, and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it: the restlessness was in my nature; it agitated me to pain sometimes..." (102-103)

It was at the point in which A Room Of One's Own and Jane Eyre intersect in Woolf's text that I became alert to a nibbling on my line. And then it happened - the jerk, the sudden resistance, the locked lines. Woolf was saying:

That is an awkward break, I thought. It is upsetting to come upon Grace Poole all of a sudden. The continuity is disturbed. One might say, I continued, laying the book down beside Pride and Prejudice, that the woman who wrote those pages had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted? (104)

The black snake which Woolf warns us against looms large in her assessment of Charlotte Brontë. The seamless web of insight and image so skilfully woven by Woolf in A Room Of One's Own is obscured by her glaring resistance to Brontë's text. The gap in Woolf's hitherto carefully reasoned thinking regarding women and fiction, the gap she creates between a perceived awkward break in Jane Eyre and her pronouncement that Brontë could not help but die young, cramped and thwarted, reveals more about Woolf than it does about Brontë. It seems to me that Woolf resists, by an act of dismissal, any implication which may be inherent in the "awkward break" in Jane Eyre. The context is certainly not a neutral one. On the one hand, there is the self-conscious articulation which is Jane, her serious entreaties to a world outside, a world which has narrowly defined her place in it. On the other hand, there is the laughter of a woman whose identity, at this point, is that of a stout middle-aged Scottish servant. I will refrain from any further interpretations of Brontë's text, for the present, returning to it in Chapter Five. My immediate concerns centre on Woolf's mandate for a room and five hundred pounds a year, and her refusal to entertain the point of rupture in Brontë's book, a rupture which, to my mind, implies innumerable possibilities for writing, especially women's writing.

And so I reread A Room Of One's Own, not as one content to admire and applaud, but as one who must learn through participation the intricate handling of the rod, and where best to let down one's line. With this in mind, I noted the

spot where Woolf first lets down her line. It is an invention, the place she calls Oxbridge, but it is no more of an invention than are Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael. The enquiry is Woolf's; her conditions for women writing fiction are well considered and wonderfully articulated; and there is no doubt whatsoever that Oxbridge stands for Oxford and Cambridge, the site at which Woolf first situates the reader, the same site which offers her a less than exuberant welcome. However, she does not remain forever treading the gravel. She repairs to a luncheon, along with the fellows, and other guests at the college, and sits down to what might be called a sumptuous feast. She is not just fed; she is amply nourished:

...the lunch on this occasion began with soles, sunk in a deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream.... The partridges, many and various, came with all their retinue of sauces and salads, the sharp and the sweet, each in its order; their potatoes, thin as coins but not so hard; their sprouts, foliated as rosebuds but more succulent...Meanwhile the wine-glasses had flushed yellow and flushed crimson, had been emptied; had been filled. And thus by degrees was lit, half-way down the spine, which is the seat of the soul, not that hard little electric light which we call brilliance, as it pops in and out upon our lips, but the more profound, subtle and subterranean glow which is the rich yellow flame of

rational intercourse. No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself... as, lighting a good cigarette, one sank among the cushions in the window-seat. (16-18)

We may question, as Woolf proceeds to do for the remainder of A Room Of One's Own, the merits of luncheon at Oxbridge, given its aftermath; Woolf's revealing visit to the British Museum, her perusal of shelves whereon little can be found that is penned by women, and her disturbing projection of the imaginary Judith Shakespeare. But words which trigger the senses, which cradle the reader in an aura of protective care and feeding, words, quite frankly, which allude to an all-bestowing mother dispensing soles and partridges and delicately spiced puddings, followed by wine and cigarettes and cushioned repose, linger not so much in themselves, but in the illusions, the longing they effect. Virginia Woolf, quite rightly, takes exception to a male construction of woman, to her absence as opposed to presence in history, in literature, in the public domain. I am left, however, with the somewhat unsettling view that in spite of her brilliantly articulated analysis of the culture to which she belongs, Woolf wants to have her cake and eat it too. After all, one can no more speak of Oxbridge than one can speak of London Bridge or Big Ben without introducing deeply earthed cultural assumptions.

At the conclusion of lunch, while seated languidly among the cushions, Mary chances to observe a cat "padding softly across the quadrangle" (18), a manx cat, that tailless species.

Woolf uses the appearance of the cat to introduce a sense of absence to her luncheon repose:

But what was lacking, what was different, I asked myself, listening to the talk? And to answer that question I had to think myself out of the room, back into the past, before the war indeed, and to set before my eyes the model of another luncheon party held in rooms not very far distant from these; but different... Before the war at a luncheon party like this people would have said precisely the same things but they would have sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves. (18-19)

It is one thing for a writer to introduce an image in order to deepen the texture of his or her analysis. Images are, however, chameleonlike. They can enhance, amplify, underscore meaning, as does the manx cat who is observed through the college window. Woolf opens up a visual field. Mary is basking in the pleasant aftermath of a very satisfying meal. The manx cat is subsequently seen through the frame of the window. The image is introduced; the insight follows. But the image is free to make innumerable impressions on innumerable minds, so that the insight which attends it may or may not register as clearly as does the image. At the time of my second reading of A Room Of One's Own I had entirely

forgotten the explicated relationship between the manx cat and the absence of the humming. The cat had assumed an entirely different signification. The cat seemed not so much to be a lacking of something. It was, instead, rare and above all, different. It was also on the other side of the window, not settled happily and purring in the lap of a fellow or in the lap of Mary Seton, Beton, Carmichael. From the perspective of one on the inside, one who has just enjoyed a plentiful feast, the cat was the outsider, the one who takes no notice of the dining-hall wherein Mary sits. Here, I noted, not with great clarification at first, but as another of the niggings that takes shape over time, is the dilemma of desiring the comfort and protection that culturally and historically grounded rooms appear to offer, and the awareness of one's difference; that one can sit among cushions in the window seat, and experience "the subtle and subterranean glow which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse" (17), and at the same time, turn away from the room and see the solitary manx in the quadrangle. A paradox, I thought to myself. Can one be both inside and outside? And here my attention returned to the sudden mention of Grace Poole, the awkward break as Woolf phrased it. I picked up where Woolf had left off:

When thus alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me: I heard too her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh. (JE, 80)

Woolf laments the lack of women's fictions, women's untold histories, as if these histories will assume recognizable shapes and definition and will find their way neatly onto the shelves which await them. That Jane Austen confined herself physically and psychologically to the sitting or drawing room and skilfully articulated the nuances, the comfort and conformity of the rising English middle class, is but one small stage in the flowering of women and fiction. It seems to me, however, that Charlotte Brontë intuited deeper and potentially destructive implications in the disclosure of woman as an historical, cultural and imaginative absence. Brontë affirms Jane as the conscious articulation of Jane Eyre, but she and Jane thrill to the inarticulate sounds of the presence above, in the attic room.

I ask the following questions in response to what Woolf regarded as an awkward break. Can textual unbrokenness or seamless surfaces articulate the historical realities of cracks and holes, of deeply etched pits that mark a terrain of absence? I think not. Topographical maps of the world indicate changes which belong to a gradual process. Ground shifted; mountains rose up; rains fell; oceans, seas and rivers spilled into areas of varying depths. Vast expanses of the world assumed new definition thereby. The time of transition was and is tumultuous, but gradual, leaving traces of the old alongside or beneath the new. Woolf emphasizes the necessity of a room and five hundred pounds a year. But, I think she wilfully overlooks the upheavals necessary for such a realization, upheavals which involve changing relations among women, among men, between men

and women, changes which may very well privilege the unfamiliar over the familiar. And I ran over in my mind a succession of images which had lingered in the course of my readings of A Room Of One's Own: the manx cat, the rows of empty shelves, the unmarked grave outside the Elephant and Castle, Judith Shakespeare, a room, any room waiting to be filled physically, imaginatively, historically, by women. And I noted, as quickly as these images came to mind, that they all share a quality of absence - an absence which by virtue of an essential lack, a gap, or a concealment, contained unexplored potential that in turn roused considerable excitement in me. And I didn't feel angry with Virginia Woolf any more because at the very least, and curiously enough, at very best, Woolf had ventured into no man's land and indicated: here is nothing. We are absent except in these innumerable empty spaces, which spaces when duly considered are everywhere. They may not perhaps be in the massive sprawling bulk that is Oxbridge, but in the spaces that have been overlooked, in the blind spots of male vision. I was in no hurry. I needed time to reflect, to ponder this new space, this blind spot that I knew was there, that other women knew was there too, a space made all the more compelling because it marks a beginning, a vantage point from which to obtain a different perspective. But, here was I, at the close of the twentieth century, and Virginia Woolf, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Time has not stopped. Women have been defining, articulating, shaping and occupying former gaps and holes, and rooms of varying size and age, for close to two centuries, if we go back, as did Woolf, to the aristocratic poets, to Aphra Behn,

and longer if we look to the French and consider Marguerite de Navarre, or to the Greeks and Sappho. All this was true, except that I, for all sorts of reasons, conscious and otherwise, had settled on A Room Of One's Own as a landmark, in the manner of a solitary traveller who seeking her way in a great and old forest, first ties a strip of tweed to the branch of a tree lest she lose her way. For a journey can be full of paths which give the impression of leading somewhere different, somewhere of untold import, but which trail off into little clumps of bush or briar, or forgo new directions by linking up to more well-travelled lanes or highways.

However, there are rare exceptions, the discovery of which is made all the more exciting when little clues have been left along the way. After all, A Room Of One's Own is not only Oxbridge, Bloomsbury, and the British Museum. There is also Bombay, home to the ill-fated aunt whose death makes possible a room and five hundred pounds a year for Mary Seton, Beton, Carmichael. So in spite of the well defined spatial envelope of Oxbridge, the British Museum, and Bloomsbury, there are the colonies, India being a very significant one, whose sole purpose in A Room Of One's Own is as a source of much needed money for the acquisition of a much needed room. It recalls to mind a question often posed by parents to children who have just described something they simply must have. And so who's going to pay for this? Woolf admits that the old aunt isn't the ideal source for five hundred pounds per year. She, nonetheless, remains Mary's sole benefactor, which throws something of a twist into the procuring of a room and five hundred pounds per

year, that in spite of Woolf's disdain for men who must possess what they see, the act of possessing can prove beneficial for women in need of five hundred pounds a year. What Woolf doesn't do, and it is understandable why she doesn't, is follow through the implications of five hundred pounds a year derived through imperialist conquests and subjugations. And this gave considerable pause for reflection. And I was obliged to review once again the several images which had most intrigued me in A Room Of One's Own, and I mentally juxtaposed the manx cat and the imaginary Judith Shakespeare. And I took the liberty of dropping the first and last names, that the woman described by Woolf might be someone other than an English woman and still be a genius, and I took the further liberty of placing her in the twentieth century. And then I too made a trip to a library, to the Carleton University library rather than the British Museum, to peruse its modest collection of books. And I noted that Virginia Woolf occupies a position of plenty on the shelves, as do Jane Austen and Charlotte Brönte. But my visit contained more purpose than I have hitherto spoken of. For in the passage of time, in which books are read, and life is lived, and thoughts and images and experiences mingle freely in the unconscious, my own enquiry was gradually taking shape, and I found my attention returning with greater frequency to the work of a lesser-read woman novelist who seemed, at one and the same time, to merge in my mind as both the manx cat and an imagined Judith Shakespeare. So, with specific intent, I scanned the Carleton University library shelves and located a half shelf of books by and about the novelist Jean Rhys.

Chapter Two

Beginnings

In 1928, one year before A Room Of One's Own was published, Jean Rhys's novel, Quartet, also known as Postures (its British title), was published. It was Rhys's first published novel. Her first novel, later to become Voyage In The Dark, accompanied Rhys from room to room for many years before it was even shown to anyone - three and a half exercise books written in a room in Fulham when she was twenty:

The first morning I woke up there it seemed to me the furniture was so like that in the room I had just left that moving hardly made any difference. But the table, which had been in the middle and covered with a cloth, was now pushed directly under the window and was bare and very ugly.[...] I must get some flowers or a plant or something, I thought. I can't bear that table.[...]

After lunch I walked along looking into shop windows.[...] I passed a stationer's shop where quill pens were displayed in the window, a lot of them, red, blue, green, yellow.[...] I went into the shop and bought a dozen. Then I noticed some black exercise books on the counter.[...] I bought several of these, I didn't know why, just because I liked the look of them.[...] Now that old table won't look so bare, I thought.

It was after supper that night - [...] - that it happened. My fingers tingled, and the palms of my hands. I pulled a chair up to the table, opened an exercise book, and wrote, This is my Diary. But it

wasn't a diary. I remembered everything that had happened to me in the last year and a half. I remembered what he'd said, what I'd felt. I wrote on until late in the night, till I was so tired that I couldn't go on, and I fell into bed and slept.

(SP, 128-129)

She wrote for several days and when she was finished she wrote, " God I'm only twenty and I'll have to go on living and living and living" (SP, 129). The exercise books were then placed at the bottom of her suitcase where they remained, unopened, for over fifteen years.

It wasn't until after she had met and married her first husband, Jean Lenglet, after they had moved to Paris, to Vienna, and back to Paris, that the exercise books were retrieved from the bottom of the suitcase. Rhys had suggested that Lenglet write articles for possible publication in one of the English newspapers. He wrote them in French; Rhys translated and took them to Mrs. Adam, wife of The Times correspondent in Paris, George Adam. Mrs. Adam was doubtful as to the suitability of the articles for an English readership, but she was curious to know if Rhys herself had written anything:

I thought of the exercise books that I'd carried round without having looked at them for years. I hesitated because I still didn't want to show them to anybody. Then I told myself not be be such a fool, all that was finished and I never meant to go back to London.[...] It would be stupid to miss the chance of

making a little money. I said, 'Yes, I've got a sort of thing I wrote years ago - a diary or rather I wrote it in diary form' - 'I'd like to see it,' she said, and I promised that she should have it next day. (SP, 154-155)

Mrs. Adam liked Rhys's diary. She typed it, made several changes, called it Triple Sec, and sent it to Ford Madox Ford, who was then publisher of The Transatlantic Review.

Ford was not impressed with Mrs. Adam's window dressing, but he was impressed with Rhys's writing. In the Preface to The Left Bank and Other Stories, Rhys's first book to be published, Ford says of her writing:

What struck me on the technical side - which does not much interest the Anglo-Saxon reader, but which is almost the only thing that interests me - was the singular instinct for form possessed by this young lady, an instinct for form being possessed by singularly few writers of English and by almost no English women writers. (24-25)

When I read this - and I add that, in the Preface, Jean Rhys's name does not appear until the seventeenth page of a twenty-one page preface - I thought of Hemingway and the renown which attended his, and I stress, his, instinct for form. Without a doubt, Hemingway is considered one of the great stylists of the twentieth century, and contemporaneous as they were, Rhys received none of the critical acclaim that launched Hemingway into celestial orbit. Why, I wondered. Is writing which seeks to eliminate emotion simply more accessible to a reader

than writing which unswervingly discloses emotions? Or is it possible that the physical, emotional and cultural sites revealed in Rhys's fiction threaten or undermine the disposition of a bourgeois readership? I ask these questions no less naively than does Virginia Woolf ask different questions in A Room Of One's Own.

For now, I will return to Ford's Preface. He goes on to say: "Her business was with passion, hardship, emotions: the locality in which these things are endured is immaterial" (LB, 26). He is correct in the first instance. Passion, hardships, emotions are the cutting edge of Jean Rhys's work. But the second half of his pronouncement reveals Ford's critical short-sightedness. Ford Madox Ford writes from the position of one in possession of something. He first tells us of his Paris, embracing in the sweep of an ample arm, London and New York too. And finally, after fleeting nods in the directions of Cairo, Palm Beach, and Buenos Aires, he reaches into his waistcoat pocket and reveals a fascinating find - a young woman "with a terrifying insight and a terrific - an almost lurid! - passion for stating the case of the underdog" (LB, 24). This is his Jean Rhys and his locale. It is not Rhys we are commanded to behold. It is Ford - Ford as publisher, editor, writer, important figure on the Left Bank, Ford in possession of a fascinating find which happens to be a female writer named Jean Rhys. The irony, of course, is that Rhys, unlike Ford, does not write from the perspective of one in possession - a position Ford cannot occupy, the blind spot as it were, which Rhys does occupy and fill, in and through her fiction.

The long-time editor of Rhys's later work, Diana Athill, comments on Rhys's writing and recalls Rhys's personal observations on writing:

It started out from something that had happened, and her first concern was to get it down as accurately as possible. But 'I like shape very much' - and again, 'a novel has to have a shape, and life doesn't have any'. (SP, 9-10)

I find Rhys's personal remarks to be very intriguing, in view of Ford's assertions about the Left Bank, about Paris, about Rhys. As the self-appointed figure of authority introducing Rhys's first published work, he struts forth, sure of the terrain which has been historically and culturally laid out before him. Rhys, on the other hand, remarks an unmarked terrain, a terrain which clarifies itself through a mapping of ambiguous displacements. The Oxford Paperback Dictionary (Second Edition) provides the following sample usage of displacement: "Weeds tend to displace other plants" (184). From the perspective of home owners who grow and tend grass, weeds are not welcome. From the perspective of a herablist, weeds are to be cared for; and from the perspective of a naturalist, weeds are part of an integral complex of plants. Jean Rhys, throughout her work, reveals that what appears to be a condition or site of displacement is merely so because of the singular view that weeds, if not controlled or destroyed, displace other plants. It is the insidious dilemma of a fixed perspective frustrating or eclipsing other perspectives.

I would like the reader to pause, for a moment, and

consider London Bridge. Cars and buses drive over it, conveying people to their places of work and home again. Tourists stand at the sides pointing Instamatics at other smiling tourists or at the Thames or at the city skyline. But, beneath the bridge, there is a world apart from that of commuters and visitors. There are those who shelter in the steel and concrete of the bridge's pilings, those who, at the very least, live a transient existence, one which lacks the material security of a propertied class. Unfortunately, such existences are all too often cast in a sociological framework, wherein those who possess material security regard those who do not with patronizing condescension, a condescension which serves to conceal a deep-seated fear of material insecurity.

Throughout her early novels, Jean Rhys writes of life beneath the bridge, as it merges with and diverges from life atop the bridge. She does not advance a longing permanently to join those atop the bridge; neither does she sentimentalize life beneath the bridge. What she does do, is expose, in a very brave and ruthless manner, the precariousness of a life informed by material insecurity, and an entrenched sociological cultural perspective which acts to consolidate and protect those who fear both the prospect of material insecurity and the perspective of those who live in that material insecurity. In an excerpt from a diary that Rhys kept in the late nineteen thirties and the forties, she writes:

The trouble is I have plenty to say. Not only that
but I am bound to say it.

Bound?

I must.

Why? Why? Why?

I must write. If I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure. It is that already do other people. But it could be an abject failure to myself. I will not have earned death.[...]

But I have not written for so long that all I can force myself to do is to write, to write. I must trust that out of that will come the pattern, the clue that can be followed. (SP, 163-164)

The pattern that Rhys speaks of is contained in her work. It is an elusive and allusive one which slips in and out of silences, mapping rooms and stairwells, dark or dreary streets, houses and cafs which are friendly or not - a strangely animate world in which people and objects alike impact on each heroine's senses. It is the impress of plants from a herbalist's garden. It is the world beneath the bridge. It is also, in its subtlest shadings and nuances, the life of an artist.

In an interview with Elizabeth Vreeland, Rhys said:

There's very little invention in my books. What came first with most of them was the wish to get rid of this awful sadness that weighed me down. I found when I was a child that if I could put the hurt into words, it would go.[...] I would write to forget, to get rid of sad moments. Once they were written down they were gone. (PR, 223)

The sadness was first recorded in the exercise books. But it was a private sorrow which Rhys withheld from public scrutiny for many years. It was her anger which first made its way into the public domain, mediated in her first published novel, Quartet, the novel she wrote after her affair with Ford Madox Ford had ended, a story Rhys began because "she was angry with Ford and wanted to pay him back" (Nebeker, 202).

Virginia Woolf was very sceptical about books written in, what she called, the red light of emotion, especially when anger, the black snake, moves through them. Anger can play havoc with the subtext of a piece of writing. It may also be indispensable to the development of a narrative voice which speaks to that which has been experienced. Quartet lacks the consistent economy of language which Rhys's later novels are noted for. As process, however, as an important step toward a narrative style which establishes its own terms of reference, Quartet is wonderfully audacious, especially when Quartet, as a book realized by Rhys, the writer, is placed within the context of the story it relates, of Rhys, the woman, interacting with other people, intimately. This may sound somewhat complicated, but it only seems complicated because Rhys's writing is of a rare kind. There aren't any models for Rhys's particular fiction.

Rhys speaks of herself and of her heroines as vagabonds , a double-edged and ironical term. Vagabonds are not only wanderers and vagrants; they are also considered idle and dishonest. The social interactions contained in Rhys's novels

are frequently dishonest exchanges and the heroines appear to be idle. But the writer is not idle, and the unspoken thoughts of Rhys's heroines are startlingly honest. It is an honesty which pinpoints what it feels like to be voluntarily outside the social norm, and needing protection, love and some understanding as one on the outside. It is a position of instability, but it is not unique. It only seems so when cultures attempt, and often succeed, through various strategies, to perpetuate a bourgeois privileging of what is important and what is not important, what is right and what is not right. As Anna Morgan of Voyage In The Dark says, when she cannot reconcile the differences between England and Dominica: "It all depends doesn't it" (52). It seems to me that the difficulty that critics and readers may have or have had with Rhys's fiction (Rhys herself couldn't understand why her work was called "sordid and depressing"²) is that her terms of reference are often found to be unacceptable. They do not perpetuate, uphold, celebrate the values of the propertied middle class. The heroines are not reconciled at the end to available cultural identities which bring about the consolidation of middle class values.³ Rhys's novels work toward a de-consolidation of these values. They occupy the spaces in between, spaces that a bourgeois consciousness wilfully or circumspectly disavows.

In Quartet, Marya considers the world beyond the tiny balcony of the Hôtel de l'Univers:

It was astonishing how significant, coherent and understandable it all became after a glass of wine

on an empty stomach.[...] The value of an illusion, for instance, and that the shadow can be more important than the substance. (22-23)

Rhys speaks to the shadows, tracing their imprint with a deft and knowing hand. In life, Rhys referred to herself as a ghost.⁴ As a writer, she inscribes the ghost site of shadows, fully cognizant that while people may not welcome her contribution, she is obliged to produce it.

When the affair between Marya and Heidler is in its decline, after he has installed her in a room in the Hôtel du Bosphore, Marya "imagines all the women who had lain where she was lying. Laughing. Or crying if they were drunk enough. She felt giddy and curiously light, as if she were floating about bodiless in the scented dimness" (Q, 119). Rhys is not writing the life of a tart, as some critics⁵ have been quick to assume. She is writing what women feared to write, feared partly because society can too easily dismiss and condemn what is perceived to be deviance, especially deviance initiated by women.

In A Room Of One's Own, Virginia Woolf conceives one possible scenario for Judith Shakespeare - seduction, an unwanted pregnancy, and suicide. Jean Rhys alters Woolf's projection. Seduction may lead to pregnancy, but not necessarily to suicide. Seduction, pregnancy, abortion, the terrible weight that threatens daily to drag under a woman who fails to conform to society's expectations of her can be lessened, even transcended, when it is given a voice. The exercise books began Rhys's process of articulation. They were set

aside, but not forgotten. The Left Bank And Other Stories are tentatively-made forays - well-crafted sketches or vignettes which provide glimpses of Rhys's life and of the Europe and Caribbean she was familiar with. It was these stories which impressed Ford. He encouraged her to write and made suggestions on style. He took her under his wing, and soon into his bed. At the time, Rhys's first husband, Jean Lenglet, was in prison on a currency violation; Maryvonne, the second child born to Rhys and Lenglet, was living with a family in Paris; and Jean Rhys was completely destitute.

Ford Madox Ford made no secret of his penchant for coming to the rescue of damsels-in-distress, not least when they were gifted damsels. The dynamics which existed among Ford, Stella Bowen, Lenglet, and Rhys are not fully known and need not concern the specifics of the present work. It is interesting to note, however, that each of the four (I include Rhys) found Rhys to be an unusually passive person, and all, Rhys as well, found this to be a troublesome trait. Insofar as social relations were concerned, I am sure it was. But in regard to her writing it may have been a most useful trait. Diana Athill says of Rhys's writing:

A novel once it had possessed her would dictate its own shape and atmosphere, and she could rely on her infallible instinct to tell her what her people would say and do within its framework. (SP, 5)

It would not be unreasonable to link the passivity which Rhys and others remarked on, with the intuitive nature of the writing process. What is viewed as a social handicap for Rhys,

the social being, was integral to Rhys, the gifted writer. Her work with its haunting clarity is mediated by a seemingly passive social being who behaves outwardly in one way, thinks in quite another way, and merges the two in powerfully assertive fiction.

Quartet is an uneven realization of such a merger. Quartet, unlike the last three novels, is written in the third person and contains considerably more dialogue than do the other novels. In fact, Rhys thought of Quartet as a play.⁶ She spent several months in the 1950's scripting it for the actress Selma Vaz Dias, who took especial interest in Rhys's work. What I find interesting about Quartet is the interpenetration of a literary self and a social self. It goes without saying that Ford was instrumental in introducing Rhys's work to a reading public. It would also appear that Quartet was written because Rhys was angry with Ford, that the dynamics of the relationship with Ford, with Bowen, with the jailed Lenglet needed to be given voice and shape. But, unlike Rhys's other novels, there is very little past history in Quartet, very little of Marya's life prior to life with Stephan in the Hôtel de l'Univers and her involvement with the Heidlers. It is as if the terrifying insight and instinct for form are being subtly overwhelmed by something else.

Quartet opens with a visit by Marya to Miss De Solla's studio: "It was a peaceful place, white-walled, smelling strongly of decayed vegetables. The artist explained that a marchand des quatre saisons kept her stock in the courtyard [...]" (6). It is here in the smelling white-walled studio

that Marya first hears of the Heidlers and is urged to meet them, in company with Miss De Solla, at Lefrancis, a restaurant on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. At the close of Marya's visit with Miss De So'lla, a scene in which a bad smell and the Heidlers are conjoined, an observation is made of Miss De Solla: "She looked round her austere studio, and the Jewess's hunger for the softness and warmth of life was naked in her eyes" (9). It is a fascinating disclosure which undercuts Ford's discourse on locale. Rhys delivers a disquieting juxtaposition. On the one hand, there is Miss De Solla, the painter who lives in the austere studio. On the other, there is Miss De Solla, the woman, hungry for the warmth and softness of life, not art. Miss De Solla presages the unsettling contradictions which reside in Marya/Rhys - the self which creates and the self which needs love and warmth. There is no return to Miss De Solla's studio in the novel. Marya encounters Miss De Solla later, by chance, on the street:

One evening, just outside the Café de la Rotonde, she met Miss De Solla. That lady had been ill, and seemed discontented with Montparnasse. She was going to Florence for some months, she said, and would not be back in Paris before June.

When Marya informed her that she was living with the Heidlers: 'Yes,' said Miss De Solla, with an uneasy expression, 'as a matter of fact, I heard that you were.' (68)

Marya is not yet intimately involved with Heidler, but the fleeting encounter with Miss De Solla who is not well, who

is not happy, who is the original link between Marya and the Heidlers, signals the unhappiness which awaits Marya. After all, Quartet doesn't begin with the Hôtel de l'Univers, the hotel in which Marya and Stephan live. It begins with a visit to the studio filled with a lingering, sometimes overpowering, bad odour.

The scene which follows Marya's visit to Miss De Solla's studio takes place in Lefranc's wherein the Heidlers are seated. In the course of conversation, Miss De Solla agrees with the Heidlers that eating is the greatest pleasure in life: "They discussed eating, cooking, England and finally Marya, whom they spoke of in the third person as if she was a strange animal or at any rate a strayed animal - one not quite of the fold (11)."

Humour is not something that is much spoken of by critics of Rhys's books. The books do tend, however, to be outrageously funny. It is Marya who is first made privy to the decayed smell in Miss De Solla's studio, Marya who listens to loud expostulations on eating, and who by the end of the paragraph is cast, again very subtly, as the dish which awaits collective consumption.

Later that evening, Marya climbs the five flights of stairs to the tiny room where she lives with Stephan, with whom "life swayed regularly, even monotonously, between two extremes, avoiding the soul-destroying middle" (22). But Stephan, described by Marya as "probably a bad lot" (17), with whom she feels "strangely peaceful" (17), is arrested for theft and sentenced to a year in the Santé Prison. Marya

is left without a sou, as was Rhys when Lenglet was sent to prison.

Quartet focuses alternately on Marya's growing dependence on the Heidlers, H.J. in particular, and her Sunday visits to see Stephan who is locked away, " enclosed in the circle of his own pain, unreachable" (45).

When Marya finally learns the nature of the charge against Stephan, after lengthy waits at the Palais de Justice, she thinks of all the corridors and staircases, which have brought her to the musty room of the men in black robes. Marya's thoughts speak directly to the scurrying of the journalist who mistakes Stephan for a confrère, and who leads Marya up and down, forwards and backwards, before he leaves her at the door to the musty-smelling room. Indirectly Marya's thoughts bespeak the complex of rules and regulations which originate in musty-smelling rooms occupied by judiciary or other sorts of power brokers.

Later, while Marya is waiting to see Stephan in the Santé Prison, she remarks again the bureaucratic complex: " People are very rum. With all their little arrangements, prisons and drains and things, tucked away where nobody can see (55) " .

Rhys weaves deep sympathies between Marya and Stephan as individuals who come into the knowledge of drains and prisons, through experience. So that while Stephan must endure life in the Santé Prison, Marya must survive in the drains as one without home and money, as one who must accept whatever help or shelter affords itself:

The door flew open, and Mrs. Adler led the way up the

the wooden, uncarpeted staircase, still talking.[...]
'you don't want to come and stay with us, do you?
Now why? What's the fuss about? If you really mean
that you're afraid of being a bother, put that right
out of your head. I'm used to H.J.'s always rescuing
some young genius or the other and installing him
in the spare bedroom... Many's the one we've pulled
out of a hole since we've been in Montparnasse, I
can tell you.' (50-51)

The room to which Marya is taken is described only as a
" little room which smelt clean and cold. Striped grey and
green curtains hung straight over the long windows" (54).
Already, in the description of the curtains, Rhys links Marya's
situation to Stephan's. The affinities are accentuated when
Marya discovers later that Heidler has made and will continue
to make a habit of watching her at night while she lies
sleeping in her bed:

She watched the handle of the door turning very
gently, very slowly. And during the moments that
passed from the time she heard the board creak to
the time she saw Heidler and said, 'Oh, it's you then,
it's you,' she was in a frenzy of senseless fright.
Fright of a child shut up in a dark room. Fright of
an animal caught in a trap. (90)

In an earlier chapter, Marya describes Stephan as one who
has " suddenly been shot out of a trap" (36). But Rhys extends
the image of the trap to Heidler's situation as well:

'Don't rush off', he said. And then, 'Oh, God, I
am so utterly sick of myself sometimes. D'you ever

get sick of yourself? No, not yet, of course. Wait a bit, you will one of these days.'

'No,' answered Marya reflectively. 'I'm not sick of myself. I'm rather sick of my sort of life.'

'Well, I'm sick of myself,' Heidler said gloomily. 'And yet it goes on. One knows that the whole damn thing's idiotic, futile, not even pleasant, but one goes on. One's caught in a sort of trap, I suppose.' (66)

There is a difference in Marya's emphatic use of the word trap to describe both her and Stephan's situations, and Heidler's non-committal use of the word. Being sick of one's self and being sick of one's sort of life are two very different things. What is underscored is Heidler's preoccupation with himself and his cautious use of the word trap. After all, there is a flip side to the business of traps. There are also those who set them:

'H.J.,' said Marya. 'It's no use. I can't go on with this. I can't stick it. It isn't my line at all.'

'But that's not playing the game, is it?' remarked Heidler, in an impersonal voice. 'Not any sort of game.'

'What game?' answered Marya fiercely. 'Your game? Lois's game? Why should I play Lois's game? Yes, that is just it, it's all a game I can't play, that I don't know how to play.'

He said:[...] 'Can't you understand that you are in a different world now? People breed differently after a while, you know. You won't be let down.'

There's no trick, no trap. You're with friends'. ...
She felt hypnotized as she listened to him,
impotent. (88-89)

The game, the trap, is comprised of the keeping up of
appearances, of Heidler in his bowler hat looking like Queen
Victoria, of Heidler as God's pal kneeling in the church to
pray for Marya.

One afternoon in the Hôtel du Bosphore, as Heidler is
dressing to leave, Marya lies in the bed thinking:

'A bedroom in hell might look rather like this one.
Yellow-green and dullish mauve flowers crawling
over black walls.

Her lips were dry. Her body ached. He was so
heavy. ... He bore her down. (119)

It seems to me that Rhys quite overturns the matter of
locale that Ford so pompously claims is lacking in her stories.
And I recall for the reader his assertion and what follows it:

Her business was with passion, hardships, emotion:
the locality in which these things are endured is
immaterial....But I, owing for my sins the book
market, imagined the reader saying, 'Where did all
this take place? What sort of places are these?' So
I have butted in. (LB,26)

Rhys supplies ample answers to Ford's imagined queries, making
it quite unnecessary for him to butt in again (not quite in a
manner which would sit best with Ford). The terrifying in-
sight and lurid passion spare none in Rhys's vivid portrayal
of the Montparnasse inhabited by Ford, Stella Bowen, Jean
Lenglet, Jean Rhys, and the various friends or acquaintances

who come and go in the course of the book. I say spare none because Rhys does not attempt to establish Marya as a heroine in the conventional sense of the term, nor does she privilege Marya as victim of the piece. Quartet closes with Stephan in need of help, just as Marya was so in need of help when Stephan was imprisoned for a year. Quartet centres on survival - survival attended by physical and psychological needs which confound tidy resolutions. Rhys steadfastly avoids the temptation to oversimplify the world of physical and emotional needs. In a letter to her daughter, Maryvonne, Rhys says of Hemingway's A Moveable Feast: "I did enjoy the Hemingway but it wasn't very truthful I think" (JRL, 292).

Quartet neither romanticizes nor celebrates Montparnasse. The wafting odours of decaying vegetables relentlessly pervade studios, hotel rooms, cafés, even streets - with the exception of one:

(Marya) dined that night by herself in a little crémèrie in the Rue St. Jacques. After the meal, which she paid for with her last carefully hoarded hundred franc note, she walked very quickly along the winding street, between two rows of gas lamps, past the low doors of little buvettes, where a gramophone played gaily and workmen in caps stood drinking at the counters. It was a beautiful street. The street of homeless cats, she often thought. She never came into it without seeing several of them, prowling, thin vagabonds, furtive, aloof, but strangely proud. Sympathetic creatures, after all.
(Q, 65)

Marya belongs among the homeless cats. She is rarely well fed, rarely sure of a home, or care and affection. As well, she is suspicious of people, often unfriendly, on the look-out for available scraps, shelter, and, sometimes, attention. "[...] I feel like a homeless cat with a tin can tied to it too" (JRL, 80), Rhys writes in a letter to her friend, Peggy Kirkaldy. It is a funny depiction of oneself. It is sad, too, but funny given that Rhys is rarely silent regarding her status in life. But who ties the tin can round the cat's neck you might ask? Is it just a child out to play a bit of a nasty prank? No, I am inclined to think it is Rhys the writer, sounding the life of the stray cat who is sometimes within, and often without, but bound to speak of it.

Chapter Three

Journey to the Centre

After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie continues the story of Quartet's Marya. Only Marya is renamed Julia. And After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is not dominated by the autocratic Heidler who shares much in common with Mr. Mackenzie. Julia, however, is once removed from Marya. Marya is part of Heidler's scheme of things. She perceives the world as one trapped physically and emotionally in another's scheme, as a prisoner who reacts but rarely initiates. Julia is not subject to the scheme as social practice. She receives three hundred francs per month, by post, and lives the life of an outcast - a voluntary but lonely outcast. She does so until she receives written notice from Mr. Mackenzie's solicitor that there will be no further payments from that quarter, that the enclosed cheque for fifteen hundred francs will be the last:

She had always expected that one day they would do something like this. Yet, now that it had happened, she felt bewildered, as a prisoner might feel who has resigned herself to solitary confinement for an indefinite period in a not uncomfortable cell and who is told one morning, 'Now then, you're going to be let off today. Here's a little money for you. Clear out.' (19)

After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is about leaving the cell, the refuge that has enabled Julia to remove herself from the gaze of middle-class censorship, and to wait for the "sore and cringing feeling, which was the legacy of Mr. Mackenzie" (11), to subside. The arrival of the last cheque signals an end to Julia's time of withdrawal, her emotional convalescence. And Julia recognizes that change if both desirable and necessary.

But what change?

She thought: 'I must go away. That was a good idea. That's the only thing to be done.' [...]

She thought: 'If a taxi hoots before I count three, I'll go to London. If not, I won't.'

She counted. 'One . . . Two . . .' slowly. A car shrieked a loud blast. (57)

Marya of Quartet is quite overwhelmed by her experiences. Julia is a different matter. A recklessness prevails in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie that has not so much to do with youth, but with disorientation and aimlessness. As Julia says in a conversation recalled by Mr. Mackenzie:

'You see, a time comes in your life when, if you have any money, you can go one way. But if you have nothing at all - absolutely nothing at all - and nowhere to get anything, then you go another.' (26)

That Rhys leaves open the possibility of another way indicates the will to survive that inheres in both the writer and what is being written. We are not going to read the story that Woolf mapped out for Shakespeare's sister. We're going to read something else, something that does not incline to the dramatic heights of Judith Shakespeare's end, something that ultimately refuses to be beaten back and downed in defeat.

Rhys writes with elegant restraint in The Left Bank and Other Stories, highlighting particular moments, people and places. Her keen eye encompasses far reaching places of the globe, unencumbered by self-aggrandizement or flourish. It is as if the events depicted inhabit a bottomless suitcase into which the writer dips to make careful selections, selections

which she reproduces with especial regard to light and shadow, colour and texture, the nuances of feeling which linger in each attentively scrutinized moment. That Ford Madox Ford's unrestrained self-aggrandizements as flag waving globe-trotter preface Rhys's pointillistic sketches seems ludicrous in the extreme, not least because the work that follows The Left Bank and Other Stories, Quartet, is notably without lingering mention of London, Vienna, the Caribbean. Horizons which open up in The Left Bank and Other Stories close in Quartet as the writer seeks to give shape and definition to an effluent of emotional turbulence which is at least in part linked to Ford and his blinkered, but enforced, vision of Montparnasse. This ferocity of emotion, which is rarely apparent in The Left Bank and Other Stories, pushes Rhys's work into an urban landscape of rooms and cafés which expands then contracts violently to a point of suffocation which affords no more release for the reader than it does for the characters. As a response to the Preface of The Left Bank and Other Stories, which seeks to patronize and categorize, Quartet is ground-breaking in its unstinting revelation of the emotional complicities which underlie the struggle for economic and artistic survival. Ford Madox Ford remarked an absence of locale in The Left Bank and Other Stories. What is clearly absent, however, is any reference to the writer as either real or fictional. Rhys does not advance the writer as character to justify, or enhance, her life as depicted in her work. The writer shapes, distills, augments, deletes materials which are the writer's life. She, the writer, is present in the style of a book or story, in the careful choice of words which convey mood and feeling, the cold,

the damp, the scent of a room or a dress. It is the characters - Marya, Julia, Anna, and Sasha - who are stripped to the bone, who bear witness to life's exacting toll:

(Marya) spent the foggy day in endless, aimless walking for it seemed to her that if she moved quickly enough she would escape the fear that hunted her. It was a vague and shadowy fear of something cruel and stupid that had caught her and would never let her go. She had always known that it was there - hidden under the more or less pleasant surfaces of things. Always. Ever since she was a child. (Q, 33)

Rhys's heroines are neither artists nor writers. But they all experience themselves as different from other people, as alone in their difference, isolated by it. The world, thereby, is not a friendly or welcoming place. It is a hostile environment, and the people in it rarely understand or tolerate the difference which marks Rhys's heroines. Rhys's fiction does not attempt in any way to bridge the gap between her heroines and those around them. There is little compromise with society at large, no price of admission wrought from the female characters. Rhys is unswerving in her portrayal of women who are not only outside the mainstream, but who have neither the interest nor the will to join it. As Marya admits of her life with Stephan: "Her life swayed regularly, even monotonously, between two extremes, avoiding the soul-destroying middle" (Q, 22). Anna of Voyage in the Dark also reflects on the middle:

I don't know how people live when they know exactly

what's going to happen to them each day. It seems to me it's better to be dead than to live like that.

(75)

These statements in no way suggest easy reconciliations between cultural marginalization and human needs, especially when the middle class constitutes an extremely powerful ideological force which Rhys's heroines unavoidably grapple with.

The emotional cacaphony of Quartet, the anger which impelled Rhys to write it, does not lay to rest the subject matter of the book. The figure of Heidler, modelled after Ford, and duplicated in Mackenzie, exists as an imposing threat to Julia's psychological autonomy, and by implication, I would suggest, Rhys's artistic autonomy. After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie traces the seemingly wayward path that an emotionally bereft Julia sets out on after the allowance from Mr. Mackenzie has been stopped. The details which comprise Julia's journey are a mix of fact and fiction which obscures rather than reveals clues which are realized in Rhys's later fiction. After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie represents a shying away from the deeply personal roots of Rhys's life. Years after the publication of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Rhys said that she wished that she had never written it.⁷ After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is written in the third person, which is not Rhys's strongest or most direct narrative voice. Quartet is also written in the third person, but it is highly autobiographical, and the autobiographical perspective is such a powerful directive in Rhys's works, that I can understand why Rhys, the writer who felt the acuity of experience, would harbour reservations about After Leaving Mr.

Mackenzie. I will return to Rhys's and my own reservations later. For the time being, I say, without any doubt, that After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie holds the pivotal place among Rhys's books, as integral to the realization of pattern which Rhys speaks of in her diary.

After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie begins and ends with an encounter between Julia and Mr. Mackenzie. These are two translucently clear scenes which serve as windows onto a complicated and emotionally disruptive relationship which spans two books. Too much is said about the Rhys heroines as pathetic and down-trodden creatures, but very little is said about their presence as tricksters in a social milieu that upholds middle-class decorum and the virtue of keeping up appearances. I direct the reader's attention to the Restaurant Albert. Before Julia follows Mr. Mackenzie into this restaurant, she thinks of both Mr. Mackenzie and Maître Legros:

When she thought of the combination of Mr. Mackenzie and Maître Legros, all sense of reality deserted her and it seemed to her that there were no limits at all to their joint powers of defeating and hurting her. Together the two perfectly represented organized society, in which she had no place and against which she had not a dog's chance.

She thought stubbornly, 'I don't care. I'm going to have it out with him. I don't care.' (22)

Julia perceives Mr. Mackenzie and Maître Legros to be in collusion against her. She chooses her moment with no small amount of cunning. Mackenzie is alone. She follows him and

sees him enter the Restaurant Albert. Rhys then shifts the focus to Mr. Mackenzie, who is now seated in the Restaurant Albert. The reader is given a brief background to Mr. Mackenzie, which is not out of keeping with descriptions of Heidler in Quartet:

His code was perfectly adapted to the social system and in any argument he could have defended it against any attack whatsoever. However, he never argued about it, because that was part of the code. You didn't argue about these things. Simply, under certain circumstances you did this, and under other circumstances you did that. (24)

The reader is then made privy to Mr. Mackenzie's musings which centre on Julia Martin and the affair he had had with her:

An insanity! [...]

He had always intended their parting to be a final one - things had to come to an end. When he told her that he was going away, and that he proposed to present her with a certain sum of money weekly to give her time to rest, to look about her, etc, etc, she had answered that she did not want to rest or look about her. She had asked him to help her to get right away. [...] He had abruptly refused, adding some scathing but truthful remarks.

Julia had wept; she had become hysterical. She had made a scene, sitting in that very restaurant, under the shocked and disapproving eyes of Monsieur Albert. She had made him look a fool.[...]

Then he lifted his eyes from the veal - and there

she was, coming in at the door. (25-27)

Rhys drops a well placed hint linking Mr. Mackenzie to Heidler.

Julia asks Mr. Mackenzie:

'Tell me, do you really like life? Do you think it's fair? Honestly, now do you? (30)

Mr. Mackenzie doesn't answer Julia. He thinks to himself instead:

'No, of course life isn't fair. It's damned unfair, really. Everybody knows that, but what does she expect me to do about it? I'm not God Almighty.'

She asked, 'How's your pal Maître Legros?' (30)

This is a biting bit of fun on Rhys's part. The reader will recall Heidler's and Marya's visit to the church where Heidler kneels and prays:

'What were you praying about just now?' she asked him suddenly.

'You!' he said.

'God's quite a pal of yours?'

'Yes,' said Heidler. (Q, 96)

The entire scene within the restaurant is very double-edged, in the way that Julia's remark about pals is double-edged. The society into which Mr. Mackenzie has thrown his lot will continue to bully and oppress Julia. It has appropriated even divine authority to assist it. But alone and exposed in the restaurant, with the unpredictable Julia opposite him, Mr. Mackenzie looms large in the social spotlight as he wriggles and squirms, imprisoned by the social values he touts:

[...] while she was talking, a chap whom he knew, a journalist called Moon, had come in with a friend,

and was sitting two or three tables away. Moon was a gossip. He was talking volubly, and the friend, a thin, dark, youngish man was glancing round the restaurant with rather a bored expression. At any moment the attention of these two might be attracted. Who knew to what wild lengths Julia would go.

Mr. Mackenzie thought, 'Never again - never, never again - will I get mixed up with this sort of woman.'

(32)

Rhys introduces a very interesting ploy in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie. The heroine becomes something of a front woman for the writer. I am reminded of the military, and of the soldiers who make up the front line of attack in a battle. There is something of this in the way Rhys manipulates the heroines of her books, who also happen to be modelled after her. Rhys writes about life on the front line as one who experienced that very thing, and who survived. It does not necessarily follow that all of the heroines survive. What matters is that the fear, the dread, the boredom, the longing that is experienced be conveyed honestly, not sentimentally, or even mythically. That Rhys is creating, and not simply recounting, relieves her of any compunction about self-censorship that might result in compromise. Witness how she turns the tables on Mr. Mackenzie's smug deliberations on tragedy and comedy:

He listened, half-smiling. Surely even she must see that she was trying to make a tragedy out of a situation that was fundamentally comical. The discarded mistress - the faithful lawyer defending the honour of the client....A situation consecrated

as comical by ten thousand farces and a thousand comedies. (30-31)

What Rhys conveys to the reader, particularly the female reader, is that Mr. Mackenzie, the cool deliberator on tragedy and comedy, is the fool of the piece. Thinking of Julia, Mackenzie's thoughts turn to the letters he had written to her:

He had definitely suspected her of hoarding some rather foolish letter which he had written and which she had insisted that she had torn up. One of the letters had begun, 'I would like to put my throat under your feet.' He wriggled when he thought of it. Insanity! Forget it; forget it. (28)

The opening scenes of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, which depict Julia in company with Mr. Mackenzie, establish Julia's precariously poised detachment from Mr. Mackenzie. The slap which registers as public humiliation for Mr. Mackenzie reflects the nature of Rhys's work as a slap in the face of a society bent on perpetuating the game of respectability while exploiting those it deems unrespectable. Julia's slapping Mackenzie does not change the nature of their relationship, but it does underscore Mr. Mackenzie's relationship to middle-class censor:

Mr. Mackenzie ate a few more mouthfuls of veal. By this time it was cold. But he wanted to gain time to compose himself.

Then he drank a little wine.

Then he looked around the room.

As he did so he was convinced that nobody had noticed

anything.[...]

Gradually Mr. Mackenzie became calm. He felt he wanted some hot food.

He looked across the room, trying to attract Monsieur Albert's attention, and saw that the dark young man at the neighbouring table was staring at him with curiosity.

The dark young man instantly averted his eyes and his eyes and his face assumed a completely blank expression - too blank.

'Hell!' thought Mr. Mackenzie, 'that chap saw.'

(34-35)

The chap who sees is Mr. Horsfield, but Mr. Horsfield only sees a mirror reflection of what takes place:

There had been something fantastic, almost dream-like about seeing a thing like that reflected in a looking-glass. A bad looking-glass, too. So that the actors had been slightly distorted, as in an unstill pool of water.[...]

He had not stared at them, but he had seen the young woman slapping the man's face. He had gathered from her expression that it was not a caress, or a joke, or anything of that sort. (37)

Mr. Horsfield does not see Mr. Mackenzie's face. He sees the back of his head, as it appears "round and pugnacious" (37) in the looking-glass. He sees only the reflection of Julia's face - her troubled face, her glove slapping Mackenzie's face, her face as she is about to cry. In the subtle exchange between Horsfield as viewer, and Julia as reflection in the

looking-glass, Rhys establishes tentative likenesses between Horsfield and Julia. Viewed from Mr. Mackenzie's decidedly conformist perspective, Julia is the former mistress and "dangerous person" (33) he longs to be rid of. Seen from Mr. Horsfield's perspective, Julia is appealingly ambiguous. He seeks her out, not as one person feeding upon another, but as one who has recognized something of himself in the looking-glass. When he locates Julia in a somewhat glaring café, and she takes exception to his ill-timed interruption of what she is saying, Horsfield thinks to himself:

'But why should she be annoyed? [...] 'Supposing I were to say to somebody, "I'm a hop factor; I own a small and decaying business," , and he were to look incredulous. Should I be insulted? Not a bit of it. I shouldn't care a hoot.'

He wanted to laugh and say aloud, 'I'm a decaying hop factor, damn you! My father did the growth and I'm doing the decay.' (41)

But he doesn't say this. He only thinks it, as many of Rhys's characters are wont to do, particularly the heroines. In a moment of candour, Julia remarks: "It's funny how you say one thing when you're thinking of quite another, isn't it?" (93) Mr. Horsfield, like the heroines, frequently does precisely this:

He decided that when they left the cinema he would find out where she lived, get a taxi, take her home - and there would be the end of it. Once you started letting the instinct of pity degenerate from the general to the particular, life became completely

impossible.

She caught her breath again. He put his hand out and felt for hers.[...]

'Will you come back to my hotel?' he asked. 'We can talk much better there.' (45)

The passive indifference of Julia, the sore and cringing feeling which informs her responses, or lack thereof, to Mr. Horsfield, is well compensated for by his private thoughts and impulsive actions, especially given that he bears a resemblance to Julia. His presence, as the one who recognizes something of himself in the looking-glass, prevents the despair which has caught hold of Julia from overwhelming Julia as character, and After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie as novel. Through the character of Mr. Horsfield, Rhys can reveal something of Julia that Julia has lost access to because of the sore and cringing feeling that currently possesses her. In company with Horsfield, who is not "that swine Mackenzie" (49), Julia's emotional state and Mr. Horsfield's impulsive curiosity and empathy for Julia (and by implication, himself) make for good comedy, not unlike that of the Theatre of the Absurd:

She began: 'After all...' and then stopped. She had the look in her eyes of someone who is longing to explain herself, to say: 'This is how I am. This is how I feel.'

He suddenly remembered: 'Pa was a colonel. I was seduced by a clergyman at a garden-party. Pa shot him. Heavens, how the blighter bled!' He wanted to laugh.[...]

She stared at him, thinking: 'What's the use of tryin

to explain? It's all gone on too long.' [...]

Then her face assumed such a vague expression that Mr. Horsfield thought: 'Well go on, get on with it. If it's going to be the story of your life, get on with it.' (48-50)

Mr. Horsfield's impulsiveness (he spent the only legacy he ever had, or was ever likely to have, in travelling about Spain and the south of France), his saying and doing things in spite of so-called better judgment, make him an ideal site for Rhys to explore the grey areas of middle-class values. He occupies a middle ground between Mackenzie, the bourgeois conformist, and Julia, the vagabond, a middle ground which Quartet lacked. The oppositional relations of the Heidlers and the Zellis give way to a larger complex of cultural nuances in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, in which Julia, unlike Quartet's Ma'ya, assumes a more subordinated role. There are no prisons/havens in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie. There is instead a reckless, but necessary journey outward which demands patience and cunning on Julia's part, as well as public exposure. Through the presence of Mr. Horsfield, Rhys can provide a perspective on Julia which isn't wholly circumscribed by Mr. Mackenzie, even though he lingers as a crippling blight on Julia's precariously poised psychological well-being. After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie begins and ends with encounters between Julia and Mr. Mackenzie, encounters which are strictly confined to the Paris café setting. Mr. Horsfield, on the other hand, a visitor to Paris, carries the action forward, and Julia along with it. His thoughts and actions, which frequently contradict

one another, make for an added lively exchange as he and Julia enter and leave cinemas, taxis and hotels. The despair which links Julia to Mr. Mackenzie is given halting and absurdly humorous articulation through the social exchanges of Horsfield and Julia. It is by no means purged, but Mr. Mackenzie fades as a determinant force, leaving the way open for Julia's return journey to London.

Julia's journey back to her mother is a deftly staged one. In the Restaurant Albert, Mr. Mackenzie concludes that people like Julia are best left alone:

He soon stopped asking intimate questions, because he knew it was a mistake to be too curious about people who drift into your life and must soon inevitably drift out again. That wasn't the way to live.

The secret of life was never to go too far or too deep. And so you left these people alone. They would be pretty certain to tell you lies, anyhow. (26)

To Mackenzie's mind, Julia, as a woman connected to people and places through personal history, is both irrelevant and an affront to his sense of propriety. From Mr. Horsfield's perspective, the people and places which comprise Julia's personal history are important because their existence might help to relieve him of the burden he is feeling obliged to assume, the burden being Julia, herself:

He said: 'Now look here, I'm going to talk sense to you. Why don't you come back to London?'

She looked at him steadily with her large, unwinking eyes. She said: 'I don't know. I might go back to London. There's nothing to stop me.'

Then he thought: 'Good God, why in the world have I suggested that?' and added cautiously, 'I mean, you've surely got people there, haven't you?' (54)

Julia's decision to return to London is made at the shriek of a car horn, and finalized by the note she writes to Norah from her room in Paris. Her actual return contains the first intimations of Rhys's predilection for a woman's past as integral to the shaping of a narrative as mood, as substance, as style:

A church clock chimed the hour. At once all feeling of strangeness left her. She felt that her life had moved in a circle. Predestined, she had returned to her starting point, in this little Bloomsbury bedroom that was so exactly like the little Bloomsbury bedroom she had left nearly ten years before. And even the clock which struck each quarter in that aggressive and melancholy way was the same clock that she used to hear. (67)

Quartet marks out a wire-fenced terrain in which anger, fear, and love are barely contained. In After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie the terrain opens up as Rhys moves backwards in time, reclaiming the London which receives scant mention in Quartet:

She walked on through the fog into Tottenham Court Road. The houses and the people passing were withdrawn, nebulous. There was only a grey fog shot with yellow lights, and its cold breath on her face, and the ghost of herself coming out of the fog to meet her.

The ghost was thin and eager. It wore a long, very

tight check skirt, a short dark-blue coat, and a bunch of violets bought from the old man in Woburn Square. It drifted up to her and passed her in the fog. And she had the feeling that, like the old man, it looked at her coldly, without recognizing her. (ALMM, 67-68)

The small details of the past retained in memory - the little old man in the bowler hat, his thin feeble voice calling, "Violets, lady, violets" (ALMM, 67), the grey fog, the Belgian weeping in the cinema - mark the beginning of Rhys's uncanny genius for blurring the boundaries between past and present. Marya needn't lie on the bed and imagine all the women who lay there before her. Julia, Anna, and Sasha are those women, and through them the past is mediated.

After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie moves progressively closer and closer to the site of the mother, by degrees, as it were, marked by Julia's encounters with others from her past - her sister, Norah, and her Uncle Griffiths. But before Julia meets Norah, Rhys includes a marvellous vignette. Julia is seated in Lyons having lunch. A man sits down at her table, then rushes off in the middle of his meal, only to return minutes later:

He said excitedly: 'A most extraordinary thing! I've just seen a man I thought was dead. Well, that's an extraordinary thing. A thing like that doesn't happen every day to anybody, does it? A man I thought was killed in the Japanese earthquake.'

'Were you pleased to see him?' asked Julia.

'Pleased to see him?' echoed the little man cautiously. 'Well, I don't know. But it gave me a bit

of a turn, I can tell you.' (69)

The brief scene with the little man presages Julia's re-encounter with those who figure in her past, the underlying truth being that no one is particularly pleased to see Julia, the " importunate ghost" (66). Julia leaves Lyons and re-enters the street. Rhys remarks the drab and hopeless looking older women " with timid hunted expressions" (69) who Julia passes on her way to her hotel. And on this note, Norah is introduced.

Rhys echoes Mr. Horsfield's impressions of Norah, " middle class, no money" (73); and the meeting between Norah and Julia is not unlike the meeting between the little man in Lyons and the man presumed dead:

When she (Norah) had read Julia's letter she had said: 'You'll never guess who's turned up again.... Well, I suppose I'd better go along and see her'. She was feeling curious, even pleased. Because something fresh was always something fresh - a little excitement to break the monotony.

But now all her curiosity had departed and she only wanted to get away. (73)

Julia's journey from Paris, the train, the channel crossing, the Bloomsbury room, Uncle Griffith's rooms in Bayswater, the awkward reunion with Mr. Horsfield - all culminate in Julia's arrival at the flat in Acton where she is first met by the nurse, Wyatt, and then by Norah who conducts Julia to the mother's room, a scene which takes place precisely in the middle of the book:

Julia stared at the bed and saw her mother's body -
a huge, shapeless mass under the sheets and blankets -

and her mother's face against the white-frilled pillow. Dark-skinned, with high cheek-bones and an aquiline nose. (97)

Julia later reflects on her life as a child:

Her mother had been the warm centre of the world. You loved to watch her brushing her long hair; and when you missed the caresses and the warmth you groped for them.... And then her mother - entirely wrapped up in the new baby - had said things like, 'Don't be a cry-baby. You're too old to go on like that. You're a great big girl of six.' And from being the warm centre of the world her mother had gradually become a dark, austere, rather plump woman, who, because she was worried, slapped you for no reason that you knew. So that there were times when you were afraid of her; other times when you disliked her.

Then you stopped being afraid or disliking. You simply became indifferent and tolerant and rather sentimental, because after all she was your mother.

It was strange sitting there, and remembering the time when she was the sweet, warm centre of the world, remembering it so vividly that mysteriously it was all there again. (106-107)

In both Smile Please and Wide Sargasso Sea Rhys includes similar descriptions of the mother/daughter relationship, but in Smile Please and Wide Sargasso Sea the mother is physically situated in the Caribbean, whereas in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie the mother is said to have come from Brazil. "I have often hated Mackenzie and wished I'd never written it" (Nebeker, 203),

Rhys wrote in the letter to Diana Athill in 1978, that I have already cited. Given the curious setting for the mother in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, I find this to be an apt sentiment on Rhys's part. The mother in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is too vaguely presented. There are no descriptions of place which really ground her in time and memory. She is a shapeless mass who in a rare and lucid moment puts Julia "outside the pale" (96) with a single look. Her only utterance is "orange trees" (105), which links her to the tropical world we are told she came from long ago. But, the mention of Brazil, the mother's silence, her life as a paralytic shut-in in a room in Action suggest an obscuring of something rather than a disclosure.

Julia describes her return to a Bloomsbury room as having come full circle, but the mother and daughter who live in London do not figure as London vividly recalled. They are shrouded in mystery, whereas the chapter which follows Julia's first visit to her mother's bedside, 'Mr. James', the re-encounter of Julia/Rhys with her first lover, is told with a clarity that draws forth the past, linking Julia to the thin eager ghost who knew and loved Mr. James:

This was the affair which had ended quietly and decently, without fuss or scenes or hysteria. When you were nineteen , and it was the first time you had been let down, you did not make scenes. You felt as if your back was broken, as if you would never move again. But you did not make a scene. That started later on, when the same thing had happened five or six times over, and you were supposed to be getting

used to it.

Nineteen - that was a hell of a long time ago. Well, you had your reward, because there was a man who had become your friend for life. Always at the back of your mind had been the thought: 'If the worst absolutely comes to the worst he'll help.' (109)

In the very brief time that Julia spends with Mr. James, Julia's past tumbles forwards in her thoughts, clearly, hauntingly, filling a gap that always remains, in spite of words, because it is rooted in experience:

She was thinking: 'It was just my luck, wasn't it that when we needed it most we should have lost everything? When you've just had a baby, and it dies for the simple reason that you haven't enough money to keep it alive, it leaves you with a sort of hunger. Not sentimental - oh, no. Just a funny feeling, like hunger. And then, of course, you're indifferent - because the whole damned thing is too stupid to be anything else but indifferent about.... He's so little. And he dies and is put under the earth.' (111-112)

These are the thoughts which are never spoken aloud, thoughts which Anna of Voyage In The Dark knows one can never tell about, thoughts which Rhys divulges little by little, in simple sentences and short paragraphs. These unembellished admissions multiply as Rhys's vision matured. And the economy of language prevails as each image and insight is pulled taut as a bow's string. During Julia's visit to Mr. James, Rhys lets fly a little arrow from her bow:

So many threads. To try to disentangle them - no use. Because he has money he's a kind of God. Because I have none I'm a kind of worm. A worm because I've failed and I have no money. A worm because I'm not even sure if I hate you. (ALMM, 112-113)

This single paragraph stands apart from the rest of the book for the simple reason that the third person suddenly vanishes. Rhys and Julia become one in a direct address to the person of Mr. James. The passage anticipates Rhys's shift to first person narrative, the narrative voice which best facilitated her awesome ability to use her life as her material and transform it stylistically.

Rhys's life, however, is held at bay in the Acton chapter, hidden by bedclothes, exiled to a country the writer is unfamiliar with. But the very admission of the shapeless, human mass, robbed of speech, save for the muttered "orange trees", suggests a lacuna which must be filled. That it is not filled in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is immaterial. As part of the process which enabled Rhys to take out the exercise books and write Voyage In The Dark, After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie rouses the dormant world of London, the world of the thin and eager ghost and Mr. James. That the chapters on Mr. James and Julia's mother are back to back, in the middle of the book, suggests the importance these two people portend for Rhys's future fiction, an importance which Rhys articulates in Voyage In The Dark.

After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is not only Julia's voyage in, to the centre and back out again; it is the writer's voyage as well. It is as if that which is seen, heard, and felt at the

centre of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie - the mother sickening for the sun, who cannot be articulated, and the surge of memories which saturate the strained encounter between Julia and Mr. James - are the epiphany which makes Voyage In The Dark possible.

At the mother's funeral, Julia puts her head in her hands and abandons herself - sobs of rage, not sadness, as Norah mistakenly thinks:

She was crying not because she remembered that her life had been a long succession of humiliations and mistakes and pains and ridiculous efforts. Everybody's life was like that. At the same time, in a miraculous manner, some essence of her was shooting upwards like a flame. She was great. She was a defiant flame shooting upwards not to plead but to threaten. Then the flame sank down again, useless, having reached nothing. (131)

The Janus-faced reality of the dying mother and Mr. James are not for Julia to articulate. It is enough that Julia, the front woman destined to make the journey back to London, reveals to the writer what lies beneath the bedclothes and experiences the terrible humiliation of one who feels she has no right to "intrude her sordid wish somehow to keep alive into (Mr. James's) beautiful room" (111). Rhys does not abandon Julia at the novel's centre. By degrees, she is eased out and away from what has been witnessed. But she doesn't speak of it, not even to Mr. Horsfield whom she meets again, at night, on the day of her mother's funeral:

'I'm awfully glad I caught you,' said Mr. Horsfield

in a rather embarrassed voice. 'You see, I managed to scratch my appointment after all.' [...]

'I'm glad,' said Julia, but without surprise.

'I didn't want to be alone this evening.' [...]

'What is it? Is anything the matter?' Mr.

Horsfield inquired. [...] (143)

It is only after Julia and Mr. Horsfield make love, a very different kind of release from the sobs let out in the funeral home, that a quiet measure of introspection enters the novel. Julia recalls the catching of the butterfly when she was a child, being afraid for the first time and telling no one about it.

Julia's time with Mr. Horsfield reaches an unusually funny climax when they mount the stairs the following night. It is a scene which would have left the likes of Mackenzie in permanent wriggles:

'Who touched me?' she screamed. 'Who's that?

Who touched my hand? What's that?'

'Julia!' he said.

But she went on screaming loudly: 'Who's that?

Who's that? Who touched my hand?'

'Well,' thought Mr. Horsfield, 'that's torn it.'

He wondered if he would have time to bolt; dismissed the idea. [...]

'But, my dear,' he said, 'I touched you.' [...]

The strangest understandings, the wildest plans, lit up his brain - together with an overwhelming contempt for the organization of society. (164-166)

The business on the stairs and Mr. Horsfield's later

reflections on Julia, his understanding of her, his understanding of himself, establish him as outside of the Heidler/Mackenzie nexus. Mr. Horsfield is loosely based on Jean Rhys's second husband, Leslie Tilden Smith, a man who unswervingly stood behind Rhys's work. In fact, it was during the years with him that Rhys wrote After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Voyage In The Dark, Good Morning, Midnight, and a very early version of Wide Sargasso Sea, called Le Revenant. It was also Leslie Tilden Smith's legacy which took Rhys back to her island home, Dominica, for a month-long stay. The presence of Mr. Horsfield marks an oblique end to the Heidler/Mackenzie legacies, and, interestingly enough, the misplaced hopes that Julia had invested in Mr. James, whose gift of twenty quid is to be his last gift to her.

After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie as novel comes full circle with Julia's return to Paris where she re-encounters Mackenzie, again in a Paris café. Only this time Julia is emotionally detached. The sore and cringing feeling which so monopolized her at the novel's beginning is gone. She and Mackenzie occupy very different positions, positions in which, paradoxically, the boundaries between dog and wolf blur. Mackenzie is bidden so long. Julia returns to her hotel, and Rhys, the writer, increasingly more sure of the terrain she is mapping, goes on to write Voyage In The Dark.

Chapter Four

Sacrifice

Voyage In The Dark looks back to Rhys's early life when she first came to England, and earlier, to her childhood home, Dominica. It also looks back to the exercise books which contained the facts as recalled and recorded by Rhys about the early days in England, the untold story of Mr. James, and the hidden story of the orange trees. After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie provides peepholes, as it were, into Rhys's stylistic probings of time frames melding one into the other. The most arresting example is Julia and the thin, eager ghost passing one another by, a passing which is fitting given that After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie does not address Julia's London past in any detail. And yet, the focus of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is geographically broader than the focus of Quartet. Everything in Quartet seems to occupy somewhat fixed frames in which the characters talk, fall out, and about. Rhys's personal view of Quartet as a play is a view I can readily share. After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie is a different case altogether. It is the tracking of a journey, a journey in which the heroine drifts in and out of focus, in which the middle disclosure is shrouded in mystery, and a man, a real benefactor, materializes briefly, then disappears, seemingly forever, in a final note. Rhys takes her cues from the middle of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, developing not one but two stories which fall shadowlike before, beside, behind the story-teller.

There is, in fact, a character known for her story-telling in Voyage In The Dark, the young black servant girl, Francine, who begins each story she tells to the young Anna with, "Timmim", to which Anna must reply, "Bois sèche" (71).

Francine does not tell any stories in Voyage In The Dark. Anna tells the story, in a style unique to Anna. She does not begin, as does Francine, with "Timmtimm". Neither does she begin with "Once upon a time". She does not begin at the beginning at all. She begins somewhere in the middle. Something has happened on either side of the fallen curtain. Behind the curtain "the colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself were different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy" (7). The world behind the curtain is a world of heightened emotions, a sensuous world, a world larger than life, a dream life and at the same time an intensely alive life:

When there was a breeze the sea was millions of spangles; and on still days it was purple as Tyre and Sidon. Market Street smelt of the wind, but the narrow street smelt of niggers and woodsmoke and salt fishcakes fried in lard.[...] It was funny, but that was what I thought about more than anything else - the smell of the streets and the smells of frangipani and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup, and incense after funerals or Corpus Christi processions, and the patients standing outside the surgery next door, and the smell of the sea-breeze and the different smell of the land-breeze. (VD, 7-8)

When Rhys first came to England accompanied by her aunt Clarice, she went to the Perse School for girls - a short-

lived stay. She wrote to her father requesting his permission to study acting and enrolled in the Academy of Dramatic Art (now known as R.A.D.A.) with his approval. She spent several months at the Academy, then learned that her father had died, that there was no more money to pay her expenses in London and that she should return to Dominica at the first opportunity. She did not return. She joined the chorus line of a touring theatre company, but did not stay there for any great length of time. She recounts her discomfiture on stage in a story in her autobiography, Smile Please:

Ours was an appalling show.[...] It was cold and I was shivering. We heard a loud tramping noise and somebody said, 'What on earth's that?' The answer was: 'That's the gallery walking out.' The gallery didn't hiss or boo if they disliked a show, they simply walked out, making as much noise as possible.[...]

As soon as we began I felt the mockery and scorn coming up from the audience like smoke. I was at the end of the line, near the wings, and after a bit of this I simply left the line and went off stage.

(106-107)

The show may have been appalling and Rhys uncomfortable with it, but theatre as a medium in which time and space reduce to highly charged scenes stripped of extraneous verbiage, movement and furnishings, informs Rhys's rare and wondrous style of writing. Throughout Voyage In The Dark the curtain lifts and falls, revealing scenes of lingering intensity, grounding the narrator in time past as the present unfolds.

The I who speaks of Market Street, of the black women

selling fishcakes, is seventeen year old Anna, a chorus girl in The Bue Waltz, currently playing in Southsea, just one of the many towns the show has toured, towns which Anna describes as all exactly alike:

There was always a little grey street leading to the stage-door of the theatre and another little grey street where your lodgings were, and rows of little houses with chimneys like the funnels of dummy steamers and smoke the same colour as the sky; and a grey stone promenade running hard, naked, and straight by the side of the grey-brown or grey-green sea; or a Corporation Street or High Street or Duke Street or Lord Street where you walked about and looked at the shops. (8)

Anna's description miniaturizes everything - a little grey street, another little grey street, rows of little houses, and by way of extension, little grey people scuttling up and down streets and in and out of houses, and Anna, by virtue of her being in England, scuttling along too. If the first descriptions in Voyage In The Dark point to a world which is larger than life, the descriptions of England present a half life, a shrunken life, truncated like the tree Anna observes in the landlady's back garden:

There was a glass door behind the sofa. You could see into a small, unfurnished room, and then another glass door led into the walled-in garden. The tree by the back wall was lopped so that it looked like a man with stumps instead of arms and legs. (9)

Anna is not alone when she remarks the tree. Maudie,

another chorus girl, of a different sort than Anna, is present. So is Zola's Nana, the book which Anna is reading. Voyage In The Dark is based on Rhys's early life in London and her earlier life in the Caribbean. But the novel which derives from the exercise books was written almost a decade after she left London, after she had lived for many years in Paris. Anna would never have known Paris, but Rhys did. The inclusion of Nana is an interesting one. Many critics note the similarity of the names, Anna and Nana, and the obvious sex for money transactions which take place in both novels. But I find the inclusion of Nana interesting because it is a French book, not an English book, that Anna is absorbed in. Maudie says:

'That's a dirty book, isn't it?'

'Bits of it are all right,' I said.

Maudie said, 'I know; it's about a tart. I think it's disgusting. I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another. Besides, all books are like that - just somebody stuffing you up.' (9-10)

Anna does not comment on Zola's story, or the heroine of the book, Nana. She notes the print:

The print was very small, and the endless procession of words gave me a curious feeling - sad, excited and frightened. It wasn't what I was reading, it was the look of the dark, blurred words going on endlessly that gave me that feeling. (9)

I am reminded here of Rhys's comments on writing, that a novel

must have a shape and that life does not have any. The words which comprise the pages of Nana go on endlessly. Zola was a verbose writer. Rhys practised ruthless editing of her material. But Paris was the place in which Rhys was driven to go public with her writing, tentatively at first with The Left Bank and Other Stories, then with emotional deliberation in Quartet. In fictions as carefully orchestrated as Rhys's are there are no throwaways. The sad, excited and frightened feelings which the dark blurred words produce in Anna suggest other things. In Voyage In The Dark Anna tells the story of Rhys's first couple of years in London. What Anna cannot tell is what follows London. Marya tells part of that story. But Voyage In The Dark was a two-fold process which began as the exercise books when Rhys was twenty and ended as the published novel, Voyage In The Dark, when Rhys was forty-four years old. There is an interesting acknowledgement here of the writer, again, shaping and directing the character who is based on herself. The brief mention of the printed word anticipates Rhys's eventual move to Paris, where she found herself writing stories and novels which disclose the so-called unrespectable woman - herself.

The blurred print of Nana is later displaced by Anna's recollection of the old slave list she once saw at Constance Estate, her mother's family estate in Dominica:

'I saw an old slave-list at Constance once,' I said.

'It was hand-written on that paper that rolls up. Parchment d'you call it? It was in columns - the names and the ages and what they did and then General Remarks.'

...Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant.

(52-53)

It is no longer the look of the dark print which takes hold of Anna; it is the culturally resonant information the words reveal, information which is grounded in Anna/Rhys's past. Anna cannot tell what lies ahead, but she knows what is behind her because in Anna's world the past is always there - like a familiar shadow, like Maillotte Boyd.

It is through the simple recall of the name of a black house servant whom Anna never knew but who symbolizes a different legacy, an historical legacy of slavery and plantation owning, that Rhys merges Francine, the black story-teller, with the white West Indian, Anna Morgan. Anna carries the burden of her ancestors' past as slave-owners, and she longs to be black. Anna becomes the ritual site for the acting out of two irreconcilable positions, a site which is articulated in the first person.

In 1963, the actress Selma Vaz Dias set about staging Voyage In The Dark. She had already produced Good Morning, Midnight for radio. Rhys readily admits in a letter to Vaz Dias that she had never thought of Voyage In The Dark as a play. However, she was sufficiently intrigued that she gave Selma numerous bits of advice on staging. What is emphasized by Rhys is the ending: "Try cutting real life to the bone and concentrate on this final scene" (JRL, 236). Voyage In The Dark does build toward the final scene Rhys speaks of, and while she did not see it particularly as theatre she also emphasizes the voice in the novel:

All I can think of is a voice speaking. Sometimes
to music sometimes not - on a darkened stage.

(JRL, 236)

I am reminded here of Beckett - the privileging of voice,
a minimal set, a theatre of economy. The economy of movement,
of dialogue, of characters in Voyage In The Dark is intrinsically
characteristic of theatre, a borrowing, as it were, from one
medium in order to invest new meaning in a second medium.
The inclusion of Nana suggests yet another clue to Voyage In
The Dark. Nana is the story of a tart who rockets to fame
through her debut on the Paris stage, as Venus. Voyage In
The Dark is the story of a chorus girl, told scene by scene
like a play unfolding, right up to the end in which Anna, the
heroine, is alone on a darkened stage.

Zola describes the general thrust (no pun intended) of
Nana:

The philosophical subject is as follows: A whole
society hurling itself at the cunt. A pack of hounds
after a bitch, who is not even on heat and makes fun
of the hounds following her. The poem of male desires,
the great lever which moves the world. There is
nothing apart from the cunt and religion. (Zola, 11)

His is an entirely male constructed agenda, which is fitting
given that Zola was a man. Voyage In The Dark, however, is
written by a woman who, unlike the assertion made by Maudie,
is not stuffing people up. Voyage In The Dark moves beyond
verisimilitude and into the realm of ritual praxis; of woman
and sexuality transcending the fixed categories of the good and
the bad woman. Rhys explores a woman's sexual initiation

as process, not as classification - a feat which took no small amount of courage and wisdom, especially given that Rhys was writing Voyage In The Dark long before the sexual revolution and women's liberation:

There was a fire but the room was cold. I walked up to the looking-glass and put the lights on over it and stared at myself. It was as if I were looking at somebody else.[...]

In this room too the lights were shaded in red; and it had a secret feeling - quiet, like a place where you crouch down when you are playing hide-and-seek.

I sat down on the bed and listened, then I lay down. [...] I felt as if I had gone out of myself, as if I were in a dream.

Soon he'll come in again and kiss me, but differently. He'll be different and so I'll be different. It'll be different. I thought, 'It'll be different, different. It must be different.' (VD, 23-24)

The scene described takes place during Anna's second encounter with Walter Jeffries, after she returns to London from Southsea. Walter's intentions are made quite clear when Anna suddenly realizes that the small dining area contains a door she had not noticed before. " 'Oh,' I said, 'it's a bedroom.' My voice went high" (22). The relationship is not consummated. Anna protests and Walter apologizes. Anna returns to her room in Judd Street: " I undressed and got into bed, but I couldn't get warm. The room had a cold, close

smell. It was like being in a small, dark box" (25). In the morning a letter arrives and a big bunch of violets: "I took them up; they smelt of rain" (26). Inside the envelope is a note and five five pound notes. Rhys conjoins sex and virginity, not money and sexual favours rendered. The violets, too big for the tooth glass, fill the water jug. The money is tucked under Anna's pillow, like a gift from the fairies, and Anna speaks the magic words, "a dress and a hat and shoes and underclothes" (27).

Anna undergoes her transformation standing doll-like as the Misses Cohen dress her: "This is a beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I'll go to all the lovely places I've ever dreamt of. This is the beginning" (28).

But the beginning also contains an ominous warning in Anna's mention of The Iron Shroud. For readers unfamiliar with William Mudford's gothic tale, a second reference is made - to Poe. There is no small comfort derived from Rhys's inclusion of The Iron Shroud. The landlady's accusation, "I don't want no tarts in my house" (30), as a fixed category imposed on Anna, is dramatically represented as the room shrinking coffin-like on its occupant. Anna extends the image of the room getting smaller to the streets outside:

I lay down and started thinking about the time when I was ill in Newcastle, and the room I had there, and that story about the walls of a room getting smaller and smaller until they crush you to death. The Iron Shroud, it was called. It wasn't Poe's story; it was more frightening than that. 'I believe this damned

room's getting smaller and smaller,' I thought. And about the rows of houses outside, gimcrack, rotten-looking, and all exactly alike. (30)

The landlady is simply the collective voice emanating from the little grey houses on little grey streets, the shrunken world that Anna finds herself caught in, where a young woman is either good or bad, case or box closed. Unlike Vivenzio of The Iron Shroud, Anna is not crushed by the shrinking room. Anna becomes instead part of a larger drama which transcends the tawdry meanness of social injunctions against a desiring woman. The letter from Walter receives an unqualified response from Anna, and with the posting of her letter, Anna's words on paper, an interesting transformation takes place:

It got dark, but I couldn't get up to light the gas. I felt as if there were weights on my legs so that I couldn't move. Like that time at home when I had fever and it was afternoon and the jalousies were down and yellow light came in through the slats and lay on the floor in bars.[...] I was happy because Francine was there, and I watched her hand waving the fan backwards and forwards and the beads of sweat that rolled from underneath her handkerchief.[...] Uncle Bob said well you're off now and I turned my head so that nobody would see my crying - it ran down my face and splashed into the sea like the rain was splashing - Adieu sweetheart adieu - [...]

He was standing in the doorway. I could see him against the light in the passage. (31-32)

In the unspoken interval between Anna's timeless recall

of Dominica and Walter Jeffries' appearance in the doorway of the Judd Street room, a very subtle change of identity is intimated. Anna's letter to Walter establishes a pact between them, a pact which lies outside of the narrowly regulated sexual code of behaviour mouthed by the landlady, a pact which looks back to black Dominica, in which Anna internalizes the inscription of the old slave list. In Smile Please Rhys writes:

I dreaded growing up, I dreaded the time when I would have to worry about how many proposals I had, what if I didn't have a proposal? This was never told me but it was in every book I read, in people's faces and the way they talked.

Black girls on the contrary seemed to be perfectly free. (51)

In Voyage In The Dark Anna acts out the freedom Rhys speaks of in Smile Please, a freedom which is simultaneously interpenetrated by deeply religious significations. On her nineteenth birthday Anna is alone in her room. Maudie is expected. Walter is out of town as he always is on Sundays: "I thought about home and standing by the window on Sunday morning, dressing to go to church, and putting on a woollen vest which had shrunk in the wash and was too small, because wool next the skin is healthy" (41). Anna's thoughts of the woollen underwear (horrible and prickly next to the skin), underarm perspiration and gloves one size too small give way to "the sky close to the earth" (42), the shade of the mangotree and the stone bath where one is freed of clothes in the dark green water. The church service, long and tedious, relieved

by stained glass and " saints with bare, wax-coloured feet with long supple toes" (43), and Anna's walk in the churchyard " where the light is gold and when you shut your eyes you see fire-colour" (43) suggest another transformation:

'What have you done to yourself?' Maudie said. 'You look different. I'd have been round to see you before, but I've been away. You've done something to your hair, haven't you? It's lighter.' I said, 'Yes, I've had henna-shampoos. Do you like it?' 'In a way I do,' Maudie said. 'It's not bad.' (43)

Rhys introduces a succession of images: the saints, the stained glass, the gold light in the churchyard that turns fire-colour, Anna's hair. It is not what is explicitly said in Voyage In The Dark which is its shaping power. It is the careful arrangements of thoughts, of dialogue, of scenes which evoke patterns of unsettling likenesses, so that Anna's loss of virginity assumes unearthly resonances.

The exercise books provided a record of what happened to the young Rhys - " what he said and what she felt" (SP,129). After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie chronicles Julia's and Rhys's journeys back to a source, a remembering which is vague and shadowy which neither Julia or Rhys articulate clearly in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie. In Voyage In The Dark when Anna joins Walter in his bed the vagueness of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie gives way to a clarity of recognition:

When I got into bed there was warmth coming from him and I got close to him. Of course you've always known, always remembered, and then you forget so utterly, except that you've always known it. Always - how long

is always? (37)

Rhys remembers through Anna what appears to be an irreconcilable meeting of past and present. But, Rhys, the writer, remembers as an artist through whom deeply religious and cultural significations coalesce in story-telling and theatrical evocations of the order of classical Greek theatre.

In Voyage In The Dark Rhys creates a drama of sacrifice, practising all the while the very advice she gives to Selma Vaz Dias, "cutting real life to the bone". The bone is, after all, the underlying structure of the body. Without an appreciation of the skeletal frame, it is virtually impossible to recreate the human in art. Rhys speaks of life as having no shape, yet through her novels she makes visible life's underlying structure as it appears to her.

In the moment that Anna realizes that not only has Walter ceased to love her as he did, but that he doesn't even know her she thinks:

It was like letting go and falling back into water and seeing yourself grinning up through the water, your face like a mask, and seeing the bubbles coming up as if you were trying to speak from under the water. And how do you know what it's like to try to speak from under the water when you're drowned? 'And I've met a lot of them who were monkeys too,' he said. (98)

Anna's dressing for the part in the Cohen sisters' dress shop and lying in bed beside Walter, Anna repeating the words "Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, Maillotte Boyd, aged 18....But I

like it like this. I don't want it any other way but this" (56), culminates in Anna's face as a grinning mask and Walter as a monkey.

"This is no way for a young girl to live", Mrs. Dawes said, (90), and Vincent speaking to Anna in the car after the trip to Savernake Forest is over: "Well, what do you do with yourself all day?" he said. "I don't know", I said. (86) The point is that Anna does little if anything in the daytime. Daytime is like vacated space, the time between her nightly engagements with Walter:

Dressing to go and meet him and coming out of the restaurant and the lights in the streets and getting into a taxi and when he kissed you in the taxi going there. (75)

Theatre collapses time frames into highly charged scenes. Anna's life is pared down to her relationship with Walter and to the vivid memories of Dominica which her mind plays out, over and over, in beautifully but minimally staged vignettes:

All the way back in the taxi I was still thinking about home and when I got into bed I lay awake, thinking about it. About how sad the sun can be, especially in the afternoon, but in a different way from the sadness of cold places, quite different. And the way the bats fly out at sunset, two by two, very stately. And the smell of the store down on the Bay.[...] And the smell of Francine - acrid-sweet. And that hibiscus once - it was so red, so proud,

and its long gold tongue hung out. It was so red
that even the sky was just a background for it. And
I can't believe it's dead.... (56-57)

Throughout the novel, both in Anna's thoughts and in her
relations with others, run notes of discord, hints of what
is to come, of events that the lone individual is powerless
to avert or undo:

I got well away from the house. I sat down against
a rock in the shadow. The sky was terribly blue and
very close to the earth.[...]

The sun at home can be terrible, like God.[...]

I stood there until I felt the pain of the headache
begin and then the sky came up close to me. It
clanged, it was so hard. The pain was like knives.
And then I was cold, and when I had been very sick
I went home. (73)

The exposure, giving one's self over to the sun, to the
terrible God, to something larger than the self is made
manifest through Anna in Voyage In The Dark. Anna is the site
through which Rhys reveals the conflicts, the desires, the
ambivalence of being alive which belong to a woman's history
of being. A woman's loss of virginity is more than a private
experience. It is an act which transcends the personal because
it is collectively brought about.

Anna confides in the unmarried black servant, Francine,
when she first begins to menstruate: "[...] when I was unwell
for the first time it was she who explained to me, so that it
seemed quite all right and I thought it was all in the day's
work like eating or drinking" (68). Hester's response to

Anna's growing into womanhood is entirely different:

Hester came and jawed away at me, her eyes wandering all over the place. I kept saying, 'No, rather not.... Yes, I see.... Oh yes, of course...' But I began to feel awfully miserable, as if everything were shutting up around me and I couldn't breathe. I wanted to die. (68)

The impact that Hester makes on the young Anna reinforces the view that a woman's growing into sexuality is somehow not natural. Hester's discomfort can't stop the onset of menstruation any more than it can stop Anna's awakening to desire. She delivers what is tantamount to a soliloquy in Chapter Six of Part One, claiming to have done all she could for Anna and refusing any further responsibility for her. Anna recalls Uncle Bo's description of Hester: "a rushing river that woman" (64). The image evokes a dammed repression gushing forth, sweeping all before it, heedless of the damage it wreaks. Women like Hester, like Anna's landlady at Judd Street, like Ethel Matthews, are of a kind, and recognizable everywhere for their denial of what is natural. Rhys stages a drama in which the women who are deemed respectable by society, who comprise a collective voice of sexual censorship, select from the fold a victim worthy of sacrifice. Anna's removal of her hat on the rock-pitted hill, the sun and the pain it delivers, single her out as the chosen sacrifice. Around her the repressive guilt and self denial of the Hesters and Ethels settle, until such time as she is blotted from their minds.

The women who don't blot out sexuality are Maudie, Laurie, and Francine. Both Maudie and Laurie have learned to turn the

tables on society's hypocritical censorship of desiring women. They, especially Laurie, literally profit from it. Swank, they call it; a hard sounding word; a word without sensual undertones. It is Francine through whom Rhys conveys unabashed sensuality, the pleasure she derives from sucking on the mango, and, by implication, the sensuality of Anna who internalizes Mailotte Boyd: "But I like it like this".

In Deborah Kelly Kloepper's The Unspeakable Mother, Kloepper remarks the absence of the mother in Rhys's fiction and suggests that the mother has been smothered by the male hegemony, silenced and banished.⁸ I think, however, that the issue of the mother is a more complicated one than Kloepper's account allows for. Absence as a form of censorship need not originate from the male alone. Rhys always felt rejected by her mother. She was not the daughter that her mother wanted her to be. Affection and care were gradually withdrawn at an early age, and Rhys described her mother as an austere unsmiling woman who hit her for no reason at all. The mother in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie silences Julia with a look when Julia is convulsed with laughter after hearing that Norah was mistaken for a donkey. Julia's laughter, her release, as it were, in an emotionally strained situation, is censored by the mother. It is notable that the censorship takes place in the only moment that the two otherwise estranged sisters share something. Hester, Anna's stepmother, verbally censors the relationship between Anna and Francine:

I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I

couldn't do it. Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had!

Exactly like that dreadful girl Francine. When you were jabbering away together in the pantry I never could tell which of you was speaking. (65)

Anna is brought to England so that she might be purged of unacceptable inclinations. Or so Hester outwardly intimates. Once there, however, Hester drops out of sight, leaving Anna to face life on her own. In Rhys's own life her mother expressed relief when Rhys chose not to return to Dominica. Rhys inscribes the site of the mother as one of censorship, a censorship of woman as sensuous, as desiring, as a sexual being. And she takes it one step further. The denial of sexuality, the repression of desire, in no way ensure their abolition. The price of collective repression is the delivering up of the desiring virgin to the desiring male. In ancient Sumer the temple goddess had sexual intercourse with the temple priest. The highly ritualized ceremony, known as the Sacred Marriage, was an honouring of the power which inheres in sexuality, something which is both integral to the society at large and to the experience of being human. That the ceremony took place in the open emphasizes its importance as a religious and cultural celebration, of sexuality as intrinsic to the social fabric. In Voyage in the Dark, the ritual of sexual repression prevails, and Anna is the vehicle through whom a collective release is realized. Rhys provides no explicit delineation of the transference I have outlined. Her sophistication and wisdom, as a writer who has experienced that which she

writes about, lie in her capacity to imply rather than state meaning. When the affair with Hugh Lancelot Smith ended for the twenty-year-old Rhys, she wrote the following poem in her diary:

I didn't know

I didn't know

I didn't know. (SP, 114)

More than fifteen years later a knowing Jean Rhys transformed experience into fiction, fiction which conveys the personal and cultural shape of a ritual which was, for her, and, I would suggest, continues to be for many in the English-speaking world, conducted in an atmosphere of suppressive collusion.

It is interesting to note that the name Rhys chose to give Anna's stepmother is Hester. Well before the writing of Voyage In The Dark, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote The Scarlet Letter, whose heroine is also a Hester. Hester, it will be recalled, is obliged to wear the magnificently stitched letter A after she is found to be both pregnant and unmarried. Only once does she remove the scarlet letter. The setting is the forest where she meets Arthur Dimmesdale, the only intimate exchange they have shared since their long-ago passionate embrace. It is the only scene which admits the sensual woman, Hester. But it is stopped short. Pearl bids her mother to refasten the scarlet letter to her bodice. Hester complies, then hides forever her beautiful hair under her cap. The light that momentarily shines forth is smothered again in darkness. Hester resumes her half life and Dimmesdale dies. My point is that in Hawthorne's book, Hester consents to her half life, in spite of the passionate vitality which slumbers

within. As a woman reading The Scarlet Letter, I found the repressiveness of Puritan New England to be terrifying. That being said, I will add that the Puritan agenda regarding women and sexuality was an openly disclosed one, even though it contained and contains a terrible rot at its centre. To Hawthorne's credit, perhaps as a consequence of his own ambivalence toward Puritanism, the life denied Hester is secured by Pearl, who is liberated completely from the fettered existence of Puritan New England. This does not happen for Anna of Voyage In The Dark. Hester of Voyage In The Dark does not transgress the sexual code of behavior she aligns herself with, even though she too lives a half life. Neither does she provide protection or care for Anna. Anna's refusal to submit to the half life offered her marks her out as a worthy sacrifice, not as a free woman, as is the case for Hawthorne's Pearl, who is relocated in a non-English speaking country. Unfortunately, I think Hawthorne gives way to fantasy by the novel's end, while Rhys sees the ritual or repression and sexual sacrifice through from beginning to end. Anna is, after all, relocated - in England - by Hester. And it is in England where the sacrifice takes place and where Hester washes her hands and her conscience of Ann:

'You tell me that you hope to get an engagement in London. That's all I want to know. I intend to write to your uncle and tell him that I refuse to be made responsible for you. If he thinks you're not living in a fit and proper way he must do something to stop it himself; I can't. I've always done my duty and more than my duty, but there does come a time when -'

'The brooch has fallen down,' I said. I picked it up and put it on the table.

'Oh, thank you,' she said.

And I saw her getting calm. I knew that she was saying to herself, 'I'm never going to think of this again.' (VD, 66)

When the affair with Walter ends, Anna leaves her Judd Street room with one singular resolve: "I walked straight ahead. I thought, 'Anywhere will do, so long as it's somewhere that nobody knows'" (100). But the legacy of sacrifice goes with her. Hester is replaced by Ethel, and Maudie by Laurie. This time, when Anna dresses for the part it is not with the help of the Cohen sisters in a nice warm shop. It is with Laurie's help, Laurie the tart, and it is Laurie's dress that Anna is helped into. The evening concludes with Anna's removing the dress, but not in the privacy of her own room. She is instead in an anonymous hotel room to which she, Laurie, and Joe have repaired:

She came over and helped me to undo it. She seemed very tall and her face enormous. I could see all the lines in it, and the powder, trying to fill up the lines, and just where her lipstick stopped and her lips began. It looked like a clown's face, so that I wanted to laugh at it.[...]

Joe lit a cigarette and watched us. He was like somebody sitting in the stalls, waiting for the curtain to go up. When it was all over he was ready to clap and say, 'That was well done,' or to hiss and say, 'That was badly done' - as the case might be. (123

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This time there is no ritual performance - no preparations, meeting, climax, dénouement. Backstage is on-stage. The heroine is almost overwhelmed by the stage hands, who double as actors and audience. The balance achieved between Anna and Walter, and Anna's memories of Dominica, is gradually being undermined. There is no dressing up and meeting him, having dinner and going back to his house. There is the anonymous hotel in which Joe sits and watches Laurie undress Anna, and there is the spare room in Ethel's Bird Street flat Anna occupies, where she realizes the inevitable has happened:

The bed was heaving up and down and I lay there thinking, 'It can't be that. Pull yourself together. It can't be that. Didn't I always....And all those things they say you can do. I know when it happened. The lamp over the bed had a blue shade. It was that one I went back with just after Carl left.' Counting back days and dates and thinking, 'No, I don't think it was that time. I think it was when...'[...]

The inevitable, the obvious, the unexpected.... They watch you, their faces like masks, set in the eternal grimace of disapproval. I always knew that girl was no good. I always knew that girl was.... Why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that? Why didn't you bloody well make a hole in the water? (164)

Before Anna discovers that she is pregnant she lies in her bed, again in Ethel's spare room, trying to remember the journey to Constance Estate, the old estate on her mother's side:

[...] the sweat rolling down Joseph's face when he helped me to mount and the tear in my habit-skirt

And mounting, and then the bridge and the sound of the horse's hoofs on the wooden planks, and then the savannah.[...] Then do you turn to the right or the left? To the left, of course.[...] and the sea is at your back, and the road goes zigzag upwards.[...] And then dark cliffs and ravines and the smell of rotten leaves and damp. That's how the road to Constance is - green, and the smell of green, and the smell of water and dark earth and rotting leaves and damp.[...] The turning where you came very suddenly out of the sun into the shadow; and the shadow was always the same shape. And the place where the woman with yaws spoke to me. I suppose she was begging but I couldn't understand because her nose and mouth were eaten away;[...] I was frightened; I kept on looking backwards to see if she was following me, but when the horse came to the next ford and I saw clear water I thought I had forgotten about her. And now - there she is. (151-152)

In her reverie, Anna never gets to Constance Estate. Instead, she is faced with two irreconcilable conditions. There is the smell of water and dark earth and rotting leaves - a sensuous world which evokes a woman's sexuality. And there is the old woman, disfigured and diseased, who repels and frightens young Anna. The journey as recalled by Anna begins with anticipation and ends in fear. The sensuousness of the journey - riding on horseback, the sound of water splashing against the horse's hoofs, the smells of the sea, the horse, the dark earth and rotting leaves - is suddenly overturned, first by the shadow

which is always the same, and finally by the old woman who speaks unintelligibly with a mouth half eaten away. There is a sense in which Constance Estate is an illusion. Earlier, Anna tries to describe Constance Estate to Walter, investing it with special meaning and longing (VD, 52). As the site of the mother, however, it is an imagined place of care and protection. The road to Constance Estate leads to a diseased and disfigured woman whom Anna links to Ethel, and, by implication, to Hester, as well as, I would suggest, to the natural mother who is symbolized by Constance Estate.

In the black exercise books, a journal kept by Rhys for many years, she describes an exchange she had with her mother after a particularly terrifying nightmare, part of which reappears in Wide Sargasso Sea:

My nightgown is wet with sweat.[...]the sick fear is still there. I can't stop shivering and weeping. The door opens and my mother comes in. ... She sits on the bed and puts her arms round me. I'm little again. Now everything is forgotten.

'Oh stay on. Hold me. Protect me. Save me.' [...]

'What's the matter with you? Have you got a stomach ache?'

'No. No.'

[...] 'Did you have a nightmare?'

'Yes. Keep your arms round me. Don't let me go. Stay to save me.' [...]

[...] But she takes her arms away from me. She said, 'Really you mustn't go on like this. You're making Audrey cry.' [...] 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself

waking your little sister up?'

'Yes', I said because when she took her arms away I knew that no one would save me and that I must do it. (O'Connor, 24)

Rhys's mother, a fourth generation creole, along with the blacks, is identified with the island, with the heat, with the plantations and slave owning. She is also identified, through her absence, with rejection and censorship. Behind the curtain, there are not only the smells of Market Street, and the sea purple as Tyre or Sidon, the mangotree and the horse's hoofs on wooden planks. There is also the eternal grimace of disapproval, the face of the white woman born of Constance Estate, the face which Rhys knew would not bestow a smile of acceptance on her. Rhys records a confrontation which concludes with her mother saying, "You'll never learn to be like other people." Rhys adds:

There you are, there it was. I'd always suspected it. I saw the long road of isolation and loneliness stretching in front of me. [...]

I see now that she was trying to drive (out) something she saw in me, that was alien, that would devour me. She was trying to drive it out at all costs. However after this she ceased her efforts. (O'Connor, 37)

In Voyage In The Dark, Anna is the heroine of a very dark drama, a drama in which she, a young woman coming-of-age, is sacrificed to a white, female, middle class heritage in which woman as a sexual, desiring being has been labelled unnatural. At the end of Part Three, Anna obtains an abortion, paid for by Walter, who holds himself financially responsible for Anna's

near future. Anna places herself in the supposedly capable hands of Mrs. Robinson. The baby is successfully aborted, but Anna, alone in her new flat, hemorrhages:

The room was nearly dark but there was a long yellow ray coming in under the door from the light in the passage. I lay and watched it. I thought, 'I'm glad it happened when nobody was here because I hate people.'

I thought, 'Pain....' but it was so long ago that I had forgotten what it had been like. I was all right, except that every now and again it was as if I were falling through the bed. (183)

Mrs. Polo, the lady from downstairs, discovers Anna in her condition and calls Laurie who sends for a doctor. While the voices whisper off to one side Anna drifts, her thoughts moving in strangely sympathetic rhythm with the bed beneath her. The memory that fills the almost darkened room is of Masquerade, a three day celebration held by the black people of Dominica once a year:

... it was all the colours of the rainbow when you looked down at them and the sky so blue - there were three musicians at the head a man with a concertina and another with a triangle and another with a chak-chak playing There's a Brown Girl in a Ring and after the musicians a lot of little boys turning and twisting and dancing and others dragging kerosene-tins and beating them with sticks - the masks the men wore were a crude pink with the eyes squinting

near together squinting but the masks the women wore were made of close-meshed wire covering the whole face and tied at the back of the head - the handkerchief that went over the back of the head hid the strings and over the slits for the eyes mild blue eyes were painted then there was a small straight nose and a little red heart-shaped mouth and under the mouth another slit so that they could put their tongues out at you. (185)

" 'It ought to be stopped' " (184), says Hester. " 'It ought to be stopped' " (185), Mrs. Polo says of Anna's condition: - their voices were going up and down - I was looking out of the window and I knew why the masks were laughing and I heard the concertina-music going (186)

The whole Masquerade is orgiastic - the music, the dancing and singing, a procession of white-masked women moving through the streets, their tongues extended through slits in the masks, an overtly lewd but raucous representation of the female sex, moving through Anna's mind too, while she is hemorrhaging in her bed. Masquerade, or any other carnival-like celebration, is what has always been absent for Anna, a social praxis of jubilant sensual play and release. Mirrored for Anna, who simultaneously stands behind the curtained window and lies bleeding in her bed in a darkened London flat, is the ritual denied her. There is no celebration for Anna, no collective merriment that can transcend the eternal grimace. There is the private surrender to Walter in a different darkened room, an "inevitable" pregnancy, and an abortion that leaves her hemorrhaging, the ritual praxis of the white women, of Hester,

of Ethel and the landladies, and of Anna's mother.

Anna thinks to herself, in memory: "and I knew why the masks were laughing". As the white women's sacrifice, Anna is in a position to know why they are laughing. And the knowing transcends the dying that Rhys originally intended for Anna. The original ending of Voyage In The Dark reads as follows:

And the concertina-music stopped and it was so still, so still and lovely like just before you go to sleep and it stopped and there was the ray of light along the floor like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out and blackness comes..... (O'Connor, 129)

The editor at Constable, Michael Sadleir, censored Rhys's ending to Voyage In The Dark: "Not of course his own taste he explains but to please prospective readers" (JRL, 25).

Rhys writes of Sadleir's decision in a letter to Evelyn Scott:

I suppose I shall have to give in and cut the book and I'm afraid it will make it meaningless. The worst is that it is precisely the last part which I am most certain of that will have to be mutilated. (JRL, 25)

Rhys maintained throughout her life that the ending should not have been changed. In her letter to Selma Vaz Dias, Rhys is explicit that the girl at the end is a dying girl. The unpublished ending is by far the more powerful of the two, for the simple reason that it brings Anna to a dramatically heightened end, Anna as sacrifice, whole and entire. The Anna who knows why the masks are laughing dies in the full

knowledge of who she is and who has willed her death.

In the second version, the Anna who knows why the masks are laughing ceases to be part of the sacrificial rite. She steps out of character, as it were. The drama of sacrifice, and Anna's role as the sacrificial heroine, end before the book does:

When their voices stopped the ray of light came in again under the door like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out. I lay and watched it and thought about starting all over again. And about being new and fresh. And about mornings, and misty days, when anything might happen. And about starting all over again, all over again....

(188)

There is ambiguity as to whether or not the Anna who is cast back into the world, without a mask, without a part to play, retains the knowledge of sacrifice and of her part in it. Rhys said of her original ending: "I know the ending is the only possible ending" (JRL, 25). I am fully of the opinion that her instinct was right, that her vision was robbed of its power by the shortcomings of the editor, Michael Sadleir, whose own blind spot prevented his seeing the productive power contained in Rhys's original ending. The original ending celebrates Anna's understanding of herself, and the release that accompanies understanding. Anna transcends the collective repression which had originally exercised such enormous power over her. She transcends it because she identifies it, and by identifying it she destroys its hold over her. Her death contains the victory of revelation.

Whether or not Sadleir knew why the original ending would not meet with public approval is immaterial. The fact that he moved to censor what he believed to be unacceptable to the public indicates the power that those of lesser vision hold over those of greater vision. Sadleir's choice of endings works in favour of a society which chooses to overlook, at best, and condone, at worst, the kind of female rite of sacrifice that Rhys explores in Voyage In The Dark. Sadleir successfully diffused the visionary power of Voyage In The Dark's ending. Rhys's extraordinary insight into the workings of middle-class female ritual praxis was tampered with. The inner forces which drove Rhys to write were not, however, daunted. What is lost at the end of Voyage In The Dark is doubly gained in Good Morning, Midnight.

Chapter Five

The Strip of Tweed Unravels

In A Room Of One's Own, Virginia Woolf states, unequivocally, that a woman must have a room and five hundred pounds a year to write fiction, the implication being that once possessed - the room and the money - the fiction will follow. Does it follow? Can a room and five hundred pounds a year simply be innocuous background to the fictions they support?

Virginia Woolf chose not to deal with the implications which surround the five hundred pounds a year legacy inherited by Mary Beton. It is as if the distancing factor of the aunt in far away Bombay enabled Woolf to displace the attenuating complexities of procuring money and a room. What is striking, however, in light of Woolf's impassioned assault on Charlotte Brontë is that Jane Eyre, like Mary Beton, inherits money, not from an aunt in Bombay, but from an uncle in Spanish Town, Jamaica, another imperialist stronghold. Neither Mary Beton nor Jane earns the bulk of her money directly through her own work. They come into money, money secured in parts of the world which lie outside of the world as experienced by either Brontë or Woolf. Woolf acknowledges that the source of Mary's money is a questionable source, but she doesn't entertain the matter any further. She notes the name on a door - Bombay. But instead of opening the door and passing through it, she first scrawls in a large hand the word Bloomsbury over Bombay. It is a crude bit of handiwork in an otherwise finely woven text, but necessary to the agenda Woolf sets out for women and fiction, women of a certain class, in a certain place.

Brontë is not so audacious. Neither is she as myopic as Woolf. And I recall the reader's attention to the passage

which so raised Woolf's ire, the awkward break which occurs in the space between Jane's solitary reflections and the introduction of Grace Poole's laugh. The aunt who dies in A Room Of One's Own exists merely as an expedient. To treat her as anything more than that would have undermined Woolf's theoretical hold of the material she presents in A Room Of One's Own, material earmarked for a very specific end. To this end, many spaces, gaps, holes are skilfully side-stepped, even though the large hole - women and fiction - is kept well in sight at all times. In this way, our gaze rarely wanders to peruse the terrains both near and far. Woolf situates the reader at the edge of the cavern, instructs us as to why we are there, then tempts us back to the all-encompassing embrace of culturally sanctioned rooms purchased through imperialist endeavours. Is it any wonder that she censors the laughter emanating from the third floor of Thornfield Hall, a laughter that is both thrilling and mocking? Jane Eyre entreats the reader to condone her longing for more than life has thus far afforded her. Woolf does the same. But Brontë breaks Jane's earnest reflections with laughter, the ambiguous laughter of an ambiguous female who is both a middle-aged Scot and a mad creole heiress. Woolf disapproves of the awkward break, a kind of faltering in the text in which the uncertainty of potential chaos hovers, a moment in which writer and character hesitate at the threshold of something not known which emanates from an isolated attic room. And what of the attic room which Virginia Woolf discreetly ignores? Jane describes her journey to it:

My slippers were thin: I could walk the matted

floor as softly as a cat. He glided up the gallery and up the stairs, and stopped in the dark, low corridor of the fateful third story: I had followed and stood at his side....

I saw a room I remembered to have seen before, the day Mrs. Fairfax showed me over the house: it was hung with tapestry but the tapestry was now looped up in one part, and there was a door apparent, which had then been concealed. This door was open; a light shone out of the room within: I heard thence a snarling, snatching sound, almost like a dog quarrelling. (JE, 148)

The dark, low corridor opens into a room hung with tapestry behind which is another room, a room from which a light shines and strange noises issue forth, a room known to Rochester and to Grace Poole and inhabited by Bertha. There is much in Brontë's description of Jane's journey to the attic room that recalls to mind descriptions of the caves at Lascaux wherein the seeker negotiated a narrow, dark passage which opens to an inner chamber, whose walls are inscribed with powerfully rendered drawings of animal and human figures. It has been conjectured that the Lascaux caves are the sites of a human rite of passage whereby boys became men through a ritual process of rebirth. The dark corridor, the tapestried room, and the windowless room in Jane Eyre are all suggestive of female genitalia and the public and private significations they suggest. The tapestried room that Jane familiarizes herself with displays the ornate trappings of the social sphere, a cultural milieu in which men and women come together through

social interchange. But the room beyond the tapestried room is taboo space, a space socially off-limits to social congress. Jane thrills to the laughter she hears, she paces the third floor longing to overreach the narrow constraints which have been culturally imposed on her, but she never crosses the threshold of the windowless room of her own accord. In spite of all the peculiarities which surround the attic room, Jane does not attempt to discover its secret. The key is in Rochester's possession while the middle-aged Grace Poole maintains her full-time vigil, wardress to an ostensibly deranged woman, Mr. Rochester's first wife.

Brontë provides few descriptions of Bertha. She is big, she is of a wild nature, both physically and psychologically. She is revealed to Jane only after Richard Mason and his lawyer give evidence of the marriage between Rochester and Bertha Antoinette Mason. After the revelation, Rochester appeals to Jane not to desert him. He will send her away to a sunny isle, care for her; she won't want for anything. But Jane refuses. She has witnessed herself-to-come in the person of Bertha should she consent to become Rochester's mistress. It is a much exaggerated representation of the female as a sexual being - corpulent, dangerous, inarticulate, more animal than human. It is also an interesting portrayal given the fact that Brontë herself was a virgin, a young woman who at the time of the writing of Jane Eyre was unfamiliar with the mysteries of the windowless room.

Charlotte Brontë came into knowledge of the windowless room and its mysteries late in her short life. And Virginia Woolf was a frigid woman who arrived at such a pass shortly

after marriage to her life-long husband, Leonard Woolf. I find little to wonder at Woolf's abrupt dismissal of the awkward break in Brontë's text. While Jane tentatively mounts the stairs to the third floor, stirred by the strange utterances from above, Woolf has already determined that the way is not to be found through the windowless room.

My quarrel with Virginia Woolf afforded no easy solution. After weeks and months of patient and not so patient disentangling of lines, I was obliged to set aside the knots that simply would not undo. The convenience of the aunt in Bombay, an endless, if limited, supply of money to last a lifetime rankled too deeply. Where Brontë had intuited the complexities of womanhood, of experience as potential social transgression, Woolf had retreated from moments of slippage, holding fast to a rational discourse in which knowledge and rooms merge as consciously articulated possessions, fully dependent, one on the other, as bastions of middle-class conformity and control. Woolf's imaginary account of Judith Shakespeare serves to highlight further Woolf's fear of losing control, of losing the security that culturally and historically grounded rooms bestow on the individual. Judith is seduced, and upon her discovery that she is pregnant commits suicide. Judith transgresses the social code of behaviour socially established for young women. She yields to passions's embrace, then takes her own life. Woolf polarizes sexuality and creativity. The one is perceived to destroy the other.

The strip of tweed that I had so carefully tied to a

stately oak in an English forest was rapidly unravelling in my hands. It is true that Virginia Woolf noted the empty space which was, and in many ways still is, woman, but to my mind, and to my heart, she did not jump or slide or tumble into the hole. She maintained a careful distance while gesticulating to others to behold the yawning cavern and leap. It is unfortunate that she was unfamiliar with Jean Rhys's work - haunting testimonies of one who not only leapt, but who after great effort and the knowledge that comes of first-hand experience, found her way in and out of the hole as both victim and victor of the fall.

Chapter Six

Temple Priestess

Voyage In The Dark is the unfolding of a drama of sacrifice which is not heralded by a spiritually informed public ceremony. It is instead a solitary voyage, aided and abetted through the discreet murmurings of respectable, socially sanctioned women who hover at the edges of the sacrificial circle, never entering it themselves. Their involvement is a process of certain looks (the grimace of disapproval being the most notable), and of certain phrases, phrases which convey disinterest or disapproval or dismissal, a language of double negatives which seeks to deny and abolish, rather than acknowledge and accept.

In Good Morning, Midnight, Jean Rhys dons the mask of the middle-aged white woman, steps out of the illuminating darkness of small, low-ceilinged English rooms, and into the pink light of Paris streets. The emotional densities of Voyage In The Dark, reminiscent of Classical Greek Drama, give way to a theatre of the street in which every exchange has its comic touch, a bemusing pathos which emanates from memories which don't overwhelm the present but interpenetrate it, deepening the experience of life lived publicly and privately. It is my opinion that Good Morning, Midnight is a remarkable book. In it Rhys explores a very critical time in a woman's life - the advent of middle age and what it implies for Western women.

Throughout Voyage In The Dark Anna seeks to distance herself from the white middle-aged women who have shaped and twisted her life. And yet, these same women are inescapable. In Good Morning, Midnight, Rhys, through Sasha, confronts the death-face of the middle-aged white woman by assuming her outward

comportment and manner. In Voyage In The Dark Anna prepares for her role as sacrificial victim. She accepts the gift of money from Walter and visits the dress shop of the Cohen sisters. She undergoes a transformation that gives her great pleasure, pleasure that is sensually experienced through the feel of soft fabrics and the quiet attention of respectful attendants. Anna doesn't teeter-totter along on high heeled shoes as does the emotionally exhausted Julia of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie. Anna is a young woman in the process of experiencing herself as desirable and desiring, a process which carries a price. Voyage In The Dark is the novel which unsparingly discloses the fall, the fall so assiduously dismissed by Virginia Woolf, the fall both dreaded and desired by Charlotte Brontë.

Much has been written and said about the intertextual relationship between Brontë's Jane Eyre and Rhys's last novel, Wide Sargasso Sea. I have certainly written my own small share. What is of considerable interest to me now, however, after having followed the trail of the mad creole Bertha Rochester back to the Caribbean home of Antoinette Cosway, is that Bertha's story, the story of a desiring woman experienced in the ways of womanhood and banished to an attic prison by Charlotte Brontë, has a different telling in Good Morning, Midnight, a telling unbounded by any of Brontë's plot constraints. Good Morning, Midnight is the novel which merges desire and the middle-class white woman.

Teresa O'Connor suggests that it is in Wide Sargasso Sea that Rhys takes on her greatest enemy, the upper-class

English gentleman who embodies imperialism and who is personified by the character Rochester. She also remarks Rhys's often scathing treatment of middle-class white women.⁹ I agree that Rhys can be very scathing toward older white females, who are present in all of her books. I do not agree, however, with O'Connor's position regarding Rochester and the novel, Wide Sargasso Sea.¹⁰ I would venture to say that the greatest enemy Rhys encountered, both personally and fictionally, was the middle-aged white woman who disapproved of and censored the person Rhys was. I refer here to Rhys's mother, the woman of whom Rhys rarely spoke in her long life in Europe and Britain. Francis Wyndham, in his Preface to Wide Sargasso Sea, attributed Rhys's conviction that she didn't belong anywhere on this earth to the disappointment she experienced as a young woman pensioned off by her lover, Hugh Lancelot Smith. Diana Athill, who worked as Rhys's editor for many years, during the writing of Wide Sargasso Sea and later, refers to Wyndham's comments in a letter written to Teresa O'Connor. Athill writes:

Personally I'm sure it had happened long before that - it was the mother who did it. (And, of course, her own nature combining in its own particular way with the experiences it underwent.) (O'Connor, 29)

Athill also writes:

At some very early stage she (Rhys) must have felt that her mother and sister absolutely rejected her in a way that was impossible to forgive. They probably did, too! (O'Connor, 29)

What makes Good Morning, Midnight particularly special, to m

mind, is that Rhys assumes the guise of the very woman she fears and loathes in her other fictions. Good Morning, Midnight, like its precursor, Voyage In The Dark, is also the telling of a rite of passage. This time the perspective is not that of an inexperienced nineteen-year-old, but of a middle-aged woman who must take responsibility for her life and choose for herself.

Thomas Staley has criticized Rhys's heroines for being too passive.¹¹ I think this is a misleading description. When one belongs to or aspires to belong to a particular group in society, the act of belonging can give an appearance of active participation. When one does not belong and does not openly confront existing groups, there can be an appearance of passivity. The Rhys heroines do try the patience of the bourgeoisie when they reveal a lack of interest in getting on in life, but the appearance of passivity belies something of greater interest than the tidy surface features bourgeois culture allows for. Rhys wrote Voyage In The Dark and Good Morning, Midnight when she was in her mid-to-late forties. Quartet and After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, her first two novels, admit to the floundering chaos which precedes a time of clarity. These two books are important because they bear witness to the pain and anguish which are part of the process of coming into clarity. Rhys does not let the reader off the hook. Wisdom derived from experience is not instantaneously come by. Its realization is a slow, often humiliating, often tedious, difficult process; one which is without certainty or routine security. Rhys evokes the chaos of insecurity and uncertainty in her fiction

without relinquishing stylistic control of her material. The effect is an unsettling one for readers used to broad lines of demarcation between the work of art and its creator. In Rhys's work, the style of writing is so flawlessly inspired that the content is perceived as if through a magnifying glass, an experience made all the more unsettling by what is being magnified. Critics who take offense at Rhys's world of women who seem to drift ever downward, resist, perhaps too strenuously, the terrible truth implicit in Rhys's fiction.¹² The artist is not simply a few scribbles on the fly leaf of a book, or a biography written by some well-meaning scholar. Lives, after all, are not tidy. The lives of great writers are and have been extremely messy, to say the least. Rhys's novels blur the boundaries between a fictionalized life and the life lived which realized a fictionalized life. The price exacted in life, paid for by those who create in the face of ongoing difficulties, echoes through the pages of Rhys's texts. For the smug and complacent reader, this may be a violation of expectation, that those who create owe it to those who don't to maintain a far distance between the fictional and the personal. Jean Rhys, by her own admission, did not invent her earlier novels. She wrote what she knew, which was what she had experienced. Wedded to the act of writing was a penetrating intuition which drew patterns and clues from the experiences related. The patterns, the clues, are not so immediately transparent when critics and readers alike resist the terms of the text - the merger of stylistic virtuosity and content which is largely autobiographical. When the clues and patterns are discerned, however, they are awesomely coherent.

Quartet and After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie expose the nerve endings of Rhys, the woman struggling to survive physically and psychologically; and Rhys, the writer, coming into possession of the means by which to express this. As I have already noted, Voyage In The Dark is Rhys in possession of this means. It is the most autobiographical of Rhys's novels. It is also stunning evidence of Rhys's gift for an eloquent but economical use of language. And, as I have also expressed earlier, it is a masterful disclosure of a rite of passage which is little spoken of.

Rhys does not abandon Anna at the novel's end any more than she abandons Julia at the novel's centre. Each of these heroines is in possession of a truth about society, as women who have transgressed the social norms established by a voyeuristic, parasitical middle class. In Good Morning, Midnight, the last of the early Rhys novels, Rhys places Sasha, the oldest Rhys heroine, in a position of responsible stewardship, a position feared, refused, or shied away from by the other, younger Rhys heroines.

" 'Quite like old times,' the room says. 'Yes? No?'"
(GMM, 9) These are the opening lines of Good Morning, Midnight. Rhys continues:

There are two beds, a big one for madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur. The wash-basin is shut off by a curtain. It is a large room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible. The street outside is narrow, cobblestoned, going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What they call an impasse. (9)

Right at the beginning of Good Morning, Midnight, Rhys asserts an ambiguity. An impasse can be spoken of as a state of mind or as a material reality, but it resists appropriation because it is inherently an in-between state lacking function and without continuity. Sasha Jensen begins the novel in this in-between state, but her positing of yes? no? indicates that one or the other will prevail by the novel's end. In Good Morning, Midnight there is no curtain behind which a greater drama is relentlessly played out. Sasha stands where the curtain once hung. And she, unlike Anna who looks up from beneath the water's surface, her face a grinning mask, has been "saved, rescued, fished up..." (GMM, 9), and given a respite from her Gray's Inn Road flat in London. She is in Paris for a fortnight in a suitably dimly lit, red curtained Paris hotel room, in which the past laps more or less gently at the door without threat of flooding the room and claiming its occupant:

Twelve o'clock on a fine autumn day, and nothing to worry about. Some money to spend and nothing to worry about.

But careful, careful! Don't get excited. You know what happens when you get excited and exalted, don't you?...Yes.... And then, you know how you collapse like a pricked balloon, don't you? Having no staying power....[...] So, no excitement. This is going to be a quiet, sane fortnight. Not too much drinking, avoidance of certain cafés, of certain streets, of certain spots, and everything will go off beautifully.

The thing is to have a programme, not to leave

anything to chance - no gaps. No trailing around aimlessly with cheap gramophone records starting up in your head, no 'Here this happened, here that happened'. Above all, no crying in public, no crying at all if I can help it. (15)

Sasha's programme calls for each step to be carefully considered before being taken, for there to be no gaps to disrupt the tidy measure of time. Two pages later the programme proves quite ineffectual:

I walk along, remembering this, remembering that, trying to find a cheap place to eat - not so easy round here. The gramophone record is going strong in my head: 'Here this happened, here that happened....'

I used to work in a shop just off this street.

I can see myself coming out of the Métro station at the Rond-Point every morning at half-past eight, walking along the Avenue Marigny, turning to the left and then to the right, putting my coat and hat into the cloak room, going along a passage and starting in with: 'Good morning, madame. Has madame a vendeuse?' (17)

Sasha's remembering and Anna's remembering are markedly different. Anna remembers with an emotional intensity that erases time and distance. Sasha remembers with an intensity suffused with age and experience. She does not long unreservedly for that which is no longer. The past is part of her, worn like a second skin which is never fully shed. There is anger; there is sadness; there is irony. We are led into Sasha's past as she turns off the Avenue Marigny, then right and into Mr.

Blank's shop where she must assemble her public face as receptionist. What follows is a lengthy scene which culminates in humiliation and biting anger. An interesting interlude takes place in the course of Sasha's exchanges with Mr. Blank - the visit to the shop by an elderly Englishwoman and her daughter. For a brief time Sasha is exempt from scrutiny. It is the elderly lady on whom the attention focuses as she moves about the room modelling all manner of hair adornments on her bald head. In response to her daughter's hissing disapproval, Sasha thinks:

Oh, but why not buy her a wig, several decent dresses, as much champagne as she can drink, all the things she likes to eat and oughtn't to, a gigolo if she wants one? (23)

In After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Julia's visits to her mother in Acton, and her mother's death, are neatly divided by Julia's visit to Mr. James, the visit in which Julia's scant history gathers substance. The relationship with her older lover becomes the initial thread which enabled Rhys, through Anna of Voyage In The Dark, to unravel her own beginnings, that she might perceive the pattern which not only led her to Mr. James's/Walter Jeffries'/Hugh Lancelot Smith's bed, but into pregnancy, abortion, and near death.

The scene with the elderly English woman, like the scene in Mr. James's flat, also divides an emotionally fraught situation. The relationship between Mr. Blank and Sasha resonates with the relationship between Julia and the incommunicative mother. In both instances, an impasse is arrived

at. Rhys discovered through the writing of After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie that the way to clarity did not lie with a fictionalized mother, but through her own experience as a young woman who entered into an affair with an older man. The instinct which served her in the writing of Voyage In The Dark led to the disclosure of the woman originally hidden by bed-clothes, the woman who put Julia "out of the pale" (ALMM, 96).

It is interesting that in Good Morning, Midnight Rhys plants her crucial scene, the one of the elderly Englishwoman and her daughter, in the middle of an emotionally turbulent scene involving a younger Sasha and an inflexible, conformist Englishman. Rhys, in effect, dispenses with the likes of Mr. Blank, once she has established the social/psychological parameters of the younger Sasha's world, the world as experienced by Marya and Julia, as women who flounder to the point of exhaustion in waters unsafe for ambivalent swimmers.

But Good Morning, Midnight is not about the flailing, younger Sasha. The elderly woman who takes pleasure in dressing her bald head and viewing her image in the looking glass portends meaning for the future Sasha, the Sasha who is now in Paris recalling this long-ago scene. Sasha is not bald like the old lady. She does not stand before a mirror emperor-like in green feathers or Spanish combs. She conscientiously sets out to engage the most skilful hairdresser she can afford in order to obtain the right shade of blond cendré, then to find a hat which most becomes her new look. A strong sense of propriety informs these endeavours, which are further underscored by the wearing of a fur coat. It is not, however, the spectacle of the old woman before the mirror which Sasha is

acting out. It is rather the appeal that the younger Sasha makes in her mind on behalf of the old lady. The daughter of the old woman openly censures her mother's behaviour. She is humiliated by it. Her sense of propriety is affronted. But the agenda Sasha imagines for the old lady is also a censuring of the old woman's antics. The wigs, dresses, champagne, and gigolos are far less disarming than bald heads in green feathers. Both Sasha and the daughter are offended by the elderly woman's behaviour. To the daughter it is an overt transgression of social decorum. To Sasha it renders too blatantly visible her own inner deviance.

The Sasha who returns to Paris many years later is effectively in disguise as the ageing Anglaise determined to perfect her look - new hair colour, new dress and shoes, new hat. Her efforts are fully sanctioned by society. She is acknowledging and exercising propriety. Sasha, however, derives no pleasure from her exertions. In contrast to the old lady who takes delight in sporting each object in the shop atop her head, Sasha is sulky, if not downright surly, throughout. Only when the transformation is complete does she admit any happiness:

When I go out into the Place de l'Odéon I am
feeling happy, what with my new hair and my new
hat and the good meal and the wine and the fine
and the coffee and the smell of the night in Paris. (71)

The next step of the appeal materializes in the person of René, the gigolo who attaches himself to Sasha. René is received with no greater pleasure than were the attentions of the hair stylist or the sales woman in the hat shop, especially

when Sasha realizes that she does look like "a wealthy dame trotting around Montparnasse in the hope of _____?" : (72)

Shall I tell him to go to hell? But after all, I think, this is where I might be able to get some of my own back. You talk to them, you pretend to sympathize; then, just at the moment when they are not expecting it, you say: 'Go to hell.' (72)

The mask worn by Sasha signifies more than outer appearance. It involves a state of mind reminiscent of the Mackenzies and Heidlers of Rhys's earlier fiction. Only this time it is a Rhys heroine who exhibits the same inclinations to inflict pain, be it physical or psychological.

Her intention is almost immediately frustrated, not because René is a skilled manipulator of women, but because he is too much like Sasha, the Sasha who hides behind the mask. She enquires of him:

'But why do you want to talk to me?'

He is going to say: 'Because you look so kind,' or 'Because you look so beautiful and kind, or, subtly, 'Because you look as if you'll understand....'

He says: 'Because I think you won't betray me.'

I had meant to get this man to talk to me and tell me all about it, and then be so devastatingly English that perhaps I should manage to hurt him a little in return for all the many times I've been hurt....

'Because I think you won't betray me, because I think you won't betray me....' Now it won't be so easy. (73)

What won't be so easy? Hurting René or keeping the mask intact?

Rhys deftly counterpoints the Sasha who has returned to Paris with the Sasha who lived there years ago. There is a delightful turn of irony in her choice of recollections. René's barely concealed need for what he thinks Sasha possesses is reproduced in quite different circumstances in a memory that soon follows their first meeting : " Walking to the music of L'Arlésienne, remembering the coat I wore then - a black-and-white check with big pockets" (86). Hungry, penniless, she is approached by a man who takes her for drinks, then lays his case for money before her. It is a wonderfully understated scene made all the more poignant at its end: " I feel for the pockets of the check coat, and I am surprised when I touch the fur of the one I am wearing..." (91).

The control, the determination to conform socially, not to cry out, to put one foot ahead of the other with purpose is an ongoing struggle for Sasha. René's words echo a different refrain. Who is Sasha betraying?

In company with Serge, and Delmar the painter, she aggressively commands Serge to " Go out and get a bottle of brandy" (94), and waves the money at him. The painter relates an experience he had in London with a drunk, mulatto woman whom he rebuffed in her hour of need. The Sasha who orders Serge to get her a bottle and the Sasha who cries quietly for her lost home in Dominica are completely at odds with one another. But the surly Sasha continues to prevail, even though she commits herself to the purchase of a painting, a painting not of a pleasant rural scene or well-dressed ladies and gentlemen, but of unusual people, people who most closely resemble the bald lady in the green feather. Later in her

dim hotel room, she views her purchase:

I unroll the picture and the man standing in the gutter, playing his banjo, stares at me. He is gentle, humble, resigned, mocking, a little mad. He stares at me. He is double-headed, double-faced. He is singing 'It has been', singing 'It will be'. Double-headed and with four arms....I stare back at him and think about being hungry, being cold, being hurt, being ridiculed, as if it were in another life than this.

This damned room - it's saturated with the past. It's all the rooms I've ever slept in, all the streets I've ever walked in. Now the whole thing moves in an ordered, undulating procession past my eyes. Rooms, streets, streets, rooms.... (109)

Sasha's mind casts itself back into the past - a panoply of rooms, spilling over with richly textured life: hardship, frivolity, birth, death, joy, and great sadness. Rhys evokes all of this in her prose:

The curtains are thin, and when they are drawn the light comes through softly. There are flowers on the windowsill and I can see their shadows on the curtains. The child downstairs is screaming.

There is a wind, and the flowers on the windowsill, and their shadows on the curtains, are waving. Like swans dipping their beaks in water. Like the incalculable raising its head, uselessly and wildly, for one moment before it sinks down, beaten, into the

darkness. Like skulls on long, thin necks. Plunging wildly when the wind blows, to the end of the curtain, which is their nothingness. Distorting themselves as they plunge.

The musty smell, the bugs, the loneliness, this room, which is part of the street outside - this is all I want from life. (130-131)

And later, when the reveries come to a close:

A room? A nice room? A beautiful room? A beautiful room with bath? Swing high, swing low, swing to and fro....This happened and that happened....

And then the days came when I was alone. (142)

In After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Julia, on her return to London after a several years' absence, looks into the fog of Tottenham Court Road and sees the thin, eager ghost of herself coming toward her. The two do not meet and exchange knowing looks. Julia is at the beginning of a journey, a journey which outlasts her particular character, a journey which is taken up by a much younger heroine, Anna, who as the chosen one moves inexorably toward an end which alludes with pronounced uncertainty to a new beginning, if we accept the published ending of Voyage In The Dark, and a heightened tragic end, in the case of the original ending.

In Good Morning, Midnight, the younger self that appears in the quiet of night is not a thin eager girl in a check skirt and short, dark-blue coat, but a good-looking, young man with a foreign accent. This time there is no passing by, even though Sasha is reluctant to enter into any exchange at all with René. Sasha, mistrustful and alert to René's persuasiveness, resents

his intrusion into her life, but is psychologically powerless to stop it. The program, as it were, begins to slip from her anxious control.

The moment in which recognition grounds their relationship in time and space occurs when René claims personal knowledge of the very woman Sasha has spent several tipsy moments describing:

Well, I am trying to tell René about all this and giggling a good deal, when he stops me.

'But I know that woman. I know her very well.... Again you don't believe me. This time you shall believe me. Listen, she was like this —' He describes her exactly. 'And the house was like this —' (GMM, 168)

Sasha remarks the alteration in her relationship to René:

Of course, there's no doubt that this man has stayed in this house and does know these people. One would think that that would give us more confidence in each other. Not at all, it makes us suspicious. There's no doubt that a strict anonymity is a help on these occasions. (GMM, 169)

She abruptly excuses herself and repairs to the lavabo. The mirror in the lavabo, another feature of the past, reflects kindly on Sasha. The reassurance it conveys helps to bridge the gap between the Sasha behind the mask and the young man who has lived as she has lived. At the same time, the gap between Sasha the middle-aged Anglaise, and René the gigolo, widens.

The inclusion of Sasha's recollection of a particular woman and a particular house in which she was obliged to write for another strikes chords that echo elsewhere in Rhys's fiction and in her personal life. In Quartet, Marya is sent to the

south of France, when the affair with Heidler is at its messy end. In real life, Ford Madox Ford arranged for Rhys to journey to the south of France to ghost-write a book on furniture for a Mrs. Huenot. Rhys was dismissed, and she returned to Paris. But she went again to the south of France and was helped by her husband, Lenglet, in a way quite similar to the way Marya is helped, in Quartet. David Plante comments on the intricacies of Ford's involvement and the ghost-writing: "All of this Jean left out of the novel Quartet because it did not fit into the novel's shape" (Plante, 263).

What Rhys chose to delete from Quartet found a place of prominence in Good Morning, Midnight. This single episode, humourously shared by Sasha, recalls Marya and Julia and the morass they floundered in. The ominous side of the story is underlined when René, whom Rhys establishes as belonging to the same world as the younger Sasha, displays the long jagged scar under his chin.

The disclosure of a shared past results in a fracturing of the masks, Sasha's in particular. René asks:

'Then what are you afraid of? Tell me. I'm interested. Of men, of love?...What still?... Impossible.' (172)

And Sasha answers:

'You want to know what I'm afraid of? All right, I'll tell you... I'm afraid of men - yes. I'm very much afraid of men. And I'm even more afraid of women. And I'm very much afraid of the whole bloody human race.[...] Who wouldn't be afraid of a pack of damned hyenas?' [...]

'And when I say afraid - that's just a word I use. What I really mean is that I hate them, I hate their voices, I hate their eyes, I hate the way they laugh I hate the whole bloody business. It's cruel, it's idiotic, it's unspeakably horrible. I never had the guts to kill myself or I'd have got out of it long ago. So much the worse for me. Let's leave it at that.' (172-173)

But it won't be left at that. Not by René; not by Rhys. When Sasha asks René at the beginning of their acquaintance, "Why are you telling me all this?", he replies, "because I think you won't betray me." What begins as a possibility gathers momentum as a certainty. Sasha is not going to be allowed to betray René or herself - the essence of the mask, yes; the person behind it, no.

Alongside Sasha's verbal response to René's later question in the Deux Magots, "Then what are you afraid of?", is an altogether different response, wherein writer and heroine merge in a startlingly prophetic meditation:

You are walking along a road peacefully. You trip. You fall into blackness. That's the past - or perhaps the future. And you know that there is no past, no future, there is only this blackness, changing faintly slowly, but always the same. (172)

Suddenly the reader is in the presence of something that transcends the narrative of the book. The quotation marks which bracket Sasha's words to René are absent because it is not René who is being addressed but the reader:

...I know all about myself now, I know. You've

told me so often. You haven't left me one rag of illusion to clothe myself in. But by God, I know what you are too, and I wouldn't change places....

Everything spoiled, all spoiled. Well don't cry about it....But may you tear each other to bits, you damned hyenas, and the quicker the better....Let it be destroyed. Let it happen. Let it end, this cold insanity. Let it happen. (173)

Good Morning, Midnight was published in 1939, just before the Second World War erupted in Europe. The above, few, brief paragraphs ring out as harbingers of a terrible darkness to come, a terrible darkness which did come, within the year.

Voyage In The Dark, which was written about Rhys's first years in London, contains one single full date: March 26th, 1914 (166). The book was written many years after the end of the First World War, although the exercise books were written before. It is interesting that Rhys included such a significant date. In light of the rite of passage disclosed in Voyage In The Dark, and the inclusion of the 1914 date in a letter written by a woman who entirely disapproves of Anna, the end of Voyage In The Dark is rich in meaning. Anna dies or is dying alone, bleeding to death after a botched abortion, while through her mind passes an undulating procession of black women wearing masks of blue-eyed, red-lipped white women. And between a small slit in the mouth a tongue protrudes in a lewd and garish manner. Rhys explores through the dying Anna a double perspective - the perspective of a young woman who is caught and held by the momentum of an unstoppable rite, and the perspective of one who experienced it from the vantage point

of the knowing outsider. The masks which Anna/Rhys single out at the end have a two-fold effect. On the one hand they depict a white woman's face and features, but thrust between the lips is a black woman's tongue, taunting. Anna knows in the moment of her dying what the taunting means, but Rhys, the writer, appropriates both mask and tongue as the figure who reveals the white women's ritual sacrifice of their own. The young Anna, alone and in possession of a terrible truth, looks into a bleak future for which she is entirely unprepared. The disintegration and misery that characterize war also characterize Anna as the human site of a collective act of destruction. The difference is that society's eyes are closed to female rituals of destruction. It is the male rituals of destruction that command attention.

In Good Morning, Midnight Sasha/Rhys commands attention. She does not speak from hindsight when she calls for the hyenas to tear each other to bits. She speaks from experience, as one who long existed on the margins of society and who attempts to relinquish that position in favour of a socially more accommodating one. What the process of playing the middle-aged Anglaise reveals to Sasha is the inevitability of a rupturing of what she calls the "cold insanity" of the world around her. Sasha, like Anna, is gradually eased into a self-awareness that embraces the culture at large. She is presented with a male version of her younger self. One vexing problem of such an encounter is that if René bears strong similarities to Marya, and even to Julia, then Sasha must cast herself as Heidler or Mackenzie, a somewhat unsettling scenario. And if Sasha attempts to reclaim her youth, which René also

represents, the misery, the despair, and perhaps most importantly, the lack of time-earned wisdom, would also be hers. As a ghost figure of questionable intentions, René gradually strips away the mask that Sasha despises but thinks she needs. With the first serious blow to the mask - the dovetail of Sasha's and René's pasts - the light which brings clarity shines through, and Sasha, who has been striving to proceed with measured caution and control, falters, or trips, into visionary clarity.

The terrible truth which came too late for Anna does not come too late for Sasha. Sasha's unchecked articulation of her fear empowers her with an anger which directs itself to the imminent disintegration of the culture at large. But it is only when the mask has been irrevocably undermined that Sasha is fully alert to the impending darkness that looms.

After Jean Rhys had written and published Voyage In The Dark, she and her second husband, Leslie Tilden-Smith, took a once-only trip to Dominica. At the very least, the return to Dominica was an unsettling one for Rhys. In conversation with David Plante, she said she hated it. In a letter to Evelyn Scott, she writes:

I'm getting almost sane again - though I felt awfully tired when I first got here - could hardly move - a nice fatigue but a bit as if one were dying of opened veins in a hot bath. Such a beautiful place to die in. (JRL, 28-29)

It was during the time of the trip to Dominica and after the return to England that Rhys wrote Good Morning, Midnight. It is an intriguing sequence of events. Voyage In The Dark admits an unrequited longing for an island home whose lush

beauty hides the death mask of a disapproving mother. The 1936 trip to Dominica exposed Rhys to the new Dominica. Gone were the old estates. Gone were the vestiges of her early life there. There is very little doubt in my mind that for those few years before Europe and Britain were held fast in the grip of the Second World War, the hold that Dominica had exercised over Rhys loosened. Her antennae, her intuitions, acted with acute sensitivity to the European world she found herself back in, and which had been part of her life for almost thirty years.

Sasha, alone, sees the way of darkness that lies before her, that lies in wait for the world around her:

Only five minutes ago I was in the Deux Magots, dressed in that damned cheap black dress of mine, giggling and talking about Antibes, and now I'm lying in a misery of utter darkness. Quite alone. No voice, no touch, no hand.(...)

I heave myself out of the darkness, slowly, painfully. And there I am, and there he is, the poor gigolo. (GMM, 173)

The way back is sealed. Sasha can only go forward through a ritual of fear and humiliation in the small dimly-lit Paris hotel room where she is fully deprived of the mask she has clung to, where the tears which for too long have been held back flow, where Sasha once again becomes herself. René, the beguiling but elusive agent of the past, fades back into the Paris night after having prepared the way for the strange figure who waits silently in the room next door.

Sasha/Rhys as visionary - as kin to the double-headed,

double-faced banjo player in the gutter; to the bald lady, emperor-like in the green feather; and to the poet, Rimbaud - cannot betray who she is, nor what has been revealed to her. Sasha will not lie alone, nor will she die alone as does Anna. Sasha's Paris hotel room becomes a tableau for the rite of the sacred marriage, the coming together of the temple priestess and the temple priest who is known by the white robe he wears. The ending of Good Morning, Midnight is a startling ending. It is also an ending which is in keeping with Rhys's prophetic vision. Rhys, through Sasha, embraces the ominous future which is personified by the equally ominous figure of the commis. Even more importantly, the writer, through Sasha, embraces an entirely new identity for herself, one that combines a woman's sexuality with a fearlessness of the unknown.

In Good Morning, Midnight, Rhys explores the world of the familiar, the world informed by sentimentality. The gigolo René, a romantic figure who is attractively disreputable, and who attaches himself to Sasha Jensen, represents the world of the familiar, a world in which a woman's identity is determined through the gaze of a man, and reinforced by the status quo. The female readers' expectation for a romantic reconciliation between Sasha and René is urgently articulated through Sasha's convincing mental appeal for René to return to her bed. But the writer thwarts both Sasha's and the readers' sentimental yearnings. René does not return, and Sasha enfolds in her arms the strange commis whom she originally feared. The ending of Good Morning, Midnight - Sasha's fearless embrace of the unfamiliar - is a powerful assertion of life, and stands in direct opposition to the fate determined by Virginia Woolf for the

gifted Judith Shakespeare.

Conclusion

Good Morning, Midnight was published in 1939. When war broke out in Europe, Jean Rhys and her second husband Leslie Tilden Smith moved to Norwich and then to Wales where Tilden Smith served in the para-military. Tilden Smith died of a heart attack in 1945, and Rhys married Max Hamer, a cousin of Tilden Smith's, a year later. Rhys's life with Hamer was also a succession of rooms until 1960 when they settled at Cheriton Fitz Paine, a cottage near Crediton, Devon, which was owned by Rhys's brother.

During the years 1939 to 1949, Rhys disappeared completely from the public eye. In 1949, Selma Vaz Dias placed a notice in The New Statesman and Nation requesting information as to the whereabouts of Jean Rhys. Vaz Dias had adapted Good Morning, Midnight for radio and needed Rhys's permission in order to produce the play. Rhys saw the notice, wrote to Vaz Dias, and gave her consent. The correspondence between Vaz Dias and Rhys remained a private one, however. The BBC withheld permission to broadcast, at that time, but reconsidered this decision in 1957. It was this 1957 radio production of Good Mornig, Midnight which enabled Rhys's former publisher, André Deutsch, to renew contact with her. Eighteen years had elapsed since the publication of Good Morning, Midnight in 1939.

In 1959 Rhys wrote to Francis Wyndham:

I can only write for love as it were.

When I say write for love I mean that there are two places for me. Paris (or what it was to me) and Dominica... (JRL, 171)

Good Morning, Midnight was the last novel in which Rhys returned imaginatively to Paris. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys wrote about Dominica, but a mixture of her childhood Dominica, the one she revisited briefly in 1936, and a Dominica influenced by Jane Eyre as a mirror text. Her handling of Dominica in a very early version of Wide Sargasso Sea, which she called "Le Revenant" looked as if it was going to be, for her, another Paris. In a 1963 letter to Francis Wyndham, Rhys elaborated on this:

I started, ages ago, with a different idea.[...]
The book began with a dream and ended with a dream.[...]
All the rest was to be a long monologue. Antoinette in her prison room remembers, loves, hates, raves, talks to imaginary people, hears imaginary voices answering and overhears meaningless conversations outside. The story, if any, to be implied, never told straight.[...]

I remembered the last part of Voyage In The Dark written like that - time and place abolished, past and present the same - and I had been almost satisfied. Then everybody said it was "confused and confusing - impossible to understand etc." and I had to cut and rewrite it (I still think I was right, and they were wrong,...). Still I thought "if they fussed over one part of a book, nobody will get the hang of a whole book written that way at all" or "A mad girl speaking all the time is too much" .[...] Anyway after a week or two I decided to write it again as a story, a romance, but keeping the dream feeling

and working up to the madness (I hoped). (JRL, 233)

Rhys's decision to write Wide Sargasso Sea as a romance marked the end of a particular kind of writing that had had its inception in the exercise books written in a room in Fulham, and which had concluded with Good Morning, Midnight and a dimly lit hotel room in Paris.

I have tried to distill from what Rhys revealed about her experience of life as a woman at odds with the middle-class cultural norms of her time, the process in her novels that brought to these experiences an imaginative clarity of vision. The first four novels do stand apart from Wide Sargasso Sea, and may be addressed as an independent, but integrated body of work. Quartet, After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, Voyage In The Dark, and Good Morning, Midnight, as a whole, provide an important model for women writing fiction, with the express purpose of communicating a woman's felt experience of her life. Jean Rhys pioneered a new way of writing fiction, by and about women.

Notes

1. See Nebeker, Jean Rhys: Woman in Passage, pp. 45-46.
2. In a 1931 letter to a friend, Evelyn Scott, Jean Rhys uses this phrase and places it in quotation marks. It would seem that she was repeating word for word something that a reviewer had said about her work: "I am always being told that until my work ceases being 'sordid and depressing' I haven't much chance of selling." (JRL, 21) Elizabeth Abel raises the following question in her article, "Women and Schizophrenia": "Does Rhys's unremitting pessimism become an artistic failure that drives us to dismiss her vision despite her insight and control?" (Contemporary Literature 20, p. 156)
3. Wilson Harris discusses consolidation and fulfillment of character in the novel in Tradition and the West Indian Novel. In view of what Harris says, I would say that Rhys works toward a de-consolidation of character. Her novels work against a privileging of the status quo.
4. Jean Rhys actually disappeared altogether from public life and was presumed dead. Selma Vaz Dias found her and in a letter to Vaz Dias, Rhys mentions the ghost status: "I don't know why everybody thinks I am dead - but I was feeling a bit that way myself at the end!..." (JRL, 135)
5. Peter Wolfe writes in his book Jean Rhys: "Single women who live alone do not always become prostitutes or drunkards. Anna might have supported herself honorably." (117) Elgin Mellown writes in his article, "These women (the Rhys heroines) are forever alone outside the realm of everyday society and cut off from the ordinary patterns of life. In them we see a literal meaning of the term demimonde, for theirs is only a partial existence. They know that they are alive because they suffer and because money passes through their hands." (Contemporary Literature 13, pp. 124-125)
6. In a 1949 letter to Selma Vaz Dias, Rhys says of Quartet: "However I did write one of my novels as a four act play and have the MSS somewhere. I mean I saw it first as a play." (JRL, 62)

7. In a letter to Helen Nebeker, Diana Athill quotes Rhys regarding Nebeker's interpretation of Rhys's work: "But I would like to know what she (Nebeker) makes of the other books. I have often hated Mackenzie and wished I'd never written it. But so it goes.'" (Nebeker, 203)

8. In The Unspeakable Mother, Kloefer articulates the absence of the mother as a linguistic, cultural, and historical absence: "'Woman,' who has no space in a patriarchal linguistic system, cannot adequately articulate her exclusion; instead, she represents her linguistic alienation through alienation from or violence to the maternal body: the mother's deathbed or her own abortions." (15) Kloefer does not suggest, however, that the absence may contain a somewhat complicated network of invisible female manipulations. She stops short of criticizing her own sex, and I think this is a mistake, particularly in a reading of Rhys's work.

9. Teresa O'Connor writes in Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels: "...but it is English women who loosen her real anger... These gentlewomen, who live on the edge of poverty and who are strict enforcers of the bourgeois code, occur often in Rhys's fiction... It is for them that Rhys's heroines' greatest scorn is reserved. (99-100)

10. Teresa O'Connor says of Rochester: "While Wide Sargasso Sea is apparently about Antoinette rather than Rochester, one is tempted to comment on his character more - perhaps because his narrative is longer, perhaps because he is a more complicated character than Antoinette. ...Rochester embodies the character of the colonizing English: aggressive, controlling, urban, a warrior who captures wealth, property, and people." (170) O'Connor's description of Rochester embodies the interest which attaches to Wide Sargasso Sea and the pre-eminent position the novel holds in the Rhys canon. Wide Sargasso Sea is the one Rhys novel which yields to a privileging of history over a woman's experience. Rochester as the most vocal narrator in Wide Sargasso Sea, as the voice which explains rather than implies the dynamics of the situation is, in my view, an artistic

capitulation on Rhys's part. However, the novel has attracted more attention than any other Rhys novel. Its popularity, and the fact that it is dominated by Rochester, indicates to me a privileging of the male point of view, and an implicit preference, on the part of critics, for the kind of perspective provided by Rochester.

11. Thomas Staley uses the word "passive" frequently to describe Rhys's heroines. In Jean Rhys: A Critical Study, he describes Marya as possessing a "passive nature" (38), and writes of "the passivity and turbulence" (4) of Rhys's life. Staley also includes a quotation from Barred, a novel written by Rhys's first husband Jean Lenglet, which also speaks of Jean Rhys and passivity: "'I tortured myself by thinking of the strange passivity that characterized her.'" (12-13)

12. Elgin Mellown writes: "...happiness is always followed by sadness, and her last state is always worse than her first." (Contemporary Literature 13, p. 463) Peter Wolfe writes: "Life never offers the Rhys heroine much." (Wolfe, 26) He also writes: "The Jean Rhys heroine will sleep with a man she does not care about rather than go hungry." (Wolfe, 25)

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