

"CONNAIS-TU LE PAYS?" - ANNA MORGAN'S DOUBLE VOYAGE

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It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different.

The very first words spoken by Anna Morgan, the naive adolescent chorus girl who is both narrator and protagonist of *Voyage in the Dark*, clearly signal that a central concern of the novel will be the contrast between two widely separated locales, the lush tropical world of her (and Rhys's own) childhood and the cold, inhospitable terrain of England, the second mother country. Yet the very obviousness of that dichotomy seems to have rendered the critics simple-minded with regard to the way it is elaborated. It has been only too easy to read the story as an account of a Creole woman's inability to adjust to the demanding terms of contemporary English life<sup>1</sup> or, conversely, to equate her island heritage with the sexual vitality so lacking in that life.<sup>2</sup> Both readings are plausible but neither is adequate. To get a better understanding of Rhys's complicated intention, we need to consider a question that has largely been ignored. Since the events of the story take place long after Anna's arrival in England, what is the voyage referred to in the title? Surprisingly, only Helen Nebeker and Arnold Davidson have proposed answers. Nebeker suggests that it is the mind's venture into the subconscious territory of dreams;<sup>3</sup> Davidson evokes Joseph Conrad, claiming that for both writers "the heart of darkness lies back in the mother country and it is into that darkness that Anna voyages."<sup>4</sup> But even these contrasting interpretations tell us nothing about two other questions of paramount concern in any voyage: what is its starting point and what is its destination?

As I see it, these questions need to be posed in the context of Rhys's entire writing career. From the outset, her novels had registered the bleak and bitter conviction that her quasi-autobiographical heroines were doomed to be outcasts, but only in this, her third novel, did she set herself the task of discovering why it should be so. Thus, *Voyage in the Dark* was for Rhys herself a journey back in time, a search for origins. Moreover, that task turned out to have a double thrust. On the one hand, she had to locate the critical precipitating event - the first fall whose disastrous consequences make up the forward direction of her heroine's journey, a journey darkened by ignorance, recklessness, and a willful refusal to confront unpleasant realities. On the other, she sought to discover and reveal the still earlier origins of Anna's doom in her divided and debilitating ancestral heritage. It is Anna's resistance to such unwelcome knowledge that necessitates that second voyage into the dark that Nebeker refers to, the psyche's reluctant journey backwards into the recesses of memory and the obscure landscape of dreams. "Connais-tu le pays?" is the name of the record Anna refuses to hear at a crucial moment in her dizzying descent into social abasement; but the force of the images welling up from her unconscious carries her at last to a point of illumination that is also the extreme verge of comfortless isolation, "a place full of stones where nobody is."<sup>5</sup>

The full extent of Anna's alienation has not always been recognized. Thus, Nebeker picks up on an early reference to the fact that Anna is reading that "dirty book" *Nana* to suggest that we take her story as a representative account of the career of a "fallen woman,"<sup>6</sup> a notion supported by the bland response of

the doctor who attends her in the aftermath of a botched abortion. Nodding at the explanation that her profuse bleeding is the result of a "fall," he implies that Anna is not alone, that she can easily be "placed" in the populous ranks of scorned female outcasts.

But even there Anna does not belong. She is defined as much by her difference from the other "tarts" as she is by her deviation from and opposition to respectable society. And it is her interior journey that brings this painful truth home. In the long run, Anna's social fall is merely an adjunct to her psychic fall from beguiled innocence to the stark comprehension that none of the accommodations offered by the three domains which might claim her or be claimed by her - her ancestral English homeland, her island birthplace, or the defiant outlaw world which her friend Laurie inhabits - can accommodate the sort of person she is.<sup>7</sup>

Strictly speaking, however, Anna's knowledge is incomplete. Though she finally confronts the stark reality of her extreme alienation, she lacks the authority to condemn the forces that have condemned her. Yet Rhys, writing years after the event, knows more than her surrogate, and she steers her fictional craft with masterly control. The first-person account, told without benefit of hindsight, captures the pathos of Anna's original innocence. The accelerating pace of the narrative mimics the inexorably tightening noose of her fate. The shift of focus from external events to internalized images highlights her withdrawal from a world that has no place for her. At the same time, Rhys makes no attempt to disguise Anna's folly, and she also manages to supplement the girl's limited perspective with objective data - letters, reported dialogue, naively recorded observations - which permit the reader to draw conclusions that escape Anna. Above all, she conveys the significance of Anna's experience by the use of powerfully reverberating symbols, often incorporated into scenes of charged dramatic confrontation.

The richness of the novel's texture defies simple analysis, but its general plan can be easily sketched. The keynotes of helplessness and dislocation are struck firmly in the first pages, as Anna recalls that "sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together." And the first half of the book is devoted to Anna's eager, wistful efforts to convince herself as well as Walter, the very correct and guarded Englishman who becomes her first lover, that she has a claim on him and on "his" England. Only in the aftermath of his implacable rejection and in the face of her floundering incapacity to take charge of her life is she forced to confront the unwelcome truth not only about her relationship to England but also about her formerly cherished homeland.

At her journey's outset, however, Anna is both sanguine and callow, ready to accept the most disparate and jarring realities at face value. With artless candor she declares that the stepmother who has brought her over to England (and then virtually abandoned her) is "all right"<sup>8</sup>; the cynical wisdom of her companions in the chorus is also all right; and the genial uncle who had encouraged her earliest tipping experiments is especially "nice."<sup>9</sup> Even her naive perception of the obvious differences between England and the islands provokes no inclination to judge one setting righter than the other. Rather, just because Walter is so quintessentially English, she tends to overemphasize those aspects of the islands that mirror the mores of the mother country: the imported proprieties of a colonial Sunday, the "peaceful and melancholy" feeling of a stable social hierarchy conveyed by the text of a memorial tablet to a

revered local doctor.<sup>10</sup> That the Sunday petticoats were overstiff, the imported gloves too tight, and the genteel rowing excursions menaced by barracoutas, are disturbing realities that the girl recalls without noticeable resentment.

The whole matter of noticing is central. Evasion, Rhys suggests, is a characteristically English trait, but for the more worldly characters it is a conscious technique - most typically practiced from a vantage of lofty condescension, in effect conveying the message that what the superior being chooses not to notice is unworthy of notice. Anna's denials are more ambiguous, more representative of the universal mechanism of suppression of unwelcome truths. Thus, even in the early stages of her relationship with Walter, Rhys depicts her as simultaneously alert to disquieting portents (the sneering attitudes of waiters, cabmen, and landladies, the vaguely ominous rantings of streetcorner evangelists) and shrinking from full recognition of what she intuits. She shrinks too from admitting the dark side of her heritage. Her internal censor permits her to acknowledge to Walter that the beauty of Constance Estate, her mother's ancestral property, is radically different from English notions of beauty, but withholds the crucial admission that it is an abandoned ruin.

As the affair progresses, the lovers' fundamental incompatibility becomes increasingly evident. The prudent and circumspect Walter, who had first been attracted to Anna by the ladylike demeanor that set her apart from her mates in the chorus, is disconcerted to discover the strain of uninhibited sexual ardor with which it coexists. Her indifference to the cult of virginity shocks him, and her disregard of financial practicalities disturbs him even more. In turn, Anna is chagrined to discover that her absolute submissiveness, her readiness to live only for and through Walter, counts for nothing in the face of his cool insistence on defining their relationship as a commercial bargain that can be satisfactorily ended by a suitable payoff.

Yet it is not Walter but another representative English figure who illuminates their incompatibility most clearly. Hester Morgan, the stepmother who has transported the orphaned Anna to England, is one of Rhys's boldest fictional devices. Rhys herself had been sent to England by her father, and *Smile Please*, the autobiographical fragment written in her eighties, would record her eager anticipation of the change: "Life was not, of course, anything like as wonderful as England would be."<sup>11</sup> But here an indifferent stepmother epitomizes far more effectively Rhys's sense of the strained and tenuous relationship between the Mother Country and her wayward colonial charges: Hester's surface show of solicitude barely masks her eagerness to shed unwanted obligations while her disapproval of the slack mores of the tropics is undisguised. It is the oppressive atmosphere of Hester's drably genteel Bayswater lodgings that prompts Anna to stage the passionate rebellion that her stepmother desires no less than she (although both parties are still English enough to cushion their rupture with polite phrases).

Anna's persistent clinging to the English strain of her heritage appears too in her later decision to accept the patronage of the seedy but superficially respectable masseuse Ethel Matthews (a woman who makes much of her English superiority to "dirty" foreigners) rather than that of the defiantly raffish social outlaw Laurie Gaynor. Only when she discovers that her choice is illusory, that both women are engaged in the same business of commercialized sex, does she lose her bearings and shed all vestiges of decorum, lapsing into a pattern of heedless, drunken promiscuity.

Rhys composes a masterly scene to sum up the girl's bewilderment, rage, and despair, a drunken brawl with a nameless casual pickup who unknowingly triggers her fury by rejecting the records she has chosen to dance to. Instead of "Just a Little Love, a Little Kiss" and "Puppchen," songs which reflect Anna's sullen acquiescence in her fallen state, he asks for the air from *Mignon*, "Connais-tu le pays?" "Of course, if you know the country it makes all the difference," Anna notes savagely, and she vents her rage by smashing a picture that offends her.<sup>12</sup> A portrait of a dog called "Loyal Heart," it is a mocking reminder of how her acceptance of official English pieties - especially the master's right to slavish, doglike devotion - has played her false.

Ultimately, Anna must accept the bitter recognition that England has no place for her passionate intensity, a recognition borne home by a revised view of another sentimental icon, the cozy English scene depicted on the tins of imported biscuits "as Fresh in the Tropics as in the Motherland."<sup>13</sup> Of all its quaint details - the little girl holding up a plump currant-studded biscuit, the little boy rolling a hoop, the tidy pastel landscape - only one now seems to matter, the high wall that cuts the little girl off from the rest.

Yet long before Anna concedes her alienation from England, Rhys has begun to demonstrate that the islands can offer her no alternative refuge. The clashing images that crowd her mind in the midst of her lovemaking testify to the moral confusions of her heritage. Innocent memories of her convent school spiritual exercises are jostled by more disturbing recollections of the sexual license countenanced by her Creole forebears and commemorated by the mulatto designations featured on the slave lists at Constance Estate. Anna resists her stepmother's grim view of these lists as a prophecy of retribution for the "sins of the fathers,"<sup>14</sup> preferring the mild, tolerant skepticism of her own actual father, but Rhys provides enough evidence to weaken the latter's authority. "Morgan's Rest," the profitless legacy which Hester scornfully rechristens "Morgan's Folly," demonstrates that superior intelligence and sensitivity are no defense against the allure of escapist fantasies about the tropics. And as for Anna's surrogate father, Uncle Bo, it is one of the ironies of the farewell interview with Hester that a letter from this genial boozier reveals him to be as capable of huffy self-righteousness as Hester herself. Though he had formerly enraged Hester by his unconcealed promiscuity, he now covers up his indifference to his niece's welfare with lofty professions of responsibility for his own three offspring. The host of bastard mulatto cousins that Anna had been encouraged to recognize with gifts at Christmas for once go discreetly unmentioned.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, for all of Hester's ranting about Anna's incorrigible attraction to the "niggers," the girl herself is only too ruefully aware of the unbridgeable master-servant divide that precludes any real intimacy between the races.

After Walter leaves her, Anna's memories of the islands take on a new coloration. The early evocations of warmth and vitality are replaced by images of fragility and preordained defeat: the briefly blooming "pop flowers" that surround the pool at Morgan's Rest<sup>16</sup> and the nearly extinct indigenous Caribs, doomed by their refusal to submit to white domination.<sup>17</sup> And other monitory figures invade her consciousness, even when she most desires to cling to more comforting associations. Retracing in memory the cherished path to Constance Estate, she confronts a long-suppressed horror, the woman with yaws "whose nose and mouth were eaten away."<sup>18</sup> And still other unsought images - poor old Miss Jackson, Colonel Jackson's illegitimate daughter, tolerated but consigned to a life of shabby spinsterhood<sup>19</sup> - and the even more sinister figures of "obeah zombis" and bloodsucking "soucriants" - sum up the inauspicious destiny of women

whether they defy or submit to the rules of the dominant masculine order.

Eventually, Anna is forced to realize that the islands are no more her home than England is. In a dream she sees them from afar as "dolls of islands," planted with anomalous English trees. And no matter how hard she tries, taking "huge, climbing, flying strides,"<sup>20</sup> she is unable to get to their shores.

Anna's final evocation of the past occurs in the hallucinatory nightmares that punctuate the trauma of her nearly fatal abortion. Again English scenes and island scenes blur into one another, but the latter dominate. The white-faced casual pickup frightening the adult Anna by his strained exertions becomes the white-faced mask of an island dancer prancing in the annual Masquerade that the ruling society has licensed for as long as anyone can remember. And as that childhood memory surfaces, the ironies of the island's social arrangements stand revealed at last. While some of the white onlookers mutter censoriously that the whole indecent carnival should be stopped and others are more complacently tolerant, none are willing to forego the pleasure of looking on and offering their smugly superior comments. Uncle Bo proclaims, "You can't expect niggers to behave like white people all the time . . . it's asking too much of human nature."<sup>21</sup> And even her sensitive father watches and expects Anna to watch. Yet, as Louis James has pointed out, the scene they are all watching is not just boisterous bawdiness, but the venting of pent-up spite and rage as their underlings thrust out their tongues under the protection of their masks and their circumscribed three days of license.<sup>22</sup> In this fractured social order, there is no dignity on either side.

But it is this carnival, with its alluring refrain, "pourquoi ne pas aimer bonheur suprême,"<sup>23</sup> that has seduced Anna into a life of heedless sensuality. Following the carnival dancers, she is carried at last to the haunted ruins of Constance Estate and to the grim recognition that it is "a place full of stones where nobody is."

For Anna there is no home country. Her naive image of her "beautiful" islands has been shattered, and the wall that separates her from respectable English society is unbreachable. In the end, she is like that other disabused innocent, Gulliver, whose enlarged mental horizons also cut him off from the human herd. In both cases we can insist that their perspective is too extreme. But the challenge is thrown back to us. Where are the social forms that will permit men and women to come together in a free and equal partnership? Are the emotionally sterile cash nexus or the transitory attachments of the uncommitted the only alternatives to the treacherous pseudo-intimacy of master and subject? *Voyage in the Dark* provides no answers, but by permitting the reader to share Anna's painful double voyage, Rhys illuminates these fundamental questions.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Nancy J. Casey, "Study in the Alienation of a Creole Woman: Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 19 (September 1973), pp. 95-102.

<sup>2</sup>Helen Nebeker, *Jean Rhys: Woman in Passage* (Montreal, Eden Press, 1981), p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup>Arnold E. Davidson, *Jean Rhys, Literature and Life Series*, (New York, Ungar, 1985), p. 60.

<sup>5</sup>Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, (New York, Norton, 1982), p. 187.

<sup>6</sup>Nebeker, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup>Given the complexity and subtlety of Rhys's design, it is not surprising that most critics have been lopsided in their emphases. Nebeker, for instance, skims over the specific cultural/geographical aspect of Anna's journey to read her story as a representative account of the career of a fallen woman (or, more generally, of the fallen estate of all women in a patriarchal society). And while Thomas Staley (*Jean Rhys: A Critical Study*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1979) and Mary Lou Emery ("The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Winter 1982, pp. 418-430) recognize that the dislocations mirrored in Rhys's account belong to a more complex post-patriarchal frame of reference, they too slight Rhys's manifest concern with the problem of "knowing the country." On the other hand, while Louis James (*Jean Rhys, Critical Studies of Caribbean Writers*, London, Longman, 1978), Nancy Casey, and Teresa O'Connor (*Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels*, New York, New York University Press, 1986) are alert to the particular cultural dimensions of Anna's case, especially as it mirrors the flawed fabric of Caribbean society, they take no account of the nature of Anna's fall - not only into disgrace but also into knowledge, the bitter recognition that neither of her mother countries can accommodate the sort of person she is.

<sup>8</sup>Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>11</sup>Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (New York, Harper and Row, 1979), p. 51.

<sup>12</sup>Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, p. 161.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 186.