JEAN RHYS AND MODERNISM: A DIFFERENT VOICE

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Surviving fragments about the life of Jean Rhys reveal surprisingly little about that life. But despite the limited number of hard facts available, or perhaps because of it, critical perspectives on the Jean Rhys oeuvre are based extensively on biographical commentary which uses her fictional creations as self-portraits, designating as intuitive, original or peculiarly her own the form and style of her craft. One consistent feature of much of the criticism is the obliteration of the dividing line between the author and the critics' interpretation of her characters and themes. Her work is seen as minor, narrow, personal, sordid even, with little connection to anything outside of itself and the author's reality. A characteristic viewpoint is expressed by Elgin Mellown in his Jean Rhys: A Descriptive and Annotated Bibliography of Works and Criticism:

There is no need to make extravagant claims for the novelist: her limited output and the circumstances of her publication kept her from being an influence upon other writers in her lifetime, and her technique, so carefully crafted to express the sensibilities of women of her time, may not be of great value to writers of a later generation. But the unconquerable human spirit which informs all of her work cannot date, and one knows that readers and writers of the future, whether male or female, will continue to appreciate her expression of the feelings and longings of the isolated individual. Jean Rhys may be a minor figure in relation to the literary giants of the twentieth century, but within her own area she is an artist without peer.¹

The view of an artist's work as a product to be measured in terms of itself is one which is challenged by one of the undisputed "literary giants of the twentieth century," T.S. Eliot:

No poet, no artist of any art has [sic] complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relations to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him for contrast and comparison among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic not merely historical criticism. [W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all works of art which preceded it.²
Jean Rhys is at one with Eliot on this point. She believes that the role of the writer is ecumenical:

All of writing is a huge lake. There are great rivers that feed the lake, like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. And there are trickles like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. It is very important. Nothing else is important. . . . But you should be taking from the lake before you can think of feeding it. You must dig your bucket in very deep. . . . What matters is the lake and man's unconquerable mind.

Rhys's comments were made in 1979, the year of her death, after more than fifty years practising her craft. Her observations point to her modus operandi. She is asserting that no writer exists or can exist in isolation, that the work of the individual writer is part of a whole - part of all that has ever been written. Implicit in her comments is the view that a literary tradition essential to the craft of writing cannot be inherited in a passive or instinctive sense. It must be obtained by hard, conscious work.

The author's persistent preoccupation with this aspect of her work is also seen in her letters: "I don't believe in the individual Writer so much as in Writing. It uses you and throws you away when you are not useful any longer. But it does not do this until you are useless and quite useless too. Meanwhile there is nothing to do but plod line by line." The intellectual and literary life of which Ford was a part was self-consciously erudite, an experimental elite, with particular modes of publication, in particular the small presses and small magazines at their disposal. Aesthetic debates flourished and a remarkable system of cross-fertilisation and "networking" existed among such writers as Pound, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Joyce, Lawrence and Ford himself. The ideology underpinning the aesthetics of the modernist writers was founded on a belief in the superiority of Western cultural values, or what Eliot termed the "European
Many of these practitioners, notably Pound, Eliot, Lewis and Yeats, embraced reactionary political ideas even as they created avant-garde aesthetics. The complex indirect relations between their works and their ideological viewpoint emerge in style, image and theme. Ford himself insisted upon cultural exclusivity, asserting that in the world of thought and the arts only England and France really mattered.

While literary historians and critics reveal differing and opposed viewpoints on Ford as writer and critic, most agree that as craftsman, technician and editor he was invaluable. He was deeply concerned with art and artists and gave concrete assistance to young artists in particular. When Rhys was introduced to Ford in 1923-24, she was also introduced to an impressive inventory of literary styles, aesthetic viewpoints and experience in crafting which had been sifted through the mind not only of Ford himself, but of most of the writers with whom he collaborated, some of whom produced many of the outstanding works of modernist writing. At the time of their meeting Ford was not only editor of the transatlantic review, he was also working on his tetralogy Parade's End. During the short lifetime of the magazine, he edited the works of Valéry, Hemingway, Joyce, Stein, Pound and Asch, thereby continuing the work of the influential English Review which he founded in England in 1908.

As an apprentice, Rhys studied the methods and techniques of craft and carefully selected those which she found most useful. She retained strict control over Ford's tutelage and appropriated from him what she wanted for her work. Her singlemindedness and clearsighted determination were remarked upon by Ford himself:

I tried ... very hard to induce [Rhys] to introduce some sort of topography ... in the cunning way ... it would have been done by Flaubert or Maupassant or by Mr. Conrad. ... But would she do it? No! With cold deliberation, once her attention was called to the matter, she eliminated even such two or three words of descriptive matter as had crept into her work.

The deliberate elimination of such elements from her own work is based on Rhys's awareness of her difference from writers like Ford and his own literary models and precursors. Rhys's concern is as separate as she is from the dominant values which underpin the art and ideology of metropolitan society. She was in the metropolitan centres and appropriated the terms and theories which gave impulse to the artistic movements, but she was not of that world. As a woman and West Indian, she existed at the moral, aesthetic and hence ideological juncture of the metropolis. In imperial Europe, her home, the periphery, existed as a negation, an absence. Rhys herself was aware of this from the very beginning. When she was told that she would be introduced to Ford, who thought that some of the expatriate writers in Paris were very important, Rhys asked herself: "Am I an expatriate? Expatriate from where?"

Fellow West Indian writer, V.S. Naipaul points to the problems which Rhys would have encountered while practising her craft in the Paris (and Europe) of the 1920s:

By the 1920s when Jean Rhys began to write, the Caribbean ... belonged to antique romance: and the West Indian needed to explain himself [sic]. Jean Rhys did not explain herself. She might have been a riddle to others, but she never sought to make her experience more accessible by making it what it was not. It would have been easy for someone of her gifts to have become a
novelist of manners but she never pretended she had a society to write about. Even in her early stories of Left Bank life in Paris she avoided geographical explicitness. She never "set" her scene, English, European or West Indian: she had, as it were, no home audience to play to, she was outside that tradition of imperial expatriate writing in which the metropolitan outsider is thrown into relief against an alien background. She was an expatriate but her journey had been the other way round from a background of nothing to an organised world. Rhys recognises that her West Indian background is "nothing" to the European mind and to the metropolitan canon. The traditions and forms of the literary school in Europe were not created to express what she had to say. In some important respects, they were meant to conceal, distort or render invisible her reality as a colonial and as a woman. In her hands, the tools of the trade would be reshaped to carve out an œuvre, necessarily bound by the reach of the European forms and traditions, but removed from the ideological perceptions which inform the metropolitan writing. She ransacks and sifts through the resources of words, ideas, literary traditions and theories, seeking to draw substance from them, while re-shaping them to create her own voice. In so doing, she chooses to reject aspects of the received tradition, to impugn the moral centre of the ideology and to appropriate some of the technical and stylistic forms. The use she makes of Ford's and other modernist writers' impressive literary inventory is best demonstrated through an analysis of Quartet, her first major work, and Ford's outstanding modernist novel, The Good Soldier. Judith Kegan Gardiner argues that Rhys deliberately created her novel as a countertext to Ford's: 

Jean Rhys' great tribute to her literary mentor . . . is the novel Quartet. . . . The book blazons its esthetic tutelage and its moral independence. . . . and . . . subtly exposes [Ford] as a novelist, rewriting his masterpiece . . . as though from the inside out, or, more accurately, from the underside up. . . . [Quartet] demonstrates Rhys' seriousness about the craft of writing and about her place in literary history . . . .

The Rhys œuvre also demonstrates stylistic and technical similarities to other modernist writers. The concern with stream of consciousness technique, the relationship between art and life, the manipulation of the time sense, complex leitmotifs, verbal associations and literary allusions are features which distinguish the writing of this period and the Rhys canon reveals her own manipulation of these technical thematic strategies.

Rhys's fiction also reveals similarities with the women writers of her generation. She shares with Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson a concern with the extensive use of the stream of consciousness technique to impart the inner workings of the mind of her female protagonists. Gertrude Stein anticipates many of the stylistic features of Rhys's novels, particularly the use of repetition-with-variation and ironic juxtaposition. One clear connection between Rhys and other women writers of her generation, in particular Woolf and Richardson, is the recurrent theme of the denigration of women in life and in art. Rhys's "I Spy a Stranger" and "Till September Petronella" echo Richardson's concern in The Tunnel (1919) and Woolf's in A Room of One's Own (1929) with the way in which "life is poisoned, for women, at the very source."
Despite similarities of techniques, styles, motifs and thematic concerns, Jean Rhys does not fit easily or completely within the body of modernist writing or women's fiction of her generation in Europe. Her distinctive voice, which revealed itself from her earliest work, does not accommodate itself to the groups or concerns mentioned. Jean D'Costa points to the difficulties created by the particular voice:

A reader new to Rhys usually puzzles over her viewpoint looking both ways cross the channel and the Atlantic, she seems for and against both perspectives. Her insider- outsider's treatment of England, France and the Caribbean gnaws at comfortable ethnocentrism. Her characters play out pathologies of exploitation as lovers, siblings, as neighbours, as whole social groups. Looking for some kind of familiar ground the reader tries to fit Rhys into available models of contemporary fiction, and fails. . . . She belongs to no recognizable school; fits into no ready-made slot.13

As a white, female, West Indian, her cultural heritage would have bequeathed a double vision born of her place in her homeland. She was white and not English or European, West Indian and not black. She was taught the language and customs of a land she had never seen, while living in and being shaped by the reality of the West Indies. Her sense of belonging to the West Indies would be charged by her awareness of being part of another culture. The ambiguity of being an insider/outsider in both the metropolis and the colony helped to shape the writer's sensibility. This ambiguity would be complicated further by the complexity of the West Indian society in which she lived - the ambivalence inherent in the colour-class relationship and the simultaneous existence of different cultural modes, creole, black and indigenous. The interaction among the groups was regulated by strict social norms, but at a psycho-social level the relationship was a syncretic one. In Dominica, the creole culture consisted of a blend of French and English, further complicating the social setting. Out of this complex reality and as a means of rendering her particular vision of the world, Rhys as a writer developed an ideology of secular individualism and psychological privacy combined with a self-image of isolation expressed through "the solitary, observing experiencing self" which moves through her fiction.

The relationship between the complexity of her personal history and the nature of her art is mediated by several factors, the most important of which is her writing itself. In talking about herself as a writer, Rhys observes:

I can't make things up, I can't invent. I have no imagination. I can't invent character. I don't think I know what character is. I just write about what happened. Not that my books are entirely my life - but almost. . . . Though I guess the invention is in the writing. But then there are two ways of writing. One way is to try to write in an extraordinary way, the other in an ordinary way. Do you think it's possible to write both ways? . . . I think so. I think what one should do is write in an ordinary way and make the writing seem extraordinary. One should write too about what is ordinary and see the extraordinary behind it.15

If Rhys uses her life as a pretext for art, she insists repeatedly that life is one thing, a book is quite another. One of the major strategies used by the
author in the creation of her fiction is pastiche and parody. In the Rhys
canon, pastiche and parody represent an inbuilt aesthetic discourse with the
literary traditions of Europe and the ideological framework which defines,
constricts and, to some extent, distorts her as a woman, as an artist and as a
West Indian. The use of pastiche and parody is combined with a relentless
honouring of language to "deconstruct" the literature and the language to which she
is heir, to expose their absences and to convey her own philosophical and
critical position.

In using and criticising the literary resources of Europe while aiming for
the simplest and clearest form of expression, she seeks to create a space for
her work and necessarily for the works of later writers who also experience a
"nothingness" in terms of the metropolitan canon. In a career spanning more
than fifty years, Rhys insists repeatedly on the connection between simplicity
and artistic truth: "I have written upon the wall 'Great is truth and it shall
prevail.' Simplify - simplify - simplify." The writer believes that even
those artists who operate within the conventional framework of British
metropolitan society are often challenged by the need to tell their truth but
often bow instead to the domination of the prevailing ideology. Referring to
the organisation of English society as a kind of ant civilisation, she points to
the connection between life and art, and the damaging constraints which
convention imposes upon literature:

I believe that if books were brave enough the repressive
education [of the ant civilization] would fail but nearly
all English books and writers slavishly serve the ant civiliz-
ation. Do not blame them too much for the Niagara of repression
is also beating on them and breaking their heart.  

The clearest expression of Rhys's attitude to literature and ideology is
contained in an unpublished essay of uncertain date entitled "The Bible is
Modern":

"God said, 'Let there be Light, and there was Light.'" There
is something short, snappy, and utterly modern about this sentence.
You have only got to alter "God said" to "Said God," put a stop in
the middle, and you could almost call it a quotation from the
newest, starkest American novel.

The real English of this obviously is "In His great wisdom the
Deity commanded that the firmament should be illuminated, and
it was amply illuminated." Or you might say excessively, putting
in the fantastic touch, "Allah, bestriding the universe with the
sun in his right hand and the moon in the left, uttered these
words to his chief attendant Gabriel, The constellations and the
orbs shall march in their places. So saying, he flung the sun
and the moon into firmament. Gabriel, obedient but disapproving,
stamped with his foot, and there were stars. Behold the earth and
all the angels."[17]

Instead of this, you get the stark, modern touch - "Let there
be Light, and there was Light." In this marvellous book, the Bible -
which I am sure you have yet to discover - there are many such
stories expressed in the modern manner. And, though it is obvious
that the significance of this manner is entirely dependent on an
intensity of feeling, let us remember that we are dealing with
primitive people who express themselves in the primitive way. These people are an Oriental people who have never learnt to keep a stiff upper lip.

So buy the Bible. More modern than you know. . . . You cannot understand it, unless you understand the English social system. It is a great crime to feel intensely about anything in England, because if the average Englishman felt intensely about anything, England as it is could not exist; or, certainly, the ruling class in England could not continue to exist.

Thus, you get the full force of a very efficient propaganda machine turned on the average Englishman from the cradle to the grave, warning him that feeling intensely about anything is a quality of the subject peoples, or that it is old-fashioned, or that it is not done, or something like that.

The idea that books written in short, simple sentences, depending for their effectiveness on the intensity of feeling of the author, are inferior books, follows automatically, because the whole solidarity of the English social system is extraordinary. It is based on the idea that the poor Englishman and the middle-class Englishman must not think very much, that they certainly must never feel, and as for expressing their feelings - Never. . . . When you think of the mentality of the average Englishman, all this is understandable. But then what is difficult for us black people [sic] to understand is the ingenious way in which they set about making money out of "God said 'Let there be Light, and there was Light.'"18

Inscribed in this essay is a Rhysian poetics. The writer is attacking the ideology sustaining imperialism and class divisions which provide the discursive field of literary works in English society. It is an attack on the received form of the novel and the rhetorical and ideological shape of the literary tradition.

"The Bible is Modern" not only conveys Rhys's ideological standpoint, it reveals her working aesthetic - to create books "written in short, simple sentences depending for their effectiveness on the intensity of the feeling of the author." A study of the process of literary composition, emendations of manuscripts, replacements of one stylistic variant with another, suppressions and elaborations, can further elucidate the way in which the author uses form as ideology. In her letters, Rhys repeatedly refers to the labour involved in artistic creation: "I do toil you know and even a short story is written six times before I am satisfied. . . . Of course some things have to be done over and over before the words are in the right place."19

Rhys discloses that in order to get the right word in the right place she must search for each word individually: "I think very hard of each word in itself."20 The insistence on the mot juste extends even to Rhys's unfinished work. When Selma Vaz Dias adapted Good Morning, Midnight, Rhys advised her on how crucial every single word must be: "I don't think rustle is the right word for a man's dressing gown. . . . Taffeta rustles and so do stiff silks I suppose but wouldn't a man's dressing gown be a heavy silk? Please don't think me pernickety but every word must be exact."21
To demonstrate Rhys's concern with honing language to find her particular voice I shall examine the draft manuscripts of the short story "Before the Deluge." The first draft is undated. The next surviving manuscript is the fourth draft, dated October 25, 1974, the fifth January 22, 1975 and the sixth January 26, 1975. The story was published in her last collection of short stories, Sleep It Off Lady (1976). I shall focus mainly on the fourth, fifth and sixth drafts.

The *mot juste* which is the cornerstone of Rhys's literary artifice depends for its effectiveness not only on the selection of each word individually, but on the correct placing of each word in the sentence in relation to the other words, clauses and sentences. In the fourth manuscript, the author constructs two possible sentences to convey the dilemma of the character, Daisie:

On the contrary, she said that she now realised that sometimes it was quite a strain and that when she came off the stage she'd feel giddy, ill.

On the contrary, she told me that now she often felt giddy and ill and realised it was a very great strain.

Of the two possibilities, she chooses the second sentence, which contains twenty-two words to the twenty-eight in the first. By polishing the sentence and cleaning out the periphrasis and gratuitous words, the emphasis of the meaning shifts to call attention to Daisie's "very great strain." The writer deletes "sometimes it was quite a strain" and "when she came off the stage" to create a clearer, crisper perception of Daisie's dilemma. Daisie, whose stage career is a failure, resorts to fainting and temperament to compensate for her lack of success. The writer deletes some lexical items and rearranges what remains for purposes of concision and tightness. The use of the descriptive phrase "very great strain" and its place at the end of the sentence underlines Daisie's emotional state. "She said that" changes to "She told me" to suggest a more direct and intimate awareness on the part of the narrating consciousness. The slight shifts and changes in the sentence which Rhys selects highlight the character's emotional state.

The emphasis on the *mot juste* also extends to the way in which the author uses factual, geographical or social data. When the story opens, the narrator describes Daisie as one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. Unfortunately, her striking appearance does not come across on stage. In the fourth draft, the author observes, "In Regent Street people would turn and stare at her." In the fifth and subsequent drafts, this changes to "In Bond Street..." The change of location is from a busy shopping street to another associated with exclusivity, glamour, wealth, beautiful clothes and beautiful women. Through this shift, Daisie's extraordinary beauty is highlighted and her failure on stage dramatised and rendered more painful for her. The concern with placing her characters, even the minor ones, in an exact setting, preoccupied Rhys throughout her career.

In a reference to "Till September Petronella" which she cut from a fifty thousand word novel to a short story, Rhys says:

The date is, of course, late July 1914. It's not filled in because I wanted to find out more about market day in Cirencester at that time (too fussy you see!) I am not certain if Norfolk people do say Fare you well, or perhaps
just farewell

The location, setting or ambience and lived realities are important scaffolds in the construction of the Rhys fiction by way of being a means of shaping character response and behavior and also of imparting artistic truth. This attention to visual detail, an important aspect of Ford's literary impressionism, and to lived reality, and the manner in which these are worked into fiction, affect the shape of the narrative, its rhythm and the ultimate beauty of the artefact. In reviewing After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, one of Rhys's early critics points to a feature of her writing which applies to the oeuvre as a whole:

The book is written with something of the balance and beauty of verse. The shifting of a phrase would be a threat against the whole. Words are used like little weights, placed with an almost fractional delicacy. Phrases and words that are lovely and beguiling in their form but ruthless and explicit in their content mark the pages deterred.

The principle of selection which shapes the ordering of details, words and sentences is also used as a means of compressing the emotional or psychological impact and of manipulating almost imperceptibly the response of the reader:

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Her mother appeared from the kitchen. She stared venomously.
One look at her and I knew I was in for a torrent of abuse (MS 4)
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Her mother appeared from the kitchen. She stared at me so venomously that after one look at her I knew I was in for a torrent of abuse (MS 5)
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Then her mother appeared from the kitchen. One look at her I knew I was in for a torrent of abuse. (MS 6)
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In the final draft the number of sentences is contracted from three to two. The explicit feelings conveyed in the word "venomously" are suppressed. In the final version, the mother's look is not described but revealed through the protagonist's reaction. "She stared venomously" is replaced by "one look" and the reader is required to imagine or feel the venom and hostility conveyed in the look.

Rhys also uses the technique of suppression as a means of self-censorship. Referring to a book of short stories written during the Second World War, Rhys says: "I can't try to sell it with passion for I know its faults. I tried too hard for one thing, and was so afraid of offending that I wrote and rewrote the life out of things." In "Before the Deluge," the suppression is used apparently to avoid a socially unacceptable word, "syphilis": "I mean to say, everyone knows he's perfectly rotten with 'syphilis too" (MS 4); "Everybody knows he's rotten with it" (MS 5). The elimination of the word syphilis shifts the weight of the sentence to "rotten," which suggests not only physical but moral putrefaction. The suppression, then, reinforces rather than detracts from the situation being described.

The progression d'effet, the accumulation of details and long, slow-moving passages to heighten the effect of a quick crisis, is another technique which Rhys exploits fully. "Before the Deluge" seems to be primarily concerned with the events of Daisie's stage life and her failure to become a worthwhile
Yet the experiencing consciousness of the story is the unnamed narrator. The structural status of the narrator's consciousness is not presented as part of the narrated events, but reveals itself through the use of imagery. After detailed narration of Daisie's fainting spells and social life, the narrator unexpectedly describes her friend's wallpaper and the effect it has on her. The butterflies which form part of the pattern of the wallpaper make her afraid and she does not enjoy her visits to Daisie's house. The image of the butterflies and the feelings they engender are organically linked to the narrator's consciousness, not to the events in Daisie's life. Phanopoeia - the piling up or interweaving of imagistic detail to replace in part a direct narrative - is an important technical strategy in the Rhys oeuvre. It is a technique used extensively by Ezra Pound in his Imagist poetry, by Joseph Conrad and by the Symbolist poets. In “Before the Deluge,” the events of Daisie's life, and the narrator's fear of her wallpaper, precede an urgent summons from the former for her friend to visit her flat. The draft manuscripts demonstrate how Rhys wrestled with the words to distill the most effective dramatisation of the narrator's encounter with Daisie and of the crisis it unveils:

One day she asked me to be at her flat about noon. She said she wanted to speak to me about something very important. (MS 4)

One day - the last time I saw Daisy - she had asked me to be at her flat about noon. She said she wanted to speak about something very important. (MS 5)

One day she asked me to be at her flat about noon. She said she wanted to speak to me about something important. (MS 6)

One day she asked me to call and see her about noon. She wanted to speak to me. Something important.26

Rhys notes: "I know it seems stupid to fuss over a few lines or words, but I've never got over my longing for clarity and a smooth firm foundation underneath the sound and the fury. I've learnt one generally gets this by cutting, or by very slight shifts and changes."27 Some of the slight shifts and changes include, in the first sentence, the deletion of the word "flat" - to call to see Daisie as opposed to calling at the flat. It implies that the narrator is not being invited for a social visit, she is being summoned. Instead of "she said she wanted to speak to me," the sentence becomes "she wanted to speak to me." The sense of urgency is underlined by the polishing of the sentence to convey with clarity "the sound and fury" of Daisie's anger. The complex sentence in the final draft is transformed into two, with the second sentence being staccato and verbless. The taut construction of the sentences underlines the tension and the unpleasant atmosphere. The "something important" which Daisie wants to discuss with the narrator is rumour that she is gossiping about her. The narrator denies this hotly and Daisie faints and the latter hurries from her house.

The last sentence in the Rhys short story is almost invariably the most important. She uses extensively "the twist in the tail" or the "coup de canon," a technique refined by Maupassant. Ford's advice on how the impact of the last sentence should be achieved bears quoting, as it throws light on the way in which Rhys herself employs this narrative strategy:

You must state your argument, you must illustrate it, and then you must stick in something that appears to have nothing
whatever to do with either subject or illustration, so that the reader will exclaim "what the devil is the fellow driving at?" And then you must go on in the same way - arguing, illustrating and startling and arguing, startling and arguing until at the very end your conventions will appear like a ravelled skein. And then, in the last few lines you will draw towards you the master-string of that seeming confusion, and the whole pattern of the carpet, the whole design of the net-work will be apparent.28

The strategy which Rhys uses in the construction of the key sentence is elaboration:

I never saw her again (MS 1)

Shortly after this my own life changed very much and I never saw her or heard of her again (MS 4)

Shortly after this my life changed, everything changed and I never saw or heard of Daisy again (MS 5)

Very soon after this my life changed, everything changed and I never saw or heard of Daisy again (MS 6)

The last sentence directs the reader again to the title of the story "Before the Deluge," which suggests that the rendering of Daisie's dilemma was in some respect secondary to the portrayal of the life and times of the narrator. The aim of the story is to capture an experience filtered through the consciousness of the solitary, observing, experiencing self. Daisie's faintings, temperaments and tantrums are no more than an incident in the life of the narrator. The last sentence further implies that it was a minor incident compared to the deluge which follows.

Rhys's attention to the mot juste, her emendations, deletions and corrections, demonstrate that her simple sentences are achieved after careful attention to social detail, linguistic selection, literary tradition, and the sound and rhythm of the words themselves. The meaning of her work is processed by the form. Between the fourth and fifth drafts there are almost ninety corrections, deletions and transformations of sentences. Between the fifth and sixth, there are nine changes and ten deletions. Most of the corrections to the fifth draft include the deletion of descriptive words like "very" and "almost," the substitution of shorter phrases for long ones and the re-arrangement of words in a sentence. The length of the individual sentences varies to provide a rhythm to the flow of the story. The average length of a sentence is about twenty words, but longer sentences are followed by very short ones. In the second paragraph, for example, the first sentence consists of forty-one words, followed by eight.

Critics who insist that Jean Rhys's "life" must be used to explain her "art" would encounter contradicting evidence in the draft manuscripts not only of her short stories and novels, but also in those from which she works to produce an explicitly autobiographical work, "How I Became a Novelist." The first draft of the manuscript for the essay is undated but believed to be circa 1974. It is heavily marked and includes alternative versions of several passages. The second text of the manuscript is also undated and is very heavily revised and the opening sections differ completely from the first text.30
fourth manuscript is dated September 14, 1974 and bears close resemblance to the second. Another text of the same manuscript includes a full page insert which carries the story forward. The next manuscript, undated, is much longer, twenty-three pages to the previous thirteen, and includes manuscript versions of pieces from Wide Sargasso Sea. The last available version is heavily revised and sometimes the handwriting is indistinct. It is part of an earlier draft and was published as "Overtures and Beginners" in Smile Please. Part of the short story "Kismet" has also been worked into this manuscript.

An examination of the various manuscripts reveals that the autobiographical work undergoes a series of remarkable transformations which are not essentially different from the technical methods Rhys uses when she is processing her literary projects to produce a work of fiction. The reworking of text which involves concision, clarity, the mot juste, suppression and rearrangement, demonstrates that the author's writing is an end in itself. If there are parallels between her life and the motifs of her fiction, the transformation which takes place under the technical and linguistic pressure of writing makes the real connection between writing and living, art and life, impossible to prove. The most effective way of understanding and using Rhys's oft-quoted statement, "If you want to write the truth you must go out from yourself ... I am the only real truth I know," is, as Harriett Blogett suggests, to make a clear distinction between "truths" and "facts" or "events":

The most important debt of her fiction to her life actually remains inaccessible, except by inference. Her novels ... reproduce a sensibility rather than a biography. ... Rhys produces experiences, reactions, sensations, and attitudes more consequentially than she does events or circumstances. Thus, not Jean Rhys, but how life educates the sensibilities becomes the subject of her fiction. She recaptures the effects of the pressures of her life; she also extracts from them a perspective on suffering which gives her novels a humaneness not yet acknowledged by her critics.

Facts are fidelity to reality, but truth suggests a world that gives the semblance of reality and includes more. To work toward this "more" is a mark of literary devotion, not a confession of life experiences.

In discussing how she proceeds as a writer, Rhys says that she imagines a shape for her work, leaving in whatever fits into that shape and omitting what does not. It is this same method which she applies to her autobiographical writing. The two different beginnings of the second manuscript are useful as a means of examining the way in which shape or form not only produces but accretes meaning:

We were sitting by the fire in the small sitting room when Camilla said: "I simply hate my father, don't you?" Hail was rattling against the red-curtained window. I'd been told about snow long before I left the West Indies but hail was a surprise and exciting in its way. Another red curtain hung over the door which led into a long passage and the empty classrooms.

It must have been a very cold winter for we spent a good deal of our time huddled near the fire in the small dining room. That evening I was listening to hail rattling against the red-curtained windows while Camilla talked about her love affair. She was
seventeen - a year older than I was.\(^\text{37}\)

The first beginning is the one which she uses in all subsequent drafts. This choice demonstrates how the process of conscious selection of narrative detail is used to construct the shape of the project. The reference to Camilla's age father opens the way for a recounting of how Jean Rhys (as a construct within this piece of writing) came to be in England, how she left the West Indies and the part her father and other members of her family played in her move. In choosing one aspect of the conversation (whether the words are indeed factual or not germane) to open her work, Rhys is selecting from and thereby distorting the substance of her lived reality to make it serve for art. The facts of her existence cannot be recuperated fairly or accurately from her words. If such ambiguity arises in an overtly autobiographical piece, how much more so would it apply in a deliberately constructed fictive piece? What the writer seems to be proposing in her autobiographical writing is the construction of a fictive self through which she can impart the "truth" of her perceptions, sensibility and intellect.

The penultimate draft of the manuscript is an extended piece which includes details suppressed in the other drafts. One piece of factual information contained in the manuscript is that Rhys's father died when she was at drama school and she was forced to leave for financial reasons. The form through which his death and its effect upon her is expressed, demonstrates the way in which the transformation from life to art distances the former and makes the writing itself the subject and object of enquiry:

I was to spend a vacation with relatives in Yorkshire and one morning very early my uncle woke me with a cablegram, the news of my father's sudden death. I was quite calm and he seemed surprised. The thing was I didn't really believe him. All that early autumn Harrogate was full of music concertinas, harpists, barrel-organs and one afternoon in an unfamiliar street I heard a man's voice singing "It may be for years and it may be forever" I burst into tears. Once started I was unable to stop and was soon packed off to responsible Aunt Clare in Wales. "You cry" she told me the day after I arrived, "without any reticence." I thought "And you watch me without any reticence." However in a week or two my mind played its usual tricks. I remembered him vividly, photographically what he looked like, the way he talked. I hardly remembered him at all. Also I was still quite certain that in some way impossible to explain it was not true. They were all making a great mistake. \(^{38}\)

The "event" in Jean Rhys's life invites close scrutiny and practical criticism. The use of the musical instruments as a catalysis to underscore and reveal the experienced emotional trauma and the way in which the feelings erupt suddenly and intensely after a period of numbness and silence is a narrative device used in the creation of fiction. The "hesitations" and "recastings" seen in deletions and punctuation changes are staple techniques of narrative discourse. The changes she makes are demanded by the internal requirement of the writing. As a writer Jean Rhys consciously crafts the techniques of narrative writing to render immediately and vividly the pressures on the sensibilities of certain life experiences.

Her draft manuscripts reveal that the raw material of Rhys's art is not he:
life, but language itself, a literary tradition which she manipulated to reveal her own vision of the world. Ultimately, the selected events of her life which form a base for her imaginative writing cannot be considered important in themselves to the Rhysian oeuvre.

If Rhys is constantly struggling with language, to mould it, to convey her particular vision and truth, she accepts the government of language and literary tradition. Language shapes and limits her enterprise. It dictates the nature of the writing itself and what can be written. It is in this sense that Rhys accepts that she is an amanuensis:

"I'm a pen. I'm nothing but a pen."
"And do you imagine yourself in someone's hand?"
"Of course. Of course. It's only then that I know I'm writing well. It's only then that I know my writing is true. Not really true, as fact. But true as writing. That's why I know the Bible is true. . . . the writing is true, it reads true. Oh to be able to write like that! But you can't do it. It's not up to you. You're picked up like a pen, and when you're used up you're thrown away, ruthlessly, and someone else is picked up. You can be sure of that: someone else will be picked up."^39

The view of herself as an instrument of language and literary tradition is shared by two of the outstanding modernist practitioners, often praised for their innovative techniques - Joyce and Proust. Joyce observes, "I am content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man for that seems to be a harsh but not unjust description."^40 The narrating consciousness of Proust's autobiographical work A la Recherche du temps perdu observes,

Je m'apercevais que ce livre essentiel, le seul livre vrai, un grand écrivain n'a pas, dans le sens courant, à l'inventer, puisqu'il existe déjà en chacun de nous, mais à le traduire. Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain son ceux d'un traducteur."^41

Although Rhys repudiates some of the ideological assumptions of Western cultural values and practices manifest in writers like Proust, Joyce and her mentor Ford, her relationship with the European conventions remains a problematic one. Since the ideology is secreted in the language, the most careful selection and honing notwithstanding, her work still reveals areas of compromise with the dominant culture. These compromises reveal themselves in different but interrelated ways.

One important area of compromise relates to the circumstances of publication for what, perhaps not surprisingly, is her favourite work, Voyage in the Dark. On June 20, 1934, Rhys wrote to fellow-writer Evelyn Scott about the problems she was encountering with her novel:

I'd been feeling down as hell. The book is having decidedly stormy weather. I minded more than I would have believed possible as I've always prided myself on being more or less indifferent to what most people thought about a book once it was finished. Self deception obviously - . . . Cape had written and told me how grey I was, without light or shade, how people would dislike it, that he couldn't hope to sell it even as well as Mackenzie etc and so on, then Hamish Hamilton
wanted it cut so much that it would become meaningless. . . .

Sadleir of Constable likes it and has written very kindly about it but he also wants it cut. Not of course his own taste he explains but to please prospective readers.42

Rhys's letter shows her awareness that her writing is part of an industry: a commodity produced by publishers and sold on the market for profit. The internal nature and form of what she writes is determined by this factor. She recognises that she must compromise, as the readership is an important part of her writing:

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. . . . I know the ending is the only possible ending.43

Some thirty years later she recalls the experience and insists that she was right and they wrong:

I remembered the last part of "Voyage in the Dark" written . . . [with] 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, tho' it was long ago).44

Despite the compromises she made, mainly though not exclusively in matters of publication and readership, Rhys remained true to her vision during her long career. Her work represents a complex and subtle dialogue between the language traditions and literary practices of the metropolitan society and her own sense of herself as colonial outsider and woman within that cultural milieu.

NOTES


5Ibid., p. 101.


8Ford Madox Ford, Preface to The Left Bank and Other Stories, (London, Cape,

9Jean Rhys, "How I became a novelist," unpublished manuscript, final draft, undated, Jean Rhys Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.


14Ibid., p. 395.


16Unnumbered notebook, British Library, circa 1939.

17Folio 152, British Library, Jean Rhys Manuscripts.

18Jean Rhys, "The Bible is Modern," Item no. 14, Jean Rhys Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.


20Plante, Difficult Women, p. 53.

21Letters, p. 137.

22Jean Rhys, "Before the Deluge," Items 26-29, Jean Rhys Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

23Ibid., Item. no. 27.


26Sleep It Off Lady, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979), p. 84.

27Letters, p. 113.


29Jean Rhys, "Leaving School: How I Became a Novelist," Item no. 48, Jean Rhys Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. Many details from this
long essay are reworked into Smile Please.

30Ibid., Item no. 49.
31Ibid., Item no. 51.
32Ibid., Item no. 52.
33Ibid., Item no. 53.
34Ibid., Item no. 54.
37Item no. 49, Jean Rhys Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.
38Ibid., Item no. 54.
41Marcel Proust, A la Recherche du temps perdu, quoted in Josipovici, op. cit., p. 119.
42Letters, pp. 24-25.
43Letters, p. 25.
44Letters, p. 233.

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