

perfumed air, the solace of the flowers and the earth, and the clear water tasting neither of vinegar nor the casks, they will speak in voices that, after the roar and babble of a month at sea, seem strange to them, as though from long disuse. Here, standing in the tree's crossed shadow, they will pronounce the new name for the place, and although at first their voices are lost in the crush crush of the waves along the beach and echo strangely from the chambered woods behind it, singing, they will mark it in the air. Just like that will the dreamed-of place be known.

That is tomorrow. Tonight we are still at sea and even now, somewhere in the darkness out before us the beach is asking its eternal question. It is the same question that it asks and asks of all the waves that lisp along it - listen, listen. The sailors do not hear it yet. They do not hear it yet.

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## REFLECTIONS & RESPONSES

*JEAN RHYS - THEY DESTROYED ALL THE ROSES.*

Jan Louter, Director. Amsterdam: A Viewpoints & NPS production, 1997.  
70 minutes, in Dutch and English, with English subtitles.

Martien Kappers

Rhys aficionados will be both elated and frustrated by Jan Louter's documentary film *Jean Rhys - They Destroyed All the Roses*, which was shown at the Rotterdam International Film Festival, and subsequently on the Dutch Third TV Channel, in the course of 1997.<sup>1</sup> Elated, because a visual documentary on Rhys's life and work is surely long overdue. Elated because Louter has captured on screen before it is too late, information that only people who have actually known Rhys can provide. Elated, too, because Louter's film is a sensitive, empathic and honest attempt at capturing the obsessional quality of Rhys's tormented career. But they will also be frustrated, because the film focuses so near-exclusively on *Wide Sargasso Sea* and on the Dominican-English duality of Rhys's life and work. Frustrated as well because so much of its space is taken up by atmospheric shots meant to convey that very duality, whereas the continent of Europe, scene of highly dramatic events in Rhys's life as well as of her most productive years, is rarely mentioned and is in fact not "shown" at all. Viewers unfamiliar with the Rhys saga may well be under the impression, at the end of Louter's film, that between the blue-misted mountains of a lush tropical Dominica, and the bleak hills of a snowy wintry Devonshire, nothing much happened to her. Indeed, as the film's publicity blurb informs us, *They Destroyed All the Roses* aims not so much at traditional biographical documentation as at visualization of the impact on Rhys of Dominica as the "lost paradise of her youth" - both in terms of her personal tragedy and as her main source of literary inspiration.

Far from accidentally, as it turns out, the film's self-imposed limitations coincide with the central focus of *Goedenavond, Mrs Rhys* (*Good Evening, Mrs Rhys*), a "factional" travel-report about a visit made to Dominica in the early 90s by Louter's childhood friend Jan Brokken (discussed in the *Jean Rhys Review*, 7, 1-2). Indeed, Brokken is a silent actor in Louter's film, which loosely follows his journey (by rail, on boat) from Holland through England to the West Indies, and back again. The opening shot is that of a train leaving Amsterdam Central Station, followed by Brokken tramping around London, alighting (presumably) on the English south-west coast, visiting Rhys's house, her neighborhood and, movingly, her grave; thence on board ship in West Indian waters; in an around Roseau, with Carnival and other street scenes, at Rhys's family house, at Geneva Plantation, etc., and, finally, striding through the Dominican rainforest. The film ends with a train pulling out of the same coastal station - presumably back to base. The whole is interspersed with voice-over readings from Brokken's book, as well as from Rhys's own work.

It is hard to see, however, what Brokken's presence adds to this film (apart from perpetuating his professed self-identification with Rhys's nostalgia for a lost tropical paradise). This is the more regrettable because Louter could apparently find no room for an interview with a far more interesting Dutchman (from the biographical point-of-view): the writer Jan van Houts who visited Rhys in Cheriton Fitzpaine in 1970. That five-day visit made such an impression on her that she wrote a story about it, "Who Knows What's Up in the Attic?" (published in 1976), followed (in 1982) by van Houts's fictional counterpart, "Het Gaatje in het Gordijn," which appeared under the title "The Hole in the Curtain," in Pierrette Frickey's *Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys* (1990). Van Houts's absence here is not only a sad but also a surprising omission, since Louter incorporates in his documentary various shots taken from the fascinating 8mm silent film the former made on the occasion (with Rhys's full permission). These film fragments show Jean Rhys in a rare relaxed mood; mutely smiling at van Houts behind the forsythia-grown window of her cottage; routinely having a puff at her cigarette; gracefully posing in her best hat on a sunlit coastal beach; in short, having a good time in apparently congenial company. One can only deplore that Louter missed the (perhaps last) opportunity of interviewing on screen a visitor with whom Jean Rhys had such a special rapport that she entrusted him with arranging a short holiday, and actually allowed him to record it on film. And one can only wonder at Louter's choice to interview, instead, another admirer who made the long trek to Cheriton Fitzpaine, but found the door closed in his face: the Dominican historian Lennox Honychurch. He tells a comical tale of arriving unannounced, being stopped at the door by Diana Athill (whom he mistakes for Rhys's secretary), and returning to London without having exchanged a single word with Jean Rhys. Honychurch, with his marked Dominican accent, is an excellent guide to the vanished world of Rhys's youth. His empathy with Rhys's sense of displacement as a white West Indian, in Dominica as well as in England, does not, however, justify Louter's choice of him as a documentary witness to Rhys's old age.

But perhaps we should count our blessings rather than our losses. For Louter has managed to interview various other formidable witnesses of important stages in Rhys's life: her daughter Maryvonne Lenglet, her literary executor Francis Wyndham, her editor Diana Athill and her Devon neighbour Joan Butler. (Of her youth in Dominica, her late teens in England, and her mature years on the Continent there are, alas, no longer any living witnesses.)

At 74, Maryvonne Moerman-Lenglet manifests a striking resemblance to her mother (who is 80 in van Houts's film fragment; "76," she herself would have said). Though Rhys "did her best," she singularly failed to be a "nice" mother, so Mrs. Moerman feels; in fact, her life was "rather a failure" altogether, except for her work, Rhys's "only source of consolation." She states with great

emphasis that there is no reason for pitying her mother: "She would not have appreciated that; she often said 'it's my own fault.' My mother's books did not mean much to me," the daughter adds. "All that griping; and I thought, 'well, woman, get up and do something about it.' That never happened in her books. The poor women did nothing ...."

Francis Wyndham, commenting that Rhys "had a theme that did not suit everyone" (namely, the "rather unacceptable truth ... of what it is like to be a person"), unwittingly provides a retort to Mrs. Moerman's self-proclaimed aversion. He has perceptive things to say about the avant-garde quality of Rhys's work, which he characterizes as Modernist without its conscious experimentation. Going back to the years of Rhys's "disappearance," Wyndham recalls how during the second World War he picked up *Voyage in the Dark* in a second-hand bookshop, but was unable to trace her other work, so that he had to resort to the famous Reading Room of the British Library. Pointing to Rhys's spidery handwriting on one or two manuscript proofs of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, taken from his executor's archives, Wyndham comments that what seems at first sight a startling mass of chaotic-looking corrections, possibly written when Rhys was drunk, reveals on closer inspection to have a logic quite its own.

Diana Athill, too, stresses that Rhys's alcoholism was not necessarily an impediment. "Jean drank a lot, but ... she kept a very good front up and she was always extremely elegant, and not in any way drunk. But ... one realized, gradually, that she kept herself going on alcohol, largely.... The first couple of drinks gave her the strength to write, ... and then she would begin to get very charming with about the third drink, and she would be delightful ... - you could suddenly see the girl of 18 that she used to be ...; absolutely enchanting.... And then it would go a bit further and she would become tearful. And then, if it went too far of course, it was dreadful; she would then be violent and there would be terrible scenes" (Maryvonne Lenglet agrees that her mother's drinking was not always a problem: "I was used to it. I never blamed her for it. She needed it to flee from reality.") Athill lends support to the controversial story of Rhys (at 17) having left Dominica because of "an unsuitable love affair or flirtation of some sort (...) with a coloured boy": "she once said to me something that implied that was in fact so." She postulates that mad Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a projection of Rhys's own recurrent mental breakdowns, of which she was deeply ashamed. She also points out that in her personal life Rhys retained a far more conservative attitude towards the effects of slavery on black and white people in the West Indies than might be expected from reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "She was quite an old-fashioned traditional planter."

It was because of the success of that final novel that her dutiful Cheriton neighbour Joan Butler, Louter's last important screen witness, came into Rhys's life. When she read in the papers about the famous author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she realized that was none other than the "eccentric and rather unpleasant" old Mrs. Hamer who would not return the villagers' greetings, and who was gossiped to be a witch. Like Rhys's daughter, Mrs. Butler feels impatient with the passivity of Rhys's heroines, nor does she manifest much sympathy with their author's personality: "It was as though she was determined not to be grateful for anything." When fame and recognition came with the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "all she could say, ever, was, 'It's come too late.'" Rhys was blind to the beauties of the Devonshire countryside too, her neighbour adds with some indignation, and would incessantly talk, with great nostalgia, about the lost scenery of her Dominican childhood. "It was as though she did not want to appreciate our English landscape" (a point convincingly carried by the recurring shots in Louter's film of a beautiful but bleak Devonshire that would have inspired Rhys with chilly horror).

As for the writing life itself: the sensuous elegance of Rhys's poetic prose is successfully evoked by the many voice-overs of fragments read from her work, underlining, but also occasionally undermining, the visual scenes they accompany, once more pointing out the basic duality in her life. Thus, a wintry English landscape may coincide with a reading from *Wide Sargasso Sea* or vice-versa. Various "stills" (shots of stage-like arrangements such as an old-fashioned hotel bedroom strewn with frilly Edwardian clothes, cosmetics, candlesticks, pens and sheets of writing-paper, or of a table with inkstand, notebook, whiskey-bottle and overflowing ashtray) only whet the viewer's appetite for more original biographical documentation than Louter's film has to offer. However, the film's strongest point comes at the end, which brilliantly knits together what has gone before. With a surprise amounting to near-shock, the audience, having been exposed to a number of divergent views and opinions about this difficult woman and gifted writer, of whom they have seen only a few tantalizing glimpses and of whose work they have heard only unrelated fragments, are suddenly confronted with the living author herself, as she addresses them in her own quavery voice, in the sole television interview with Rhys that the BBC had the blessed inspiration to record, in 1974, and preserve. As Jean Rhys finally comes alive for us on screen as she was, and not as others saw her, her disarming and intelligent retort that, no, she supposed she had "never had a long period of being happy - d'you think anybody has?" instantly gains our sympathy. Her subsequent lamentation that, though writing helps against unhappiness, nevertheless, "if I had to choose, then I'd rather be happy than write," makes sense of much that seemed uneasy in what we have seen and heard before. It still rings in our ears as the final credits flash by on the screen. Frustrated as we may have felt at times by what Louter's film failed to give us, its apotheosis leaves us ultimately elated, and grateful for the treasures it did have to offer.

<sup>1</sup>The film's preview in Amsterdam and its sequel in Rotterdam attracted a sizable Dutch "Jean Rhys crowd," among them J.J. Peereboom, the first Dutch journalist to visit Rhys in Devon (in 1967), Jan Louter, Jan Brokken, Jan van Houts, Maryvonne Lenglet Moerman, and the reviewer, while Diana Athill came over from England, and Lennox Honychurch from Dominica.

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