laissant l'évidence implacable de l'objet envahir le texte. La représentation ne semble que pouvoir créer un objet bloc, qui, à peine sorti des limbes de l'amorphe, s'immobilise là, dans son identité massive et soude de chose sur laquelle vient buter l'écriture. C'est alors un travail de prémption-déperdition qui s'opère. Prémption de l'objet en son identité, déperdition du sens. À peine arraché à l'indifférence, l'objet porte, au plus manifeste de sa présence, le silence. Les descriptions, pourtant bribes éparples, se frôlent, menacent de se fondre l'une à l'autre: il ne s'agit plus que d'une description d'un seul objet. Comme si la représentation se paralysait dans la reconnaissance de cette assertion immobile de l'objet.

A travers ces deux écritures de l'objet s'élabore le même travail du deuil. Hallucinant l'objet perdu, l'Ile édénique, et le maintenant vivant dans l'espace du fantasme, la représentation participe de la même démarche mélancolique dont Pierre Fédida dit qu'elle est "moins la réaction régressive à la perte d'un objet que la capacité fantasmétique ou hallucinatoire de le maintenir vivant comme objet perdu." Lieu et temps de l'épiphanie, l'Ile est comme un espace sacré où, dans la fusion du sujet, de son univers et de son langage, semblait pouvoir s'abolir la question de l'origine puisque tout y était célébration de l'adéquation parfaite, de l'instant projeté comme hors du temps. Pourtant le simulacre sur lequel repose l'hallucination donne à entendre une déchirure, un silence de l'image mythique. Eloignée de sa source, la représentation se tarit, se fige dans le constat de l'Objet.

NOTES


2 Luce Irigaray, "Du fantasme et du verbe," "Freud," L'Arc, no. 34, p. 98.

3 In Sigmund Freud, Métapsychologie, Paris: Gallimard, collection Idées, 1940, p. 150.


§ § §

MAGICKED BY THE PLACE: SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE IN WIDE SARGASSO SEA

Stephanie Branson

From 1963 to 1966, Jean Rhys worked relentlessly despite her own advanced age and paralyzing despair, and despite her husband's illness and death, to complete a novel which "...nourished the renaissance of her literary career. Wide Sargasso Sea rose out of a quarter century of silence, and began a second wave of fiction flowing from Rhys's pen. As one of the "West Indian" novels, Wide Sargasso Sea is associated with what Teresa O'Connor..."
Rhys’s need, to reinvokethe myth of her own beginnings: her colonial upbringing in a land that is for her at once female- and black-identified, a place for which she yearns and which is at best indifferent to her.¹

In a letter to Diana Athill, her editor at André Deutsch, dated April 1966, Rhys writes that she is “sad” to have been “so long” at writing the novel, “but it was a difficult book and done under very difficult circumstances.”²

Part Six of the 1984 edition of Rhys’s correspondence, in particular letters to critic and longtime supporter Francis Wyndham, and to Diana Athill, chronicles that struggle. But the letters do more than tell the story of the painful creation of Wide Sargasso Sea; in one sense they form a subtext for the novel. Rhys discusses in the letters characters and themes, explains difficult passages, and offers fictional supplements in the form of poetry.

Employing the letters, one can trace Wide Sargasso Sea from “skeleton” (Rhys’s term) to incarnation through the publication of Antoinette’s narrative in the first issue of Art and Literature (1964), to intermediate versions, represented by a typescript version of the novel revised between the publication of Part I and the publication of the complete novel by Deutsch in 1966. The typescript is part of the Rhys Collection in McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa.³

An examination of the letters, of the typescript, and of a short story, “The Whistling Bird,” which grew out of a discarded passage of the novel, provides a context indispensable to a thorough reading of Wide Sargasso Sea. These peripheral texts are “shadows” of the primary text which is the subject of this study - they offer, for a novel rich in magic and mystery, a further dimension. In particular, it is my purpose to analyze two segments from the typescript of the novel which, although deleted from the published text, function nevertheless as a supplement to Rhys’s portrayal of Dominica in Wide Sargasso Sea.

Rhys herself indicates the need for another dimension in regard to her portrayal of her homeland. She writes to Wyndham that she “suddenly saw that [she] must lift the whole thing out of real life into - well on to a different plane” insisting that “it is dark Dominica. Or was” (Letters, 277). In another letter to Wyndham, Rhys writes that she “could not get Dominica.” She suggests that “perhaps that can only be got (by me) sidelong, sideways - a throw away line as it were. If at all.” (Letters, 279)

Rhys’s dilemma lay in writing a modern novel for a somewhat literal-minded British or American audience which would convey a sense of the non-rational, passionate land which she herself understood, but which eluded explanation or even illustration in that form. Perhaps all good writing is an act of translating almost inexpressible ideas into words. But Rhys’s own fiction had predisposed her audience to the portrayal of realistic experience, in recognizable locales like London and Paris, of ordinary if perversely desperate women contemporary to their audience. In Wide Sargasso Sea Rhys diverges dramatically from the stream of her previous discourse, launches into (or on to) the “sea of wrecks” (Letters, 261) which divides England from Dominica, or the known from the unknown.

The gap was bridged with the intermediary language of poetry. Rhys indicates that writing poems was always an easy “exercise for her, something she had done since the age of ten or twelve (Letters, 261). She describes the process by which she overcame her block regarding the novel:

Then I got this idea of making the last chapter partly “poetry” - partly prose - songs, anything.... It is not finished or polished up at all. I may not have done it.... Anyway it would be fun to do a whole book like
Many passages in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are poetic without being poetry in the strictest sense. Thomas Staley describes Rhys's achievement in writing the novel as "considerable, especially in the way it captures with a lyrical intensity the rhythm between the physical and metaphysical world." But Rhys's impulse to experiment with poetry and prose was held in check, due to real or imagined expectations on the part of her audience, and it may be that her difficulty in rendering the rhythms of Dominica was intensified by that limitation.

One case in point: Rhys indicates in a letter to Diana Athill that the second part of the novel, Rochester's narrative, posed a greater challenge than the other two-thirds, of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She writes:

> Damned old Part II!! Never mind - Rot chucked out. Bits put in. Even spelling fixed up. Still it was (to me) dead as a dead heart. Not all of course. (Letters, 269)

Part II was revived, Rhys tells us, when she set aside her novel on the advice of "one of these old hat lot" and wrote a series of poems. The second of these, entitled "Obeah Night" and signed "Edward Rochester or Raworth/Written in Spring 1842," Rhys calls "the Breakthrough" (Letters, 269). "I have tried to show this man being magicied by the place which is (or was) a lovely, lost and magic place" (Letters, 269). Writing the episode of the night of "angry love" in free verse allowed Rhys to work through her block (Letters, 262-3).

"Obeah Night" is printed in full in the Wyndham/Melly edition of the letters (264-6). In the poem, Rochester ruminates over the events of that night: "I saw Love's dark face/Was Love's dark face ... 'I was a god myself last night/I've tamed and changed a wild girl!'" (lines 3-4, 12-13). He reproaches himself for not embracing the love which was offered: "I turned away - Traitor/Too sane to face my madness (or despair)/Far, far too cold and sane" (lines 31-32). He covers his wife, "a sleeping girl," and closes his heart to her: "No. I'll lock that door/Forget it.-" (lines 70-71). The poem ends with Rochester's chagrin:

> Lost, lovely Antoinette
> How can I forget you
> When the spring comes?...
> Where did you go?
> I'll never see you now
> I'll never know
> For you left me—my truest Love
> Long ago

("Obeah Night," Letters, 266)

The tenderness of this refrain was lost, either by design or by default, in the passage of *Wide Sargasso Sea* which corresponds to it. On page 137 of the novel Rochester relates the following: "I woke in the dark after dreaming that I was buried alive, and when I was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted." Unlike the speaker in "Obeah Night," the narrator of the pages which follow in the novel acknowledges no loss of love for Antoinette. The Rochester of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the "cold and sane" individual the speaker of the poem considers himself to be; the moment of lucidity, of complete understanding experienced by the speaker of "Obeah Night" is not part of the consciousness of Rochester in the novel.

In a passage deleted from the published version of *Wide Sargasso Sea* but legible still on the typescript, Rochester, who in the printed text is just about to take food...
from Amélie, understands. The typescript reads “I looked at the shadows and for a
time it touched me the meaning of shadows and the mystery of all things” (138). Rhys
withholds this level of understanding from Rochester, deleting the passage from the
printed text, but provides it to Antoinette, who even as a child in the convent knows
“meaning of shadows”:

Everything was brightness, or dark. The walls, the blazing colours of
the flowers in the garden, the nuns’ habits were bright, but their
veils, the Crucifix hanging from their waists, the shadow of the tree
were black. That was how it was, light and dark, sun and shadow, Heaven
and Hell .... I felt bolder, happier, more free. But not so safe.

As Antoinette matures, she begins to understand the dual nature of existence, and this
knowledge frees her while at the same time it endangers her. Her understanding binds her
to her mother, to her Aunt Cora, indeed to all the women (and to some black men) in the
novel.

In the house-burning episode of Part I, Antoinette hears bamboos creak outside the
bedroom of Coulibri. She forces herself to look out, but sees “nothing but shadows in
moonlight (37). Her mother had understood the violence building up around the house and
pleaded with “Mr. Mason” to leave: “I will not stay at Coulibri any longer .... it is not
safe. It is not safe for Pierre” (35); Mr. Mason, an outsider, a white male, believes the
“shadows” are harmless - “they are children - they wouldn’t hurt a fly” (35); Aunt Cora,
an initiate, rejoins, “unhappily children do hurt flies” (35). In this scene, as elsewhere in the novel, white males are excluded from participation in the shadow world, which has its outward expression in obeah. This reinforces O’Connor’s assertion (quoted in my introduction) that for Rhys, Dominica is “female- and black-identified.” Mr. Mason’s lack of understanding of the power of shadow is echoed by Rochester’s inability to understand Antoinette or the island. Thus, Rhys demonstrates one difference between women and men, and between black and white men. It is largely a question of power versus
powerlessness; on the island, it is the power of shadow which dominates, whereas in
England, money and property, principally in the hands of white men like Rochester, rule. Mason and Rochester are products of the “cardboard world where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it” (Wide Sargasso Sea, 181), a world Antoinette refuses to believe is England. It is Thornfield, seat of power for Rochester, for Antoinette a prison.

The understanding accorded in varying degrees to the women in the novel provides
freedom, but not safety. Antoinette’s mother understands obeah, and fears its power. However, she is unable to use this knowledge, either to save herself or her son (she
expresses no wish to save Antoinette) and she escapes into madness. Aunt Cora
understands, and she is able to nurture Antoinette until she becomes an adult. However, not even Christophine, priestess of obeah and more knowledgeable than anyone in the novel regarding the shadow World, is able to save Antoinette from Rochester, from exile and death in England. Antoinette refuses to believe is England. It is Thornfield, seat of power for Rochester, for Antoinette a prison.

Rochester is, however, on the verge of understanding. This is due perhaps to his
association with Antoinette, or to his relative lack of power as a younger son, manipulated by a father and older brother at a time when he is weakened by fever and
untired in the ways of the world. In a second segment deleted from the printed version
of the novel Rochester approaches understanding. Once again, Rhys was on the verge of
including in the novel an experimental passage which, like the poem “Obelah Night,” evokes
the passion of Antoinette’s world. It comes on pages 77-8 of the typescript and
corresponds to page 87 of the novel. Rochester is bathing alone in the pool, musing on
the wild beauty of his surroundings. He refers to the “secret” of the place, to the “not
nothing” hidden by what he can see - the surface beauty of the mountain pool, what Rhys
calls “lovely beaches or smiling people” - the outsider’s view of Dominica, an illusion
Following the phrase "that is not nothing" in the Deutsch text comes the following passage in the typescript:

Still a touch of fever? Half asleep? Dreaming? But I'd be broad awake and turn sharply not knowing what I wished or feared to see, certain I would see it.

Here! Now! Look if you dare ... Only a long shadow (was it there before?) or a tree waving wildly and no wind to wave it. Waiting, listening. That is the mountain whistler calling, the solitaire, and the sound comes from the dark, feared forest. Why are they afraid of the forest? I'll follow your whistle. Tell me which way to go. Which way? No answer. Silence. The shadow's gone, the tree like any other tree, the green water flows past smiling. But so cold. So cold that smile and I am cold too, shivering in the sun. More shadow than sun - it's time to go. Which way? Which way?

This discarded passage represents an experiment to describe what may be experienced beneath the surface reality of Dominica. What is the long shadow to which she refers?

The natural world surrounding her narrator comes alive in a supernatural way - the tree speaks without external stimulus, the bird's call takes on prophetic importance. The visionary state into which Rochester falls is only momentary, as if outsiders, even those potentially initiated into the shadow world through passionate contact with its inhabitants, are privileged with only a glimpse of the truth. As is true of the previous segment deleted from the printed text, in deleting this passage Rhys withholds ultimately an understanding of that world from white males in the novel. Rochester gives voice to...

Rhys' comments on the deleted passage in the letter referred to earlier in which she writes she "could not get Dominica" (to Wyndham, 21 May 1964). She continues:

I put a red line near the bit I'll cut or rewrite. All wrong and not so. The solitaire has only one note - and which way is more like a cuckoo - two notes..." But the Solitaire (the mountain whistler) is very wild and lovely and do hope there are some left - and not all trapped or something. You only hear them high up." (Letters, 279)

Perhaps the sound of the bird was "all wrong" to Rhys - that the solitaire speaks of Dominica, that it embodies for Rhys the essence of that magic place, is undeniable. When Rochester is accompanying his bride to her home, once he is high enough, as Rhys insists above, he hears the bird:

A bird whistled, a long sad note. 'What bird is that?' She was too far ahead and did not hear me. The bird whistled again. 'A mountain bird. Shrii and sweet. A very lonely sound.' (Wide Sargasso Sea, 70)

Although this passage, like the one deleted, describes Rochester's impressions as he discovers the island, an outsider, alone (Antoinette is "too far ahead" of him) there is a difference in tone between the relatively conventional and realistic rendering here, and the more experimental, almost hallucinogenic quality of the deleted passage. In both, the solitaire's sound exemplifies its name. Rochester will never become a part of Antoinette's world, despite his desire to understand. In the passage in the novel immediately preceding the mention of the bird, he says "everything is too much... Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger." (70). "The surface quality of all that is the world Rochester sees reflects perhaps the intensity, the uncontrolled nature of the island itself.

Unlike England, it is a lawless place, or rather its laws are secret..."
Further evidence exists to support the association of the solitaire and Wide Sargasso Sea. In a short story entitled "The Whistling Bird," published in The New Yorker in 1978, Rhys tells the story of a West Indian cousin, Liliane, who is also a poet. As a baby Liliane is "dark, small, and silent, except that every now and again she would wail, a thin, strange cry..." (38). She grows to be a "strange girl, shyly away from any attempt to help her," and the story ends with her unexplained death, while still young, in England.

A poem which Liliane gives the narrator before she dies echoes the story of Wide Sargasso Sea: "Unlike the others, it was a sad song, about a man who kills his sweetheart, hides her body in the Dominica forest, and escapes to England before she is missed" (39). This could well serve as an alternate ending to the story of Rochester and Antoinette without the constraint of the Jane Eyre ending of Part III.

In the poem within the short story of "The Whistling Bird," the man "cannot forget his dead sweetheart because the whistling bird calls him" (39). After reciting the poem, Liliane speaks of the solitaire, wondering if there are any left in Dominica. The narrator answers that no one would buy a mountain whistler because, "if it were caught, it would probably die." Liliane's rejoinder, "Not at once," prophesies her own death after only a brief stay in England, and the title of the story comes to signify at once the bird itself, the "call" of Dominica, and Liliane.

The importance of the solitaire as symbol in Wide Sargasso Sea is reinforced by the fact that Rhys considered using "Solitaire" as a possible title for the novel. In a letter to Diana Athill Rhys writes that she is not "mad keen" on the title Wide Sargasso Sea, but that:

all the others I think of like "Solitaire" which is the French for our Mountain Whistler, or "Before the Break of Day" or "Speak for me" aren't attractive or they are "used" or have the wrong number of letters (very superstitious about that). (Letters, 257)

The mountain bird, like the power of obeah, is an elusive, evocative, essentially feminine symbol in the novel and short story. Freedom appears to be its only requirement - the "very lonely sound" it makes suggests that the price of freedom is loneliness. In the short story the bird and the woman, Liliane, are irrevocably linked, and both illustrate the fate of exotic beings transported to an alien environment. Rhys was herself sent to England at a young age and, by evoking what O'Connor terms "the myth of her own beginnings," she recaptures some of the magic of Dominica and of her childhood through Antoinette.

More ought to be said regarding the omitted passage, however. Overshadowing the lonely bird is another "figure" of note, that of the "long shadow" (typescript, 77). Throughout Wide Sargasso Sea, shadows weave in and out of the narrative, as much a part of the consciousness of the characters as are more palpable realities. Christophine, a "Martinique obeah woman" whom everyone save Antoinette fears, embodies the magic of obeah, a shadow world behind the placid exterior life of the island. Rhys writes to Wyndham: "The first clue [to the difficulties of the novel] is Obeah which I assure you existed, and still does, in Haiti, South America and of course in Africa - under different names: The others - sals pas. It was against the law in the 'English' islands" (Letters, 262).

Christophine is a sorceress, in whose room Antoinette expects to find the elements of witchcraft:

I was certain that hidden in the room (behind the old black press?) there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly. Drop by drop the blood was falling into a red basin and I imagined I could hear it. No one had
ever spoken to me about obeah - but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. *(Wide Sargasso Sea, 31)*

Antoinette has an intuitive understanding of magic because, despite the antipathy of the blacks, she is everywhere identified with the island. Staley describes Antoinette's position in this way:

> For all her estrangement from the native and black population, Antoinette is a part of the Islands; her attraction to the wild and the exotic confines her affinity; it ties her irrevocably to this land, in spite of her hostility to it and it to her. *(Jean Rhys, 103)*

I would argue that Antoinette's affinity is due at least in part to her positive relationship with Christophine, and thus with obeah. Even in Thornfield Hall, Antoinette invokes the power of obeah - she brings with her a red dress, a dress "the colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers" *(185)*. The scent of the dress becomes inexplicably stronger in Antoinette's hands, "the smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the spell of the rain" *(185)*. The dress reminds Antoinette of the island, of Sandi, finally of her purpose - to gain freedom, to burn the house down around her *(187)*.

In this scene, as elsewhere in the novel, Antoinette is imbued with supernatural significance. The boy with "the eyes of a dead fish" who harasses her on the way to school in Part I of the novel calls Antoinette, and her mother, zombies: "'She have eyes like zombie and you have eyes like zombie too.... One day I catch you alone, you wait, one day I catch you alone!'" *(48-50)*. However, Antoinette is alone until Sandi comes on the scene, after the boy has left. Perhaps her identification with zombies frightens the boy, limiting his behavior in the same way that Christophine's power limits the behavior of those around her. When Rochester threatens to have Christophine thrown out of Coulibri, she responds "'You think the men here touch me? They not damn fool like you to put their hand on me'" *(159)*.

Apparently Antoinette agrees with the boy that her mother is "zombie-like," as a result of the events at Coulibri which lead to her son's death. In a passage near the end of Antoinette's narrative, she prays, "This is for my mother, I would think, 'Wherever her soul is wandering, for it has left her body'" *(57)*. In regard to Rochester, Rhys says in a letter to Wyndham that in the poem "Obeah Night" Rochester consoles himself or justifies himself by saying that *his* Antoinette runs away after the "Obeah nights" and that the creature who comes back is not the one who ran away. I wish this had been thought of before - for that too is part of Obeah.

A Zombie is a dead person raised by the Obeah woman, it's usually a woman I think, and a zombie can take the appearance of anyone. Or anything.

But I did not write it that way and I'm glad, for it would have been a bit creepy! And probably, certainly I think, beyond me.

Still, it's a thought - for anyone who writes those sort of stories. *(Letters, 263)*

This seems a curious rumination on the part of Rhys regarding the role of magic in the novel. She suggests that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not a "ghost story" in the traditional sense. Neither is *Jane Eyre* a traditional ghost story, although it has supernatural aspects.

Admittedly, it is not traditional for the living heroine of a gothic tale to be its main ghost. But the barriers between life and death are broken down in a world in which magic reigns and, as Rochester's narrative relates, "I watched her die many times. In
my way, not in hers. In sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight" (72). Rochester describes the lovemaking of the honeymoon in this way, overtly connecting sex and death. Rochester's "way" of dying is sexual; we are not told what Antoinette's way of dying is - only that it is a different way. Antoinette literally embraces Rochester's method of dying, I contend, because in fact she is a ghost already. As Antoinette states near the end of her own narrative in Part I, she "learnt to gabble ... about changing now and the hour of our death for that is all we have" (57). The hour of Antoinette's death is the final hour of the novel, and she embraces her destiny in that instance as well:

I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage. (Wide Sargasso Sea, 190)

"The dark passage" could well be the passage from life to death. Here, as in the end of the short story "The Whistling Bird," death means deliverance from imprisonment.

But what of the passage from the known to the unknown, from fact to fiction, substance to shadow, the realistic to the poetic? Rhys seems to have lighted the way to imaginative prose through the writing of poetry; she was reluctant to extinguish the torch: "I wrote three poems to cure myself of sadness, now I've the greatest difficulty stopping myself doing everything in poetry" (Letters, 261). Later Rhys writes "As to what I wrote - The book as a whole must be considered and if Mr. X's poems get in the way then I will scrap them or turn them into prose" (Letters, 281). "Obeah Night" was turned into prose, perhaps others were "scraped," but it may be worth investigating what these poems were "in the way" of - the story line? reader expectation? publication?

Rhys does comment, however, on fact and fiction in the novel. In a letter to Athill, she writes of the composition of Wide Sargasso Sea:

I started off quite lightheartedly thinking I could do it easily, but I soon found out that it was going to be a devil, partly because I haven't much imagination really. I do like a basis of fact. I went on - sometimes blindly. (Letters, 297)

In a letter to Wyndham dated 27 May 1964, Rhys supplies further detail regarding the difficulties of writing Part II:

As to this strange love affair. Well I have the death wish myself and always have had, so can write about it. As to what he thinks - it's guessing. I do not know and can't do it in the usual way - by dialogue because I'm uncertain about that. Indeed all through the dialogue has been a stumbling block. I can remember. I can record speech. But I was not listening in 1840. (Letters, 281)

Several clues are hereby provided. First of all, Rhys clarifies that part of Antoinette's motivation throughout was the will to die; her final act, suicide, grew out of a conscious desire for freedom. This complicates Antoinette's role in the novel as "victim" of Rochester, who in turn may be considered the victim of his father, brother, or brother-in-law. Second, Rhys's intimation that she must guess what Rochester thinks, as if he were a living being rather than the product of her or Charlotte Brontë's imagination, suggests that Rhys feels herself outside of the writing process, an observer or recorder rather than a creator.

Rhys seems to be implying that she is like a journalist who keeps her ears open, records characteristic or authentic conversation, or who records events from the given subject, elaborating little upon them. Yet Wide Sargasso Sea is much more than
journalism, and attests to a great deal of imagination, as well as power of observation, on the part of its author. In the passage following the one quoted above, Rhys gets to what may be the heart of the matter.

I feel that I have failed in one important link. I want the man to fall in love with the place however unwillingly - the girl becomes a symbol of the elusive place. But not (he thinks) elusive. Well that’s enough of that - I will get it, if at all, sideways and throwaway - (Letters, 281)

Rhys suggests again that getting the island across to Rochester (and to her readers) poses the greatest challenge. Perhaps in the story the problem is that it is difficult to capture the beauty of loneliness, of tragedy, of death. In terms of the transmission to the reader of the essence of Dominica, the difficulty may lie in a restriction upon the use of what is, certainly, the “literature” of the islands - poetry in song, ideas as incantation. This may also be what comes most naturally to Rhys in terms of material; she rejects it as unsuitable.

For the brief time that Rochester is “magicked” by Antoinette and the island, he listens to the island’s music:

It was often raining when I woke during the night, a light capricious shower, dancing playful rain, or hushed, muted, growing louder, more persistent, more powerful, an inexorable sound. But always music, a music I had never heard before. (Wide Sargasso Sea, 90)

During the honeymoon period, Rochester is “haunted” by Antoinette’s songs, which she tries to teach him (91). Like the song of the solitaire, or the song/poem of the “The Whistling Bird,” the rain in the above passage expresses more eloquently than any conversation could the beauty, violence and loneliness of the island. The title Wide Sargasso Sea came originally from the title of a Creole song (“Gold Sargasso Sea”):

I suppose it could be called “Gold Sargasso Sea” which would be colourful and appropriate? The Creole song I took the title from was written by a cousin of mine. She comes from St Lucia and has given up these artless songs now. She says she can only sell ersatz. I’m sorry - for she was going to do a Chanson Creole to end all Chansons for me. She said it would take years. Like my book. (Letters, 253)

Rhys mentions more than once in the correspondence that the title she finally chose fit the poem “Obeah Night” more than it did her novel:

How about

“There comes a time” for title
The poem ties up with “Sargasso Sea”
but with very little in the book. It’s not important.
Yet. (Letters, 272)

Rhys’s letters as they are published in the Wyndham/Melly collection demonstrate wonderfully what the combination of prose, poetry, business and reminiscences offers. The letters may come closer to playing the music of Dominica than the novel does, because their rhythm is completely natural, unhindered by the rules of composition. However, at its best Wide Sargasso Sea is very evocative indeed, and rhythm is only one element of any kind of music. The novel reflects what Rhys had herself become - an amalgam of West Indian and British elements, perhaps Antoinette and Rochester rolled into one, passion controlled by society. It is nevertheless interesting to speculate on what she would have produced had she exerted less control. Perhaps the “myth of her beginnings” would have become (her)historical, perhaps she would have “gotten” Dominica more completely.
This possibility is made apparent by an examination of the letters, the novel in typescript and printed form, and of poetry or short stories which inform Wide Sargasso Sea. If Rhys is, in her own terms, "only the instrument" through which the music of Dominica is played, it is well to heed her caveat "...[the writer] must not be smashed. Or he goes bust. Then no music if you smash the violin" (Letters, 270). During the final two years of composition of the novel, her own health was often threatened, and her husband died. On March 9th, 1966 Rhys wrote to Diana Athill:

I feel that I've been walking a tight rope for a long, long time and have finally fallen off. I can't believe that I am so alone, and that there is no Max.

I've dreamt several times that I was going to have a baby - then I woke with relief.

Finally I dreamt that I was looking at the baby in a cradle - such a puny weak thing.

So the book must be finished, and that must be what I think about it really. I don't dream about it any more. (Letters, 301)

Rhys did complete Wide Sargasso Sea shortly thereafter, and she thus delivered into the world a child of some strength. What the letters, the deleted passages, and perhaps the short story "The Whistling Bird" demonstrate is that in some way Rhys may have become estranged from her work, for a number of complex reasons, long before its birth. This becomes important in the larger context of women novelists, or perhaps of novelists of the twentieth century in general. Rhys reminds us of the fragility of the writer's psyche before the maelstrom of the publishing world: "Then no music if you smash the violin." Rhys's understanding of the shadow world of Wide Sargasso Sea did not, perhaps, keep her safe from the vicissitudes of life; it may have allowed her to rise above them.

NOTES

3Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, typescript, Box 1: Folder 15, Jean Rhys Collection, Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.
5Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea, London, Andre Deutsch Limited, 1966, p. 57. All further references will be to this edition.

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