

§ § §

PAULA LE GALLEZ: *THE RHYS WOMAN. AN EXAMINATION OF CHARACTER IN THE WORK OF*  
 JEAN RHYS  
 NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 1990, 183 PAGES, \$35

Pearl Hochstadt

Paula Le Gallez's *The Rhys Woman* is a very interesting book that bears the marks of the strain between its imperfectly yoked intentions. Its best features include some very illuminating bits of textual exegesis, but the parts never quite come together into a coherent whole. Moreover, its style is initially so off-putting that if I hadn't been a reviewer I might never have gotten to the excellent material in the later chapters.

Le Gallez identifies her aims at the end of her Introduction: "I hope that the unconscious feminism of a consciously non-feminist writer will become clear in the process of the following reading, and also that the novels of Jean Rhys will be shown to having nothing to fear from the most detailed textual analysis" (8). And she provides a link between these two seemingly disparate objectives by claiming that her book is the first deliberate alternative to what she takes to be the prevailing tendency among critical readers of Rhys, namely the habit of reading the novels in terms of their autobiographical matrix. In her view, it is essential to reject the commonly held idea that these works form a continuum tracing the life history of a single heroine whose temperament and experience taken together invite her identification with her creator. Rather, each novel is to be examined as a self-contained text whose language is sufficient to reveal both the individuality of its protagonist and a more universal basis for the concept of "the Rhys woman": namely the idea that her apparent hallmark of "passivity" is the culturally determined product of patriarchal oppression. Unfortunately, though Le-Gallez's larger aims seem unexceptionable - surely a feminist component in Rhys's writing is easy to discern, and even more surely the work of such a consummate artist can stand up to close inspection - the actual development of her argument is troublesome.

To begin with, there is the question of what Le Gallez means when she claims that Rhys is an "unconscious" feminist. She notes that Rhys is on the record as stating that "I'm not at all for women's lib. I don't dislike women exactly, but I don't trust them" (5). Yet she goes on to argue that her writings nevertheless support the ideas of the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, which she then proceeds to summarize. According to Le Gallez, Dworkin's starting point is the claim that women are conditioned to be passive, but her far more sweeping conclusion is that whether women accept or reject their conditioning, they will be destroyed (Dworkin's word is "nullified") by their male oppressors. Moreover, in Dworkin's own words, "All forms of dominance and submission, whether it be man over woman, white over black, boss over worker, rich over poor, are tied irrevocably to the sexual identities of men and are derived from the male sexual model" (5). Now it is easy to see that Rhys's novels are partly consonant with such views; indeed, the equally depressed lives of the "good" Norah and the "bad" Julia in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* are a perfect illustration of Dworkin's gloomy prognosis. But it is one thing to concede that "dominance" is "derived from the male sexual model," quite another to ascribe all villainous oppression to men's "sexual identity." Such a wholesale condemnation of one half of humanity is utterly foreign to the spirit of Rhys's novels. As even Le Gallez acknowledges, "occasionally the men in her novels are shown to suffer oppression too" (6) - she might have added that very occasionally (like the painter Serge Rubin in *Good Morning, Midnight*) they are genuinely sympathetic. Yet rather than concede the possibility that Rhys's sympathies are "all-embracingly human," she prefers to insist that "women who are oppressed also require a strategy for

survival. They find it through their act of oppressing women" (6). This is a point worth returning to.

A second problem concerns Le Gallez's language. Her book is a revised doctoral dissertation, and it sometimes seems as if her real purpose has less to do with demonstrating a thesis than with demonstrating her fitness to become a member of the literary academy by putting on an ostentatious display of her mastery of its arcane terms. Some examples follow:

Thus, the slowing down of the narrative pace with the physical description of Marya ends with this rather sudden introduction of an iterative section in the same paragraph. Introduced into the text by the word 'Often', this is where several occurrences in the diegesis, concerning the way in which Marya interrelates with the 'shabby youths', are synthesised into one descriptive utterance. (24)

The formality of this narrative arrangement is an indication of the writer's restrained use of free indirect style where Mackenzie is concerned. The liberating effect of it could have resulted in a textual rendering much closer to the actual diegetic simultaneity. (66)

What is particularly annoying about such passages is that they frequently have no discernible bearing on the question of Rhys's feminism or even the secondary question of whether Rhys's women are sufficiently individualized. But even when Le Gallez attempts to make the connection, her analysis is often both strained and unconvincing. Thus, Chapter 1, "Reducing Fifi," (the only chapter to deal with one of Rhys's short stories) develops an elaborate argument meant, so far as I could tell, to demonstrate that Rhys's language effectively "nullifies" the grotesque "grosse Fifi" in a manner that parallels a crucial event in the story, her death at the hands of her faithless lover. And this bit of virtuosity is then somehow linked up with the effect of Fifi's story upon the narrator, Roseau, in terms too confusing to be worth disentangling.

Even when her analysis is clearer, some of her readings are extremely questionable. Her discussion of Marya, the central character of *Quartet*, may serve as an example. She first sets up a strawman, the "myth" that the "Rhys woman" is characterized by her exceptional innocence and passivity. She then goes on to argue that the prevailing view of Marya as such a woman is mistaken because it ignores the "ironic" awareness she brings to her situation. But her entire case depends on the extremely dubious proposition that "there is sufficient textual evidence to make a total identification of the narrative stance with that of Marya's perspective" (22) - this even though the third person narrative often enters into the consciousness of other characters, and even though some of the passages she cites, for example the descriptive passage beginning, "Marya was a blonde girl, not very tall, slender-waisted" (23), can hardly be said to represent Marya's perspective. To patch her case together, she offers the notion that the seemingly detached, omniscient narrator is really an older, wiser Marya who recounts the trials of her younger self, adopting the third-person perspective for some unspecified reason. The trouble with this line of thought is that it leads to just that conclusion which Le Gallez most wishes to reject - namely, that if Marya is the narrator, then she is a stand-in for Rhys herself. Or, to take a smaller point, Le Gallez spends considerable energy refuting the claim that Marya is "innocent"; but she is attacking another strawman since the actual charge that she notes is that Marya is "innocent of bourgeois values and institutions," a much narrower action with a very specific trust.

It is, of course, much easier to...

in Rhys's "autodiegetic" (first-person) narratives, and when Le Gallez is released from the strain of having to construct an improbable linkage, she begins to do her best work. The chapter on *Voyage in the Dark* is full of acute perceptions, and the one on *Good Morning, Midnight* is even better. Anna Morgan's innocence and insecure hypersensitivity are demonstrated by means of numerous references, most tellingly to the many times that she turns to a mirror either to check on her own identity or to maintain a protective distance from painful intrusions (though again a reference to "an almost Lacanian sense of her own identity as an absence or fiction" is another telltale sign of the work's origin as a doctoral dissertation). In addition, Le Gallez's keen marking of some of Rhys's most striking images, for example, "candles crying wax tears," and other subtle effects, such as Laurie Gaynor's significant dropping of her early nickname for Anna, "Virgin," or the rich cluster of associations attached to the phrase "behind a glass" (108) all lend weight and credibility to her account of Anna's deep-seated alienation.

In the case of *Good Morning, Midnight*, Le Gallez's radical rereading of Sasha's self-divided voice helped me to recognize something I had scarcely considered, namely, how much wit and humor coexist with its bitterness, and thus how much her narrative is a conscious performance. And how, paradoxically, this performance makes her pain all the more real for the reader. Le Gallez's lengthy citation of Sasha's account of the birth and death of her baby, drawing attention to the understated parallel between the baby's swaddling clothes and the bandages meant to erase the mother's stretchmarks, a parallel underlined by a grim pun on the word "mummy," is especially fine. Similarly, she highlights nuances in Sasha's powerfully rendered climactic encounter with the gigolo Rene that had escaped my attention, especially the way in which Sasha's language separates her "real" identity from her cynical "second voice." Moreover, by calling attention to Sasha's financial extremity during a brief interval when her husband has left her, she begins to undermine my hitherto comfortable assumption that Rene can be seen as a male counterpart to Rhys's vulnerable women. In a sense, of course, he is; but Le Gallez's characterization of his "dependence" as a travesty of Sasha's gives me pause.

Le Gallez's final demonstration of Rhys's implicit feminism comes in her discussion of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Readers familiar with the history of the long gestation of that novel will recall how Rhys struggled to find an apt means of representing Edward's side of things before she eventually settled on an antiphonal alternation of voices. But Le Gallez's analysis makes a strong case for the claim that Edward's language shows him up as a petulant self-dramatizer whose self-pity allows him to absolve himself of any blame for driving Antoinette mad.

Given the cumulative power of these later insights, is there any reason to quarrel with Le Gallez? It seems to me that there is only one, and it may seem like something of a quibble. In her Conclusion, she shifts the grounds of her claims for Rhys's feminism away from its congeniality with Dworkin's analysis. Rejecting the latter's emphasis on women's almost inevitable victimization and defeat, she now advances a new claim on behalf of the "Rhys woman," namely, that "as the author of her own discourse, she sets herself against the suffocation of her spirit, a suffocation which the traditionally expected 'passivity' would surely bring her" (176). But it is Rhys, not her heroines, who is the author of these narratives, Rhys whose spirit is not suffocated. (The one exception to Rhys's catalog of emotionally devastated heroines is Sasha, who is genuinely, though painfully revived.) Moreover, her capacity to imagine exploitative women like Lois Heidler and Ethel Matthews, sensitive men like the painter Rubin and Anna Morgan's father, and "free" women like Christophine definitely suggests that Rhys's feminism deserves to be inscribed within a larger framework of potentially universal human sympathy. At the very outset of her career, Ford Madox Ford stated her passion for stating the case of the underdog. Yet, as some of Sasha's

more cutting observations indicate, Rhys also understood the latent viciousness waiting to be released when the underdog becomes top dog. Until we can be certain that empowered women will demonstrate their moral superiority over their former oppressors, Rhys remains in the select ranks of those of either sex haunted by a dream of emotional generosity as the foundation of relationships between men and women and plagued by the knowledge of its rarity in reality.

§ § §

### THE THREE FACES OF RHYS

CORAL ANN HOWELLS: *JEAN RHYS*  
NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 1991, 171 PAGES, \$39.95

Elaine Savory

In her rather too brief, but focussed survey of Rhysian criticism to date, Coral Ann Howells makes the point that many readings of Rhys reflect the critic's preoccupations as much as they illuminate the text. This is not a surprising observation, given that the majority of criticism derives from subjective attachments to particular texts, writers or issues in writing, though Howells sees in Rhysian criticism a particularly intense case of this. She goes on to develop a reading of Rhys' fiction which brings together three facets of her life and concerns: Creole identity, modernist form and female consciousness. All of these aspects of Rhys have been explored before, of course, but Howells' point is that there has been too much in the way of criticism which reads Rhys from only one point of view. Perhaps the most important contribution which Howells makes about Rhys' fiction is to recognise there is a "field of multiple and contradictory voices" which construct the Rhysian protagonist, (whom Howells still calls heroine), and against which she continually struggles.

It is however still true of Howells' approach that a critical thesis is established and followed through without a conscious awareness of self-contradiction. This only becomes troubling at times when her sense of productive contradiction in Rhys' texts is suppressed by a definitive statement. An example of this is where Howells discusses Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) as "silenced subject," thereby reading the first person narrative as "a brilliant response" on Rhys' part "to the challenge of writing about a confused and increasingly speechless young woman," (73). What follows is an interesting discussion of the "multivoiced" narrative, but Howells does not examine the buried contradiction she has noticed here. It is important because it relates centrally to Rhys' technique for constructing the apparently powerless woman, i.e., a productive and subversive use of silence. This is a part of the political response of colonial peoples to a prevailing alien authority which scarcely hears them even if they do speak. When, at the end of *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna drifts back in memory to her Creole childhood, she still records the other voices which populate her memories but she is herself a commentator ("I knew why the masks were laughing"). She is also, Howells points out, an outsider in this memory, a marginalised white Creole whose reading of the scenes of Carnival in the streets is not voiced either to her own people or to the black community she witnesses. There is much in Anna's perception of the world which is unsaid, and which therefore has a political meaning as withheld communication. Rhys' carefully edited, spare text must be read between the lines for Anna's full perception of her world to be comprehended - what she doesn't say is extremely important. The use of italics for Anna's infrequent private commentaries on her observations is indicative of the inner world which she scarcely ever shares through words.