THE POLITICS OF COLOURS AND THE POLITICS OF WRITING IN THE FICTION OF JEAN RHYS

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I had always imagined that my aunt didn't like me much, but the colour she had chosen was exactly right, a blue-green which reminded you of the sea, and my eyes were no longer pale but reflected the colour.  

Although some critics have noticed that colour plays a particular role in Jean Rhys' fiction, there has as yet been no extensive, sustained attempt to interpret her palette. Colour is a sustained code in her writing, including not only the primaries (red, blue, green, yellow), but also purple, pink, silver, brown, ochre, black, white, bronze, beige, gold, grey, orange and various significant combinations of the above. In addition, Rhys is acutely aware of race and of, therefore, the "colours" of people, (black, white, red, yellow, pale, dark, blue-eyed, brown-eyed).

She wrote with clarity and economy, following Ford Madox Ford's advice to "cut when in doubt, but just as a poet uses the compression of poetic form to advantage when layering the meaning in words, illuminating the substance of the poem through line order and imagery, so Rhys uses colours as a symbolic code in the fiction. There is another analogy with poetry, for just as poetry almost always comes from a semiconscious level of the intelligence, so it seems to me that the colours in Rhys' writing function as a subliminal language, a kind of space in which certain feelings and responses can be hidden; and yet marked. Certain colours unlocked for her certain associations, created particular insights, set her along certain paths of recall.

Our subject here is politics. I define politics as the sphere of power relations, in which the polarities are domination/submission; control/chaos; strong/weak. We recognise the idea of "strong," overpowering colours, and speak of them as being associated with passionate or uncontrolled behaviour. Those who seek control of their emotions or their senses, such as the devout, often wear white (a reflection of all colours), or black (an absorber of all). Where, as in Catholic ceremonials, strong colours like crimson or purple are worn, they are reserved for those of highest spiritual authority, those who ought to be able to wear them without damage to their inner balance.

Our sense of colour is very much affected by culture also. Let us take a single example: the colour purple, made celebrated a few years ago by the novel of the same name by Alice Walker. "In What Colour Are You?," Annie Wilson and Alica-Beale define, love of purple as associated with artistic ability, appreciation of beauty and spiritual introspection. Indigo, they say, indicates a power to heal. By absolute contrast, the Luscher Colour Test defines violet as a colour of immaturity. The mentally mature will normally prefer one of the basic colours other than violet; the mentally and emotionally immature, on the other hand, may prefer violet. In the case of 1,600 pre-adolescent schoolchildren, 75% of them preferred violet. Statistics embracing Americans, Africans and Brazilians showed a marked preference for this colour as compared with Euro-Caucasians. It is not so much the striking difference in interpretations of the same colour range here which is important, but the facile slur on three quite different communities (one a whole racial/cultural continuum present in much of the world), made on the basis of
an assumption about what colour means. Whereas Wilson and Bek work within the context of Eastern mysticism, Luscher takes a Western intellectual approach through biology and psychology, arguing that the distinguishing of colour is a result of "development and education rather than instinct and reactive response" (Luscher Colour Test, 19). Yet Luscher's analysis makes no allowance for the powerfully different contexts of various world cultures.

It is necessary to be acutely aware of shifting cultural contexts in dealing with a writer like Jean Rhys, who was born of a marriage of a Creole mother and a Welsh father, on the island of Dominica. She was born (to say colour), white, part of an oppressive minority with whom she did not strongly identify, wishing instead that she were (to say colour), black. Her ambivalence towards white and black (as racial identities) is clearly shown in her autobiography, Smile Please, and in the interviews which David Plante wrote into his memoir of Rhys in Difficult Women. The most vivid story in Smile Please concerns the child Rhys, (called Gwendolen, which means white in Welsh, because she was the palest child of the family, and she hated that), smashing with a rock the face of a pale doll sent by her grandmother. She had wanted another one, a dark one, but that was given to her sister. Such a symbolic destruction of an unwanted self-image of course could not free Rhys from the desire to be something she was not, a desire which often lurked within her attitudes towards black people and black culture, about which she sometimes harboured jealousy. Plante records her shifting attitudes expressed in memories of her childhood home, in which the meaning of blackness (as racial identity) was to have positive, warm, lively, happy, full of spirit, except where it was withdrawn against her as against all whites. As long as black culture was a safe haven, the child Rhys longed to be a part of it, but when it became threatening, naturally she was afraid. From Smile Please, we know that her nurse Meta told her terrifying stories and caused her to be afraid and distrustful, and that this was her experience of a black mother-figure, and a formative one.

Yet when Rhys left Dominica as a young woman and remained for most of the rest of her life in England (making only one short visit back to the island), she felt cut off from the colours and vitality of Caribbean life and the natural environment. She was adrift between the mores and culture of her childhood and the mores and culture of England in the twentieth century, and in her writing she attempted to articulate this lost state, this cross-cultural experience. Her heroines are deeply uncertain women, for whom colours have an important meaning which is usually in some conflict with the meaning of colour for the powerful people who control their environments. Like Rhys, who struggled to live through feelings of self-pity, self-contempt and isolation in an England she frequently read as cold and hostile, the women central to Rhysian fiction have to combat confident insensitive hegemonic values, particularly patriarchal ones, without any answering certainties on their side. In this fictional world, colour becomes a code for shifting values, just as in Rhys' childhood, strong colours were a code for escaping the control of a world which denied self-confidence and pleasure. Irish Granny's fairy stories, from England, were "the red, the blue, the green, the yellow," and were a loved means of escape for the bookish girl. In Smile Please, Rhys describes seeing quill pens in a stationer's shop, "red, blue, green, and yellow" (103), and going in to buy about a dozen of these and some exercise books, after which she began to write a journal which was a precursor of her fiction.

I want to digress for a while from the subject of colour here, to establish what mean by the "politics of writing," and the connection between this and the nature of colour in Rhys' work. Rhys became a writer as a result of a morally dangerous encounter with Ford Madox Ford, who not only exploited her emotionally and sexually, but also her to recognise her writing ability and get published. Her first formed work, The Bank, was a collection of sketches and stories for which Ford wrote a preface. He saw her clarity of style, which he felt was different from the other women writers within
cultural context. As a Eurocentric man of his time, Ford saw good writing as being control of material, cutting out anything which caused the writer doubt. This is still a prevailing taste within European literary culture, where conventions which provide a reassuring sense of control over material (life) have a strong appeal to writers and critics alike. The originally West Indian novelist, V.S. Naipaul, writes in this manner and has become very much admired within the British literary establishment.

Rhys' style, then, was partly encouraged and shaped by a man whose patriarchal values were the very ones which Rhysian heroines had to fight against. Her style, as it were, became the controlling influence, the means by which extremely painful and powerful emotions could be brought into order and made into art. Of course, all writing involves the imposition of order on the chaos of experience, and at best both flow together, in balance, and the work seems "to write itself." In Rhys' best work, it is as if, when this happens, the male and female principles within her personality offset each other, as when the controlling Rochester is confronted by the passional Antoinette in Wide Sargasso Sea. There is no ultimate harmony between these poles, but rather they are together a dynamic universe of energy. Rhys' language, then, which tends to be carefully defined, clear and exact, disciplined, seems almost to symbolize the element which her major female characters lack, i.e., a capacity to impose a particular order on the world. Rhys' very syntax contains and defines her heroines in their chaotic and aimless experience.

Colours, which act as a subversive code within that language, suggest the possibilities inherent in the Other who so defiantly occupies the central space in Rhys' fiction. Readers of Rhys' fiction will usually be aware of the primary colours as occupying an important place. The colours red, green and blue occur a number of times, often in combination with purple, which Rhys prefers over yellow. Rochester in Wide Sargasso Sea rejects the colours of the tropics: "Everything is too much ... Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red ..." The counterpane which Aunt Cora makes in the same novel is "red, blue, purple, green, yellow, all one shimmering colour" (Wide Sargasso Sea 47). The window which is broken by Selina in "Let Them Call It Jazz" is "green and purple and yellow." In Good Morning, Midnight, Sasha describes her black dress, "my dress," as having "red, green, blue, purple" in the embroidery on the sleeves (25). It is noticeable also that yellow here either comes last or is absent. This occurs a number of times in the fiction and is like a combination whose ordering can unlock the door of memory for Rhys, for it occurs in too many different contexts to convince us that it belongs to one particular character's consciousness.

In Voyage In the Dark, colours denote an oppositional relation between life and death, the tropics and Europe.

Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey.... The colours are red, purple, blue, gold, all shades of green.
The colours here are black, brown, grey, dim-green, pale blue, the white of people's faces - like woodlice.

Life worth living is always emphasized in Rhys' work in terms of vibrant colours, this was the way Rhys characterized black culture, in her way of seeing a direct opposition to white, English culture. In Smile Please, her accounts of processions and of Carnival in Dominica amongst the black community stress their colourful clothes and the desire they provoked in Rhys as a child to "dance, too, in the sun." (43). Rhys clearly held to certain stereotypes, which we can see in her portrayal of black characters (the strong black single mother, Christophe in example), and so when we examine her work in terms of the portrayal of race and gender, it is not misplaced to suggest that Rhys could perceive white as a restrictive collection of qualities, and black as another, preferred, but nevertheless still narrowed collection.
In this sense, the clustering of colours in her work can be interpreted as reflecting her vision of the world as a dualistic universe: black against white, good against evil, rich colour against greyness. In her association of maleness, whiteness or drabness and control, she seems to line up a gender/racial/colour code against femaleness/blackness/warmth/spontaneity. It might not be too extremely speculative to see her "controlling" style as an image of her "white," "male" side, according to her own universal scheme.

In the early story "Illusion," there is a very interesting study of style as control and suppression of colours through the portrait of a woman who has a "masculine" style of dress and manner. Miss Bruce, a British woman of "character and training," seems, after seven years in Paris, "utterly untouched, utterly unaffected, by anything hectic, slightly exotic or unwholesome." Unlike many of Rhys' heroines, she is successful in her world, in charge of her life, and a minor artist, though she has a "respectably" large private income. She wears brown sensible shoes, tweeds, a plain well-cut black gown for evening and she is "exceedingly nice." But when the narrator of the story has to go through Miss Bruce's things to take some clothes to the hospital after she had been taken ill, she finds in the wardrobe "a glow of colour, a riot of soft silks":

In the middle, hanging in the place of honour, was an evening dress of a very beautiful shade of old gold: near it another of flame colour: of two black dresses the one was touched with silver, the other with a jaunty belt, a flowered crépe de chine—positively flowered: then a carnival costume complete with mask, then a huddle, a positive huddle of all colours, of all stuffs. (Tigers Are Better-Looking 142)

There is more, for Miss Bruce has a box of make-up, including "Rouge Fascination," and the narrator speculates that despite her "gentlemanly manner," Miss Bruce experiences a perpetual hunger to be beautiful and that thirst to be loved which is the real curse of Eve, and so secretly dresses up in front of her mirror. Interestingly, on a second look, the narrator thinks the yellow dress is "malevolent."

Miss Bruce is an unusual Rhysian heroine in her masculine appearance, and she practices an unusual degree of suppression of her love of colours, delicate fabrics, make-up. Her British training is associated with a male aspect of her character, with order and a dominance over her love of colour: Miss Bruce has conquered her tendency towards being an "Eve" (Tigers Are Better-Looking 143). Antoinette, the "wild, unstable, fragile, dangerously feminine heroine of Wide Sargasso Sea is the opposite of Miss Bruce. Though in her prison, she often wears a grey wrap, and appears a "ghost in the grey daylight" to her husband, Antoinette longs to be consumed by red, i.e., her "passion's self," and in her dream of leaping out into the red sky, there is perhaps a strong suggestion of her entry into permanent desire, into a kind of hell, at the end of the novel. Antoinette, then, is a poignant depiction of the results of passionate love of colour without the restraining discipline of control.

A rebellious attack on a brightly coloured window identifies Selina in "Let It Call It Jazz" as a fighter for her rights. Selina is a black West Indian woman, of her crucial experience (incarceration in Holloway prison for a domestic dispute actually Rhys' own). In Selina and Christophine, Rhys discovers the power in her symbolic world of the combination of black resistance and female resistance, and women are strongly associated with vivid colours.

Yet Rhys' fiction is centrally concerned with white women, especially with her portraits of black women are restricted and often close to stereotype. Black women appear hardly at all in any important sense. White men are generally paternalist, ...
controlling, cruel or emotionally crippled. In her portraits of the latter, Rhys exploits
colours to reinforce the negativity of a character. For example, Heidler in Quartet has
pale blue eyes. Sometimes Rhys uses a pale skin to indicate this unwanted hegemonic
tendency.

In Smile Please, there is an important passage which conveys her dislike of her own
skin colour in relation to that of her brothers and sisters:

Catching sight of myself in the long looking glass, I felt despair. I
had grown into a thin girl, tall for my age. My straight hair was pulled
severely from my face and tied with a black ribbon. I was fair with a
pale skin and huge staring eyes of no particular colour. My brothers
and sisters all had brown eyes and hair; why was I singled out to be the
only fair one, to be called Gwendolen, which means white in Welsh I was
told … I hated myself. (Smile Please 14)

Rhys was a pretty woman, with striking colouring, as Leslie Tilden Smith's daughter Anne
remembers, having green eyes, white skin and reddish-brown hair. Yet her consciousness
rejects her own colouring. Clearly, she felt herself that black people were better-
looking than white. Her mother, she records, preferred black babies to white ones;
thereby probably reinforcing Rhys' self-rejection (Smile Please, 33).

She seems to have made her appearance, her make-up and dress, a central aspect of
her sense of self. In old age, she greeted David Plante wearing ill-applied make-up. In
her fiction, women often wear make-up, and significance is attached to how it is applied and
what colours are used. Make-up is a mask before the world, an adding of colour to a
pale face, a covering up of imperfections real or imagined. In Rhys' fiction, it is
another colour code. Cri-Cri, in Quartet, is a model, with sleek black hair, green eyes and
white skin. Her make-up is astonishingly accurate, and she favours red, which is an
important colour in Rhys and mainly signifies desire, sexual vitality, defiant femininity.

A wonderful performance.

In the same novel, the male patron of a bar is said to have "crimson where crimson
should be, and rose-colour where rose-colour" (Quartet 9). Make-up well-applied is not
only a sign of attractiveness, but also of being in control, and being able to shape and
yet not crush the vital spirit which is the basis of an appeal to others. It is, of
course, a way of colouring the self, and giving the impression of being a person of vivid
appearance.

Strong colours are associated for Rhys with sexuality, the life force, the libido.
In her scheme of race and gender, black people and women, often wearing make-up, convey
the life force by their vivid presence. This is a simplistic and reductive vision of both
race and gender, but one on which Rhys relied a good deal in her writing. For example,
her portrait of the Sidi, in The Left Bank, is full of strong colours, ebony, red lips,
ivory as a strong contrast, copper. He has eyes full of vivid images and the "hot light
of Morocco." In Voyage in the Dark, the passage describing the carnival makes primary
colours the central focus:

I was watching them from between the slats of the jalousies dancing along
dressed in red and blue and yellow the women with their dark necks and
arms covered with white powder - dancing slowly -
in all the colours of the rainbow and the sky so blue ...

(Voyage in the Dark 157)

Bright colours, then, are not just warming and a sign of life, but a sign also of resistance to repression. In this context, the colour red is particularly important, especially when it is a dominant colour. In some of Rhys' descriptive passages, life seems trapped by an unfeeling ordering of society, and this is conveyed in the small details of colour which enter a scene, suggesting vitality, but without the capacity to change the major elements of the environment (red lights reflected on a wet, dark street, a lampshade striped in yellow and green, etc.).

Red, however, and also pink, are often central in Rhys' writing. Pink, in her writing is the colour of seduction: lingerie, evening dresses, beds (in old age, Rhys had a pink wig). Red is often present in descriptions of tropical landscapes and is often privileged in her lists of primary colours. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette's red dress is a powerful symbol in her imprisonment, as a memory of living fully, and a possibility of sanity and happiness, "... something you can touch and hold like my red dress, that has a meaning" (151). Red is in fact the central colour in Antoinette's later consciousness. She says of the sky, "It was red and all my life was in it," (155). Red is also the colour of the flamboyant flower, which Antoinette loves. But it is not just any kind of strong colour which she finds important. Her vision of England includes red, but a red which is dull and unappealing: "... this cardboard world where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it" (148). Finally, of course, there is the fire in Antoinette's final dream, which brings her home, so to speak, and which may represent the unrestrained desire which consumes her. She and the man who imprisons her are opposite poles of the emotional spectrum: she, wild, immature, full of life and chaotic energy; he, disciplined, afraid of feeling and of what he cannot control, insecure and narrow. She loves all bright colours, especially red. He is repelled by them. In this context, we can perhaps understand the red to be a kind of desire which is consuming, insatiable, immediate, like Wilson Harris' image of hell, "the hound of fire." 17

In this love of desire as flame, Antoinette resembles Marya in Quartet, who reflects that if the lustful but shallow Heidler dreamed, his dreams would not be "many-coloured," or dark shot with flame like her own." Instead, they would be almost "certainly gross," with those pale blue, secretive eyes." (Quartet, 76). Heidler is another controlling man, and Marya another victim, full of life but unable to direct her energies in constructive directions to protect herself.

But if red promises pleasure which is not sustained and is finally outweighed by pain, yellow is fresh sunshine and clear hope and promise when tropical, or dangerously threatening or depressing when associated with white people or grey weather, "Despair; grey-yellow like their sky." (Towards the end of Quartet, Marya remembers a yellow dress which Stephan bought her in a happier time, which is associated with a memory of being "fresh and young and like a flower." (Quartet, 127).

Like yellow and red, blue can be both positive and negative in Rhys' palette. Strong blues (the tropical sea and sky) have a better significance than paler shades (eyes, muslin). But blue and white together sometimes signify childhood innocence. At the end of Good Morning, Midnight, Sasha's horrific encounter with the commiss (a sinister figure, "another poor devil of a human being," 159) is made even more disturbing by her intense concern as to whether his dressing gown is blue or white. Combined with green, which is a powerful colour in the Dominican landscape, blue is indicative of the world of living emotions and energy which is the tropical environment in Rhys' work. The worst in the Blue spectrum is grey, which is a very negative colour. We saw it associated with yellow as a depressing colour in "above, and this, of course a faded, old colour for Petronella" in "Till September: Petronella." She says,
Anyway, however old I get, I'll never let my hair go grey. I'll dye it black, red, any colour you like, but I'll never let it go grey. I hate grey too much. 19

These colour symbolisms, then, insert a very important code into Rhys' controlled prose. It is a feminine code, for so many of her colours function within the feminine world of make-up, hair colour, clothes, the need to appeal to men and to bolster up a sense of self in a world where a woman's appearance is of central importance in the estimation of her value. Within the conventions of her time, the control she exerted in her prose was, as Ford sensed in separating her work from that of other women, almost a masculine style. In Rhys' work, extremes of oppositional forces meet and struggle against one another, just as in her prose, the carefully restrained tone of her words is challenged by the powerful colour code within them.

In Wide Sargasso Sea, the description of the garden at Coulibri is a good example of this effect:

Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered - then not an inch of tentacle showed: 'It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it. (Wide Sargasso Sea 17)

Rhys also uses colour as an important signifier in the account of the relationship between Julia and Norah in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie. Here, 'green and red are important colours. Rhys uses green quite frequently and variously in her fiction. Here, green seems to be associated, as is common, with jealousy, in this case, sibling rivalry for a mother's affection. Not only Norah's dress, but the curtains in the mother's room are green. The "good" daughter, Norah, who has taken on the responsibility for her sick mother, also has a small red rose pinned onto her dress. The red rose seems to be indicative of a passionate nature kept in check, for Norah clearly resents her life, and feels deprived of sensation and enjoyment, even whilst she is virtuous and in a position to make her sister feel her moral superiority.

Colours are linked to mood changes, and also to moral and spiritual qualities in Rhys' writing. Silver is an important indicator of spiritual qualities. Christophe's bangle, before which Antoinette kneels to try to obtain special help in Wide Sargasso Sea, is silver (89). Pink and "moonlight" blue are associated with silver in sexual contexts. James Lindroth has pointed out the relation between silver and grey, black and yellow, green and gold in Rhys' work, arguing that Rhys' world is one of "exquisitely modulated light,"20 a painter's world, in which changing combinations of colours convey changing psychological states. Certainly colour can make or destroy crucially important attitudes in Rhysian characters. The protagonist in "Overture and Beginners Please" relates colour to a very important loss of self-confidence, when an aunt buys a dress she dislikes for her:

But I knew the exact day when I lost belief in myself and cold caution took control. It was when she bought me the ugly dress instead of the pretty wine-coloured one. (Sleep It Off Lady 71)

This, like the quotation which opens this paper, shows the power of colour to reinforce or destroy a female consciousness which is starved of supportive love, and in desperate need of maternal or substitute maternal affection:

In Quarrel, Marya describes wallpaper in a bedroom which might be "in hell." Yellow
green and dullish mauve flowers crawling over black walls" (93), a kind of perverse and distorted image of tropical flowers, lacking light and life. Later in the same novel, Marya feels "numb and grey like a soul in limbo" (114).

Colours, then, function as a kind of insurrection within the careful control of Rhys' prose style. Her use of colours grows more intense through her work until Wide Sargasso Sea, after which there is a lessening of central importance for colour in her writing. Rhys' work exhibits a strong tension between control and strong feeling, both the portrayal of character, and in the structure of her prose (her precision and clarity; her use of colours). Like the tulips in the hall at Mr. James' house in After Leave Mr Mackenzie, Rhys' fiction is a striking arrangement of conflicting elements. There is little resolution of opposed forces within her work, which mainly shows the impossibility of union between different kinds of personalities and emotional intensities. In this exploration of confrontations between men and women, different races, different cultures and different moral imperatives, Rhys' use of colours plays a central and consistently illuminating part.

But perhaps the most fascinating drama which plays out here is the conflict between the controlling writer Rhys and the feminine, chaotic woman Rhys, a drama which produces the exquisite tensions in her writing, and which is never resolved. Thus, for me, her use of colours is far more than that of an artist, far more even than a useful symbolic patterning to deepen the sensuousness of her prose. It is the expression of Rhys' sense of spontaneous; sensuous, natural experience, constantly surrounded and embattled by the ordering which is as necessary to successful living as it is necessary to successful writing, and which, however she characterised it (misguidedly, as male), Rhys knew and accepted whenever she took up her pen to write, and more significantly, to edit, about which she was very particular indeed.

In the interpretation of Wide Sargasso Sea, there is a tendency for critics to make Antoinette the sympathetically regarded victim of colonisation; I think Rhys was paying something else, in giving Antoinette's husband so much of the narrative. She was illuminating the tragedy of a collision of extremes, neither capable of giving balance to the other, and therefore neither capable of developing the art of living as a writer might: develop the art of balancing internal forces within words and structures of words. Rhys, in some important ways a casualty of the opposition which characterised her life and contexts: black versus white, woman versus man, poor versus rich, Caribbean versus English, often remained within those oppositions. In her writing, she found a way to balance control and spontaneity, and the role of colours in her fiction is a reflection of the search for perfect stylistic balance, for a voice for each of the conflicting opposites which live within her unresolved and unresolvable fictional world.

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2See, however: Peter Wolfe (Jean Rhys, Boston, Twayne, 1980) who notes that the colour of despair in Rhys' work, that yellow is the colour of dispensable blue dominates both Quartet and Ford's The Good Soldier; and the "dusty past. "Let Them Call It Jazz"; Carole Angier (Jean Rhys, Harmondsworth, Penguin, the importance of colour to the young Rhys in the story of her aunt Emily for clothes; and the yellow-grey sky of Cambridge where Rhys went to school of no hope; Louis James (Jean Rhys, London, Longman, 1978) notes how green and quotes Alex Waugh saying he never thought of green before he encountered it as "a colour that could dazzle you" (11) and that Rhys' sensibility was "Caribbean", was very aware of brightness. Helen Nebeker (Jean Rhys, N.

3I hope to extend this discussion at a future time to include all of Rhys' palette in detail.


8V.S. Naipaul, born Trinidad and Tobago in 1932, went to live and work in England 1950. His work, which has tones ranging from satirical to ironical to serious, is highly regarded, justifiably, for its fine technique, but Naipaul has been resented and disliked by many in the Caribbean for his unbalanced criticisms of his native region and the unexplicably bleak and sexual bias in his work. His work contains a preponderance of inexplicably bleak women characters, and emotionally numb or underdeveloped men. Joyful sexuality, emotional responsiveness and genuine warmth of personality are scarce in his work, of which the most obvious example in this respect is Guerrillas (1975). By contrast, the moving and complex A House for Mr. Biswas (1961), whilst exposing and denying romanticism and optimism, creates an emotionally subtle world, and is a very humane novel.

9Rochester, of course, is not named in the novel, but by the intertextual connection with Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, we know his name.


18Jean Rhys, "Overture and Beginners Please," Sleep It Off Lady, Harmondsworth, Penguin,
L'AUTOPORTRAIT. OU LE TOMBEAU DE NARCISSE DANS SMILE PLEASE DE JEAN RHYS

Sylvie Maurel

Le terme d'autoportrait, pris dans son acception la plus générale, est comme soufflé au lecteur par l'œuvre de Jean Rhys. Il est induit par l'un de ces aspects les plus immédiatement perceptibles: l'écriture de Jean Rhys est indubitablement solidaire de son vécu. Elle disait ne pouvoir écrire qu'à partir de ce qu'elle connaissait: "I can't make things up, I can't invent." Si bien que son oeuvre est généralement considérée par la critique comme une manière d'autoportrait au sens large, où l'écrivain se mire en même temps qu'il se peint, pour en retirer, qui sait, quelque jouissance narcissique, à moins que s'auto-représenter n'ait des vertus thérapeutiques.

Néanmoins, Jean Rhys délaisse la fiction pour la première fois à la fin de sa vie avec Smile Please, paru en 1979 et sous-titré par l'éditeur "An Unfinished Autobiography." Elle s'agissait pour la première fois d'un texte autobiographique avec le lecteur, au sens où Philippe Lejeune l'entend, et porte un regard rétrospectif sur sa vie et sur son ouvrage. C'est sur ce texte que je me fonderai pour analyser la notion d'autoportrait, ou plus exactement sur la première partie de Smile Please, la seule qui soit véritablement achevée, puisque la mort empêcha ensuite l'auteur de veiller aux révisions qu'elle jugeait nécessaires avant publication.

Smile Please porte l'étiquette d'autobiographie et rien ne nous autorise à assimiler sans précaution autobiographie et autoportrait, bien qu'en recherchant chez tel ou tel quelque garde-fou critique, l'on s'aperçoive que toute tentative de définition associe obstinément à l'autoportrait l'autobiographie comme double générique. Les caractéristiques formelles de l'autoportrait sont mal définies: c'est un genre à part, nous dit-on, un genre qui tend à regrouper des écrits inclassables. Toutefois, la distinction entre autoportrait et autobiographie semble pouvoir se faire sur des critères de temporalité. L'autoportrait en général, et Smile Please en particulier, ne sont pas assujettis à l'ordre chronologique, qui est souvent le principe structurant de l'autobiographie classique. Il est doublement réflexif: retour du je sur soi, retour de l'œuvre sur elle-même. En plaçant au centre du cadre le je-écrivant dans ses tentatives de saisir le je-object, smile please pose la question des rapports entre le verbe et la subjectivité.

Le terme d'autoportrait me tente aussi pour ses origines. Il nous vient de la peinture et me paraît susceptible d'élargir le champ d'investigation que l'autobiographie par nature, tend à restreindre à l'histoire d'une personnalité rapportée linéairement. Appliqué à l'écrin, il est nécessairement métaphorique puisqu'il désigne un écrin et un train de se peindre. Il met implicitement en relation les systèmes de représentation et cette tension métaphorique pose une problématique de la représentation de la subjectivité. De plus, le terme désigne à la fois le produit, l'oeuvre-objet, et le processus de production. Il est doublement réflexif: retour du je sur soi, retour de l'œuvre sur elle-même. En plaçant au centre du cadre le je-écrivant dans ses tentatives de saisir le je-object, smile please pose la question des rapports entre le verbe et la subjectivité.