VOYAGE IN THE DARK, ESTHER WATERS, AND THE NATURALISTIC TRADITION

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We do not always choose what you call unpleasant subjects, but we try to go to the roots of things, and, the basis of life being material and not spiritual, the analyst inevitably finds himself, sooner or later, handling what this sentimental age calls coarse .... The novel, if it be anything, is contemporary history, an exact and complete reproduction of social surroundings of the age we live in. George Moore, A Modern Lover

Often hailed as the first significant Caribbean novel to establish the archetype of expatriation from the West Indies and confrontation with the colonizing, imperial power of Great Britain, Voyage in the Dark (1934) is widely regarded as a classic of Caribbean literature. Kenneth Ramchand, for example, calls it "one of the most moving of the West Indian novels of exile."

Yet Voyage in the Dark is also an English novel and quite close in mood, characterization, and theme to Rhys's other European novels of the thirties, After Leaving Mr Mackenzie and Good Morning, Midnight. Though set in London, Voyage in the Dark, like much of Rhys's fiction, possesses an unmistakable French point of reference. One of the traditions out of which Voyage springs and which it in turn enriches is French naturalism.

During her apprenticeship years in Paris, Rhys acquired considerable acquaintance with naturalistic fiction. She translated Francis Carco's Perversité (1928), for example, which Ford proclaimed on the book jacket "A Second Madame Bovary." In point of fact, Carco's novel was closer to Zola than to Flaubert. Its sordid lower-depths milieu provides the setting for such characters as a congenitally brutish brother, his prostitute sister, and her sadistic pimp. Moreover, in her personal life Rhys became familiar with such naturalistic and non-bourgeois experiences as prison life, during her visits to her incarcerated husband, Jean Lenglet. Some of this experience found its way into sketches in her first book, The Left Bank and Other Stories. Later, of course, she translated Lenglet's account of those years, Sous les verrous, under the English title, Barred. Both at the literary and personal level, then, Rhys, as Ford certainly recognized, was familiar with life at the bottom stratum of society, which is one of the données of classic naturalism.

In the specific case of Voyage in the Dark an explicit connection with the most influential of all French naturalists, Zola, is expressed directly in the opening pages. Anna Morgan, the protagonist-narrator, is lying on a sofa, reading Nana. Her name, as one critic has suggested, may be read as an anagram of Nana. Anna describes the book and the emotion of reading it:

It was a paper-covered book with a coloured picture of a stout, dark woman brandishing a wine-glass. She was sitting on the knee of a bald-headed man in evening dress. The print was very small, and the endless procession of words gave me a curious feeling - sad, excited and frightened. It wasn't what I was reading, it was the look of the dark, blurred words going on endlessly that gave me that feeling.

Her roommate Maudie, also a chorus girl, queries Anna about Nana: "That's a dirty book, isn't it?" (p. 4). When Anna defends it, "Bits of it are all right" (p. 4), Maudie, whose suggestive, careless way of dressing and fresh manner have brought down on them the moral censure of their landlady, gives a
critique of Zola: "I know; it's about a tart. I think it's disgusting. I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another. Besides, all books are like that — just somebody stuffing you up" (pp. 4-5).

Maudie's views are not Anna's (or Rhys's). Some books are true; others, the bad ones that tell lies, do stuff you up, in Maudie's vernacular. For Maudie, whose favorite expression is "Swank's the word," literature is not, in the scheme of things, a chorus girl's concern (p. 5). Maudie's name, incidentally, may allude to the famous circulating library of the Victorian era, owned by Charles Mudie, which catered to middle class tastes and refused to represent works by French naturalists like Zola.

The relevance of Zola's text to the lives of Rhys's chorus-girls is obvious. Anna Morgan and Maudie are two young women traveling about England as members of a theatrical troupe. Like Nana, they are fair game for any male: the generally low reputation of theatrical types would have insured that reading of their status. They are pretty, acquisitive, and totally vulnerable to male power. The men want sex; the women want material goods and security. The men offer gifts and money, the medium of exchange; the women their sexual favors. The men may employ the rhetoric of courtship, with its ultimate promise of marriage, but marriage is not in the cards, as they characteristically grow tired of the "girls" once they have satisfied their sexual appetites. According to their logic, any girl who sleeps with them is not fit to marry. Perhaps here it is worth amending the impression left by several of Rhys's critics that these young women are prostitutes. Evelyn Hawthorne Vanouse, for example, says of Rhys's women characters in general: "The women of her fiction are most frequently working-class girls who turn to dubious liaisons, and in many cases eventual prostitution, to survive in cities of the Old World such as London and Paris." Similarly, Jan Curtis concludes that Rhys's images of falling and drowning "indicate that Anna, as a prostitute, is a 'fallen' woman...." In the specific case of Voyage in the Dark, these readings would seem to be overstated. By its strictest definition, prostitution is sex for hire. Surely a distinction should be made between the direct meaning of that term and the actions of Anna and Maudie, who as members of a stage chorus earn an admittedly bleak living, but a living nonetheless. It is true that these characters expect — even ask for — quality gifts, including money presents or "loans," during courtships that generally do involve sex. Although the moral harridan of a landlady from whom Anna and Maudie let rooms calls them "tarts" (p. 18), a "loose woman" does not in every case fit squarely with the most precise definition of prostitution.

Zola's influence finds its way into Voyage in another, more oblique manner, and in a specifically English context, through the medium of the principal British exponent of French naturalism, George Moore. A devotee of Zola, Moore tried in his novels to create "[t]he ideas of a new art based upon science." In practice, in such novels as A Modern Lover (1883) and A Mummer's Wife (1884), Moore sought to apply Zola's principles of environmental and biological determinism to studies of English life.

A Mummer's Wife pursued Zolaesque themes with a sensationalism that shocked English audiences. A woman who forsakes her husband to take up with the manager of a touring theatrical company comes to a bad end. She loses her money, her baby dies, and she degenerates into alcoholism and narrowly avoids becoming a prostitute. Whether Rhys knew of this novel (and its obvious relation to Nana) is unknown, but that she did know Moore's most famous novel, Esther Waters (1894) is clear. In a letter of 1950 she stated, "Peggy [Kirkaldy] forgive this dithering, it's the only relief I've allowed myself for a long time. That and reading Esther Waters - why Esther Waters? I don't know. It's beautifully done and doesn't date a bit. I suppose reading about someone strong quiet and simple helps me." Three years later, in another letter, she elaborated on the importance of Moore's novel for her personally:
Well day before yesterday I read "Esther Waters" for the 60th time. It is a book I keep for very bad days, and it never fails me. It was published in 1894 and that's near enough to the date of my birth - I'm older a bit. So very old. I don't know why "Esther Waters" has this magic effect on me - because I do not like horses particularly or care about racing [...] or servants (White. Black ones are nice.) Or religion - Still there it is. Magic for me Every time.11

Is sixty an exaggeration? Possibly, but the use of such a precise figure certainly underlines the importance of the novel to Rhys. In any event, no one has heretofore paid attention to the praise she accorded Esther Waters or explored the possibility of a traceable impact upon Rhys's own work. Admittedly, there is no evidence in the letters regarding how early in her life Rhys discovered Esther Waters. Moore's best-known work went through many editions, including one in 1920 that drew reviews from such eminent writers as Katherine Mansfield.12 In any case, reading the two novels in conjunction with one another leads to the impression of many affinities. Rhys is not the only well-known writer to have admired this novel. According to David Skilton, "James Joyce at one time rated it 'the best novel of modern English life.'"13 (Incidentally, Ulysses contains numerous allusions to Moore - twelve to be exact.)

Rhys would doubtless have appreciated the basic set of problems faced by the protagonist of Esther Waters, a novel about the economics of sex. It explores the issues of fallen virtue, illegitimacy, and the struggle of a young woman to survive in a hostile world. Esther Waters, who comes from a family of scant means, is placed in a manor house as a kitchen-maid. She has spirit, good looks, no education, and bad luck. She falls in love with a charming, raffish man attached to the manor, William Latch, the son of the cook and a servant of the manor himself whose favorite pastime is betting on horse races and whose highest ambition is to operate a public house and betting establishment.

Nature takes its course; they sleep together, an action made easier by her having drunk a bit too much, the first time in her life she has taken a drop; she becomes pregnant; they are separated without his knowing about the pregnancy; and she is left to deal with the consequences. If the novel were conventionally inscribed, Esther Waters as a fallen woman would suffer a calamitous fate in the tradition of Richardson's Clarissa, Hardy's Tess, or the thousand ruined maidens of a thousand Victorian novels. But Esther Waters has a source of strength that stands her in good stead through all her travails. She is a Christian, a member of a Protestant sect, the Plymouth Brethren. Moore is not dogmatic about Esther's Christian faith, but it is always there, in the background, a rock against the faithlessness of a morally chaotic and dissolute world.

Despite Esther's not having to conform to the prescribed formula of the fictional fallen woman, she suffers quite a bit, and graphically so, as Moore details a disturbing economic system of illegitimacy and its economic consequences. Several chapters are devoted to a harrowing account of "baby farms," an arrangement whereby a lower-class, unwed mother places her baby with a caretaker who may have in her keeping thirty babies at one time. These "farms," as Esther discovers, may mask sinister practices. There is a kind of collusion between the caretakers and upper-class mothers whose babies are nursed by the poor mothers, thus depriving the poor children of sufficient milk from their own mothers. Mrs. Spires, with whom Esther places her infant, hints that it would be better all around if the baby were allowed to die. Esther reacts strongly to this supposition in a passage displaying Moore's naturalistic imagery:

... it seemed to this ignorant girl that she was the victim of a far-reaching conspiracy; she experienced the sensation of the captured animal, and scanned the doors and windows, thinking of some means of escape.14
That her fear is well-founded is clear from a later narrative summary statement of such establishments: "they [babies] all died like the early flies." This image of the flies recalls an earlier passage describing the entire class of servant-girls: "Some eight or nine poor girls stood outside, dressed alike in dingy garments, like half-dead flies trying to crawl through an October afternoon."

The relevance of Esther's story to *Voyage in the Dark* is apparent. Though Anna and her chorus-girl roommate are better educated than the illiterate Esther Waters, they live in the same patriarchal construct in which the lives of young women are defined by barter according to the trade nexus of the sexual marketplace. Rhys's opening chapter sets the pattern swiftly in motion. When Anna and Maudie leave their rented room to look for some stockings, they encounter on the street two well-dressed men who look them "up and down, in that way they have" (p. 5), and the foursome pair off into twosomes. Inside the shop Anna's new acquaintance offers to pay for the stockings and she lets him. Maudie invites the men to their rooms for tea and, when pressed, they say their names are Jones and Jeffries. Both the girls feel they are being lied to. Anna thinks: "You pick up people and then they are rude to you. This business of picking up people and then they always imagine they can be rude to you" (p. 5). After the men leave, the girls review the encounter. Though neither likes the men, both are willing to have further dealings with them. Maudie knows they have money, which is precisely what the girls don't have. Anna, who is always cold on account of the chilly English weather, is shivering, and Maudie wraps her in a fur coat given to her, of course, by another man: "Viv gave me that coat," Maudie said. "He's like that. He doesn't give much but what he gives is good stuff, not shoddy" (p. 8).

Economics — cash, presents, clothes, fur coats, anything material — are what drive the relationships between women and men in this novel. Later Anna becomes sexually involved with Walter Jeffries, the man she "picked up," and he eventually leaves her. The reason he abandons her is never spelled out directly, but there are hints that male fear of female sexuality is a major factor. Such fear permeates all of Rhys's novels. Walter Jeffries' seduction of Anna in *Voyage* arouses her full sexuality, and in one scene, to his prudish, hypocritical dismay, she becomes the aggressor: "He imitated me. 'Let's go upstairs, let's go upstairs. You really shock me sometimes. Miss Morgan'" (p. 55). Joan Givney sums up well this aspect of the male-female sexual dynamics in *Voyage*: "Walter Jeffries senses that she is sexually awakened, that he has lost control of the situation and no longer has the ability to dominate, intimidate, and subdue."17

After Walter terminates his relationship with Anna, he employs an intermediary, his friend Vincent, to explain things to Anna and, essentially, to pension her off. (Male bonds last longer than mixed gender ones.) Vincent tells her in a letter that she should "always have known that the thing could not go on for ever ... Love is not everything — especially that sort of love" (p. 58). Finally he reduces the affair to nothing: "These muddles do happen" (p. 58). In a sense Anna is not surprised. At one level she has always known how it is with men, especially upper-class men. In a restaurant with Walter, earlier in the novel, she observes to herself — in a scene similar to Julia Martin's restaurant meeting with Mr. Mackenzie in Rhys's second novel — a complicity between the moneymaking seducer and a solicitous waiter: "The Brothers Slick and Slack, the Brothers Pushmeofftheearth" (p. 11). The patriarchy of class, money, and power absolutely excludes the Annas of the world.

But Anna is not just abandoned. Like Esther Waters, she is left pregnant. Unlike Esther, whose last name suggests both fecundity and faith, Anna will not bear the child and lacks the faith that Esther draws from. Rhys's heroine invokes Christian faith in only the most ironic, demythologized images. At one point she remembers a former place where she boarded, a dreadful hostel for chorus-girls, named the Cats' House and presided over by women of dreary religiosity:
I drank some more wine and stared at the table-cloth, seeing the matron praying with uplifted face and shut eyes. And her little, short nose and her long, moving lips. Just like a rabbit, she was, like a blind rabbit. There was something horrible about that sort of praying. I thought, 'I believe there's something horrible about any sort of praying.' (p. 12)

Anna lives in a much bleaker naturalistic world than does Esther Waters. Early in the novel Anna and Maudie discuss the necessity of good clothes, a central requirement for success in the economics of sexual transaction. Maudie tells Anna about a former lover who noted that a girl's clothes cost more than what is in them:

'That isn't the way to talk,' [Maudie] said. And he said, 'Well, it's true, isn't it? You can get a very nice girl for five pounds, a very nice girl indeed; you can even get a very nice girl for nothing if you know how to go about it. But you can't get a very nice costume for her for five pounds. To say nothing of underclothes, shoes, etcetera and so on.' And then I had to laugh, because after all, it's true, isn't it? People are much cheaper than things. And look here! Some dogs are more expensive than people, aren't they? And as to some horses ...' (p. 28)

Maudie's friend's speech sums up all the force of money in this novel, and nothing in the chorus-girls' experience ever tells them otherwise. Earlier, Anna has had an epiphany equally powerful in its evocation of naturalistic helplessness:

The ones without any money, the ones with beastly lives.
Perhaps I'm going to be one of the ones with beastly lives. They swarm like woodlice when you push a stick into a woodlice-nest at home. And their faces are the colour of woodlice. (p. 15)

Another point of contact between Esther and Anna is their status as outsiders who exist within an alien culture. Esther, as a Plymouth Sister, feels different from the society of spendthrift horse racers and racetrack gamblers among whom she is relegated to spend her life, and one of the nicer ironies is that Esther, once she is reunited with William Latch, the father of her son, helps him manage a public house which takes the majority of its proceeds from betting. Esther is a survivor, a working-class girl who overcomes seduction, abandonment, pregnancy, and various economic woes, to live a life full of hope and even joy. At the end of the novel she is rewarded with a strong, sturdy son who is off to serve in the army. Moore's cool detachment and keen observation of lower-class manners and mores keep the novel far from the merest touch of sentimentality. Rhys admired Moore's technique, well-characterized by David Skilton as "a British naturalization of a French approach."18

One reason Rhys was so drawn to Esther Waters, I believe, is that the novel bore relevance to her own early adulthood. Esther Waters is a story of triumph over specifically female adversity - seduction, abandonment, and their economic consequences. Esther is never defeated: she bears a child out of wedlock, raises it against all odds, is reunited with the father, and later, with the church as well, when she begins attending prayer meetings with another Plymouth Sister, Mrs. Barfield, the mistress of the manor where Esther began her life as a servant. Esther survives to see, at the end of the novel, her tall and sturdy son grown into a fine man in uniform.

In contrast, Rhys's early adult life did not conform to the triumph of motherhood over tarnished virtue. In England during the period when she was a chorus-girl (just like Anna), Rhys had an affair with Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith, a public school man from a well-to-do family in banking, who pensioned her off when the affair came to an end. In her first marriage Rhys herself lost one child at three weeks of age (she and her husband were gaily drinking champagne, she
learned later, at the precise moment of the infant’s death in hospital) and was
at best, it seems, a rather distant mother with her second child. In a personal
communication, Maryvonne Moerman-Langlet, Rhys’s daughter, wrote on July 24,
Rhys’s daughter, wrote on July 24, 1988, “I have so little I want to tell, so little I am sure about. Like with
everybody else, my interpretation of Jean Rhys is pure speculation.”

Anna Morgan’s fate is far different from Esther’s - and far bleaker. Like
Esther, she is also an outsider, specifically a West Indian. Numerous times in
the novel Anna is called “the Hottentot” (p. 7), a contemporary slur for
blackness, and there are many memory scenes in which she evocatively recalls her
early life in Dominica, the luxurious rain-forest vegetation, the closeness and
intensity of the sun, the brilliant array of colors and lushness, all contrasted
with gray, rainy, chilly England.

Anna’s outsider status is also defined in direct opposition to her hatred of
England. The intensity of her distaste for English culture is pronounced, to say
the least: “Scorn and loathing of the female - a very common expression in this
country. [...] I wouldn’t be an Englishwoman [...] for any money you could give
me or anything else” (p. 50). In an unpublished essay, “The Ant Civilisation:
The Kingdoms of the Human Ants,” Rhys set forth her own strikingly negative
assessment of English (the Ant) civilization. In a remarkable passage from this
essay, Rhys defined woman’s lot in specifically naturalist terms, with special
reference to the condition of women in England, land of kings, knights, and
patriarchy:

All women are individuals and they resist so long as they are
alive the process which makes them into the neuter - the ant
female - Even in England, with heredity and environment pressing
on them they still unbearably resist - (unbearably to the
onlooker) [...] But the process is inevitable in the ant
civilisation - For nothing is more antagonistic than the love of a
woman for a man and man for a woman to the ant civilisation.

Here, spelled out in explicit terms, is the key naturalistic paradigm: the twin
forces of heredity and environment, straight out of Darwin or Zola. Anna Morgan,
despite her exotic West Indian differentness, lives, as do all of Rhys’s
heroines, in a world of hegemonic patriarchy. The English version of that world,
Rhys seems to have believed, was among the worst.

Anna Morgan, like Esther, is left pregnant by the errant male lover. But
there the similarities end. Anna does not bear the child and indeed never really
considers doing so; instead she goes to an abortionist, a scene that ends, in the
original version, with Anna’s death. Numerous publishers objected strongly to
this conclusion and refused to publish the book as it stood. They wanted the
novel to be less depressing, which meant that Anna must live.

One publisher suggested several possibilities: Anna could recover and marry
a rich man, or, failing that, a poor, good-natured man. “Oh, give the girl a
chance,” he told Rhys. But Rhys resisted, as she wrote her American novelist
friend Evelyn Scott:

Evelyn I don’t know what to do. I suppose I shall have to
give in and cut the book and I’m afraid it will make it
meaningless. The worst is that it is precisely the last part
which I am most certain of that will have to be mutilated.

My dear it is so mad - really it is not a disgusting book -
or even a very grey book. And I know the ending is the only
possible ending.

The original ending read as follows:
And the concertina-music stopped and it was so still so
still and lovely like just before you go to sleep and it stopped
and there was the ray of light along the floor like the last
thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out and
blackness comes ...  

In this, Rhys's most naturalistic ending, the heroine's journey ends in the
ultimate darkness of death: here there is no intermediate state as in After
Leaving Mr. Mackenzie or Good Morning, Midnight. Yet despite Rhys's protestations
to Evelyn Scott, she agreed to revise the ending. The published novel ends thus:

When their voices stopped the ray of light came in again
under the door like the last thrust of remembering before
everything is blotted out. I lay and watched it and thought about
starting all over again. And about being new and fresh. And
about mornings, and misty days, when anything might happen. And
about starting all over again, all over again... (p. 115)

Carole Angier, who has recently suggested that Rhys herself came to prefer
the published ending, offers several reasons for this view. First, Rhys had two
later opportunities to restore the original ending in reprint editions but chose
not to. Angier also suggests that the revised ending accords well with the
vibrancy and life-affirmations of the Caribbean subtext of the novel. Rhys
proclaimed Voyage in the Dark as the most autobiographical of her works as well
as her personal favorite. Much has been made of Anna's West Indian identity in
Rhys criticism. In such readings Walter Jeffries is the hegemonic, imperialist,
Anna the objectified, colonized Other: a pairing of the overseer and his slave.  
Obviously such readings are warranted. Rhys's original title for this novel was
"Two Tunes," the intention being, as she explained in a letter, to represent
"Past and Present," that is, a counterpointing of Dominica and England. The
title she settled on, of course, is darker, literally and figuratively. Jan
Curtis offers the tidiest interpretation of the Caribbean significance of the
"voyage in the dark": "Anna Morgan's journey from the West Indies to England
parallels her spiritual journey into darkness." The dark voyage could also
refer to the passage of the fetus through the birth canal. During a successful
birth, of course, the fetus/baby enters into light. While there is no denying
the positive counter-motif of Dominican memories in the novel, there is also no
denying the logic of its pessimistic naturalism; expressed most completely in the
end-of-the-line conclusion of the original version.

Finally, Angier also contends that the scenario of editorial benightedness
fit in well with Rhys's fondness for an "anti-them" position and played to Rhys's
tendency to see herself - and her heroines - as victims. Too much can be made
of the Rhysian self-victimizing idea, though. Rhys herself in a late article,
"Q. and A.: Making Bricks Without Straw," wrote of the tendency of interviewers
to see her always in the same way, as victim:

The question-and-answer game goes on. I realize that I am
being gently pushed into my predestined role, the role of victim.
I have never had any good times, never laughed, never got my own
back, never dared, never worn pretty clothes, never been happy,
ever known wild hopes, or wilder despairs. I've forgotten all
about it. Wailing, I have gone from tyrant to tyrant; each let
down worse than the last. All this, of course, leads straight to
Women's Lib.  

Rhys's daughter spoke of the particular predisposition of American academics to
regard her mother as a "pure feminist," which Moerman considered "the most
ridiculous thing."
Rhys's resistance to being labeled a victim ties in directly with the function of naturalism in her fiction. Naturalism universalizes (or Europeanizes) the condition of her protagonists, placing Rhys among novelists of naturalism and alienation rather than victimization, as some male and female critics often prefer to see her. "Voyage in the Dark" remains a powerful Rhysian novel for both its Caribbean and its European themes.

Notes


2For an early overview of the West Indianess of Rhys's work, see Louis James, "Sun Fire - Painted Fire: Jean Rhys as a Caribbean Novelist," Ariel, 8, no. 3 (July 1977), pp. 111-127.


6Karl Beckson, London in the 1890s: A Cultural History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), pp. 297-298. Mudie's Library declined, for example, to circulate George Moore's first novel, A Modern Lover (1883), on grounds of its salacious content. Moore himself attacked Mudie in pamphlets such as Literature as Nurse; or Circulating Morals (p. 298).


9Skilton, p. x.


11Ibid. Jean Rhys to Morchard Bishop, March 5 [1953], p. 103.


13Quoted by Skilton, p. xx.


15Ibid., p. 155.
16Ibid., p. 138.


18Skilton, p. xiv.


21For a full account of the difficulties that Rhys ran into with this novel, see Nancy Hemond Brown, “Jean Rhys and Voyage in the Dark,” London Magazine (April/May 1985), 40-59.


23Jean Rhys to Evelyn Scott, 10 June [1934], Letters, p. 25.

24Quoted in Brown, "Jean Rhys and Voyage in the Dark," p. 56.

25See, for example, Vanouse and Curtis.

26Jean Rhys to Selma Vaz Dias, 6 November [1957], Letters, p. 149.

27Curtis, p. 146.

