WHITE NOISE: VOCAL FREQUENCIES IN JEAN RHYS’S GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT

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Discussion of Jean Rhys’s fourth novel, Good Morning, Midnight (1939), begins and ends largely with Francis Wyndham’s summary of it in his introduction to Wide Sargasso Sea (1966). Describing what is perhaps the book’s central intrigue—the relationship between Sasha Jensen and René, “the gigolo” — Wyndham writes that “[t]his involved episode is worked out with great subtlety; its climax, which brings the novel to an end, is brilliantly written and indescribably unnerving to read” (9). Subsequent criticism has almost unanimously agreed with this appraisal; Good Morning, Midnight is “beautifully written” and “unnerving to read.” We have, however, gained no further ground towards an account of Rhys’s techniques and their effects, and Wyndham’s “indescribable” still hangs in the air, as though a caveat against further inquiry. And this to me seems a shame, as Rhys’s fourth novel ranks not only with her more lauded Wide Sargasso Sea, but also with many of the more widely-read classics of modernist literature.

Good Morning, Midnight is a dark book—darker than most, really—and this may account in part for its lack of popularity. Its darkness, too, has made it hard to see; the slim body of criticism the novel has inspired spends itself either insisting upon or merely assuming Rhys’s technical brilliance, without examining it in detail. What I shall demonstrate here is how the “darkness” of the novel stems from the particular and peculiar engagements with the narrator’s voice that Rhys’s techniques call for in a reader.

Several critics have registered the fact that, in Good Morning, Midnight particularly, there is a certain strangeness to the tone of Rhys’s narrator. A number of them have identified some variety of binary split in order to account for the audible uneasiness they experience, positing such entities as a “double focus” in the novel or the “two voices” of the narrator, Sasha Jensen.1 These in turn have led to interpretations of the novel in which Sasha is construed as caught between conflicting discourses, which, broadly speaking have been identified as the repressive voice of society and the defeated voice of desire. The impulse behind such theories seems to me as understandable as it is misguided. It is, of course, highly tempting to consider conflicts heard in the voice of a narrator as a conflict, a struggle between two distinct discursive practices, each of which attempts to drown the other out. But, I think, the complexity of and variety in Sasha’s voice resist the imposition of any simple schema to account for them.2

I may as well begin at the beginning:

“Quite like old times,” the room says. “Yes? No?” (9)
What are we to make of a narrator who begins a novel in such a fashion, attributing the very first utterance to "the room"? What sort of person would say such a thing? Perhaps the narrator of some lurid, Kafka-esque nightmare, in which the inanimate is animate and things that should not speak suddenly demand voice. Perhaps instead, the narrator of a fairy story, or of a newly-discovered work by Lewis Carroll; "the room" does, after all, sound rather blithe, even gay, as if about to lure poor Alice Liddell into a third series of hallucinatory misadventures. Yet the narrative delivers none of these possibilities, continuing, in an apparently less fantastic vein:

There are two beds, a big one for madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur. The wash-basin is shut off by a curtain. It is a large room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible. The street outside is narrow, cobble-stoned, going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What they call an impasse. (9)

The first sentence here has the ring of a hotel brochure—or perhaps suggests the voice of a bellhop demonstrating the amenities of a room for a couple—and this effect is largely generated by the formal politeness of "madame" and "monsieur" which punctuates the otherwise descriptive sentence. Yet this vocal posture too is immediately abandoned, supplanted by three flatter sentences of visual description. If these sentences sound like anything, it is narrative. There is, perhaps a hint of personality in "the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible," but for the most part, we might say that these are "unvoiced" sentences; informational rather than tonal. Then, suddenly, the narrator drops a colloquial, almost off-hand remark—"What they call an impasse"—invoking the vague "they" of everyday conversation. So far we have heard four tones in half as many paragraphs.

I have been here five days. I have decided on a place to eat in at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in after dinner. I have arranged my little life. (9)

This is our first indication that the narrative is in the first-person, that the narrator is a particular speaker within the scene. The first two sentences are largely expository and informational; the third, however, alters frequency once more, by means of the word "little." It sounds snide, contemptuous almost, belittling all that has just been said.

These three paragraphs compose the first discreet section of Good Morning, Midnight, and I think they are indicative of the sort of pace Rhys will put her reader's ear through. I would suggest that Sasha Jensen's voice is not a single, unified one, nor is it the site of two conflicting discourses; it is, rather, constantly shifting, from paragraph to paragraph, often from sentence to sentence, and occasionally within a sentence. Sasha Jensen commands a vast array of tonal frequencies and vocal postures, moving among them in such rapid succession that a reader is not allowed to sink into a sustained and comfortable engagement with any one of them. Her voice is not a voice at all but more a discordant "white noise" of competing and conflicting frequencies. But I would do better at this point not to rely on the various metaphors this condition might generate than to describe further examples of its functioning.

Sasha sometimes oscillates among several different tones within a given passage, in effect arguing with herself about her attitude toward the situation at hand:

Come on, stand straight, keep your head up, smile. ... No don't smile. If you smile, he'll think you're trying to get off with him. I know his type. He won't give me the benefit of a shadow of a doubt. Don't smile then, but look eager, alert;
It seems to me that Sasha’s voice moves among at least three distinct registers in this passage. She begins with a stern, self-admonishing tone, but quickly (after the first ellipsis) switches to an indignant and shrewdly observational purchase on the scene: “I know his type. He won’t give me the benefit of a shadow of a doubt.” This serves, however, merely to adjust her previous attitude, and soon she returns to the original tone: “look eager, alert, attentive.” What follows is a quick burst of panic—the third tone—urging herself to “get away,” whereupon she reasserts her original tone more forcibly (“You fool,” etc.). The passage ends, finally, with her voice running through the three tones in rapid succession: indignation (“look here, he’s doing this on purpose”), admonition (“Of course he isn’t doing it on purpose”), and an almost child-like whimpering (“He is, he is. He’s doing it on purpose”).

It is no doubt the presence of such self-censure within her vocal range—as I have indicated above—that has given rise to the interpretations of Sasha’s audile peculiarities as some sort of struggle between the social and the individual. But it is difficult to see where, say, her tone of cool appraisal and indignation would fit comfortably in such a bifurcated model. Or, for that matter, where her more frivolous vocal posturings, such as those in the following passages, would:

I try to decide what colour I shall have my hair dyed, and hand on to that thought as you hang on to something when you are drowning: shall I have it red? Shall I have it black? Now, black—that would be startling. Shall I have it blond cendré? But blond cendré, madame, is the most difficult of colours. It is very, very rarely, madame, that hair can be successfully dyed blond cendré. It’s even harder on the hair than dying it platinum blonde. First it must be bleached, that is to say, its own colour must be taken out of it— and then it must be dyed, that is to say, another colour must be imposed on it. (Educated hair.... And then, what?) (51, ellipsis in original)

and

“Petite Maman—No, Petite Maman, you are not reasonable. Love is one thing; marriage—alas!—is quite another. If you haven’t found that out yet you soon will, I assure you. Nevertheless....”

No, mademoiselle, no, madame, life is not easy. Do not delude yourselves. Nothing is easy. But there is hope (turn to page 5), and yet more hope (turn to page 9)....

I am in the middle of a long article by a lady who has had her breasts lifted when he takes the dryer off my head. (61-62, ellipsis in original)

In these passages, Sasha adopts other vocal postures, more clearly recognizable as types rather than manifestations of her own mixed emotions. In the first, she slides seamlessly from a consideration of how she should have her hair dyed (“Shall I have it blond cendré?”) to a travesty of a fussy hairdresser advising her on the tribulations of the hair business (“But blond cendré, madame, is the most difficult of colours. It is very, very rarely, madame, that hair can be successfully dyed blond cendré.”). As in our first example, “madame” proves to be the lever that switches the voice, here conjuring the suave and respectful
tones of a "Félix" or an "Antoine" (56) speaking to his clientèle. The paragraph ends with Sasha making a somewhat cryptic, parenthetical joke about her own-vocal impression ("(Educated hair.... And then, what?)").

In the second passage, Sasha is actually at the hairdresser's, reading an advice column in a woman's magazine. The first paragraph is in quotation marks, indicating its location in the series of printed responses she reads. With the next paragraph, however, the quotation ends, but Sasha herself still persists in the voice of the magazine. Is she musing on her own situation, mocking the facile solutions of advice columns, or ridiculing the mesdames and mesdemoiselles who seek such simple answers? Or is she even, in this otherwise grim novel, being playful? It is difficult to decide. It may perhaps be an arbitrary fragmentation of the voice, a splintering resistant to logical explanation, like segments of The Waste Land (1922) or Ulysses (1922). The point is simply that she chooses to make this vocal aside before continuing with the narration of the story.

Sasha's vocal dissonances, I should add, are by no means always so apparently aimless. On the contrary, they often occur in such a manner as to cloud our perception of Sasha's purchase on a given scene. This, I think, in turn lends a certain ambivalence to our own response to her voice, for what are we to think or feel about a narrator who is at once poignant and self-ridiculing - who tugs our heart-strings with one hand and gooses us with the other - as in the following passages:

It was then that I had the bright idea of drinking myself to death. Thirty-five pounds of the legacy had accumulated, it seemed. That ought to do the trick. (43)

Yes, I am sad, sad as a circus-lioness, sad as an eagle without wings, sad as a violin with only one string and that one broken, sad as a woman who is growing old. Sad, sad, sad. ... Or perhaps if I just said "merde" it would do as well. (45, ellipsis in original)

and

My throat shuts up, my eyes sting. This is awful. Now I am going to cry. This is the worst. If I do that I shall really have to walk under a bus when I get outside. (51, ellipsis in original)

In the first instance, the tonal disparities occur not only from sentence to sentence, but even within a sentence. How are we to respond to the bright idea of drinking myself to death? The breezily scornful "bright idea" positively jars against the somber "drinking myself to death." Can we hear two such phrases in the same tone? What sort of tone could carry both? Or, if a single tone wins out, is it not obvious how inappropriate part of the content is? The two sentences that follow offer a more relaxed version of the same vocal clash. There is something frighteningly ruthless and calculating in the second sentence as it follows on the heels of "drinking myself to death," this cold assessment of her own finances as adequate means to kill herself. This tone then gives way to one of flip banter: "That ought to do the trick."

The second example is one of the more lyrical passages in the novel. Provoked by a question from a stranger - "Pourquoi êtes-vous si triste?" (45) - Sasha internally improvises similes on this theme, creating a rhythmic cadence around the word "sad." She concludes with a literal statement of her sadness, trailing off "Sad, sad, sad...." Then, it seems, she immediately dismisses such sentiments and/or the effect of her lyricism upon her hearers. She cynically shrugs off the preceding vocal display, as if the word "merde" could substitute just as effectively. In the third passage, Sasha has just been publicly
humiliated by a young lady in a restaurant and is trying to choke back tears. She describes her abject embarrassment at the situation, pausing for a moment in an ellipsis, before concluding, "If I do that I shall really have to walk under a bus when I get outside." It is a humorous-sounding line, though it's difficult to say exactly what is funny about it. Is it the exaggerated formality and politeness of her grammar ("I shall really have to"), the idea of "walk[ing] under a bus" (rather than "in front of a bus," or being "run over" by one), or the seeming innocuous calm with which she utters such a statement (as if it had no more consequence than, say, "If it rains, I shall really have to take my umbrella on my walk")? If we laugh, however, it is an uneasy laugh, given the backdrop of humiliation against which the statement is made and the incongruity between the glibness of her tone and the idea expressed.

As I hope is obvious by now, the audible discomfort which has troubled the ears of a number of critics of Good Morning, Midnight may be attributed to the extreme liberties Rhys takes with the voice of her narrator, Sasha Jensen. In Sasha, the reader encounters a narrator with a vocal range so wide that it is difficult to circumscribe. She might - it seems - say anything at any particular time. We are able to place very few restrictions upon her language with any confidence and, we may wish to say, we have little choice but to take her at her word at any point in her narration. What I mean by this is that she maintains a certain unpredictability in her speech, and a reader must follow along - attentive to the changing nuances of her tone - rather than think ahead with comfortable assurance as to what her reaction to a given situation will be. We can, I would argue, neither foresee nor rule out what she will say next or how she will say it. Her reaction upon viewing the work of the painter Serge, for example, is as unexpected as it is perfectly possible:

I am surrounded by the pictures. It is astonishing how vivid they are in this dim light. . . . Now the room expands and the iron band round my heart loosens. The miracle has happened. I am happy.

Looking at the pictures, I go off into a vague dream. (99, ellipsis in original)

Sasha's moments of happiness, her delighted, almost rapturous utterances, are infrequent occurrences in Good Morning, Midnight. There's no telling when they will arise, and yet, no feeling that they are inappropriate or out-of-character. Here is a voice - or a collection of voices - which, in its overwhelming darkness, refuses to abide by even that consistency.

Good Morning, Midnight does not provide a comfortable reading experience. Sasha's voice keeps a reader's ear on edge with its white noise, its barrage of conflicting frequencies. As we have seen, this action is at its most vexed in reference to Sasha's emotional states; we are often at a loss as to how to react to the wild ambivalence in her tones, the often gross disparity between her tone and the message she delivers. Rhys's narration is not accountable to critical conceptions which see it as torn between two warring discursive factions, as it never remains in one particular voice long enough to constitute either side. It ultimately may not be accountable to any particular human speech practice, with its cavalier disregard for unities of time and place, its perverse insistence on the present tense regardless of its temporal vantage point, its disdain to be rationalized into plausible and consistent categorization. I think it is this "inhuman" quality of Sasha Jensen, the uncertain and not altogether possible purchases she has on the scenes she renders, that makes Good Morning, Midnight such a darkly disturbing - and yet compellingly fascinating - book to read.

Notes

1 See Marsha Z. Cummins (360) and Kristien Hemmerechts (341) respectively. Bianca Tarozzi (5) and Jane Neide Ashcom (23) construct similar models in discussing Sasha's voice.
Hemmerecht's study, A Plausible Story and a Plausible Way of Telling It: A Structuralist Analysis of Jean Rhys's Novels, is a particularly interesting document of confusion in this respect. Indeed, given the decidedly less political or psychological terms into which Hemmerecht seeks to divide Sasha's voice - attempting to draw a distinction between "main character's voice" and "narrator's voice" - the failure of her attempt seems all the more telling. After positing the distinction, Hemmerecht notes that "it is not always possible to draw the line between the voice of the experiencing character Sasha, and that of the narrator Sasha" (340), and ultimately concludes "that in Good Morning, Midnight there is no distinct main narrator's voice, which would derive its authority from its very status of being a main narrator's voice. The voice we hear in Good Morning, Midnight is mostly that of the character Sasha... rather than the narrator's commentary... Seldom can a passage unequivocally be assigned to the main narrator" (341).

This is, admittedly, an inference, based on the language of the answers she reads. Sasha begins by reading women's magazines (Eves and so forth), then switches to hair magazines (the Art of Hairdressing, etc.) before picking up the unnamed "curious journal" (61) in which she reads the "answers to correspondents."

I find the action of this switch from the similes to the literal statement interesting, at least deserving a footnote as the point is more or less unrelated to my contentions above. It is, I think, a pleasurable game for the reader's mind to note the switch in the meaning of the word "as" in its last appearance, moving from the "like" of the similes to its use as identification in the literal statement (i.e. "as a woman who is growing old, I am sad"). This switch plays against the insistence of the cadence - and of the formal similarity between the similes and the literal statement - that "as" means the same thing in both cases.

A counter-example to Sasha's "unpredictability" might be Faulkner's achievement of consistent and sustained voiced narratives in The Sound and the Fury (1929). It comes as no surprise, for example, that when Luster disturbs Benjy's jimson weed graveyard, that Benjy will start to bellow (34). Furthermore, as both Luster and the reader are aware, when Luster whispers "Caddy. Beller now. Caddy" (34), Benjy's anguish will only increase. Benjy informs us that "he began to cry" (34) only after Luster took his weeds. Our suspicion that, after Luster returns the weeds, Benjy will continue to bellow due to the mention of Caddy, is subsequently confirmed - without his needing to tell us so - by Dilsey's intervention in the scene (34-35).

This remark harkens back to my earlier appraisal of Hemmerecht's efforts to make the story conform to conventional narrative conventions. She writes, for example, that given the present tense of the narration, "the act of narrating is synchronous with the events" (341). This seems to me a statement we cannot insist upon, and not just because of the obvious objection that, with the exception of a few past tense transitions between the "present" action and her reminiscences, scenes from the past are narrated in the present tense as well. The matter would require some demonstrating, but there are occasional indications that Sasha knows what is about to occur - as if these were past events recalled - juxtaposed with indications that she is experiencing the narrative as she says it. But, we might ask, from where and to whom could such a present tense narrative be narrated? There is no answer to this question, which I think may indicate something about first-person, present-tense narratives. It may be impossible to measure them, as speaking situations, by the yardstick of possible human behavior.

Works Cited


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LITERATURE FROM THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD IN THE CLASSROOM:
SHORT PROSE FICTION FROM THE NEW ENGLISH LITERATURES

Heidi Ganner

English literature from all over the world has successfully penetrated the European book market. The interest of publishers in originals and translations, the market for the young reader, the growth of the ELT (English Language Teaching) market, and annotated, abridged, and simplified texts have increasingly shifted towards the New English Literatures, whose relevance for the European academic and for the interested non-academic reader is most obviously reflected in recent reference works of English literature. The pages of these works have been opened to the New English Literatures, even if not all publishers have actually gone so far as to change their titles to "Guides" or "Companions to Literature in English." A standard work such as The Oxford Companion to English Literature (1985 edition, Margaret Drabble, editor) would have been the poorer for not including Nadine Gordimer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, and many others whose origins clearly lie outside the traditional boundaries, at least geographically, of English literature.

English literature has indeed been redefined on the basis of the common denominator of all these writers - a language which Anita Desai describes as "the most flexible, the most rich in nuances and subtleties," making it the natural vehicle of communication and artistic expression, even for writers for whom English is not the mother tongue, or whose rejection of colonialism may make them hostile towards European culture. It is the instrument of expression particularly for all those who seek to find solidarity outside their own worlds in their struggle for human rights, for freedom, or for the liberation of women in cultures as diverse as those of Nigeria, New Zealand, or the Caribbean.