JEAN RHYS: THE FRENCH CONNECTION?

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One of the most striking scenes in Jean Rhys's literary corpus, one to which she obsessively returns, involves a young white girl watching a West Indian carnival parade —an event experienced by Rhys herself as a child in Dominica. The blind, or *jalousie*, through which the girl looks can be considered as a metaphor uniting and illuminating Rhys's thematic and aesthetic concerns. On one level the blind is a physical barrier representing the divisions between people of different colour, faith, station and race. However, rather than privileging the position of the bourgeois, white, Protestant colonials, Rhys, ever the non-conformist, reverses traditional expectations in her provision of a first-person narrator who, although physically on the inside of the window, is nonetheless figuratively ascribed the instantly recognisable role of "outsider", observing events from a position of vulnerability, dislocation and marginality. The reader is invited to participate vicariously in the girl's chronic experience of emotional and corporeal isolation and difference, together with her equally acute desire for connection, acceptance and a sense of community. Throughout the scene the protagonist remains passive and silent, unable to give utterance to her feelings of thwarted desire. Rhys's repeated retelling acknowledges this primary absence of verbal articulation and constitutes a *post hoc* attempt to provide a voice for the vulnerable child. This is paradigmatic of Rhys's corpus as a whole, although the specific nature of alienation does vary, encompassing age, creed, colour, class, financial status and, most frequently, gender.[1]

The second aspect of the *jalousie* reference underlines Rhys's aesthetic concerns and in particular the importance she attaches to perspective in all her works. Just as the slats of the blinds dissect and blot out parts of the overall picture as viewed by the girl, the text itself becomes lacunary and highly fragmented. Rhys's choice of *jalousie* as opposed to some other form of blind

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or shutter (*store*, *persienne*, *contrevent*, or *volet*, for example), is significant as in addition to its primary meaning, it also denotes jealousy, thus alerting the reader to the fact that the narrative is deeply subjective, coloured by an emotional or psychological filter. In this there is a definite marked shift away from nineteenth-century preoccupations with objective recording and verisimilitude towards a more modernist notion of what constitutes realism. So the *jalousie* blinds, then, serve as a metaphor for both separation, isolation and linguistic suppression on the one hand, and, on the other, the innovative narrative process which will provide the means and method of connection.

Given Rhys's reputation for meticulous attention to detail in her work, her decision to employ a French term to express this key image of the *jalousie* is significant. It raises the question of the role played by France in Rhys's fictional corpus. This essay, focusing principally on Rhys's early continental novels, will assess the ways in which France is constructed in Rhys's *oeuvre* to provide a potential route away from alienation towards assimilation, enabling her characters to explore and perhaps reify the possibility of connection. It will additionally interrogate her aesthetic principles to assess the way in which her quest for a radical new form of writing, more apposite to expressing the concerns of the disempowered, draws on the intellectual and creative ambience of inter-war France and intersects with feminist and modernist discourses. As Rhys once said in a letter written to her daughter Maryvonne Moerman on 15 October 1953: 'I will always put France the first though. It is my best love and heaven knows why" (Rhys 1984: 112).

Rhys's autobiography,[2] her first four novels[3] and a number of her Paris-based short stories[4] provide some clues to the enigma of her love of France. In her first novel, *Quartet*, Paris is seen to exert two quite distinctive forces of attraction. Both are symbolically foregrounded early in the novel in a discussion of a series of pictures. The first reason posited for Paris's magnetic appeal is the notion of the metropolis as a cultural and cerebral Mecca. The content of the pictures, described as "Groups of women. Masses of flesh arranged to form intricate and absorbing patterns" (1929: 8), is reminiscent of Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907) with its naked, female bodies transformed into geometrical triangles and lozenges, a work described by Alan Bullock (1991: 58) as the first truly twentieth-century painting to herald in the modernist aesthetic vision. Moreover, the pictures have been newly purchased by a certain Miss De Solla, an English, expatriate, female painter living on the Parisian Left Bank. This underlines

the popular image of Paris as a major seat of modernism, and as the artistic and intellectual heart of Europe in the inter-war years.

However, Rhys evokes this widely held utopian notion of Paris as an alternative aesthetic homeland precisely in order to show that such a belief is illusory. Almost immediately Miss De Solla deflates the image of Paris as an empowering refuge for writers, painters and musicians alike when she comments: "It's pretty awful to think of the hundreds of women round here, painting away and all that" (1929: 10). This ironic, detached attitude has much in common with the equally dismissive views adopted by Rhys in her autobiographical works. While Paris may have afforded her privacy, tolerance and the necessary freedom to exercise her chosen profession as a writer —a freedom difficult, if not impossible, to secure in England[5], it did not promote sustained physical connection with any literary group, least of all the *avant-garde* Anglo-American "lost generation". She did not, for example, see Nathalie Barney's renowned separatist coterie of Sapphic novelists and poets as a potential source of sisterhood and support, nor did she form an allegiance with any of the "forgotten generation" of French women writers such as Anna de Noailles, Rachilde, Colette, Marguerite Audoux, Irène Némirovsky, Louise de Vilmorin, Josette Clotis, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Jeanne Galzy, Myriam Harry and Catherine Pozzi.[6] There is no mention in her works of the network of powerful and influential French *salonnières* under whose auspices as yet unknown writers were given patronage and encouragement, or of the Anglo-American women of the Left Bank —Stein, Wharton, Nin, Loy, Doolittle, Barnes, Flanner, Beach, Wilde, Anderson, Brookes, Hall and Solano, far less their male counterparts.

As Lorna Sage argues, Rhys was "far more radically displaced than any of the literary figures imagination now obligingly supplies to surround her" (1992: 48). Her situation on the periphery is well illustrated in the diagram entitled "A Tangled Mesh of Modernists" (Scott 1990: 10). Here the names of forty-nine authors are placed in a circle, with twenty-six of these including Rhys printed in bold. Lines are drawn between authors to show relationships of a personal or professional nature. Reading alphabetically, we see that Ezra Pound, who precedes Rhys, has fifteen attachments, and Dorothy Richardson, who follows her, has ten, while Rhys herself has only two. Even Shari Benstock admits, "she moved like a ghost among the expatriates. Whether by choice or by chance she remained at the furthest fringes of intellectual and literary activity during her Paris residence" (1987: 449). Benstock's analysis stops too short, as this issue of choice or circumstance lies at the crux of Rhys's position vis-à-vis modernism.

Certainly Rhys's financial situation directly contributed to her physical isolation and feeling of difference from the majority of Paris-based modernists. She lived, after all, not in the fashionable Latin Quarter, but in the thirteenth district where she led a painfully deracinated, vagabond existence, drifting from one dismal, anonymous hotel to the next. However, the authorial persona generated in Rhys's correspondence and *Smile Please* would seem to suggest that her artistic isolation should be read quite differently: not as a biographical given, but as something self-conscious, as something self-imposed. She chooses to express no sense of solidarity or connection whatsoever with the "lost generation" whom she explicitly dismisses on several grounds, and this despite the fact that Ford Madox Ford considered her of their camp. For example, she expresses resentment over what she saw as the modernists' phoney bohemianism which sat so at odds with their privileged, financially secure backgrounds.[7] In addition, she attacks their failure to integrate properly with the French. Rhys writes in a letter to Diana Athill:

> The "Paris" all these people write about, Henry Miller, even Hemingway etc was not "Paris" at all —it was "America in Paris" or "England in Paris". The real Paris had nothing to do with that lot.—As soon as the tourists came the *Montparnos* packed up and left. (1984: 280)

Her own, quite different experience of "the other Paris" is fêted as being not only less cloistered, but also more genuine. Again, as with the *jalousie*, we see a challenge to conventional expectations and a celebration of marginality and difference.

Although Rhys explodes the myth of Paris as a unifying cultural haven, drawing her self-portrait as an isolated literary figure, she does not do so naively. However, critics have not always recognised that her self-imposed decision to limit contact with other *avant-garde* writers of the day and to relinquish the comforts and the consolations of a shared group identity in favour of artistic marginality is a self-conscious writing strategy. Judith Kegan Gardiner notes that Rhys's situation as a female outsider has all too often resulted in critics reductively classifying her work as narrowly autobiographical, while the reception accorded to male modernists who adopt a similar position of marginality is markedly different. Their affected alienation and assumed persona of the *flâneur* viewing life from societal margins is read as a metaphor for their ironic interrogation of "the diminishing possibility of human existence in a modern metropolitan society" (1982: 242). Rhys also knowingly exploits her doubly alienated

authorial position to explore the self-same thematic and aesthetic issues which preoccupied so many of her *avant-garde* peers.

The second set of associations linked to the collection of pictures with which *Quartet* opens, which might go some way to explaining Rhys's attachment to France, is related to their actual subject matter. The image of entwined, naked female bodies suggests women liberated from repressive social taboos, freely exploring their own sexuality. This is very much in accordance with the popular conception of inter-war Paris as a centre for progressive moral attitudes.[8] Christopher Robinson argues that although the Civil Code was still severe in the period, especially for male homosexuals, and while the public at large remained hostile to overt sexual experimentation, there was indeed a general relaxation of morality in post-1918 France. He also stresses that the expatriate women of the Left Bank were not subject to, nor indeed even susceptible to, the same type of constraints placed on their French peers (1995: 1-39). It is this very image of social and sexual emancipation associated with Paris in the *"années folles"* which first attracts Marya Zelli in *Quartet*. There is a decided element of sexual curiosity and voyeuristic excitement in her constant, vagabond wanderings past scenes as sharply focused as any Brassaï photograph —the haunts of "gaily painted ladies", the so-called "midwives' premises", the restaurant with the transvestite proprietor, the clubs and cafés frequented by working-class homosexuals, and the labyrinthine, "redly lit" streets (1929: 9, 29). She is entranced by what she considers the thrilling, authentic, hidden Paris, this underworld community of mistresses, models, call-girls and courtesans.

Once more Rhys sets up this romanticised concept of erotic freedom in order to show that it is ill-advised and fallacious. To reinforce the point that Marya's beliefs are fuelled more by fiction than reality, she simultaneously undermines several of the key tenets of the realist novel of education. In terms of the overall form, *Quartet* follows some conventions, opening with Marya's move to the capital and ending with her ingenuous illusions being stripped away. However, her enlightenment is not accompanied by the achievement of familial or social integration as would be the case in, say, a Fielding novel. Instead, following a series of rites of passage, she is led on an increasingly solitary downward spiral into the world of male violence and sexual exploitation. The author accentuates the grim inevitability of this *denouement* through several linguistic correlations in the opening and closing scenes: Marya's husband initially objected verbally "with violence" to her walking through "sordid streets" (1929: 9); he finally objects with physical

violence when Marya's endless walks take on a different set of connotations of actual street-walking.

Rhys also eradicates the traditional *Bildungsroman*'s series of mentor figures. None of the characters, least of all Lois with her mask of amiability and benevolence, acts as a guide to help the heroine in her journey to enlightenment. So Marya's primary lesson is that in the realm of romantic and carnal love there is a glaring absence of any spirit of solidarity and mutual support between women. Instead she experiences first-hand acute rivalry and competition on a psycho-sexual and an ontological level. Rhys depicts an existential dystopia in which all four principal characters seek to affirm their own sovereignty by quashing the threat of the others' equally autonomous consciousnesses. This is seen too in terms of the use of narrative voices articulating the key themes and *leitmotifs* within the novel, as there is considerable rivalry and tension in the four perspectives which constitute the fugal aspect of the titular quartet. Marya, whose voice is silenced at the end of the novel, comes to realize that in Paris, this so-called woman's paradise, concepts of selfhood are designated by hostile external agents and that the process of definition for all women involves the establishment of an arbitrary market value. She comes to understand the true nature of the balance of power between the sexes. Women's lives are determined by economic strictures and the ongoing daily quest for subsistence and shelter. In a novel where the principal male characters are art dealers and collectors, vulnerable women ultimately become like the physical paintings with which the novel opened: mere commodities to be bought, possessed and sold. Ultimately in this city governed by a market economy, driven by acquisitiveness, as elsewhere, money is all that really counts. As Bernadet says: "My God, Paris. Paris. Well, and then? Without money Paris is as rotten as anywhere else" (1929: 130). The reader, now enlightened, reinterprets the earliest image feminizing Paris in *Quartet*. The lights on the Seine no longer suggest a row of diamonds across an erotic, seductive woman's throat. With references to suicide and with the ambiguous ending in which Marya is perhaps herself murdered, the necklace of jewels, and the market economy it now symbolises, comes to resemble a noose. Rhys, then, refuses to endorse the popular myth of a sexually liberal Paris in which communities of women contentedly explore their own eroticism. In subverting key aspects of the traditional novel of education in the process, she destabilises our reading position, so that we are encouraged to re-examine the prescriptive, essentialist female roles, constructed in accordance with images of male desire, which are promoted by so much realist fiction.

Given the highly deceptive nature of inter-war Paris as a utopian literary Parnassus or an enabling, sexually liberated metropolis, and given Rhys's and her characters' related lack of assimilation, one might imagine that Paris affords no opportunities for connection whatsoever. But this is not so. We need to look at the roots of Rhys's francophilia to discover Paris's true potential. According to Rhys's autobiography, the origin of her love of France can be found in her early childhood. As a direct result of the near-total withdrawal of actual maternal affection in her infancy, Rhys transfers her filial need for nurturing onto a surrogate mother figure and, significantly, the language she speaks. In the first instance this is Ann Tewitt, the obeah cook, who would chat to her in French patois in the secure, female environment of the kitchen.[9] As an older child she experiences a second emotional shift in allegiance in her adoration of the convent Superior, Mother Mount Calvary, who taught her the French language. The immediate effect of this infatuation is an aspiration to live cloistered in the protective enclave of the convent, in a segregated, all-female, French-speaking realm beyond the jurisdiction of the patriarchal world. As she writes in *Smile Please*, it is viewed as "a safe place —there I would be happy" (1979: 79). Later still, in a further transfer of desire, it is Paris itself which comes to offer this utopian vision of a special maternal, protective and empowering domain.

This scenario has a fictional corollary in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. While the emotional gulf between Julia Morgan and her estranged mother is never spanned, some connection occurs through textual correlations, chiefly through the associations attributed to a Modigliani painting and through Rhys's disruptive chronology. Modigliani's naked model is explicitly equated with Julia, who exercises the same profession (1931: 40), and implicitly likened to Mrs Morgan, who has the same dark, frightening and fascinating mask-like face and proud, beautiful, animal body as the model (1931: 40, 70, 90). This similarity between Julia and her mother is reinforced when we are shown parallels in their lives. We see the mother regressing to a childlike condition and advancing through the final stages of old age, sickness and death. Similarly, through Julia's interior monologue recollections we observe her as an infant and a mother, and through her imagined projections we see her as a woman past her prime. But actual identification with the real mother is highly problematic, because it prefigures isolation, which accompanies female maturity. On Mrs Morgan's demise, Julia's ageing process accelerates alarmingly, a point made unambiguously in the ironic parallels and reversals in the chapters entitled "The First Unknown" and "The Second Unknown". Her physical change is succinctly captured in her attitude to her older neighbour with the badly dyed hair and black dress. Initially she holds her in

disdain; in the final scenes she is attired identically even down to adopting the "cringing" attitude attributed earlier to the older woman (1931: 11, 130). However, Mrs Morgan's death is also a potential liberation. This maternal erasure and the resultant definitive rupture of the mother-daughter bond plays a pivotal part in motivating, re-launching and structuring Julia's voyage of self-discovery, propelling her back to Paris for a second time in search of a matrilinear tradition or matriarchal community. Despite the fact that her first transfer of filial desire in Paris was unsuccessful, the cyclic nature of the novel and its lack of closure still leaves open the possibility of establishing valid emotional symbiotic connection in Paris.[10]

Rhys's next novel, *Good Morning, Midnight*, the most stylistically innovative of her works, forms an interesting pair with *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* as it too explores a young girl's attempt to develop a pseudo-symbiotic union in Paris. It treats the subject in a much more positive fashion, and this is underlined by the way in which it reverses the structure of the earlier novel. In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* the action of the central section —the ultimate rupture of the mother daughter relationship— occurs during a ten-day break back in London, where Julia formerly lived. Paris, the seat of potential nurturing, is only present in the framework. In total contrast, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, the framework is London and the core of the novel comprises Sasha Jensen's ten-day visit to Paris during which she successfully establishes two supportive emotional attachments.

The novel is set precisely in October 1937 against an oppressive masculinized landscape overcast by the vying political threats of fascism and communism, symbolically present in the Trocadero International Exhibition scenes. Psychologically, it is a dystopic nightmare world fostered in no mean part by the male protagonists whose words and actions confuse and verbally suppress Sasha. In almost every dialogue, they wilfully deceive her with false or lacunary information concerning their names, ages, nationalities or pasts. Of these characters, one of the most damaging is Sasha's pompous English employer, Mr Blank, viewed by Rosalind Miles as an "individual bully" as well as a representative of "institutional masculine hostility" (1987: 135). With his very name suggesting his own uncomprehending nature, it is he, and not Sasha, who is uniquely responsible for the breakdown in their communications. His mastery of French is poor, he is unable to express himself clearly, and he brutally terrorises his female interlocutor into silence. The impact of this atmosphere and the result of such episodes is a breakdown in Sasha's sense of who she is, which in terms of the plot culminates in her descent into chronic alienation, oblivion, drunkenness and madness.

Identity is based on continuity of experience, and Rhys textually demonstrates its disintegration in several ways. She shows the acting/speaking self becoming split and multiple in the interior monologues when Sasha addresses herself arbitrarily in the first, second and third person (1939: 144, 153-7). In addition to this, there is an almost total absence of coherent linearity and progression in the narrative. Actual chronological time is replaced by subjective psychological notions of time, such that, for example, tomorrow sometimes is a few hours away, sometimes it is "A long time till tomorrow. A hundred years perhaps, till tomorrow..." (1939: 152), sometimes "tomorrow never comes" (1939: 133). Moreover, Sasha constructs a plurality of imagined, on occasion mutually exclusive, pasts, and is ambiguous in her use of future and future conditional tenses. An unreliable narrative in which fact and fantasy compete is generated, a point highlighted when Sasha comments: "the truth is improbable, the truth is fantastic; it's in a distorting mirror that you see the truth" (1939: 63). The text itself, mirroring Sasha's divided personalities, and her disorientating experiences of temporal dislocation and discontinuity, becomes splintered with streams of unanswered rhetorical questions and unfinished sentences tailing off in an abundant use of aposiopesis. Rhys's purpose seems clear. The collapse of Sasha's sense of selfhood makes her quest for supportive, symbiotic emotional attachment all the more pressing, just as the aggressively masculinized nature of Paris emphasises the need for a special, intimate space (both physical and textual) in which women may more freely bond and communicate.

The first constructive connection made by Sasha is with a milliner. The impetus for much of the plot is an early scene in which Sasha is publicly belittled in impeccable colloquial French by a younger English girl who correctly identifies her age, nationality and social status, from her appearance alone.[11] In order to soothe her pain of being doubly ostracised and to abate her acute sense of difference, Sasha attempts to suppress all signs of her status as a foreigner, including her native linguistic patterns. Using a French noun and an inverted phrasal structure common in French, she appraises her situation thus: "It shouts "Anglaise" my hat" (1939: 14). She dreams of clothing as a type of "protective armour" (1939: 84), which could hide her true identity as an outsider and so promote assimilation into the dominant group. The milliner does more than just supply Sasha with a new persona: she provides a moment of genuine meaningful connection. Her reassuring, intimate words and gestures are viewed as a celebration of an extraordinary exclusively female ritual, which stands in stark contrast to the failed dialogue with Mr Blank.[12] The second woman with whom Sasha establishes a meaningful relationship

in Paris is the midwife who delivers her baby. Just as her actions, like the milliner's, have an almost sacramental, ceremonial quality consecrating a unique female experience, the language of the midwife generates a special bond: "She speaks to me in a language that is no language. But I understand it". "Speaking her old, old language of words that are not words" (1939: 50). Like French to the ears of the native English-speaking child, like the non-verbal intercourse between the mother and new-born baby, the midwife's utterances and Sasha's response as her baby is delivered constitute a special female means of communication.

As with the *jalousie*, Rhys now challenges and reverses the reader's value systems. The highly disrupted texture of *Good Morning, Midnight* shifts from being an expression of a single woman's experience of alienation and loss of selfhood to being a celebration of womanhood, a re-appraisal of the concept of marginality. Working within a binary system, Rhys venerates all that is traditionally inscribed as negative, from labour pains to the titular midnight. In her new hierarchy, Mr Blank's domineering verbosity, which originally seemed more commanding than Sasha's silence, in hindsight is superseded by her superior, ironic, subversive laughter. Authoritarian rational prose, associated with masculine perspectives in the novel, is subordinated to rich free-flowing associative interior monologues with all their syntactical disruption (verbs without agents, shifting use of persons, accumulations of words performing the same grammatical function in the sentence). Even the novel's severe chronological disturbance —the blurring of past, present and future— takes on new meaning as Sasha and the midwife become part of a greater continuum of women stretching out through time. They are joined in a quasi-religious experience, united through a shared non-patriarchal language, a linguistic system whose primary attachment is to the natural rhythms of the female body. This is reflected in the novel's plot and structure, where cyclic repetition replaces a more conventional rigidly linear progression forwards. Just as Sasha's original fixed programme gives way to impulsive return visits to old haunts, so the narrative doubles up on itself repeatedly, a point underlined by the opening setting of the *impasse*, which acts as a physical barrier to onward movement. This circularity is mirrored too in the *leitmotif* of the return which features prominently in both the *in medias res* opening scene with its nostalgia for the past, and the forward-looking open-ended *dénouement*. So, Sasha succeeds in finding true assimilation in Paris and Rhys succeeds in privileging woman-centred themes within a stylistically innovative, subversive, narrative framework, producing a prototypal form of what Hélène Cixous and Annie Leclerc will much later describe as an *écriture féminine*.

In addition to this special female bonding process Rhys proposes a further, more general form of connection through literature itself. This requires some qualification as numerous aspects in the production and reception of literature, she notes, are divisive. For instance, the content of many works may be imperialist, homophobic, xenophobic or misogynistic, in short alienating for certain groups of readers, as is made evident in Audrey's reading experience in "The Insect World" in *Sleep It Off Lady*. Even books as physical artefacts can be used unjustly to assert the primacy and power of the owner: in "The Day They Burned the Books" in *Tigers are Better-Looking* Mr Sawyer's assumed supremacy over his wife is stressed symbolically through his possession of a fine library. Despite such problem areas, Rhys has a very positive view of the potential of literature, ending the opening section of her autobiography with the buoyant line: "now I was alone except for books" (1979: 26). Helen Carr argues that far from being "an inward-looking chronicler of private pathos, ignorant of literary culture, untutored even if intuiting the tone of her times", as some critics have described her, Rhys was indeed as much a reader as a writer (1996: 9). Her letters reveal her to have been a voracious one at that. Just as Woolf considers literature to be a "common ground", Rhys also understands it as a shared inheritance, there to be reappraised and adapted by each new generation of writers. This awareness of other authors, a keystone in modernist writing, is systematically translated into rigorously self-conscious works which interact with canonical texts in such a way as to constitute a form of vibrant, ongoing dialectic process.

One result is that in her own fiction, as Ellen Friedman puts it, she attempts to rewrite earlier authors into modernity (1989: 127), challenging their use of traditional narrative techniques and perspectives. This is patently the case of her most celebrated novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It draws on Elizabeth Jenkins's novel *Harriet* (1934), which treats the same theme of domestic sequestration, and also on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848), rejecting and reversing traditional value systems, retelling the first wife's story from a more articulate, feminist and anti-imperialist viewpoint, and, despite Antoinette's self-immolation, declaring cultural negativity a source of power and strength worthy of celebration.[13] This, her last novel, is not an anomaly, as a number of her earlier works also employ a subversive process of literary appropriation and modernisation, enabling her to connect with other writers' ideas. Nor is this interaction in any way restricted to an exclusively English tradition. Rhys draws attention to this when in a letter to Francis Wyndham she relates her love of reading: "For years I have escaped

from an exclusively Anglo-Saxon influence and have never returned to it" (1984: 281).

Throughout her diverse correspondence there are references to a number of French authors including Guy de Maupassant and Gustave Flaubert (both viewed as exemplary models for Anglo-Saxon modernist fiction), Prosper Mérimée, Émile Zola, Georges Bernanos, Francis Carco (whose work she translated), Mallarmé, Léon Daudet, Colette, Genet, Cocteau and Jean-Paul Sartre. So, it should come as no surprise, then, that French literature plays an important part in her fiction, and extensive inter-textual references abound. Judith Kegan notes her allusions to Rimbaud, Verlaine, Anatole France and again Colette in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Helen Carr, exploring the influence of Maupassant's short stories on Rhys, notes that she chooses to align herself with a French tradition, and she astutely adds that it is an anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment tradition which was a dissident one in France itself.[14] But Rhys, I feel, goes further still. Not just content to associate herself with this nonconformist canon, she actively sought to rework some of its most stalwart mainstays.[15]

Voyage in the Dark is her most fully developed reinterpretation of a French classic. In its opening chapter the heroine, Anna Morgan, is reading Zola's *Nana* (1880), the ninth novel of his twenty-volume Naturalist Rougon-Macquart series, which tells of the rise and fall of an actress-courtesan in Second Empire Paris. Rhys alerts the reader to the fact that she will provide a very different perspective when Anna's friend Maudie comments: "I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another" (1934: 9). There are three crucial areas of difference. First, Rhys spurns Zola's baroque theatricality. This is signalled by the antithetical opening scenes. *Voyage in the Dark* begins quietly with the heroine alone, imagining darkness and the fall of a curtain, while in total contrast *Nana* starts amid the excitement and animation of Bordenave's theatre/ brothel with a protracted, anticipatory wait for the rise of the curtain and the naked heroine's first public performance. All the atmosphere of what David Baguley describes as a "prolonged striptease", a long voyeuristic orgy, "a peepshow" (1993: 67-68) is absent in Rhys's work. Quite the reverse of Zola's heroine, Anna does not take pride in the power of her own sexuality or exude total self-confidence. She shows none of Nana's innate uninhibited erotic sensuality or obsessive self-absorption. Rhys, in *Voyage in the Dark*, then, paints a very different picture of the bohemian world of the theatre, stressing that while chorus girls and actresses, like Anna, may well serve as stimuli for male voyeuristic titillation, this does not mean that they are sexually insatiable, inclined to sapphism and involved in prostitution. Secondly, Rhys

rejects Zola's determinist theories, when she examines what motivates women to become prostitutes. It is no mere accident that in these two novels the protagonists have names which are anagrams. Nana in French is both a personal name and a colloquial noun for "girl". The implication, on Rhys's part, is that Anna could represent Everywoman. She rejects Zola's emphasis on the largely inescapable effects of heredity and milieu. In a more modernist vein, she highlights the randomness of Anna's fate, putting the case polemically that any respectable woman could be reduced to living on the largesse of others in a world driven by commercial enterprise.

Furthermore, Rhys questions Zola's presentation of the balance of power between the sexes. Throughout *Nana*, the heroine's sexuality is portrayed as a threat to patriarchal social norms. Her sexual preference for narcissist solipsism and lesbianism is construed as a refusal of traditional dependency on men, an aggressive transgression of the natural order. Her disdain for the masculine realm of power and finance is presented as a radical attack on the fundamental tenets of bourgeois mercantile society. There can be little doubt that Anna Morgan is aware of the way in which Nana's actions and attitudes alter the hegemony of power in both the class struggle and sex war. As Anna reads Zola, her vision becomes distorted —in her garden the tree is metamorphosed into "a man with stumps instead of arms and legs" and "the washing hangs limp" on the line (1934: 9). The striking images of emasculation and flaccid detumescence reflect Zola's depiction of middle-class and upper-class men, who considered themselves to be the helpless victims of intentionally alluring working-class prostitutes. The fact that Anna's vision is out of focus implies that Zola's viewpoint is similarly erroneous: it is women, not men, who are the true victims in the sex industry. Underpinning Rhys's rewriting of both *Jane Eyre* and *Nana*, then, is an innovative reappraisal of nineteenth-century literary constructions of female sexuality, with Rhys shifting the narrative perspective to give a new voice to a traditionally muted group.

Rhys's feminist revisionary stance, so evident in her treatment of *Nana*, together with her frank exploration of a woman's sexual life from the menarche to the menopause and beyond, enables her to do more than remodel nineteenth-century novels. It allows her to forge new, dynamic links with a substantial corpus of contemporaneous, French, female-authored works. Parallels can be seen in her open presentation of menstruation and the loss of virginity and Marthe de Bibesco's *Catherine Paris* (1927). Her depiction of adultery finds echoes in a range of works by Josette Clotis and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus. Her picture of the anxieties and desires of the mature woman is mirrored in Colette's *La Naissance du jour* (1928). Even her description of

women in old age has much in common with Christine and Minna in Irène Némirovsky's "Les Fumées du vin" (1934). Such correspondences are important for Rhys, who does not see literature as a single monolithic scheme, an exclusively linear progression, but rather as something altogether more rhizomatic and progressive, which draws on a wide range of sources and, in turn, exerts many varied influences.[16] One can only imagine her response to the ways in which her thematic and aesthetic concerns have continued to fascinate current French women writers —her attitudes, for example, to Simone de Beauvoir's *L'Invitée*, which draws heavily on the plot, characterisation and the existential dimension of *Quartet*; or indeed to Marguerite Duras's work, which shares with Rhys's corpus not just its innovative narrative experimentation, but its equally obsessive reworking of transmuted autobiographical material and its radical exploration of colonialism, female sexuality and power relations.

In explicitly resisting full assimilation into the "lost generation" of Anglo-Americans, in choosing to privilege women-centred themes within the context of modernist discourse, and in drawing on French culture and literature, Rhys effectively demonstrates that modernism, as Bonnie Kime Scott puts it, can be something other than a "directed, monological phenomenon" (1990: 4). Rhys's tangential alignment with an already dissident French tradition and her adoption of a revisionary attitude towards it provides her with a writing strategy which enables her to connect with other authors and schools of thought, while still producing formally and linguistically innovative fiction well suited to expressing the concerns of the disempowered outsider. It allows her to produce rich, thought-provoking extensively inter-textual works, while simultaneously maintaining the unique and very special quality of her own dissentient voice.

NOTES

[1] In the version of events which constitutes the original, suppressed ending of *Voyage in the Dark* (printed in full in Scott 1990: 381-389) it is gender which is foregrounded as the key thematic issue. Here Rhys uses a double narrative perspective to stress that women of all ages are exploited. The principal viewpoint is that of a call-girl dying from a botched abortion. As Anna slips in and out of consciousness her elliptical, at times almost hallucinatory, first-person interior monologue juxtaposes and interweaves piecemeal details of her present condition and childhood recollections of the carnival. In this way a striking parallel is set up between Anna's suffering as a girl and adult woman. The girl's fascination with the parade is presented as a complex desire to understand the world of adult sexuality, which the festivities celebrate in the suggestive dancing of the semi-naked men and the ambiguous playful/ erotic gestures of the women who stick their tongues through slits in the heart-shaped lips of the masks they wear. The image is grotesquely mirrored in an oblique reference to the child being sexually abused. Anna at both ages is cast as silent/ silenced victim, and this role is one which Rhys interrogates and challenges relentlessly throughout her fiction.

[2] Jean Rhys's autobiography, *Smile Please*, covers her life story from the age of six to her marriage to Jean Lenglet, their taking up residence in Paris and her initial contact with Ford Madox Ford, who supported so many emerging modernist writers, that is to say the period 1896-1923.

[3] Rhys lived in Paris for much of the twenties and she started writing the first four of her novels there. Paris is the setting for *Quartet*, parts I and III of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, and *Good Morning, Midnight*.

[4] Paris forms the backdrop for many of *The Left Bank* stories, "Outside the Machine" in *Tigers are Better-Looking*, and "Night Out" and "The Chevalier of the Place Blanche" in *Sleep It Off Lady*.

[5] The difficulties experienced by women writers in England are depicted in "The Lotus" in *Tigers Are Better-Looking*.

[6] For further information on these authors see Milligan (1997).

[7] Mr Horsfield *in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is a highly parodic example of the pseudo-bohemian observer/ writer, who returns to the security of the dominant bourgeois group at the end of the novel. His supposed preoccupation and empathy with the displaced and dispossessed on the economic periphery is little more than a transient, vicarious experience, just another aspect of his nomadic tourism.

[8] Rhys ironically reflects Paris's reputation for moral laxity in a number of her early works. In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, for example, the London cinema shows a French film entitled "Hot Stuff from Paris". A similar metaphor is used in "Heat" in *Sleep It Off Lady*. The Domincans interpret the pyroclastic eruption of the Mont Peleé volcano in St. Pierre Martinique in 1902, which killed some forty thousand people, as a form of divine retribution for the corruption of the female islanders by a visiting troupe of wanton, "hot", Parisian actresses.

[9] Dominica had been a French colony until 1865.

[10] Julia is not Rhys's only fictional character to turn to Paris in search of nurturing, nor is she the most successful. The short story "Mannequin" in *The Left Bank,* set against the separatist ultra-feminine backdrop of an haute couture fashion house, provides an interesting example of a rewarding pseudo-symbiotic mother/ daughter bond between the maternal proprietor and the *jeune fille* mannequin.

[11] Most of Rhys's characters, like Sasha, are unable or unwilling to allow their clothes to express their own personalities. Miss Bruce in "Illusion", the first short story in *The Left Bank*, for example, wears sensible shoes, serge dresses and neat, tweed suits. These contrast with her world of desire, which is firmly repressed. Her perpetual longing for erotic love is transferred onto exotic cosmetics and brightly-coloured and richly textured designer gowns and dresses, which remain locked in her wardrobe. Only Antoinette Cosway, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, succeeds in reclaiming her true identity. She does so through the associations of her red dress. The colour of the dress recalls the deadly Dominican red ant which has colonised the secret bathing pool where Rochester first discovered his wife's freely expressed sexuality. In laying claim to her dress and all it symbolises, the heroine is able to halt the systematic erosion of her personality, to resume her true name (ant/ Antoinette), and rediscover her repressed nature. She casts off Rochester's false view of her and reasserts her power and passion in an apocalyptic scene where her inner nature and outer appearance merge as one, and where her red dress becomes synonymous with the crimson flames which destroy her attic prison.

[12] In "Heat", Rhys shows a certain solidarity among the Martiniquan women. Like Sasha and the milliner, they too have a secret language related to their head scarves and the particular method of knotting them. The literary representation of such traditions, with particular reference to Mme de Graffigny and Mme de Lafayette, is discussed in Miller (1988: 125-161).

[13] See the interpretation given in Spaull (1989: 83-121, 97).

[14] For an examination of the significance of Maupassant's "Fort comme la mort", "La Mason Tellier", "Mme Fifi", "Boule de Suif" and "La Horla", see Carr (1996: 31, 40-46, 90, 96).

[15] There is some movement towards acknowledging this in Coral Ann Howells's suggestion that "Temps perdu" is a re-examination of Proustian involuntary memory (Howells 1991: 38).

[16] In her letters Rhys repeatedly acknowledges the pleasure she finds in her own works being opened up to re-interpretation and reappraisal. She appreciated Selma Vaz Dias adapting her novels and short stories for radio performances, she expressed interest in the project of one of her readers to rework *Good Morning, Midnight* from the viewpoint of the gigolo, and, of course, she was actively involved in the translation and publication of her first husband's reinterpretation of *Quartet* (Jean Lenglet, who wrote under the pseudonym Edward de Nève).

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CRYING FIRE IN A THEATRE: AUDEN'S HARLEQUINADES

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> It so happened in a theatre that there was a fire behind the curtain. A harlequin stepped out in front of the curtain to inform the audience about what was going on. The news was received as a joke and applauded. The harlequin repeated it again only to greater enjoyment of the audience. This is how I think the end of the world will happen —to the laughter and clapping of wits who will think it a joke.
>
> Kierkegaard

In the chapter on "The Humorous Element in Modernist Poetry" in their *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, first published in 1927, Laura Riding and Robert Graves argued that modernist writing, for all its high intellectual seriousness, had a propensity for the comic mode and was distinguished by a sort of "wilful cheerfulness". The modernist poet, they argued, oscillates between "formal clownishness" and "unrestrained burlesque". He is original in that he is able to "make fun of himself when he is at his most serious" (1969: 226-229). Such playfulness was not however just there for its own sake. Frivolity is one of the strategies embraced by modernist writers to come to terms with the very condition of modernity:

> [M]odernist poetry retains the clown's privilege of having irrational prejudices in favour of a few things as well as against a few things. It assumes, indeed, the humorous championship of things that the last centuries have either hated, neglected or mishandled (1969: 242-243).

The presence of a frivolous theme, always a dynamic subversion, can be personified by Dionysus, who presides over the theoretical assumptions of

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