

"FEEDING THE LAKE": BITTER DROPS THAT MATTER - THE SHORT FICTION OF JEAN RHYS

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"Please don't think me pernickety but every word must be exact" (Rhys 1984b, 139). While it seemed appropriate to start this paper by quoting Jean Rhys, I could just as well have chosen the advice given by Ford Madox Ford - "When in doubt, cut" (Plante 1979, 255) - or echo Flaubert's words in a 1852 letter to Louise Colet:

Médite donc plus avant d'écrire et attache-toi au *mot*. Tout le talent d'écrire ne consiste après tout que dans le choix des mots.
C'est la précision qui fait la force. (Flaubert 1963, 83)

When, back in the 1920s, Rhys made her apprenticeship of writing, she already possessed "the singular instinct for form" (Rhys 1984a, 24) which would distinguish her prose but she lacked the discipline. Under Ford's guidance, she read French authors, learning "clarity" (Vreeland 1979, 226; see also Rhys 1984b, 207) and establishing the pattern of a lifelong struggle with words. This struggle with words is in her case intimately connected with her conflict with life. "Born not-adapted, a bit of a rebel" (Vreeland 1979, 222), Rhys would stubbornly pursue her difference and earn her position in literature by creating "the syntax and vocabulary needed to bridge the gap between the outcast and society." (Wilson 1986, 442). Refusing - in her themes as in her style - to compromise with any techniques capable of enticing the reader to an easy acceptance of her texts, "saying anything that anybody liked" (Rhys 1972, 65), Jean Rhys persisted throughout her work in transfiguring her experience of life into the direct concrete prose which so effectively articulates "an area of society, a type of person, not yet admitted to the general literate consciousness" (Lessing 1973, 79).

Her novels and short stories all take for granted the cruelty and brutality of human behaviour which we are always so eager to ignore. She deals in dejection, lassitude and squalor. She exposes drunkenness, passivity and isolation. She never compromises with a bright picture of life. Her bohemians have no glamour. There is no real intimacy in her world. The figures wandering through her texts are virtually homeless, they have no family, no friends, they drift along life, barely surviving on the margins of society. There is no poetic justice in her stories, no reward for the virtuous, no punishment for the wicked because hers is a world where conventional values are either unknown or discarded. As Rebecca West pointed out in a 1931 review of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* :

It is doubtful if one ought to open this volume unless one is

happily married, immensely rich, and in robust health; for, if one is not entirely free from misery when one opens the book one will be at the suicide point long before one closes it. (Angier 1990, 280)

Ford was aware from the very beginning that Rhys would find trouble in securing an audience (Rhys 1984a, 26) and after the initial *succès d'estime* she was more or less forgotten. Her work was too gloomy, her books too angry and unhappy, her heroines too remote from an optimistic picture of woman's condition. Recognising her talent for compression and her preference for misfits and outsiders, Ford encouraged her to write in the traditionally marginal form of the short story.

Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society ... an intense awareness of human loneliness. (O'Connor 1985, 19)

The words written in 1963 by Frank O'Connor, when trying to define the short story, would fit Rhys's *oeuvre* as a whole and not only her short fiction. However, I want to show how the short story was the literary form that best suited her vision of life and to suggest that even in her novels she went back again and again to the fragmentary and episodic structure of the stories.

While it would be impossible (and perhaps even undesirable) to attempt a definition of the short story as a genre, it is possible to agree on a set of characteristics common to most stories. The brevity of the form imposes an economy of words and a capacity to select those which will maximise the effect sought for; it forces the elision of what went before a certain moment and of what happened next, it leads the writer to evoke feelings and atmospheres rather than to tell us about them - it works by suggestion rather than by statement. The short story chooses to isolate one moment in time instead of establishing a continuum, working through scenes, episodes or fragments and capturing, out of banal everyday situations, a sudden illumination. "Short-story writers see by the light of the flash: theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of - the present moment" (Gordimer 1968, 459; see also Bonheim 1986; Hanson 1985; Lohafer and Clarey 1989).

In their hand-to-mouth existence the heroines of Jean Rhys's stories have neither past nor future. They show no control over their destiny and they don't even seem to care much. Not knowing how to play by other people's rules, they feel a certain pride in their eternally displaced condition. Living in a world almost totally isolated from any human contact, these women persistently refuse to abandon their stubborn freedom from social ties. They suffer from their exiled condition yet they refuse to belong as if they were doomed never to be at home wherever they went. They find no support in other people. Men abuse them. Women reject them. They are free and therefore dangerous to the ordered well-behaved lives around them.

One of the rare narrative situations where another woman understands the heroine's distance from a sheltered and respectable existence is also a good example of Rhys's writing technique. In "Outside the Machine" (1960)¹ - which I will now briefly

analyse - the story is divided into five different episodes, all characteristically presented through the heroine's consciousness and relating to her experience in an English hospital in Paris. Although there is more of a linear chronology than is common in the author's fiction (episodes more often flow along the text building through narrative discontinuity a sort of time dissolution), the progression of events does not really change anything in the heroine's life. By the end of the story she is in the same lonely destitute condition she had to face at the beginning. Yet the reliance of this text on a visible time sequence plays an important narrative function: once Inez has been operated on she cannot afford to stay much longer and she has nowhere to go.

'You must go straight to bed as soon as you get back'.

'Get back where?' Inez thought. 'Why should you always take for granted that everybody has somewhere to get back to?' (Rhys 1972, 98)

In this situation, every day counts and Inez hopelessly counts her days in hospital as a momentary pause before confronting the menace of the outside world.

'There's still heaps of time'.

And soon she believed it. Lying there, being looked after and waking obediently at dawn, she began to feel like a child, as if the future would surely be pleasant, though it was hardly conceivable. (Rhys 1972, 90)

As always in Jean's fiction no illusion of a better life lasts long enough to be taken seriously either by the heroine or by the reader. In her first day in hospital Inez thinks: "The day after I come out of this place something lucky might happen" (Rhys 1972, 79). Relentlessly the days go by, the initial sadness is exchanged for despair: "No, this time I won't be able to pull it off, this time I'm done." (Rhys 1972, 97). And each new episode confirms the heroine's knowledge that she does not belong in the "stable, decent world" (Rhys 1972, 81) of the English hospital. Overheard bits of dialogue, glances, occasional remarks combine with the narrator's inner voice to evoke for the reader the atmosphere of the place. As Inez felt from the start, the claustrophobic space of the women's ward is part of the destructive fabric of society, not a respite from life's struggle.

[The nurses] moved about surely and quickly. They did everything in an impersonal way. They were like parts of a machine, she thought, that was working smoothly. The women in the beds bobbed up and down and in and out. They too were parts of a machine. They had a strength, a certainty, because all their lives they had belonged to the machine and worked smoothly, in and out, just as they were told. (Rhys 1972, 82)

"Up and down", "in and out" - the mechanical quality of the patients' movements is, as so often in Jean's prose, objectively rendered. In the clear-cut precision of her style she anatomises the cruel inhuman routine of (hospital) life, where there is no place for individual suffering, no room for those who do not have the stamina or the discipline to abide by the rules.

Listless and in pain, "cold", "tired" (Rhys 1972, 79, 95), the narrator identifies with the "sullen", "mysterious" (Rhys 1972, 90) Mrs Murphy who tries to take her own life in the fourth episode of the story. In the "shocked anger" (Rhys 1972, 92) of the nurse as in the overt condemnation of the "sanctimonious" (Rhys 1972, 90), "aggressively respectable" (Rhys 1972, 80) Mrs Wilson or of Pat, the chorus girl with "plenty of survival value" (Rhys 1972, 87), Inez hears the voice of those who "stick to life as it is." (Rhys 1972, 80).

And what a thing to do, to try and kill yourself!

... The fool, ... one of these idiotic neurasthenics, neurotics, or whatever you call them. She says she's frightened of life,

... Oughtn't a woman like that to be hung? (Rhys 1972, 93, 94)

Another woman in the ward does not judge Mrs Murphy. The "calm and gentle" (Rhys 1972, 80) Madame Tavernier, familiar with solitude and suffering, vulnerable with old age and the fear of death, respects sadness and has shown from the first day genuine sympathy towards Inez. Her gift of a little money is a token of her understanding: "'Take care. Don't let the others see. Don't let them notice you crying...'" She whispered, 'You mustn't mind these people; they don't know anything about life'" (Rhys 1972, 99).

For the second time in Jean Rhys' fiction there is kindness and a feeling of companionship between women.² The theme of women's relationships with each other repeatedly appears in her work and often the reader is, admittedly, irritated by the utter lack of feminine solidarity. In a masculine world women cannot afford any compassion towards other women - possible competitors for men's attention and money. Those who conform to society's values are either much too busy securing safe places or feel threatened by those heroines who force them to question their own respectable lives. Let me just remind you, among many other instances, Peggy Olsen in "La Grosse Fifi" (1927), Frankie in "Till September Petronella" (1960), Christine in "The Lotus" (1967). In Madame Tavernier the Rhys heroine meets a woman who cares and is willing to help. Not that it changes anything. Sincere as Inez may be when she thanks the old lady, she knows as well as any other heroine in Jean's fiction that she is "useless" (Rhys 1972, 82).

"And it isn't any good wanting to be adapted, you've got to be born adapted" (Rhys 1972, 76), says Maidie Richards in "Tigers Are Better-Looking" (1968) and Sasha Jansen echoes the same feeling in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939): "Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed, but look how hard I try" (Rhys 1969b, 88); (cf. Flora 1990, 393-403).

In the old woman's attitude to life Inez glimpses for a moment the possibility of peace after suffering. But she has to cope with "the incoherent, interminable

conversation in her head", with the "sinister", "distorted" "pictures of the past" (Rhys 1972, 89) - of which the reader is characteristically not informed - and she lacks the courage to fight for a different future. Leaving the hospital, she is just as frightened of life as before: "Because you can't die and come to life again for a few hundred francs. It takes more than that. It takes more, perhaps, than anybody is ever willing to give" (Rhys 1972, 100). As the story ends, the narrator's complete isolation leaves the reader no comfort or reassurance.

This example of a lonely existence where there is no possibility of escape is typical of Jean Rhys's writing. Throughout her work we find the same spare prose, the same skilful combination of objectively presented dialogue with the interior monologue of the narrating consciousness. Such focus on the contrast between what people say - in bits and fragments of heard conversation - and what the narrator silently experiences is one of the techniques used by the author to emphasise the isolation of her figures. Figures, yes, not characters. There never is in Rhys's short fiction a complete portrayal of anyone. All we get are glimpses of other people's feelings or motives and while this is perhaps a consequence of her choice of genre - the short story being too brief to elaborate on the building of character - I would argue that it is a central characteristic of her fiction. As she wrote in a 1953 letter to Morchard Bishop, "No one knows anything but himself or herself. And that badly. ... Other people are seen and heard and felt. Known? Not on your life" (Rhys 1984b, 104).³

Figures with no background, wandering from room to room, never certain of their personal identity, sometimes not even sure of why or when they have changed their names,⁴ deprived of all but the minimum for survival haunt her novels as well as her short stories. Marya Zelli in *Quartet* (1928), Julia Martin in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Sasha Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) all share the kafkaesque (cf. Rhys 1973, 23-25 and 1969b, 22-24) condition of drifting through life as through a nightmare. Let us pause for a moment and listen to Julia: "... she was tortured because her brain was making a huge effort to grapple with nothingness" (Rhys 1971, 94).

The only truly realised feminine character in her work - Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) - shares her sisters' feeling of life as unreality or rather as a reality she can only cope with through a final self-inflicted violence and the redemption of death.

And through her heroines' "film-mind" (Rhys 1969b, 147) float a succession of disconnected images and random memories - fragments which the author pieces together, episode after episode, time and again dissolving any (narrative) expectations of a sheltered existence, plodding "along line upon line" (Rhys 1984b, 103) in a stubborn attempt to build for the reader a coherent puzzle out of her dismembered experience of life.

Through the understated elliptical style of her prose, Rhys used her own displacement to challenge conventional patterns, institutionalised structures of power, accepted narrative strategies and protocols for seducing or persuading the reader. In this, and specially in her knowledge of human suffering, she comes much closer to us today than most of her contemporaries. She was once more misbehaving when experimenting

with narrative techniques. She was testing her own limits.

As a woman writer she knew that her fiction was transgressing on the new image of woman and disrupting the pervasive twentieth-century myth that the world is ours for the taking.

As Elaine Fido perceptively wrote:

Rhys' language ... which tends to be carefully defined, clear and exact, disciplined, seems almost to symbolise the element which her major female characters lack, i.e., a capacity to impose a particular order on the world. Rhys' very syntax contains and defines her heroines in their chaotic and aimless experience. (Fido 1991, 5)

Or, in the words of Thomas Staley,

Rhys's creative energy is in itself a force against the world which her art depicts. The dislocating and disturbing impulses, the absence of moral order, the failure of the will except for mere survival, these conditions become sources of energy for her art, for rather than repress them she confronts the dark image of life they impose. (Staley 1979, 30)

Through the limited possibilities of human communication, "dressing old words new / Spending again what is already spent" (Shakespeare 1986, 114), Jean Rhys's small personal voice secured a place in literature by giving us a very private insight into human loneliness, because "All of writing is a huge lake. There are great rivers that feed the lake, like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. And there are trickles, like Jean Rhys. All that matters is feeding the lake. I don't matter. The lake matters. ... You must dip your bucket in very deep" (Plante 1979, 247).

She did.

ENDNOTES

¹ On the importance of the "machine" theme in Rhys's work see Angier 1990, 416.

² The first example of feminine solidarity in her fiction is the relationship between Roseau and Fifi in the 1927 story "La Grosse Fifi". And of course there is kindness (and motherly feelings) in Christophine's attitude towards Antoinette.

³ And on another occasion she commented: "I don't know other people. I have never known other people. I have only ever written about myself". (Plante 1979, 269-70).

⁴ See *Good Morning, Midnight* (Rhys 1969b, 11), or recall Jean's own words: "I have called myself so many different names" (Rhys 1981, 121).

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