

JEAN RHYS

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CHAPTER I

Living on both sides, living to write

With this eye I see & no other . . . I had two longings & one
was fighting the other.
I wanted to be loved & I wanted to be always alone.

(GEB)

It is crucially important to explore the contexts of Rhys's work, especially her placement of the role of writing in her life and of race, class, nationality, gender and religion. She was interestingly contradictory on these subjects, and inclined therefore to tell a story which was Janus-faced, capable of capturing opposing readings of the world which usually failed to communicate well with one another.

Rhys had a well-developed instinct for the submerged pattern within the raw material of life, she also, as a writer, created her own history, not only in her autobiography, but less guardedly in letters and fragments of unfinished autobiographical manuscript. Emotional honesty was her touchstone, selectivity and clarity her writing mantras. Honesty does not mean disclosure has to be complete: selectivity does not mean anything important has to be left out. Rhys chose to tell a very edited version of her life in *Smile Please* (1979) and left, in her will, an injunction against anyone writing her biography: she wanted to insist that attention be paid only to the work. There were clearly episodes in her life which she preferred not to discuss and which she argued were irrelevant to her literary achievement. Naturally such an attempt at censorship has not been entirely successful, given the fact that Rhys had a particularly interesting career as a writer which clearly drew closely on an unusual life experience, though it is important to

acknowledge Rhys's profound feeling 'all of a writer that matters is in the book or books' (*SP*: 136). She thought it 'is idiotic to be curious about the person' (*SP*: 136).

Rhys has successfully thwarted the biographical scholar to some extent: given the many moves and the intense poverty which she suffered for long periods of her life, it is remarkable that we have any manuscripts at all before the period of high public and literary interest in Rhys which followed the appearance of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.¹ By the time Carole Angier did research for her 1990 biography, many of the people who might have provided crucial information were also dead or very old. In the end, Angier sometimes tried, to her detriment, to utilise Rhys's fiction to fill gaps in the life. Because Rhys preferred to erase her private life, it is not surprising that so many of the unpublished essays, fragments of fiction and exercise books filled with early rough drafts and sometimes autobiographical entries are concerned with the writing, with the story of the artist as working professional woman. This is the story she left, though even here we have highly contradictory and fragmentary and often self-censored comments by Rhys on how the work came about. The issue of how women write is a topic which many feminists still find compelling: the means of production of women's texts is often a critical issue in understanding their cultural identity and placement.

The narrative of Jean Rhys's life is, since Angier's biography, fairly well understood, though further work clearly remains to be done. My purpose in reinterpreting the story is to point out the centrality and specificity of her Caribbean experience, particularly for those readers unfamiliar with the region, and/or unaware of the developing scholarly map of her life and work. Given the fact that many critics have effectively marginalised Rhys's Caribbean origins (this even to an extent in Angier's work, since she did not visit Dominica), it is important to make quite sure Rhys's Caribbean childhood and her views on race, class and nationality which began to be formed there are understood as the doorway into my readings of Rhys texts. Her conceptions of gender and her religious affiliations, both of which mark her fiction powerfully and both of which also owe a good deal to Rhys's Dominican years, are included in subsequent chapters.

I have another important reason for interest in Rhys's life, especially, in this chapter, the importance of the formative years, and that is to explain the complex cultural identity which so informs her textuality, not just in theme but in the multi-voiced narrative she gradually developed in her long fiction. As Veronica Gregg has noted (1995), citing Jean D'Costa (1986), Rhys was self-contradictory and ambiguous about many issues of identity. She had an intense ambivalence towards both the Caribbean and England and was, in her culturally complex identity as she grew older, unable to entirely belong anywhere. To the writer David Plante she was unable or unwilling to answer when asked if she was a West Indian or a French writer and responded quite vehemently when asked about her English literary affiliation; 'No! I'm not! I'm not! I'm not even English' (1984: 44).

Whilst Gregg acknowledges Rhys's capacity to change position on a given topic, she also constructs her as 'the white Creole', following the tendency of post-colonial theory to address general cultural identities.² But as Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out, in her biography of Dominican politician and novelist Phyllis Allfrey (1996), not all white Creoles feel alienated in Dominica.³ Nor do they all have the degree of Rhys's ties to and alienation from England. Her father was Welsh, but that was complicated by his sense of rejection by his father.⁴ Rhys lived in England most of her life and married two English men. Her immediate white family migrated successfully to England during her adult life,⁵ but she never felt at home there.

Her childhood was in the small white community of Dominica, but nevertheless gave her experience of different races (black, white, mixed, Carib), languages and cultures. It evidently taught her that meaning and truth can be multi-layered. But if she had stayed in the region, in my view she would not have been able to fit in any better than she did anywhere else: her country was essentially the page and her most important personal connections often other writers or her characters, including her fictional versions of herself. Though her adult life in Europe contributed much profoundly influential experience, her personal narratives of writing and cultural identity begin with her Caribbean childhood: Dominica is of central importance in reading Rhys's life and work.

Rhys was born in Dominica in 1890 (though she encouraged confusion about her birthdate and much early scholarship accepted 1894).⁶ She was named Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams, though the spelling of Gwendoline during her lifetime and in critical studies is diverse.⁷ Her mother was white Creole of Scottish ancestry, a Lockhart, and her father was Welsh and had come to Dominica in 1881, shortly before his marriage, to practise medicine.⁸ Gwen Williams grew up in the enclave of white Anglican Roseau, still now a small town sitting between the dramatic forested escarpments which characterise Dominica's interior and the huge horizon of the almost always deserted Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. Much of the island was impenetrable in her childhood as it is now. Governor Hesketh Bell tried to open up a road to facilitate colonial settlement: it was never completed.⁹ Rhys used the idea of this Imperial Road in a piece of unpublished creative non-fiction.¹⁰

Most of Dominica's people are of African descent and had in 1890, the year of Rhys's birth, still vivid memories of the slavery which had ended in 1834. In 1890 many were also Catholic (as is true today) and spoke a distinct French patois. The Anglican hierarchy attempted to be dominant as a representation of the religious wing of British possession and white hegemony. Rhys's response to Catholicism is, as I shall argue later, very important.

The context of Rhys's childhood can be pieced together by studying Dominica's history, reading the surviving newspapers of Rhys's childhood years, and then interpreting Rhys's heavily self-edited published account of her young life (*Smile Please*), along with surviving drafts, letters and notebooks. Indeed Rhys cannot be seriously read without the context of Dominican life in the late nineteenth century, from which we can extrapolate the class, race, religious and gender formations which were laid on Rhys at birth and which she both contested and accepted at different times.

Dominicans of colour resisted colonial injustice when they could. The Report of the Royal Commission (1894) on the condition of Dominica is important. Lennox Honychurch (1984) describes a heavily taxed peasantry, more burdened by a tax increase in 1888. In 1893, the village of La Plaine, in one of the poorest and least accessible areas of Dominica for produce markets, strongly

resisted when one of their community was evicted from his house so the Government could sell it for non-payment of taxes. The resistance turned violent and police and naval forces opened fire: several were killed or injured. The incident became known as the La Plaine Riots. The Commission's report includes notes on the views of Rhys's father, Dr W. R. Williams and her uncle, Acton Don Lockhart.

Gwen Williams's maternal family, the Lockharts, were in a very powerful position in Dominica in the late nineteenth century: Rhys was 'that Lockhart girl' in her youth to members of her family's circle, signifying the relative unimportance of her father's name on the island.¹¹ Her mother had grown up on the lovely and important estate in the south of Dominica called Geneva, which had been owned by the family since 1824. Acton Lockhart, Rhys's mother's youngest brother, took over the running of the Geneva Estate from his widowed mother sometime in the 1880s, by Carole Angier's estimate (1990: 8). Both men had been Government-appointed, 'nominated' members of the Assembly, part of the machinery of white colonial control of island affairs. In 1894, Williams expressly did not want to see elective seats increased in the Assembly, i.e. he appears to have been on the colonial, white side of Dominican politics.¹²

When Williams arrived in Dominica from Britain and married Minna Lockhart a year later, in 1882, he entered an intensely political, competitive, small world in which the white, colonial and so-called mulatto or coloured intelligentsia debated the issues of the day in both the legislature and the local press. Dominica, as Lennox Honychurch points out (1984), was the only island in the West Indies where white power was successfully challenged. Dominica's elite of mixed-race landowners, ancestrally from French territories, uneasily co-existed with white political appointees and professionals from Britain.¹³ In 1831, the so-called 'Brown Privilege' Bill made discrimination in political and cultural life on the basis of race illegal. Three members of colour were elected to the House of Assembly in 1832 and by 1838, there was a majority of colour.

One of the most controversial figures in Roseau life when Williams arrived was Dr Henry Nicholls, originally English and

married into a prominent Dominican white family.¹⁴ In the 1880s, he was at the height of his influence as doctor, horticulturist and literary and political personality. Rees Williams was not the ambitious, political and social star that Nicholls was, although he made his own social connections, such as his bridge playing (*SP*: 57). He was first nominated to the Assembly for a period in the mid-1880s.

In my reading of the Dominican newspapers, I concur with Sue Thomas (1996c) that Williams's colonial affiliations seriously and justifiably irritated the coloured intellectual elite of Roseau. However I think Lennox Honychurch's view of him as complex is convincing.¹⁵ If he was both liberal (in relative terms) and critical of the mulatto elite, then he was both at one with his wife's family interests (Thomas 1996c) and also at times a mildly dissident Celt on the subject of race or religion, just as his daughter was capable of holding both liberal and racist views. Williams certainly understood, in his testimony to the Royal Commission in 1894, that taxation was the root cause of general unrest and that elective members of the Assembly 'know they can be out-voted' and 'discount the value' of votes of Government nominees (Report of Royal Commission, 1894: 21). Nevertheless, he seems to have thought that more Government projects and control of the Assembly would be the solution.

Williams was often attacked in the feisty local press, including the *Dominica Dial*. On Saturday, 31 May 1884, it was implied that his fondness for alcohol got in the way of his professional duty, the editor calling him 'a convivial practitioner'. On Saturday, 30 August 1884, the *Dial* editorial was a little sharp about Dr Williams's sweet potato farm at Bona Vista, in the hills above Roseau, since it was outside the district under Williams's medical jurisdiction: enjoyment of his farm might therefore prevent the doctor's prompt attendance to his patients. Williams had negotiated, early in his time in Dominica, and with the help of Dr Nicholls, to shift his medical responsibilities closer to Roseau so as to become part of town society and enjoy a larger income (see also Thomas 1996c).¹⁶ The *Dial* went on to comment sardonically that in a crop of sweet potatoes grown at fifteen hundred feet above sea-level 'lay the foundation of the fortune which every emigrating Briton expects to extract from the colony of his choice'.

On 29 November of the same year, Williams was described as 'the professional man who was lucky enough to jump from the post of medical attendant on board a telegraph repairing steamer', thereby increasing his salary from sixty to two hundred and fifty pounds a year.¹⁷

The tone of these comments is quite characteristic of the rough and tumble of the Dominican press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and entirely recognisable in Rhys's short fiction.¹⁸ Nicholls, who had also passed through a process of being presented in the press as upstart foreigner and then as important, if often maddening, local dignitary, was eventually said to have received the task of heading a Commission on Yaws as a compensation for some loss of his income and practice.¹⁹ A letter to the editor of the *Dominica Dial*, 20 August 1886, says bluntly, 'We all are alive to the fact that Dr Nicholls is the most prejudiced white man in the island.' Nicholls was inclined to engage in protracted skirmishes in the newspapers when he was attacked.²⁰ This was often: he clearly had both political and social ambitions, was evidently both pompous and had great status (Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert describes him and his wife as 'the equivalent of a Dominican royal couple' (1996: 12)), and was gifted with words as well as in medicine and horticulture. He was also quite willing to be provocative. Williams however seems to have remained silent in the face of verbal attacks, unusual in the world of educated Roseau in the late nineteenth century.

Sue Thomas goes further and argues Williams transformed from first appearance in the island as 'European exotic' to final development into a 'full-blown planter' (1996c). By the late 1890s, Thomas points out, he was a vocal member of the lobby for Crown Colony Government, perceived as a tributary of British control in that it resisted relative political autonomy for Dominica because of the power, political and economic, of the coloured elite in the island.²¹ Perhaps most importantly, Thomas challenges Carole Angier's explanation of the reason why Rhys's eldest sister Minna went to live with relatives: instead of financial woes, Thomas suggests that Minna needed to complete her education at a higher level than was available in Dominica at the time. Thomas argues that Dr Williams was listed in the 1910 electoral register for the

Roseau Town Board as one of the seven richest men in the community so he could not have been financially fragile in the 1890s and early 1900s. Yet Rhys noted in *Smile Please* the loss of the two estates her father owned when she was small, Bona Vista and Amelia, explaining that they were not profitable because her father could not spare enough time from his medicine to farm them.

However, Lennox Honychurch describes an important economic change between the 1890s and the years before the First World War (1984: 113–21). Williams got out of agriculture just before an upturn in Dominican revenues from crops. He clearly, if we accept Thomas, became affluent again after his daughter left for England in 1907.²² No doubt Rhys had the selective memory of her family history which we all do: she always told the story of her leaving theatre school in London concealing her failure to be able to continue her acting course, as Angier points out (1990: 49): she claimed the cause was her father's financial difficulties. She did not deny memory is selective and often self-protective: in *Smile Please*, a note of self-interrogation sounds in her admission that she probably romanticises her father, perhaps as she saw little of him (*SP*: 57). She did remember her mother crying to a coloured Dominican woman friend, maybe about money (*SP*: 34).

Veronica Gregg also questions Rhys's *Smile Please* account of a riot when she argues that there is no record of a riot in Roseau in 1902 or 1906 (*SP*: 37–41). Gregg ascribes 1902 or 1906 depending on whether Rhys's birth is calculated at 1890 or 1894. But according to Irving Andre, William Davies (the *Dial* owner, whom Andre identifies as a wealthy plantation owner as well as political leader and newspaper proprietor) declared in 1898 that 'race war' would be waged against the British if they introduced Crown Colony government (1995: 74ff). The actual unrest, which Rhys remembered as 'the Riot' from her childhood was provoked according to Andre by rumours that the Presbytery and Catholic cathedral were to be burned down by members of the coloured community. Rhys would have been eight, though she says in *Smile Please* she was about twelve, perhaps the age she gives Antoinette at the time of the riot in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. For Rhys, the cause was a local newspaper editor's article attacking the

power of Catholic priests in Dominica. André comments that the black community would at times riot in defence of the whites and against the coloured community: coloured elites had by no means always been supportive of the black majority and were often distrusted, sometimes even more than the white colonials.

The tensions between white, coloured or brown, and black people dominated the Dominica of Rhys's childhood and early adolescence, at the end of the nineteenth and first years of the twentieth century during which the country moved slowly away from the memory of slavery and towards a modern state: James (1978) claims Williams received the respect of many poor people when he died, signifying he must have had some racial sensitivity and kindness. That this could be the same man who offended the anti-colonial middle class is not in the least unbelievable: the strength of internalised colonialism and the extent of racism could, for some people, make the slightest humane response on the part of the white doctor a matter for gratitude. For those however who had a critical and resisting eye on colonialism and racism, Dr Williams might easily have been just another opportunistic white migrant from Britain.

The Commonwealth of Dominica obtained independence from British colonial rule in 1978, after a period of Associated Statehood from 1967. The young high-colonial child Gwen Williams lived mainly in the family house on Cork Street in Roseau, a corner property with a courtyard and a large mango tree, stables and Dr Williams's surgery, holidaying on one of her father's small estates in the hills.²³ She was a Lockhart, a doctor's daughter, white and Anglican. Her father's mother, 'Irish Granny', sent gifts from England. In Dominica, a relatively modest income by the standards of Britain gave whites a life-style which was in caste and pattern much higher than their station. Rhys's family escaped the heat and dust of the town for holidays, most memorably at Bona Vista, where servants attended their needs. The slim margin by which such privilege was maintained is indicated by the sale of Bona Vista and another small estate, Amelia, both sold by Rhys's father when she was fairly young (*SP*: 16–17).

Rhys's ambivalence about race has to be understood in the light of her early memories of the times at Bona Vista, set against

her growing realisation as she grew older of the grim facts of racial tension and white isolation which informed her Roseau life. The family's journey was from Roseau along the coast to the fishing village of Massacre, then up inland along a narrow trail, set with stones to assist the horses and make the trail more durable, along a ridge line and up into the hills, across a valley to higher ground and the house, sitting on a gentle slope of hillside, overlooking the distant but still vivid sea: it was a journey of escape from the pressures of town to the holiday world of the hills. Amelia was on a slightly lower hillside not far from Bona Vista. Though the Bona Vista house has disappeared, except for some tell-tale pieces of foundation stone and roof, the site is immediately recognisable from Rhys's terse descriptions of the location and passages in her fiction and drafts.²⁴

It is virtually impossible to overestimate the formative years in Dominica as shaping the idea of language Rhys worked with. The tension between the West Indian, white Creole accent she had as a young woman and could produce even in old age and the middle-class English voice she mainly used towards the end of her life reflects her response to British middle-class, largely literary connections. But her Caribbean childhood must have taught her that language is almost always a layered means of communication, with hidden codes and contrasting registers. It is very evident in her letters that French was an important linguistic resource for her throughout her life. She must have originally understood it not only as something learned at school but as living patois in her Dominican years. Later she learned different registers when she married Jean Lenglet, himself a French speaker who was not fluent in English, and she lived and worked in Paris.²⁵ Peter Roberts, in his history of West Indian language (1988), points out that plantation whites did not have to strive for formal language and slaves were denied language education, so that standardised forms of language were less significantly established in the Caribbean than in societies where a middle class struggled to become acceptable by adopting the formal language structures of their superiors. The very linguistic inventiveness which so marks Caribbean writing and performance was made possible by the history of lack of extensive imposition of formal language

structures in plantation society for either white or black culture. By Rhys's day, a rather ponderous anglicised tone was adopted in the Dominican newspapers, especially by Dr Nicholls, one which fortunately seems to have entirely failed to influence her writing voice. In the *Dominica Dial*, 31 March 1888, there was an attack on English patois as 'an ignoble travesty of the mother tongue', an attitude which extended to French patois as well. This local (and colonised) attitude towards Creoles was generally pervasive until well into the twentieth century. Major work by Caribbean and African linguists has begun to establish a much more precise understanding of the roots of Caribbean Creoles (Roberts 1988). In the forced union of European and African languages during slavery lay the beginnings of new language structures, syncretic and creative, which ultimately became Creoles, or as Kamau Brathwaite has said, 'nation languages'.²⁶ One of the most obvious established characteristics of Caribbean writing is linguistic multi-valency, a characteristic shared in some ways by other literatures of resistance, such as Irish, African-American and African writing and subtly present in Rhys's texts.

In going to the Perse School in Cambridge, the city where her Welsh grandfather had been to university, Rhys effectively left her mother's world for her father's. In 1909, after she left school, she entered a drama course at Tree's School (so named after its founder, subsequently known as the Academy of Dramatic Arts and ultimately the Royal Academy, or RADA). She always said that she left Tree's School because her father died and her mother could not afford to keep her there. Angier's version is that Rhys was rejected by the theatre school because of her West Indian accent and failure to accommodate to the expected standard British voices then thought essential to an actor's employability (1990: 49). If anything would have impressed upon Rhys her colonial and marginal status it would have been this painful failure to achieve her dream of acting because of her accent (though it is not clear that Rhys had much performance talent, from her own account of her chorus girl days).²⁷ She excised the truth about the rejection from her story in *Smile Please* of Aunt Clarice taking her shopping to buy clothes for the return to Dominica, and Rhys going into a theatrical agent's office and getting a

job in 'in the chorus of a musical comedy called *Our Miss Gibbs*' (*SP*: 85).

Rhys's journey from instinctual to professional writer seriously began in Paris in the years of High Modernism. From her comments on writing we can see how writing itself became in effect the country she knew best. Her comments on writing very often stress its enormous centrality in her interior life:

I can't remember feeling much pity I was too young My pity was for imaginary people not real ones. (BEB)

In fact, I'm certain I was often disagreeable whenever I was interrupted in the effort to get down and shape the flocks of words which came into my head, I didn't and don't know why. (*SP*: 128)

My will is quite weakened because I drink too much but even this lunatic writing is better than the blank blank days and the feeling that they have won. (GEB)

Trying to piece together Rhys's narratives of self means stitching together manuscript fragments, published or unpublished, autobiography, letter, draft or reported conversation or interview: these are either the edited version which Rhys intended to be made public or the series of revealing ruptures in unedited writing of that controlled series of statements.

Jean Rhys was always a writer, that is, the name Jean Rhys came into being as the signature on a piece of achieved writing. The other adult women who inhabited her body are not Rhys's concern in the writing: Ella Gray, Ella Lenglet and Ella Hamer, about whom we know comparatively little. In old age, Rhys signed an envelope containing manuscript material in the presence of David Plante as both Jean Rhys and E. G. Hamer (Plante 1984: 44): no doubt this was a legal necessity but it is also a powerful symbol of Rhys's knowledge of the power of names, and also the fact that her private name signified a self unavailable through the writing.

We have, beyond the published novels, stories, autobiography and essays: a few notebooks, with drafts ranging between fictionalised diary and rough draft; a reasonably large quantity of letters, mostly to editors, publishers, agents, and literary friends and associates which deal with her writing or with writing and reading

in general and a number of interviews or profiles which contain statements by Rhys. These are invariably about her writing. David Plante's profile of Rhys (1984) tries to balance the writer with the frail old woman who also inhabited the same body, but his unsettling narrative makes Ella Hamer even more fugitive. Plante further complicates Rhys's autobiography by claiming he seriously collaborated with her on it (1984: 42). Nevertheless *Smile Please* is the major source for Rhys's writing narrative. Perhaps, when she was old, there was little left except the writer: this is not unusual in any seriously committed artist who receives late recognition.

Certainly Plante's ambivalence, at the beginning of his essay, about becoming involved in Rhys's private space makes it clear it was only the writer who had attracted his interest, and at intervals he returns to this theme: 'You are attentive to her, not as Mrs Hamer but as Jean Rhys' (1984: 25). But Plante also clearly found exposure of the fragile woman behind the writing too tempting to resist: his shameful betrayal of an old woman's trust to his writing ambition is well known.²⁸

Despite Rhys's comment to David Plante that she wondered 'if it was right to give up so much of my life for writing' (1984: 31), there were many years, especially between 1939 and 1966, when the writing was largely a personal commitment, that is, though Rhys continued to write, her work remained mostly unpublished. Her private life was painful: during 1939–45, she struggled with not knowing what had happened to her only living child, Maryvonne, who disappeared in Holland after working for the Resistance, as did Maryvonne's father.²⁹ In 1945, Rhys's husband Leslie died suddenly of a heart attack in immensely stressful circumstances.³⁰ She wrote this into a story, 'The Sound of the River' (*TAB-L*, 1968; *CSS*, 1987). But the relationship with Maryvonne, the experience of motherhood, is almost entirely missing from Rhys's texts: even as raw material for fiction she largely censored it. Her major protagonists are either young and unmarried, with pregnancies terminated early or resulting in the loss of a very young child, or they are older and childless.

If it is true that, as Rhys said, 'Writing took me over. It was all I thought of. Nothing and nobody else mattered much to me' (*SP*: 128), it might be assumed there should be more finished

work than the relatively slim, though finely finished, shelf of books Rhys completed. David Plante reported that Rhys's response to his comment that writing was her life was 'My life has been turbulent and very boring' (1984: 53). This is a chilling comment, which does not quite make clear whether it was the turbulence or the surrounding calmer time when she was able to write which was boring. It is of course one of the paradoxes of the writing life that large stretches of lonely, uneventful time are essential to the achievement of finished work. The raw material of experience which informs that work does not necessarily need to be exciting or unusual.

First and foremost Rhys was a professional writer, then a professional writer whose consciousness was centrally shaped by her Caribbean childhood, as Gregg has also argued (1995). In Dominica, writing in the newspapers was a vital part of local middle-class culture and reading was of course a part of that tradition. We do not know for sure whether Rhys discovered any of the narratives of women travellers or residents in the Caribbean or of early Caribbean-born women writers.³¹ But she acknowledged the idea of the book as immensely powerful in her formative years in *Smile Please*: 'Before I could read, almost a baby, I imagined that God, this strange thing or person I heard about, was a book' (*SP*: 20). Nancy R. Harrison (1988: 115 reads this as a 'father-text' and opposed to the 'mother-book' which became Rhys's model for writing, represented by her mother's sewing book with needles flashing in the sun (*SP*: 20). In *Smile Please*, her mother gives her a book as a consolation when one of her brothers ruins a little play the children were putting on for the family: the account ends, 'Now I was alone except for books' (*SP*: 19).

Not only published books, but the oral tradition played an important part in Rhys's childhood. Her nurse Meta reiterated the common Caribbean folk concern that too much book-reading would cause illness or madness, especially threatening fertility in girls: in this case, Meta threatened that reading would make eyes drop out. The young Rhys had two story-telling companions, fictionalised as Meta and the much more pleasant and friendly Francine (*Smile Please* and *Voyage in the Dark*). Rhys claimed the

emotional impact of Meta's stories was greater: 'Meta had shown me a world of fear and distrust, and I am still in that world' (*SP*: 24).

Equally importantly, Meta connected reading for Rhys with defiance of authority and pursuit of stubborn self-assertion:

Also I was always reading I don't mean at all that I was beaten for reading but only that it added to the general irritating effect. My nurse Meta could not bear the sight of me with a book she could not bear the sight of me anyway but complete with book it was too much. (*BEB*)

Even in her story of the Geneva Estate, which was owned by members of her mother's family, Rhys mentioned magazines which warned against using makeup and how she still felt she was defying them when she wore it. Rhys's account of her life in *Smile Please* shows how powerfully her experience connected emotional intensity and working with words.

The role of books changes in the section describing Rhys's arrival in England at the age of sixteen: 'In England my love and longing for books completely left me. I never felt the least desire to read anything, not even a newspaper . . .' (*SP*: 90). There was only one book she remembered *Forest Lovers*, a popular romance.³² The degree of alienation from print here reveals how seriously a first experience of England depressed her. England would continue to be a source of serious conflict: in a draft manuscript 'Essay on England' (*UTC*), Rhys declares herself very badly educated, but nevertheless admits to avid reading: 'All the books I read were English books and all the thoughts that were given me were English thoughts, with very few exceptions' (p. 1). Her child's sense of social hierarchy and anxiety was shaped by novels about 'ladies and gentlemen'.

Variant versions exist of what she remembered as books in her childhood home, mentioned both in *Smile Please* and an untitled manuscript 'It had always been like that . . .' (*UTC*). Despite her clear, openly expressed ambivalence about England, Rhys lists major and minor English texts she remembers seeing at home: mythology sent by her 'Irish Granny', the Bible, Milton, Byron, Crabbe, Cowper, Swift, Defoe, Bunyan, Stevenson. She would say to Plante, during the period of working on *Smile Please*, that she had never read Balzac, Proust, Fielding, Trollope, George

Eliot, James, Conrad, Joyce.³³ She said she failed to enjoy Austen but had read Dickens, the English Romantic poets and Shakespeare as well as enjoying some melodrama in her youth and thrillers throughout her life (*SP*: 45). That she was extensively self-educated is clear: that she was as badly educated as she sometimes suggested is doubtful, given her evidently quick mind and willingness to read. When she was still an impressionable young woman, Ford Madox Ford set her to read French literature, beginning a life-long pleasure and a life-long influence.

Rhys's strong sense of colour (see chapter 4) was applied to her conception of books. In *Smile Please* Rhys includes the detail of loving the colours of the books 'Irish Granny' sent, 'the red, the blue, the green, the yellow' (*SP*: 20), a detail which connects with the narrative of the 'red, blue, green, yellow' quill pens she bought on the day she began to write the diaries which would one day contribute draft material to *Voyage in the Dark* (*SP*: 103). This relation of primary, jewel colours to books and writing situates those colours as positives in Rhys's personal palette.

Rhys grew up in a colonial culture where books were assumed to be written overseas, in England, and where women, especially at that time women of African descent, might be excellent storytellers, but not writers. Yet she has become, along with a few other writers, such as her friends Eliot Bliss (*Luminous Isle*, first published 1934) and Phyllis Allfrey (*The Orchid House*, first published 1953), an ancestor of contemporary Caribbean women writers. No doubt living in France, especially Paris, and in England, where the profession of writing was well established, was a help, as it was to other Caribbean writers who left the region in later generations.³⁴ But Rhys wrote plays as a child, 'nearly always dramatisations of the fairy stories I loved so much' ('Then came the time . . .', UTC). Poetry became a sustained source of comfort and verbal play early in adolescence. *Quartet*, Rhys's first novel, was first written as a play.³⁵ But it was only fiction to which she gave the dedicated willingness to draft and redraft until her voice became clear, though she incorporated both dramatic and poetic elements into her fictional technique: she never fully expressed whether she understood that her poetry was inferior to her fiction because she generally did not work professionally at

it.³⁶ The account in *Smile Please* of the enormously traumatic ending of her first serious affair opens with a very short poem she wrote: 'I didn't know / I didn't know / I didn't know' (*SP*: 92), suggesting that writing poetry had, like her first diaries, a therapeutic rather than a professional purpose. She made a strong assertion in what seems to be a rare directly personal comment in the Orange Exercise Book: 'As I was saying I dont give a dam (sic) for the novel. Only to make money the novel is / What I like is Poetry what I really like: you know some poetry my hands go quite cold when I read it.' She loved French poetry and copied it out.

If poetry was her love and her amateur writing project, fiction was her means to earn a living. But Rhys expressed contradictory views on writing for money: she said in 1949 that she was '*dragged* into writing by a series of coincidences . . . need for money' (*L*: 65) and in 1959 that she could only write for love (*L*: 171). But then Rhys often expressed contradictory views: this capacity no doubt helped her create dramatic, conflicting voices so well. In the end, writing helped her endure a good deal:

My dear, I had a horrible war . . . we got back to London in time for the V bombs and all. My daughter, Maryvonne, joined the Resistance in Holland (at 14) & except that she'd been in trouble with the Germans I heard no more until 1945.

Then Leslie died.

Well all those years are gone. I try to forget them . . .

I remember Great is Truth.

Oh yes. I used to write it up with lipstick all over the place.

What a tiresome creature I was, & still am. But if I can do this book it wont matter so much will it? (Letter to Eliot Bliss, 13 October 1947)

Rhys thought of writing at the end of her life as an autonomous and irresistible power: as David Plante reported, 'My books aren't important . . . Writing is' (1984: 57) and 'You see, I'm a pen. I'm nothing but a pen . . . You're picked up like a pen, and when you're used up you're thrown away, ruthlessly, and someone else is picked up' (*SP*: 31). She conceived of writing as a 'huge lake' fed by 'great rivers' like Tolstoy or 'trickles' like Jean Rhys (Plante 1984: 22). Like many writers, she established a legend of her beginnings as a writer (*Smile Please*) and starts with the story of

a walk in London in late autumn, when the last dead leaves on the trees look like birds: Rhys thought like a poet does, in images. Here, seeing a stationer's shop with brightly coloured quill pens displayed in the window, she thinks they will cheer up an ugly table in her newly rented room. After buying a dozen and some exercise books, her favourite nibs, ink and an inkstand, to decorate her table, she experiences a kind of catharsis:

... after supper that night – as usual a glass of milk and some bread and cheese – ... it happened. My fingers tingled, and the palms of my hands. I pulled up a chair to the table, opened an exercise book, and wrote *This is my Diary*. But it wasn't a diary. I remembered everything that had happened to me in the last year and a half. I remembered what he'd said, what I'd felt. I wrote on until late into the night, till I was so tired I couldn't go on, and I fell into bed and slept. (*SP*: 104)

The next day, she continues, after the landlady asks her not to walk up and down crying and laughing late at night and disturbing the tenant below. She fills three and a half of the exercise books, ending with a bitter sentence, 'Oh, God, I'm only twenty and I'll have to go on living and living and living' (*SP*: 105). Then she puts the exercise books in the bottom of her suitcase, under her underclothes. They stay with her through moves for seven years without being reread, the surest sign that at this time she was not a professional writer but an amateur diarist using writing as therapy. But the important elements in this story are that the writing seems to be signalled by a physical sensation which almost suggests possession, and is something which happens to Rhys as opposed to something she absolutely controls. It is evidently a catharsis and results in a rough draft (one which we know from other evidence contributed to *Voyage in the Dark* years later). It leads her into anti-social behaviour and isolation and distracts her from eating and sleeping. Rhys's papers and letters contain several versions of this story of emotional catharsis through writing, which would eventually be followed by her professional writer's care over reworking a rough autobiographical draft into polished final form. Ironically, this story of the beginnings of serious writing comes in the part of *Smile Please* which Rhys did not finish: it is interesting to speculate whether she would have cut more out of this before letting it go.³⁷

Nora Gaines, editor of the *Jean Rhys Review*, has drawn my attention to the similarity between Colette's narrative of her writing beginnings in *Mes Apprentissages* (1936; 1973) which is quoted in Colette's preface to her Claudine novels, and Rhys's narrative.³⁸ Colette finds school exercise books in a stationer's and buys them, giving her fingers 'a kind of itch' for writing lines, in the sense of school exercises or punishments. After finishing some work which the notorious Willy rejects, she puts the exercise books away for two years 'At the bottom of a drawer' (1987: Preface n.p.). Rhys may have kept the Colette text near her because in the Rhys papers there is a copied out paragraph from *Mes Apprentissages* with a note explaining it was very helpful.³⁹ It is very likely that familiarity with the Colette passage informs Rhys's story of writing origins, but Rhys's account is most interesting for its reflection of what became her essential mode of work, from autobiographical confession to rough fictional draft to tight editing through version after version until the stylistic identity of the piece satisfied her.

Rhys's statements that she only knew her writing was true 'Not really true as fact. But true as writing' (Plante 1984: 31) and that 'I think and think for a sentence, and every sentence I think for is wrong, I know it. Then, all at once, the illuminating sentence comes to me. Everything clicks into place' (Plante 1984: 30) are important here: what she composed as her official history of her writing life would not have to attend to detail but rather be written in such a way that it revealed the inner contours of remembered experience. The final shape erases the clutter of actual sequential events and cuts them down to the bone to expose an underlying structure. It also conveniently omits extraneous and surface details which might have been too personal or confessional. Rhys constructed *Smile Please* the way she constructed all of her texts: patiently cutting, reshaping, ordering and balancing until the satisfactory shape is finally achieved. Sometimes, it is clear she overly cut, especially in the composition of *Smile Please*, but mostly the evidence of her good judgement lies in the quality of her finished texts.

Evidence of Rhys's working methods can be seen by examining multiple drafts which exist for several of her short pieces of fiction. It is also very evident when we examine the process which turned

the rough drafts of the Exercise Books⁴⁰ or of stories into final published form. In this Rhys is a writer's writer: it is a pleasure to study her techniques as much as to read her finished texts.

The effect of such spare, emotionally taut writing as Rhys's mature style favoured is seen in the extraordinarily moving piece called 'From a Diary: At the Ropemaker's Arms' (*SP*: 129–41). This has some of the same legendary elements as the story of the first writing episode. Rhys is alone, in this case after her third husband's incarceration in prison for fraud. It is a time of serious emotional trauma and the writing again takes place in a rented room which is unfamiliar. It is again a diary. Angier thinks this piece so important that without it Rhys could not have written *Wide Sargasso Sea*, because it 'put her back in touch with the deepest source of her art – the lucid honesty and self-understanding which drink drowned and degraded' (1990: 460).

It is also clear however that Rhys needed alcohol to carry her beyond merciful forgetting and sane self-protection into first draft intensities which her professional writer self then took and reshaped and refined. She wrote to Selma Vaz Dias in 1959 that her struggles to finish the first draft of 'Mrs Rochester', later *Wide Sargasso Sea*, had to be fuelled with 'the help of very bad drink. One day drunk, two days hangover regular as clockwork' (*L*: 159). The intensity of frightening and immobilising feelings which the writing process could release as essential raw material is chillingly recorded in the first few lines of the Black Exercise Book, an arresting rough fictional draft which includes signature initials which were Jean Rhys's own original name: 'In bitterness & loneliness so complete . . . My heart is all . . . in my throat & tasting bitter . . . Lord save me I perish – Somebody had chalked on the wall – Lord save me I perish and underneath SOS SOS SOS signed GEW . . . Smith thought feel as I feel I'm not alone.'

There is a stunning distance between the writer of Rhys's first drafts, often highly emotional, fragmentary, cryptic as well as vivid and emotionally precise, and the meticulous and canny last editor she was, even, when the chance arose, sternly reviewing previously published work when republished.⁴¹ 'From a Diary', the very title using Rhys's oldest and most instinctive writing format and suggesting revelatory material, begins with a direct