

"The Other Side":  
Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre

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THE crucial question *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as a work of art, might seem to pose is whether it can stand and be judged alone, or whether in the view expressed by Walter Allen it is only "a triumph of atmosphere [which] does not exist in its own right, as Mr. Rochester is almost as shadowy as Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason."<sup>1</sup> Jean Rhys's own comment, "She seemed such a poor ghost, I thought I'd like to write her life,"<sup>2</sup> might seem to lend support to Allen's generalization, suggesting as it does that Rhys expended her whole creative effort upon an act of moral restitution to the stereotyped lunatic Creole heiress in Rochester's attic. Certainly, Rhys's Antoinette (Bertha), who tells Edward (Rochester) "There is always the other side, always" (p. 106),<sup>3</sup> is given a passionate voice to make "the other side" felt. Yet hers is still only one side and, though it might be argued of her creator's earlier novels between the wars that Rhys was more concerned to do fictional justice rather to her women than their men, *Wide Sargasso Sea* stands out as her most balanced novel in its even-handed treatment of the sexes. Her inward presentation, in the second part of the novel, of Rochester's viewpoint — complex but not "shadowy" — is unmatched in her earlier work, and its strength is enhanced by our contrasting recollections of *Jane Eyre*.

It is not Rhys's manner to spell out her characters' viewpoints, or to eke them out with detailed authorial commentary on background or theme. For her, as for Hardy, a novel is "an impression, not an argument."<sup>4</sup> Though I have seen people ignorant of *Jane Eyre* respond to this novel as a self-sufficient work, it would be foolish to deny

that many average readers come to it with some recollection of *Jane Eyre* and that Rhys relied in a general way on their doing so. Still, she did not assume that her reader's remembrance would be anything but dim and perhaps composed of stereotypes: Rochester recalled as a passionate, Byronically-moody man, his life blighted by the secret existence of the mad wife in the attic, she being little more than a figment of the "gothic" imagination — though the compassionate Charlotte Brontë asks that we pity her, there is no effort to understand. Only in the brief Part Three, the climactic passage set at Thornfield, is some specific knowledge of *Jane Eyre* assumed. This part is introduced by Grace Poole, the woman readers of *Jane Eyre* may remember as looking after the confined heiress. Consistent with her approach, Rhys gives more credibly human substance even to this minor character, Bertha's sullen jailor being presented as another woman as victim, sinking low that she may sink no lower:

After all the house is big and safe, a shelter from the world outside which, say what you like, can be a black and cruel world to a woman. (p. 146)

This passage implicitly echoes that which closes Part One, and the security Antoinette feels in the cold "refuge" of her convent is contrasted with "outside" (pp. 47, 50): the mad woman and her jailor are, unwittingly, sisters beneath the skin.

Again in Part Three, it is perhaps unlikely that even readers of *Jane Eyre* will recognize that the passage in which Antoinette, holding her red dress against herself, asks if it makes her "look intemperate and unchaste" as "that man" said, calling her "infamous daughter of an infamous mother" (p. 152), closely echoes Rochester's words in his self-exculpatory account to Jane of his relations with his first wife (Ch. XXVII).<sup>5</sup> This is not only an unusually explicit attempt to humanize our understanding of Bertha, but also that of Rochester, for his words are transferred in Rhys's novel to "that man", Antoinette's step-father Mr. Mason in his virulent disapproval of her

relationship with her half-caste cousin, Sandi. The remainder of Part Three allows us to see Antoinette's incendiaryism, not as a maniac's melodramatic finale, but as the inevitable tragic sequel to what we have learnt, not only of her embittered relationship with Edward, but also of her early life and trials.

An unexpected consequence of re-reading *Jane Eyre* in search of links with *Wide Sargasso Sea* is finding Brontë's novel a more "dated" work, marred by stereotyping and crude imaginings at points where a vaulting imagination such as Emily possessed was needed. I do not refer to the crude "gothic" of Bertha's characterisation, which has been often enough deplored since the novel appeared, but to the coarse assumptions about madness, mingled with the racial prejudice inherent in the insistent suggestion that "the fiery West Indian" place of Bertha's upbringing (Ch. XXVII) and her Creole blood are the essence of her lunacy: "Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard" (Ch. XXVI). Later she is "my Indian Messalina" (Ch. XXVII), a byword for debauchery, while Rochester's own confessed peccadilloes go under the milder name of "dissipation". Of course, the blackening of the dehumanized creature from the West Indian past readily serves Brontë's purpose of winning sympathy for the deceived and deluded Rochester from both Jane and those of the Victorian audience prone to racial prejudice.<sup>6</sup>

Radical though she undoubtedly was in her frank portrayal of passion in this novel, Charlotte Brontë observed certain righteous limits, which she spelt out to a correspondent — not without misgivings:

It is true that profound pity ought to be the only sentiment elicited by the view of such degradation [as Bertha's], and equally true is it that I have not sufficiently dwelt on that feeling: I have erred in making *horror* too predominant. Mrs. Rochester, indeed, lived a sinful life before she was insane, but sin is itself a species of insanity — the truly good behold and compassionate it as such.<sup>7</sup>

Evidently Brontë herself felt that she had not sufficiently realized Bertha's humanity: it was easier to make a mere

figure of a character who was, unlike Rochester and Jane, wholly imagined as a means to an end. *Jane Eyre* itself is contradictory on the issues the letter touches upon: in his account Rochester complains that Bertha's descent from "idiots and maniacs through three generations" was concealed from him, but also that her "gross, impure, depraved" vices "prematurely developed the germs of insanity" (Ch. XXVII). Thus, Bertha must be both congenitally insane and yet depraved *before* that madness shows itself — a shaky diagnosis but convenient or else it would have been possible to pity her, as indeed before she knows all Jane once beseeches him to do. Essentially, of course, our pity is needed for Rochester.

In getting *behind* Bertha's insanity, eschewing the catch-all dismissive generalization — "sin is itself a species of insanity" — Rhys joins those modern writers, novelists especially, who have sought to win their readers' understanding and compassion for those whose mental state is often, and for deeply complex reasons, just the wrong side of a thin dividing line from "normality". This concern was foreshadowed in her earlier novels, especially *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). There her heroine, Sasha, is one of Rhys's "weak", to whom the whole world is alien and menacing; her passions are a clinging to security, her fears of others' cruelty "imagination" to the strong. A passage in which one of her lovers, Serge, relates an encounter with a drunk "half-negro — a mulatto" woman who lives caged with her "monsieur" in the attic of his Paris boarding house prefigures the plight of Antoinette, everywhere an exile:

She told me she hadn't been out, except after dark, for two years. When she said this I had an extraordinary sensation, as if I were looking down into a pit. It was the expression in her eyes. I said: "But this monsieur you are living with. What about him?" "Oh, he is very Angliche, he says I imagine everything."<sup>8</sup>

This brief episode holds the seeds of the Edward/Antoinette relationship, as Rhys was to treat it twenty-five years later, in what was to be her most fairly and fully realized

analysis of that fatal want of imaginative and emotional understanding repeatedly presented in her earlier work as "very Angliche". If it may be argued that she shows some bias in that work, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* she rises above any temptation to blacken Rochester in his turn. Clearly, she set herself, not only to humanize the West Indian exotic, but also to portray subtly and sympathetically its effect upon Edward (an aspect I shall develop later). She does not for her purposes need *Jane Eyre*, not merely because this is the story of Edward and Antoinette, but because in a bold departure she draws implicit parallels, not only between Antoinette and Jane, so underlining their common plight as women, but also draws out hidden affinities between Antoinette and Edward, affinities which are the substance of their tragedy.

The development of Rhys's narrative, where it centres upon Antoinette, bears striking resemblances to Brontë's portrayal of the younger Jane. Both heroines grow up fatherless and emotionally threatened by those who take charge of them; they live much within themselves and in their imaginations, made fearful by emotional and physical insecurity. Jane is an orphan: Antoinette virtually one, losing her father in childhood and seeing her mother marry again, infatuated, only to become insane after the burning of their estate by the emancipated negroes (in the disturbances of the late 1830's). The real life of both, as children, is driven inward by maltreatment or indifference. Life is the nightmare, only in dreams and fantasy do they find relief. In fact, Jane's experience is such that she might have recognized much in Bertha's suffering at Thornfield Hall: her agonies in the red-room, where her aunt confines her, correspond to Bertha's incarceration, while her temptation to a superstitious doubt of her own reality, as when she peers in the looking glass (Ch. II), is counterpointed in Rhys's novel by the looking-glass motif linked with Antoinette, who constantly needs one to be reassured of her identity. Another implicit link between Jane and

Antoinette is in the oppressed Jane's search for escape in the "charm" of exotic far places conjured up for her by *Gulliver's Travels* — but her imagination more often torments than consoles her, inflamed by her daily struggles for survival. Those around her set her down as "a mad cat" subject to "tantrums"; before she goes to Lowood she is, like Bertha, virtually confined, and treated as a wild, unstable being. It is hardly surprising that the pictures she paints at school, which she later shows Rochester, recall her fevered imaginings: one, of the "woman's shape to the bust . . . the eyes shone dark and wild; the hair streamed shadowy" (Ch. XIII), might have been an unconscious presentiment of Bertha as she is later shown, but Brontë certainly points no such link.

Re-reading Chapters I to X of *Jane Eyre* one cannot help but notice how much in them corresponds to Antoinette's essential experience as a solitary, unloved child in Part One of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Both heroines seek imaginative escape, know terrors beyond the common, endure the encroachment of menace that threatens the very soul, and reach out for a seemingly impossible happiness. Jane's Lowood, the school that "excludes every glimpse of prospect" (Ch. V) is nevertheless, like Antoinette's convent, a "refuge" (p. 47) from a harsher world without. But here a crucial difference arises. Jane finds support and inspiration in the example of the saintly Helen: Antoinette can only envy the so well-adjusted de Plana sisters, especially Héléne (p. 45). Antoinette can only learn from her how ill fitted she is to enter life beyond the convent, where she acquires no shield against reality; she will always carry on the surface the ineradicable marks of her harsh early experience. Jane, however, goes forth armed with the saving talisman of Helen's Christian example which keeps her proof at the centre against later misfortune and temptation. The significance of this, which crystallizes clearly when Jane rebuffs Rochester's plea for love after he has confessed his "horrible life" with the words "trust in God and

yourself. Believe in Heaven. Hope to meet again there" (Ch. XXVII), may easily be overlooked by modern commentators seeking to define Jane as a free spirit.<sup>9</sup> Jane's severe morality reflects her creator's views — "sin is a species of insanity." Brontë's moral forcing, despite her casting of Jane as a seeker after liberty and self-determination, is reductive and constricting — nowhere is this more clearly shown than in the novel's dehumanizing of Bertha, the hapless creature for whom her own experience might have taught her more than a perfunctory plea for pity, soon set aside by Rochester (Ch. XXVII). Of course, Jane is a child of her author's imagination and of her time: I do not claim that Brontë could have been expected to write the greater, more complex novel potential in the parallel experiences of the early Jane and the imprisoned wife. This, in part, is what Rhys has done, writing clear of the racial prejudices that must have limited Brontë's reach and creating in the affinities between her Antoinette and Brontë's Jane a subtle, implicit comment on the shortcomings of *Jane Eyre*.

Helen Burns, Jane's moral exemplar, tells Jane that she cannot believe God's creatures will "be suffered to degenerate from man to fiend" and holds "another creed . . . [which] makes Eternity a rest — a mighty home, not a terror and an abyss" (Ch. VI). Helen's creed is instinctive and positive, a sure stay for Jane and a vanquisher of goblins. Antoinette in her convent would hold to a similar faith, if she could, as taught by the nun who "knew about Heaven and the attributes of the blessed, of which the least is transcendent beauty . . . I could hardly wait for all this ecstasy and once I prayed for a long time to be dead" (p. 48). But to despair is mortal sin, there is also Hell: what has become of the soul of her mother who in her madness has died both of the "two deaths" (p. 106)? Part One ends with Antoinette trembling on the brink of "*outside*" (p. 50); dreading the "security" of the arranged marriage her dubiously solicitous step-father, Mr. Mason,

has arranged for her, she dreams of Hell and the menacing male figure who draws her into darkness. She goes forth to meet her fate in Edward (Rochester) unsupported by other-worldly sanctions. All seems prepared for a treatment of Edward that will redress Brontë's bias against Bertha, but instead Part Two, which takes us at once into his consciousness, makes possible a sympathetic insight into him also.

In Brontë's novel, when Jane returns to Rochester after his blinding in the fire Bertha caused, he recognizes her voice and thinks it a "sweet delusion"; but Jane assures him, "your mind, sir, is too strong for delusion, your health too sound for frenzy" (Ch. XXXVII). We can readily believe this, despite Rochester's trials with Bertha and his losing Jane: his account of his marriage and Bertha's "mad" blood comes from one whose reason is always proof against the West Indian "hell" — despite the passing temptation to despair and suicide from which "A wind fresh from Europe" cleanses him (Ch. XXVII). For Rochester's highly coloured and, finally, self-exculpatory account of his hapless marriage Rhys substitutes in her Part Two a more complex, inward account, counterpointing it in many aspects against our prior insight into Antoinette's warped life. She thus achieves a poignant depiction of a mutual incomprehension that rests, in fact, on a closer identity of personal experience than Edward or Antoinette ever imagine. As he rides with her toward Granbois, their honeymoon house, Edward broods upon his invidious position and composes the first of his mental letters of reproach to his father in England:

I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother, the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son. I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. . . . (p. 59)

Edward's dubious bought "security" counterpoints Antoinette's (who is bought, who sold? . . . "The white cock-



roach she buy young man" sings the half-caste Amélie in his and Antoinette's hearing, p. 83), his inferior position in his family, his exile from what is familiar, the fever he is plunged into on his arrival in Jamaica, these all leave him groping for some sure ground for self; he is sceptical of life's promises and, like Antoinette, of "happiness": "As for my confused impressions they will never be written. There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up" (p. 64) — Edward's words, not Antoinette's. Edward, too, is young; and Rhys has built upon Rochester's expressed resentment, in *Jane Eyre*, of his "avaricious" father: "When I left college I was sent out to Jamaica to espouse a bride already courted for me" (Ch. XXVII). In her portrayal Edward (a milder name than the formidable "Rochester") is an uncertain, perhaps emotionally crippled young man.<sup>10</sup>

Rhys's counterpointing of Antoinette and Edward is deliberate and hardly to be missed. Their shared desire for "peace" (pp. 58, 66) is disabling, for each demands it of the other, neither can accept the unfamiliar as "real" (p. 67). Their potential mutual dependence is aborted by a deeply shared vulnerability, which Antoinette exposes and Edward conceals: "I thought these people are very vulnerable. How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt? A very small boy. Six, five, even earlier. It was necessary, I was told, and that view I have always accepted" (p. 85). This is an "English" flaw, clearly, but Edward is not incapable of feeling; only in him a genuine emotional susceptibility, distrusted and constricted by a willed morality, has gone dangerously awry. Rhys brings this out in various ways, of which one becomes a persistent thematic contrast — Edward's and Antoinette's conflicting responses to the place, Granbois, and its surroundings.<sup>11</sup> At first Edward goes often to Antoinette's bathing pool, finding there "an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing — I want what it *hides* — that is not nothing'" (p. 73). His early hopes and promises, to Antoinette, of "happiness" in this

inauspicious marriage are as fragile as his sense of his own reality — and little less so than hers. The passion they share at first, sharing the sun, is sure to recoil upon her. It would have taken less than Daniel Cosway's malicious gossip about her mother's madness and her own past relationship with her half-caste cousin, Sandi (of which her step-father so violently disapproved) to harden Edward's habit of repressed feeling into cold alienation. The warmer Antoinette, who "have the sun in her" (p. 130) confronts him too late with her truth. She recalls Coulibri and the garden where she had been "happy": this nakedly-remembered past merges into the alien place which is "my enemy and on your side" (p. 107). In vain she tells him, "It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else" (p. 107). Her risky recognition of non-meaning (there is no moral scheme — contrived by "people", whom she has learnt to fear) conflicts with that rigid invocation of "the power and wisdom of my creator" (p. 105) which Rhys's Edward fearfully stands upon, shunning the freedom of facing the world's "dark forest" (p. 137) — which surely involves passionate relationship — existentially.

Could Edward have acknowledged with Antoinette that dangerous freedom and have helped her face it, he might have grasped the elusive "secret". Antoinette gives him passion, a self-abandon in desire he cannot trust: Daniel Cosway's accusations,<sup>12</sup> Antoinette's foolishly countering use of the love potion certainly deepen their alienation, but are not essential. Their shared tragedy is that Edward has never learnt to give, nor Antoinette to receive securely. The "secret" is denied by their deep, shared incapacity for relationship and love. At the moment of departure Edward is "suddenly, bewilderingly . . . certain that everything I had imagined to be truth was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true — all the rest's a lie. Let it go. Here is the secret. Here" (p. 138). The place holds the "secret"; it is Antoinette's, spiritually her only stay: in

carrying her away to England he vents his frustration, rationalized as revenge for her suspected betrayal, not only upon her but upon himself. He acts with the calculating cruelty of the sensitive, not the brutal. His romantic desires for a marriage of self and place — more possible for him, as for Antoinette, than a relationship with people, for he despises her “savage” people, as she had learnt from her step-father’s example to fear his — ends with “nothing” (p. 142).

At the beginning of Part Three Grace Poole remembers “Mrs. Eff” (Mrs. Fairfax in *Jane Eyre*) reproving her for her unwillingness to accept Edward’s proposition that she look after his mad wife with this plea for sympathy: “I knew him as a boy. I knew him as a young man. He was gentle, generous, brave. His stay in the West Indies has changed him out of all knowledge. He has grey in his hair and misery in his eyes. Don’t ask me to pity anyone who had a hand in that” (p. 145). Another side, of course, and a partial one, but by this time Rhys has allowed Edward claims upon our pity; we have seen him steel himself against pity (p. 135), fearful of his own disintegration, and thus violate his own soul in destroying Antoinette’s. His future does not concern Jean Rhys (though he could have none in the Brontëan manner), but his relationship with Antoinette has been developed into a many-sided and complete study of tragic incompatibilities retrieved from Charlotte Brontë’s workshop floor.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*New York Times Book Review*, 18 June 1967, 5.

<sup>2</sup>Interview, *The Guardian*, 8th August 1968.

<sup>3</sup>References to *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), by page number.

<sup>4</sup>Preface, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*.

<sup>5</sup>*Jane Eyre* references by chapter number.

<sup>6</sup>Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge, 1971), *passim*.

<sup>7</sup>Letter to W. S. Williams, 4th January, 1848: Clement Shorter, ed., *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, Vol. 1 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908).

<sup>8</sup>*Good Morning, Midnight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) pp. 79-80.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Dennis Porter, "Of Heroines and Victims: Jean Rhys and *Jane Eyre*", *The Massachusetts Review*, 17, No. 3 (Autumn 1976), 540-551, *passim*; Porter stresses Jane's "strength of character" and "self-esteem" by contrast with Antoinette as passive victim, disabled by her colonial experience and circumstance. He overlooks the religious aspect, vital to Brontë as to her heroine.

<sup>10</sup>Here again I must differ with Dennis Porter, who roundly states "Rochester's failure to care enough for the feelings and the fate of his vulnerable child-bride is represented by Jean Rhys as a paradigm of male cruelty towards women" (*op. cit.*, 543): "child-bride" is hardly apt, not only because Antoinette Cosway is 18, but Edward himself is "young" — he reflects bitterly "a short youth mine was" (p. 70). Porter reduces the novel's complexity, seeing it simplistically as reflecting Rhys's semi-autobiographical concern with women's victimage in a male-dominated world. His paper rests upon the fashionable poles of male chauvinism and women's liberation between which the weak Antoinette falls.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Kenneth Ramchand's perceptive brief discussion, stressing the "highly subjective landscape", *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Faber, 1970), pp. 230-36.

<sup>12</sup>Daniel Cosway, not Daniel *Mason* (the name of Antoinette's step-father), as Porter mistakenly calls him, *op. cit.*, p. 544: Daniel claims to be Antoinette's half-brother, her father's illegitimate son by a black woman, and plays in his accusations upon that repugnance toward the darker races and the issue of miscegenation which was as natural to an Englishman of Edward's time as breathing. While it is true that Edward betrays Antoinette with the half-caste servant, Amélie, only to realize in the morning that "her skin was darker, her lips thicker than I had thought" (p. 115), this is no simple case of "male cruelty towards women" (see note 10 above). Edward is reacting from his conviction that Antoinette, who had given him a love-potion in a foolish effort to secure him, had tried to poison him; perhaps, too, he is bitterly imitating the affair with her half-caste cousin, Sandi, that Daniel Cosway has broadly hinted at.