

The Other Stage: from *Jane Eyre* to *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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The paper focuses on Jean Rhys's rewriting of the story of the first Mrs Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Taking as her subject the mad woman's early life in the West Indies, Jean Rhys transforms Charlotte Brontë's wintry romance into a tropical romance, or liberates the romantic material that is suppressed in *Jane Eyre*. In doing so, she reworks Bertha, the unspeakable figure of otherness, into an unnameable self, and creates a new, albeit elusive, stage for the inner self.

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In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her last novel, published in 1966, Jean Rhys seizes upon Charlotte Brontë's mad Creole, that figure of otherness put to good use in *Jane Eyre* to represent Jane's suppressed angry self, and shows us her 'other' life in the Caribbean islands.¹ Relocating the other, Jean Rhys takes the self out of the dark and wintry recesses to which it is confined in *Jane Eyre* to bring it into the limelight of a subtropical stage. In her letters, Jean Rhys complains that Charlotte Brontë's mad wife is no more than a 'paper tiger lunatic'² and accordingly undertakes to flesh her out, a revision which Michael Thorpe defines as 'an act of moral restitution to the stereotyped lunatic heiress in Rochester's attic'.³ True enough, the account of Bertha's life in *Jane Eyre* is quickly disposed of in one single chapter (vol. 3, chapter 1) and is necessarily underpinned by Victorian constructions of otherness, madness characteristically appearing as a consequence of excess and excess being conveniently associated with the heat of Bertha's distant birthplace. Before this, the mad woman has no more substance than that of 'a horrible laughter', or of a 'shape' reminiscent of 'the foul German spectre — the Vampyre' (*JE*, p. 317). Only once is she allowed to go onto the diegetic stage, and then, she appears as a compound of woman and beast:

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (*JE*, pp. 327–28)

Jean Rhys replaces the pronoun 'it' which so often refers to Bertha in *Jane Eyre* with a more human 'she' and even with an 'I', since she promotes the grovelling creature who produces what Jane calls 'oral oddities' (*JE*, p. 126) to the status of a speaking subject. If, more than a century later, Jean Rhys is thus able to right a few wrongs, her revision of *Jane Eyre* goes further than challenging Victorian conceptions of otherness. She also tries to carve new territories for the representation of the inner self, especially by revisiting the romantic material of *Jane Eyre*.

From wintry to tropical romance

'There is always the other side, always', Antoinette says to her husband as she tries to persuade him that Daniel Cosway's assertions are slanderous (*WSS*, p. 82). In her revision of *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys writes about and from 'the other side', creating an alternative version to Rochester's account of his first marriage in *Jane Eyre*. She actually reverses the perspective, as one of her letters attests:

The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel is a lay figure — repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does. She's necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry — *off stage*. For me (and for you I hope) she must be right *on stage*. (*L*, p. 156)

What is 'off stage', behind the scenes in *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys places centre stage in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Reversing the perspective, she also tends to reverse the significance of Jane's 'autobiography', which could be defined as a chronicle of suppression. Donald D. Stone, for instance, summarizes Charlotte Brontë's novel as follows: '[a] Victorianized romance celebrating the virtues of home and duty is the reward for the rejection of the excesses of romance and Romanticism'.⁴ Reworking this celebration of restraint and self-control, Jean Rhys liberates what *Jane Eyre* represses. In her search for an alternative idiom, she elaborates precisely those elements which Charlotte Brontë suppresses, especially those having to do with romance.

Jane Eyre clearly borrows from the conventional material of romance, the marriage plot in particular: Jane, the plain servant in whom many have seen a Victorian Cinderella, will against all odds marry her upper-class master. Her 'pilgrim's progress' is structured along the lines of traditional quest-romance which, as Northrop Frye points out, is a dialectical form, focused as it is on a conflict between the hero and his enemy.⁵ Jane is accordingly put to the test: on the way to wish-fulfilment, she has to confront various obstacles and impediments, including her own demons. Thornfield Hall is the site of her crucial struggle, after which, all tensions being resolved, the 'thorns' are removed, together with the raging monster which had been haunting the premises. In due course, for the romantic quest is a successful one, the little governess and her beloved master are reunited and live happily ever after, at Ferndean, a cross between 'the enclosed bower' and 'the pleasure dome', where Jane is rewarded with the mild comforts of the domestic hearth after the agony of devilish conflagration.⁶

Although Charlotte Brontë borrows from romance, she distances herself from the conventions of the genre, questioning the romantic notion that 'any woman can be swept in good Cinderella fashion from obscurity into the loving embrace of the man

in whom she'll find her world'.⁷ Hers is a *realistic* romance which challenges the forms, customs and standards of society. Charlotte Brontë may borrow from drawing-room literature but she also ironically disqualifies its formulae, so that traditional romance, the 'mythos of summer' in Northrop Frye's terms, is tempered and chilled by irony, the 'mythos of winter'. A wintry romance, *Jane Eyre* suppresses the romantic impulse.

Gothic romance is likewise suppressed. The mechanisms of the Gothic are undercut with an infusion of what Robert B. Heilman calls 'the anti-Gothic'. Comedy, for instance, serves as a 'palliative of straight Gothic'⁸ in the sequence where Bertha sets fire to Rochester's bed, initially presented as 'a marrow-freezing incident' (*JE*, p. 168). Jane flies to her master's assistance and Gothic terror is indeed defused when Rochester, soaking wet, wakes up 'fulminating strange anathemas at finding himself lying in a pool of water' (*JE*, p. 169). More importantly, the Gothic is annulled through metaphorical displacement. In *Jane Eyre*, uncanny manifestations are primarily symptoms of inner conflicts threatening the self with dissolution. The first case of hauntedness occurs in the red-room at Gateshead where, as a child, Jane is locked up after a rebellious fit. The red-room is clearly a Gothic *topos*: stately and remote, it is the death chamber where Mr Reed breathed his last. The text paves the way for 'some coming vision from another world' (*JE*, p. 24) but thanks to the immediate provision of a rational explanation by the narrating 'I' — 'I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern carried by some one across the lawn' (*JE*, p. 24) — it re-directs attention towards a psychological reading of the uncanny. A creation of Jane's fevered mind, brought about by rage, the Gothic phenomenon reads as a metaphor for the romantic excesses she must channel. In the same way, Bertha, the main prop of the Gothic at Thornfield Hall, is no other than Jane's dark double, an 'objective correlative' of the pitfalls from which she must learn to stay clear. As Donald D. Stone puts it, 'Bertha represents to be sure, Romantic energy at its most wilful and uncontrolled, *la bête humaine* personified'.⁹ Thus Charlotte Brontë calls for an allegorical reading of the Gothic system of motifs. Such a reading, Tzvetan Todorov has shown, is incompatible with fantasy.¹⁰ When it is 'naturalized' as allegory or symbolism, fantasy loses its proper non-signifying nature, its fundamental capacity to induce hesitation, its resistance to closed meaning and interpretation.

Where Charlotte Brontë tempers the romantic element in an attempt to present the reader with a realistically drawn woman, Jane, who is seen to outgrow and reject the restricting formulae of traditional romance, Jean Rhys, by contrast, seems to seek in romance new options for the representation of inner space. Taking the opposite course to Charlotte Brontë's domesticated quest-romance, Jean Rhys turns to a more canonical form, stripped, that is, of the wintry attire of irony. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as she says in one of her letters, is a 'romantic novel (my first Romance)' (*L*, p. 268). Reversing Charlotte Brontë's 'romance of reality' into 'a romantic novel', she incorporates into the novel elements that escape consensual taxonomies, while restoring romance to the summery clime to which it belongs, to the heat, even, of subtropical, unending 'summer'.

The setting in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is typical of romantic topography. If, in *Jane Eyre*, the West Indies are an over-heated, madness-inducing milieu, they are presented as an idyllic, ideal world in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a modern Eden that is not

unlike the type of setting that serves as a backdrop for today's popular romances. Yet, as the description of Coulibri suggests, the garden of Eden is also a fallen one:

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible — the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. (WSS, p. 6)

As well as invoking 'the past and the socially remote' as romantic settings tend to do,¹¹ nineteenth-century Jamaica and Dominica bear the marks of the conventional *agon* or conflict between an 'idyllic world' and a 'demonic or night world' in Northrop Frye's terms. The 'powerful polarizing tendency' of romance¹² structures the universe of Granbois in particular: it is a dream-place, remote, almost out of reach, whose 'intoxicating freshness' and 'untouched' quality 'Rochester' underlines on several occasions (WSS, pp. 44, 54). As the site of the couple's honeymoon, Granbois corresponds to the romantic universe of wish-fulfilment and of unrestrained sexual fulfilment — 'In sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight' (WSS, p. 57) — but it is not long before 'Rochester' senses a malevolent presence that might at any moment carry him from the idyllic to the demonic. Fallen Granbois does not go without its snakes or its Leviathan, the 'monster crab' that lurks under a flat stone in the river (WSS, p. 54).

In spite of the reference to the Bible, the code of good and evil in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and in romance in general 'is formulated in a magical, rather than a purely ethical, sense' as Fredric Jameson puts it.¹³ The polarity of the universe of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an archaic, magical one, giving pride of place to a primitive animism in which things and places are granted human feelings and powers. Granbois alternately is a hostile, menacing presence for 'Rochester' or a friendly, benevolent one for Antoinette. In this magical world, Christophine, an obeah woman, plays a prominent role. If the text never directly stages any of her occult activities and although obeah is, it seems, taboo as well as illegal, it nonetheless suffuses the text, in much the same way as Bertha's hidden presence suffuses the plot of *Jane Eyre*. Unlike Bertha, however, obeah is not a metaphor. The love potion which Christophine concocts for Antoinette provides a fair illustration of its literality and, incidentally, of the unsensational way in which magic is dealt with. The reader is not made privy to the actual making of the potion and all we are allowed to see is Antoinette leaving Christophine with something 'wrapped in a leaf' (WSS, p. 75). Moreover, whatever it is that Christophine has given her seems to be denied any magical efficacy; it merely makes 'Rochester' very sick and fails to counteract the gradual disintegration of the couple's relationship. The love potion does not work and yet it does in a way. Far from being ineffective, the presumably magical potion acts upon reality. Believing that he is being poisoned, 'Rochester' is at this precise point overwhelmed by rage and hatred, and 'miraculously' assumes the identity of the evil victimizer. What is more, his metamorphosis, in which the love potion definitely has a hand, proves to be the predictable enactment of Christophine's prophetic warnings: '[t]oo besides, [obeah] is not for *béké*. Bad, bad trouble come when *béké* meddle with that' (WSS, p. 71). In this understated way, the text establishes Christophine as a magician and a prophetess and designates itself as a magical narrative or a magic formula effecting the merger of archaic romance and realistic mode. If magic is realistically motivated by the West Indian context, it is not suppressed in the name of realism as romance is in *Jane Eyre*.

Suppression is by no means on the agenda of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Contrary to *Jane Eyre*, it articulates an aesthetic of extremity. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* excess is recommended where *Jane Eyre* advocates temperance and self-control. Excess is ‘naturally’ indigenous to the universe of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as strangers like Mr Mason or ‘Rochester’ repeatedly note: ‘[a]lways one extreme or the other’ Mason says of Antoinette’s mother (WSS, p. 15). Like mother like daughter: excess is inscribed in Antoinette’s body — ‘her eyes [...] are too large and can be disconcerting’ (WSS, p. 40). On his way to Granbois, the true seat of extremity, ‘Rochester’ is dumbfounded by the daunting intensity of the surroundings:

Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. (WSS, p. 42)

The silence is ‘absolute’ (WSS, p. 65), the noise ‘deafening’ and the moths are the size of birds (WSS, p. 49). ‘Rochester’s’ wish to put a check on excess is actually what will cause tragedy to prevail over the idyllic world of romance.

Gothic delirium

In the same way as she takes excess ‘out of the closet’ and generally makes manifest what is hidden in *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys removes Gothic fantasy from the strictures of the subtext in which it is confined in *Jane Eyre*. This she does in her customary economical way, for she does not resort to any of what Anthony Luengo calls ‘the traditional claptrap’ of the Gothic.¹⁴ She nonetheless ‘exacerbates the Gothic mode of her predecessor, supplying a conjure woman, descriptions of obeah, ghosts, omens, zombi-lore, and poisonous potions’.¹⁵ She uses the Gothic to rethink otherness, and to disentangle the other woman, the alien and mad Creole of *Jane Eyre*, from its stereotyped construction. ‘In Gothic’, David Punter argues, ‘we are all suffering from delirium [...] for delirium is merely the experience of being at the mercy of conflicting and unassimilable impressions’.¹⁶ Jean Rhys exploits Gothic delirium or the affinity of the Gothic with epistemological uncertainty to disrupt normative discourses and their stable identifications. The novel gestures towards realms of experience which resist interpretation. The novel’s multi-voicedness — it has three different narrators — constantly brings into play conflicting views and interpretations which never converge towards any final truth, Annette’s English husband consistently misreads the world and Antoinette’s husband can only register the confusion of his groping mind: ‘as for my confused impressions they will never be written. There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up’ (WSS, p. 46). The fever that weakens his senses when he arrives in Jamaica is but a symptom of his realization that Jamaican reality cannot be fully incorporated into the bulk of prior knowledges, and the Gothic *topos* of the secret is the only means available to him to designate the unknown, the unthought, the unassimilable. When he discovers Granbois, for instance, ‘Rochester’ clearly enters uncharted territory:

It was a beautiful place — wild, untouched, above all untouched, with 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’ (WSS, p. 54)

The hidden secret is what is yet to be mapped out, what is yet to be named, the true space, Jean Rhys suggests, of the inner self. The generic word 'secret', a kind of vacant or gaping signifier, and the phrase 'not nothing' bear witness to the loopholes in the dominant idiom and in 'Rochester's' mapping of the world.

Thus the island's geography resists or exceeds map-making and 'Rochester' can only lose his way in the Gothic maze of the forest (WSS, pp. 65–66). There, delirium or the epistemological crisis he experiences reaches a climax: he is seized by hallucination and comes upon the remnants of a paved road which he welcomes as the vestige of colonization, a familiar landmark in this otherwise unknown territory. However, Baptiste will deny that there ever was such a road (WSS, p. 66). 'Rochester' can no longer 'think or plan' (WSS, p. 65), can no longer draw the line between what is and what is not, and the truth is forever out of his reach: 'How can one discover the truth I thought and that thought led me nowhere' (WSS, p. 65).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* then, the secret is no longer the socially unacceptable, as hidden and mad Bertha is in *Jane Eyre*, but what 'Rochester's' knowledge systems cannot account for. His only groundbreaking discovery is that the secret will always elude him. At the end of his narrative, he spitefully admits that he hates Antoinette 'for she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it' (WSS, p. 111). Incapable of deciphering the secret, 'Rochester' appropriates it as he appropriates Antoinette and takes the cryptic, locked-in treasure to England where, he expects, it will be frozen into distorting textualizations of otherness:

I too can wait — for the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie. (WSS, p. 112)

His prophecy comes true since, in Part Three, Grace Poole informs us that, in spite of 'Rochester's' precautions, rumours 'about the woman he brought back to England with him' are being circulated (WSS, p. 115).

For *Jane Eyre's* unspeakable secret, Jean Rhys substitutes the unnameable; she revises the figure of the mad Creole into that of a lovely, unnameable self. As well as giving a voice to the unspeakable other, she creates a new space for the self who not only articulates her counter-story but exceeds freezing representations. Jean Rhys does not give the secret away; she just brings it to the verge of the articulate, for naming the unnameable would amount to repeating previous constructions of otherness, which acquire, at the close of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the status of 'a legend. Or a lie'. Antoinette may end up in confinement but she is forever out of reach, somewhere in uncharted territory. Through her revision of *Jane Eyre's* Gothic, Jean Rhys removes her heroine from the Victorian textualization of Rochester's embedded narrative in *Jane Eyre* and relocates the mad creature of *Jane Eyre* in the Gothic delirium of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Notes

¹ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997); hereafter WSS. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996); hereafter JE. Further references to these editions are given after quotations in the text.

² Jean Rhys, *Letters 1931–66*, ed. by Diana Melly (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 262; hereafter L.

³ Michael Thorpe, "'The Other Side': *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*", *Ariel*, 3 (1977), p. 99.

- ⁴ Donald D. Stone, *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 113.
- ⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 187.
- ⁶ This is how Gillian Beer designates romantic space: '[t]he enclosed bower, the pleasure dome, the pastoral world, all project images of bliss in which emotional and natural life find repose' (Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 29).
- ⁷ Michelle A. Massé, *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 208.
- ⁸ Robert B. Heilman, 'Charlotte Brontë's New Gothic', in *The Brontës: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Ian Gregor (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 98.
- ⁹ Stone, p. 116.
- ¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (London: Case Western Reserve University Press), 1973.
- ¹¹ Beer, p. 2.
- ¹² Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: a Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 53.
- ¹³ Fredric Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', *New Literary History*, 7 (Autumn 1975), p. 158.
- ¹⁴ Anthony Luengo, 'Wide Sargasso Sea and the Gothic Mode', *World Literature Written in English*, 15 (April 1976), p. 235.
- ¹⁵ Judie Newman, 'Postcolonial Gothic, Ruth Jhabvala and the Sobhraj Case', in *Modern Gothic: a Reader*, ed. by Victor Sage & Allan Lloyd Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 172.
- ¹⁶ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, vol. 2 (London: Longman, 1996), p. 186.

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