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Anna's Aborted Struggle to Come to Voice in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*.

> The damned way they look at you, and their damned voices, like high, smooth, unclimbable walls.
> *Voyage in the Dark* (126) [1]

For years, Jean Rhys's first autodiegetic novel,[2] *Voyage in the Dark* was mistaken for a disguised autobiography, the mere confession of one of those "scribbling" women. Actually, the choice of a first person narrative can be read as a textual device testifying to the literary achievement of a woman writer who, unlike her narrator-character, is in total control of the narrative. The challenge is twofold: lying on the one hand in Rhys's claim to establish an authorial West Indian female voice in the male dominated literary consciousness of the early thirties; on the other hand, in Rhys's claim for a nineteen-year-old West Indian girl the right to narrate her own "personal" story.[3] If the author, despite a number of serious hardships — among which the pressure of her editors to change the ending — was partly successful in

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[1] Page references in the text will be to the Penguin edition. Brackets and italics are those of the text.

[2] According to Genette, the "I" who tells the story is also the main protagonist of the story, an older version, though.

[3] I borrow this term to S. Sniader Lanser who uses the term "personal voice" to refer to narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories (Lanser 18).

her attempt,[4] her narrator eventually failed to impose her textual voice as a public voice.

A fragile narrator/character

Part of the author's strategy consists in deliberately not setting forth her narrator as an authority. Opening the novel on an interior monologue whose narrator makes no claim to omniscience and who continually violates the requirements of organised speech immediately labels the textual strategy as non-canonical. Indeed, the very first words of this interior monologue signal to the reader that the narrating agency whose gender, age and social status will only be revealed later suffers from a handicap which may seriously cause us to question his/her reliability:

> It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. (7)

Actually, as Elizabeth Abel puts it, "Jean Rhys's narrator suffers from a sense of internal division between a responsive but covert inner self and a mechanical external one" (Abel). It is thus clear from the start that the split in the self leads to a feeling of inadequacy in relation to the surrounding world: "I didn't like England at first. I couldn't get used to the cold" (7). Of the narrator's two selves, it is the experiencing self which is 'mechanical' and detached, keeping the real at a distance "It was as if it was almost like..." (7). Descriptions of England are introduced by impersonal statements revealing a lack of emotional contact: "there was a fire . . . there was a black table" and a neutral vocabulary which gives the text a dysphoric quality:

> there was always a little grey street... and another little grey street... and rows of little houses with chimneys like the funnels of dummy steamers and smoke ... and a grey stone promenade... by the side of the grey-brown or grey-green sea (8).

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[4] In a letter addressed to Evelyn Scott, June 10th (1934), Jean Rhys wrote: "The book is having decidedly stormy weather" (*Letters* 24).

On the other hand, the "covert inner self" empathises so strongly with the reminiscences of the past childhood in the West Indies that the landscape emerging from the narrator's descriptions is far more real than the real one. The organisation of the interior monologue exemplifies the logic of the narrator. Instead of ordering experience in a rational, objective way, the narrator obeys a logic based on an associative process, on a "logique des sensations organisées" (Gowing). Any word, spoken or heard, can generate in the narrator's mind the illusion of a sensation which in turn triggers a visual image or an olfactory one which invades the real and shuts it out. Once this stage is reached, sensations contaminate each other and images keep cropping up until they create a whole landscape alive with characters who are heard talking in direct discourse. For instance, as paradoxical as it may seem, the word "cold" associated with a sensation presently experienced by the narrator gives birth to images of heat: the heat of an English fire becomes the heat of the West Indian sun which, in turn evokes the breeze itself carrying smells and fragrances, those of "Niggers" as well as those of wood, smoke, salt fishcakes, frangipanni, lime-juice or Corpus Christi processions.

Obeying the law of contiguity in space and in time rather than linear chronology, the process testifies to the subjectivity of the narrating 'I' charmed and lured by the vitality of the past to the point of yielding to the temptation of re-creating it in the hostile present:

> Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together (8).

It is only after highlighting her narrator's flaws as a teller of narrative that Rhys chooses to unveil the gender mask and point out the disreputable status of her narrator. Indeed, the young woman, Anna, is a chorus-girl on a tour of English resorts. Her activity can be inferred both from a landlady's comments: "No, I don't let to professionals" and from Anna's attitude as she lets a man who has just picked her up on the Southsea pier pay for her stockings.

Besides being marked as a female voice, Anna's voice is marked by her otherness: a West Indian and still a virgin, a "Hottentot" as Laurie, one of her fellow chorus girls calls her, an exile unable to grasp the rules of the social game. Her age (she is eighteen) also signals her as more in need of guidance than as a knowledgeable person. What reader would trust a narrator who, despite her admonitions to herself, cannot even write a letter to her lover? "You make up letters that you never send or even write" (64).

Introduced as a socially unauthorised narrator, it is not surprising that as a character, too, her voice should be threatened by more assertive voices denying her credibility and trying to prevent her from making her voice public. As E. Béranger suggests, Anna is more often than not on the verge of autism (79-80). A poor communicator, she hardly ever initiates a conversation and, when addressed, she is seldom able to give appropriate answers. Her answers often point out her disconnection with the present. Thus, after Maudie has remarked: "I'm getting lines under my eyes, aren't I?" Anna says: "I've got a cousin out home, quite a kid. And she's never seen snow and she's awfully curious about it. She keeps writing and asking me to tell her what it's like" (15).

Often spoken of in the third person as if she was physically absent, Anna is also silenced by men who are unwilling to share her childhood memories with her. They interrupt her as they would an immature, thoughtless child, referring to her as "my infantile Anna," "my dear child," "shy Anna," "you rum little devil." When Anna tries to convince Walter that she is "a real West Indian," he answers:

> "I know, my sweet, . . . You told me that before," and as she insists timidly he got up and pulled me up and started kissing me.
> "You sound a bit tight," he said. "Well, let's go upstairs" (48).

As for Joe, one of her chance encounters, he takes Anna's information in the comic mode:

> "Well, it's because I was born in the West Indies and I'm always like that."

> "Oh, were you?' Joe said. He sat on the bed. "I know, I know. Trinidad, Cuba, Jamaica — why, I've spent years there." He winked at Laurie (107).

Women are no less authoritative, constantly reminding Anna of her lack of experience, of her inability to adjust to the dominant culture. Laurie who knows the tricks of the trade tells Anna:

> " I think you're a bit of a fool, that's all. And I think you'll never get on, because you don't know how to take people. . . . And besides, you always look half-asleep and people don't like that. But it's not my business" (110).

Hester, Anna's stepmother who represents the voice of British cultural supremacy indirectly admits her failure to "colonise" the young girl: "That awful singsong voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked — and still do" (56). Allowing her self-image to be constituted in such a way, no wonder then that Anna should fail to construct a coherent public voice when her moral authority is questioned by normative voices: "voices like high, smooth, unclimbable walls all round you, closing in on you. And nothing to be done about it, either" (126).

The temptation is great for her to blot out those voices, withdraw from the world, retreat into silence and choose to listen to her inner voices. Yet, as Susan Sniader Lanser suggests:

> Narrative voice and the narrated world are mutually constitutive; if there is no tale without a teller, there is no teller without a tale. This interdependence gives the narrator a liminal position that is at once contingent and privileged: the narrator has no existence "outside" the text yet brings the text into existence (Lanser 4).

Ultimately, it is the author who decides on the qualification of her narrator and Rhys has no intention of disqualifying her narrator, no matter her flaws. But, being herself a socially unauthorised author, wary

of the hostile reactions of an unreceptive audience,[5] she sets up a "mise en scène" involving an actual reader and a potential one. Rhys shows her narrator/character in the act of reading a novel, not any novel, though. Anna is reading *Nana* and is experiencing a curious sense of detachment as if she was seeing herself at the other end of a telescope: watching herself in the present and projecting herself in a future which, in all likelihood, will have much in common with Nana's:

> I was lying on the sofa, reading *Nana*. It was a paper-covered book with a coloured picture of a stout, dark woman brandishing a wine-glass. She was sitting on the knee of a bald-headed man in an evening dress. The print was very small, and the endless procession of words gave me a curious feeling — sad, excited and frightened. It wasn't what I was reading, it was the look of the dark, blurred words going on endlessly that gave me that feeling.9

Interestingly enough, the potential reader, Maudie is a female reader (a fellow chorus-girl of Anna) whose comments mirror a male point of view on a female writer. First, she questions the reliability of a male authorial voice commenting on a female character, then she doubts the relevance of choosing a non-canonical main character: "I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another. Besides, all books are like that — just somebody stuffing you up" (9).

Constructing a sub-text as a strategy of resistance.

Thus, in an oblique way, Jean Rhys expresses her own scepticism at being heard, read and trusted, while asserting the right to have a woman-centred point of view and insisting that her narrator, Anna, in spite of all her handicaps should be allowed to narrate her own experience as, to her, it is both a means of survival and a sign that she survives. If Rhys cannot make Anna's voice public, then, she will constitute her narrative authority in constructing a subtext which runs

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[5] In the letter mentioned earlier, Jean Rhys also wrote: "after Cape had written and told me how grey I was, without light or shade, how much people would dislike it, that he couldn't hope to sell it even as well as Mackenzie etc. and so on" (*Letters* 25).

parallel to the main narrative. Rhys, the author, has Anna, the narrator engage in a dialogue with herself alternately summoning sympathetic voices — preferably from the West Indies as they share a common knowledge — writing imaginary conversations or addressing herself as her own narratee.

The subtext which works on various levels first signals itself to the attention of the reader graphically. Indeed, Anna's monologues are constantly disrupted by bracketed sentences:

> All the way back in the taxi I was still thinking about home and when I got into bed I lay awake, thinking about it. . . . And the way the bats fly out at sunset, two by two, very stately. And the smell of the store down on the Bay. (I'll take four yards of the pink, please, Miss Jessie.) And the smell of Francine — acrid-sweet. And that hibiscus once — it was so red, so proud and its long tongue hung out. 49

Italics also characterise the emergence of her inner thoughts. As Anna is trying on new clothes, she comments on her decision: "This is a beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I'll go to all the lovely places I've ever dreamt of. This is the beginning" (25).

Rhetorical questions reveal her longing for an audience: "Do you know the country? Of course, if you know the country it makes all the difference. The country where the orange-tree flowers?" (137) Verbs introducing direct discourse are replaced by: "I wanted to say," "I thought," "I was thinking," "I imagined myself saying," "I kept telling myself" significant of the existence of a "silent" dialogue echoing the actual one.

Alternately congratulating herself for an occasional good performance "'I'm getting along all right,' I thought" (19); admonishing herself "Don't think of it, don't think of it. Because thinking of it makes it happen" (138), or trying to reassure herself "Of course it'll be all right" (146), Anna ends up addressing herself. The shift from the first person singular to the first person plural clearly illustrates the process: "I kept telling myself, 'You've got to think of something. You can't stay here. You've got to make a plan'" (128). As E. Béranger puts it:

> Le "you" et le "I" sont évidemment la même personne: l'héroïne dont le discours intérieur constitue le texte. Anna parle toute seule ou plutôt elle se parle. Le monde extérieur est évacué au profit de cette oreille privilégiée. L'Anna d'aujourd'hui, tout en parlant, recherche celle qu'elle fut et qui déjà s'efface (Béranger 185-86).

One of the consequences of this strategy is to increase Anna's tendency to autism: the more she listens to her own voice, the more she wants to, the further she dives into her past, the less she can control ambivalent voices which keep cropping up in her subtext and no longer connote warmth and sensuality but reveal the cruelty hidden behind the masks. Among these voices, that of Uncle Bo who betrayed her and her stepmother's, "an English lady's voice with a sharp, cutting edge to it" (50). Both of them cover the once motherly voice of the black nurse Francine comforting the sick child.

Intrusive voices: a threat to Anna's textual voice.

It is actually Anna's loss of virginity (occurring quite early in the narrative) which triggers the whole process of disintegration: the polyphony of voices abruptly turns into a cacophony. Her narrative self is reminded of a similarly traumatic experience, that of her entry into womanhood when she understood that, from then on, she had no choice but fit into a pattern of behaviour set by the dominant patriarchal culture. Painful memories of this episode surge in Anna. She remembers repeating the multiplication table to avoid bursting into tears and just sitting in the sun thinking: "Well, all right. This time I'll die" (63). Losing her virginity makes her akin to the young slave girl whose name appeared on a slave list of her father's plantation:

> Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant. The sins of the fathers Hester said are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation — don't talk such nonsense to the child Father said — a myth don't get tangled up in myths he said to me (46).

From then on, she mixes individual memories with the more collective memories of her sexual heritage. Sex becomes associated with decay and death:

> "Walter, will you put the light out? I don't like it in my eyes."
> *Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, Maillotte Boyd, aged 18... But I like it like this; I don't want it in any other way but this.*
> "Are you asleep?"
> "No, I'm not asleep."
> "You were lying so still," he said.
> *Lying so still afterwards. That's what they call the Little Death* (48).

Anna gradually loses control of her narration as, on the one hand, the voices through which she has let her self be constituted become more insistent and threatening and, on the other hand, she can no longer control the emergence of painful recollections. Anonymous or not, past or present, these voices echo the voice of the dominant ideological culture to undermine Anna's text. Literally woven in the very texture of Anna's monologue, a quote from a geography textbook represents a professional authority, a knowledgeable voice which, contrary to Anna's, can be trusted: "Lying between 15°10' and 15°40' N. and 61°14' and 61°30' W. 'A goodly island and something highland, but all overgrown with woods,' that book said" (15).

Recurring slogans testify to the pressure made on women by a male-dominated society, a normative voice that keeps reminding Anna that she has to fit into a set pattern: "There's something you can buy that makes your neck fat. Venus Carnis. 'No fascination without curves. Ladies, realise your charms'" (15). Quotes from cheap novels work as authorised sources: "It was a pity about my clothes, but anyway they were black. 'She wore black. Men delighted in that sable colour, or lack of colour.' A man called 'Coronet' wrote that" (19).

Women's voices are threatening too. Whether they are voices of morality or voices of wisdom, they testify to an internalisation of male prescriptions. The former condemn, the latter reflect a body of knowledge concerning women's attitude to sex. Landladies loudly voice their disapproval of Anna's life: "*Crawling up the stairs at three o'clock in*

the morning" (26) and their words keep haunting Anna, surfacing again and again: "He wiped my eyes gently . . . then we were going up another flight of stairs and I walked softly. *'Crawling up the stairs at three o'clock in the morning,' she said. Well, I'm crawling up the stairs*" (32).

The assertive voices of her fellow chorus-girls, more experienced than her patronise Anna; they remind her of her ignorance of the rules of behaviour with men: "I got the glass out of my handbag and looked at myself every time the taxi passed a street-lamp. *It's soppy always to look sad. Funny stories — remember some, for God's sake.* But..." (30). Their words keep recurring in Anna's mind, emphasising her failure to conform to the norm:

> The long shadows of the trees, like skeletons . . . 'I'm quite all right; I'm quite all right. Of course, everything will be all right. I've only got to pull myself together and make a plan.' ('Have you heard the one about...') It was one of these days; . . . ('Yes, that's not a bad one, but have you heard the one...') (122).

Eventually, a few of the voices succeed in expropriating Anna's voice for a time (it is the case of Ethel's which appropriates Anna's narrative). It results in a complete fragmentation of the narrative self and an incapacity to write in a coherent way as the following text suggests.

> There were sheets of paper spread all over the bed. After a while I crossed out everything and began again, writing very quickly, like you do when you write: 'You can't possibly do this you simply don't know what you're doing if I were a dog you wouldn't do this I love you I love you I love you but you're just a god-damned rotter everybody is everybody is everybody is' — My dear Walter I've read books about this and I know quite well what you're thinking (89).

Later, when Anna discovers that she is pregnant and in deep need of money to have an abortion, she writes a letter to Walter under Laurie's dictation, but not one word of it will be represented in the text. After her abortion, no longer able to re-connect her inner world with the

real one, she definitely loses control of the narrative. Deprived of her voice, condemned to listen, she loses her status of speaking subject to become an object: she only overhears conversations mentioning her in the third person pronoun "she ought to," "she oughtn't to," "she ought to."

Yet, still engaged in her silent dialogue with herself, the experiencing "I" desperately tries to listen to the inner voice but her memory fails her as it only brings to the surface disturbing and confusing images. Then, voices of the two worlds intertwine and contaminate one another to give her narration a nightmarish and hallucinatory quality. The dizziness felt by the experiencing "I" communicates itself to the text. It is highly ironic that the communion with the Blacks which Anna's younger self aspired to should happen only when the dream has turned sour:

> "I'm giddy," I said.
> *I'm awfully giddy — but we went on dancing forwards and backwards and forwards whirling round and round* (157)

Since Anna can no longer order the story of her life, mixing past and present, real and unreal; it is a voice of the dominant ideology which takes over: the doctor's voice. By assimilating Anna to her fellow chorus-girls — "You girls are too naïve to live, aren't you?" —, he leaves her no chance at all of escaping the established pattern but, instead, condemns her to repeat it endlessly, "ready to start all over again in no time."

Anna's struggle to make herself heard as a narrator clearly reflects Rhys's struggle as a writer: an exile and a woman denied credibility because of her Otherness and struggling to make herself heard by an unreceptive audience (none of which was West Indian and female). Let us not forget, however, that Anna is a fictional construct and, as such, her right to live or die is in the hands of her creator. As long as Anna can give the story of her life "shape" — however uncanonical the shape is — Rhys will let her narrate, thus subverting dominant rhetorical practices. But, when chaos invades the narrative, Rhys has to silence Anna (both physically and symbolically) since, for

her, "a novel has to have shape." It is then easier to understand both Rhys's resistance to the pressure of her male publishers to change the end of the novel and the insistence of the latter in having Anna survive her abortion.[6] As the woman writer felt her text would be "mutilated," the publishers felt, in the writing, some kind of transgression of the established order which they were reluctant to make public. Is it not the most ironical *mise en abyme* of the status of a woman writer in the British male dominated literary establishment of the nineteen thirties?

Delphine Chartier.[7]

6 "Evelyn I don't know what to do. I suppose I shall have to give in and cut the book and I'm afraid it will make it meaningless. The worst is that it is precisely the last part which I am most certain of that will have to be mutilated. My dear it is so mad — really it is not a disgusting book — or even a very grey book. And I *know* the ending is the only possible ending" (*Letters* 25). In another letter addressed to Diana Athill, some thirty years later, Rhys wrote: "I remembered the last part of *Voyage in the Dark* written like that — time and place abolished, past and present the same — and I had been almost satisfied. Then everybody said it was 'confused and confusing-impossible to understand etc.' and I had to cut and rewrite it (I still think I was right, and they were wrong, tho' it was long ago)." (*Letters* 233).

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