

11 “Today I Have Left My Armor at Home”

Revisiting Jean Rhys’s Interwar Novels after the Ethical Turn

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Introduction

“I’d never get into the sacred circle. I was always outside, shivering” (Vreeland 221). Thus spoke Jean Rhys in an interview that was published the year of her death, in which she articulates her notion of England and Englishness from the position of an immigrant woman in modern urban culture and, very explicitly, through the rhetorics of exclusion and displacement that are ever-present in both her biography and her fiction. Most criticism on Jean Rhys has identified her female characters as vulnerable, dependent and victimised women doomed to self-destruction and has tended to read her work autobiographically. Within this critical interpretation that too often conflates life and fiction, the so-called “Rhys woman” has resisted full assimilation by a feminist literary canon that advocates empowerment and agency. This would explain why her narrative is one of excommunication and peripherality and that both her modernist and feminist credentials have been often questioned. Other critics, however, value her strangeness and state that it is precisely her ongoing alterity that enables her to occupy a central position in discussions of transnational and postcolonial literatures. Sue Thomas’s *The Worlding of Jean Rhys*, for instance, gives an accurate account of her homelessness, rootlessness and expatriate condition and suggests that, together with the canonical intertexts that inspire her novels, Rhys’s fiction has to be understood as part of other cultural discourses that challenge imperial certainties: the blurring of national identities, undomesticated femininity, moral panics about prostitution in 1920s England and ethnographic definitions of the white creole.

With these few exceptions, it is noticeable that, against the glamorous depiction of women writers in modernism – Benstock, Hanscombe and Smyers, Scott, Linett – Rhys and her heroines have often been left out of critical focus because they do not comfortably fit within the hegemonic feminist imaginary. Browsing through Jean Rhys’s bibliography, it is interesting to note the considerable number of titles that suggest a

commiserating attitude towards both the novelist and her female characters.¹ However, I contend that, seen from the perspective of the “ethical turn” – illustrated along this chapter by the contributions of Emmanuel Lévinas, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy – these notions of exclusion and alienation so prevalent in Rhys’s fictional and biographical texts can now be inserted within the critical paradigms of precariousness and abjection, as formulated by Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva respectively. I will thus devote the following sections to analyse Rhys’s interwar narrative through the prism of each of these paradigms.

Rhys on Precariousness

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler argues that certain categories of pain and suffering create an exclusionary matrix that dictates which experiences and victims deserve representation, visibility and sympathy, and, ultimately, who counts as human. She claims that it is the call of the “Other” that initiates subjectivity, or a subject’s existence as such in the social realm. Thus, “we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails” (130). According to Butler, it is precisely this precariousness – not only of such an existence, but also of its very representability – that defines the human, and the human feminine in the case of Rhys’s characters: “For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give” (Butler 144).

In my view, the precarious depiction of the Other underlies the complex humanity of Rhys’s cast in her interwar novels *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939).² These novels’ female protagonists are soon introduced in these very undecidable terms, which displaces them to the margins of social visibility: “Her career of ups and downs had rubbed most of the hall-marks off her, so that it was not easy to guess at her age, her nationality, or the social background to which she properly belonged” (*Leaving* 11); “What is she doing here, the stranger, the alien, the old one?... I quite agree too, quite. I have seen that in people’s eyes all my life. I am asking myself all the time, what the devil I am doing here” (*Morning* 46). Rhys’s nomads, expatriates and zombielike figures have been analysed from the prism of postcolonial criticism as strongly inspired by the novelist’s Caribbean background, but within this new critical paradigm, their undecidable and precarious nature might be explained as part of what Butler has termed “certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (xiv–xv).³

Julia Martin, the fragile protagonist of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, offers several instances of a detached and deluded self-perception by


resorting to the rhetorics of spectrality and ghostliness as the best means to convey her alienation:

She walked on through the fog into Tottenham Court Road. The houses and the people passing were withdrawn, nebulous; there was only a grey fog shot with yellow lights and its cold breath on her face, and the ghost of herself coming out of the fog to meet her.

(*Leaving* 49)

This feeling of strangeness is addressed by Julia Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), not as external, but as inherent to ourselves, because, far from being an isolated and unified whole, the self is understood as a complex entity containing both the familiar and the foreign. This is the basic premise for her ethics of the Other. In any formulation whatsoever – the ghost, the foreigner, the Other – this undecided figure is employed by both Rhys and Kristeva to interrogate such notions as “home” and “belonging” and displace him/her to the realm of the uncanny.

This transition from “ontology” – devoted to presence and substantial beings – to “hauntology” – focused on notions of absence and non-being – was addressed by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993) as part of a metaphysics of impersonality aimed at deconstructing essentialist and totalitarian thinking. In her use of these ghostly doubles, Rhys might also be working deconstructively, by suggesting that our notions of human autonomy and individuality are illusions and that the boundaries of our identity are completely blurred. When recalling the Modigliani painting in the studio of a woman artist for whom she used to pose, Julia evokes this confusion between human and animal, subject and object, the living and the dead:

A sort of proud body, like an utterly lovely proud animal. And a face like a mask, a long, dark face, and very big eyes. The eyes were blank, like a mask, but when you had looked at it a bit it was as if you were looking at a real woman, a live woman. 


(*Leaving* 40)

This confusion is accentuated when Julia herself identifies with the painting and thus declares: “I felt as if the woman in the picture were laughing at me and saying: I am more real than you. But at the same time I *am* you. I’m all that matters of you” (*Leaving* 41).

If, according to Butler, it is the failure of representability that defines the subjects’ precariousness and, paradoxically enough, their very humanity, Julia Martin’s uncertain and hybrid condition – in-between the human and the animal, the real and the painted, the natural and the artificial – makes her, like the replicants in Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner*, more human than humans. In a similar fashion, Sasha Jensen in *Good*

Morning, Midnight expresses this sense of unbelonging and nothingness when she declares, “I am empty of everything but the thin, frail trunks of the trees and the thin, frail ghosts in my room” (56). It seems that this feeling of emptiness, intrinsically elusive and resisting capture in meaningful formulations, can only be approached symbolically, through, for instance, similes and metaphors: “Yes, I am sad, sad as a circus lioness, sad as an eagle without wings, sad as a violin with only one string, and that one broken, sad as a woman who is growing old” (*Morning* 39). That Rhys fails to situate feminine subjectivity other than within a black hole of meaning and that her heroines are haunted by nothingness might justify her use of silences and ineffability, but in this case, these strategies also function as a negative form of protest: “She speaks to me in a language that is no language ... her old language of words that are not words” (Sasha in *Morning* 50).

It is worth remembering that the interwar period in which these two novels were written was not only a shell-shocked world, but also a world of new technologies of transport and communications and of a new capitalist urban culture often viewed as an alienating and hostile cityscape of unbelonging, exile, transience, ugliness and the anonymity of zombielike commuters, recalled by Ezra Pound in “A Station of the Metro” as those “[p]etals on a wet, black bough” (Almagro 154). This modernist geography is organised around what French anthropologist Marc Augé called “non-places” – those spaces of anonymity and human frailty where the individual is equal to everybody else yet doomed to solitude (4). In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Julia’s arrival in her hotel room awakens powerful memories of another room she once occupied:

At once all feeling of strangeness left her. She felt that her life had moved in a circle. Predestined, she had returned to her starting point in this little Bloomsbury bedroom that was so exactly like the little Bloomsbury bedroom she had left nearly ten years before.  (48)


Similarly, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha meditates on the way in which hotels and hotel rooms are indistinguishable from one another: “Walking back in the night. Back to the hotel. Always the same hotel. [...] You go up the stairs. Always the same stairs, always the same room...” (28).

Streets, hotels, train or metro stations, department stores and other in-between spaces of modernist cityscapes⁴ attest to this provisional quality, which resists their aligning to either the public or the private, and simultaneously invoke the sense of dislocation and liberation that Rhys herself and her characters might have experienced as Caribbean exiles in London, Paris or Brussels. Yet, the urban geography of these novels displays itself as the fittest scenario for this inauthentic, undecided

and nomadic subjectivity that, as Sasha Jensen admits, depends entirely on the acceptance of others:

My life, which seems so simple and monotonous, is really a complicated affair of cafés where they like me and cafés where they don't, streets that are friendly, streets that aren't, rooms where I might be happy, rooms where I shall never be, looking-glasses I look nice in, looking-glasses I don't, dresses that will be lucky, dresses that won't.
(*Morning* 40)

In the painful perception of her being, she adds, “on the wrong side of the street, on the hostile café” (40), the geography of the city becomes a geography of exclusion, which, as Michel de Certeau argues, is the result of a permanent conflict between power and resistance to power, but where the organised and hegemonic forces can be contested, subverted and dismantled by everyday practices that imply an alternative appropriation of urban space (xviii). De Certeau’s “pedestrian” epitomises a mode of urban subjectivity that renders “the city as text” in his or her reading and writing the metropolitan space through idiosyncratic detours that can be neither contained nor documented in official maps (93). Seen in this light, the sinuous and aimless rambling of the cityscape by Rhys’s cosmopolitan *flâneuses*⁵ can be interpreted as defying the masculine and mathematical symmetry of urban architecture – illustrated in, for instance, Le Corbusier’s designs – and is a means to inhabit, experience and ultimately resignify urban space that challenges hegemonic practices.⁶ The fact that these vulnerable subjects are brought into the public eye disrupts the hygienic quality of dominant representations, as they move from a relatively invisible, disembodied status of anonymous spectators to an embodied position that turns them into a spectacle for others. This brings to mind Judith Butler’s statement about the controversial and highly censored visualisation of the bodies and mourning of Arabs – basically Iraqis and Afghans – in post-9/11 American media:

These were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see, and they disrupted the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field. The images furnished a reality, but they also showed a reality that disrupted the hegemonic field of representation itself. Despite their graphic effectivity, the images pointed beyond themselves, to a life and to a precariousness that they could not show. 

(150)

According to the ethical pattern of interpellation and recognition, such undecidability suggested in Rhys’s ghostly figures (or non-subjects) can also be related to Emmanuel Lévinas’s notion of the “face” – also

invoked by Butler in *Precarious Life* (166–168); a non-representable image that seeks to incite an empathic response and that, in showing its own failure as an accurate representation, suggests the unknowability of this vulnerable and traumatised Other. Julia Martin's comatose and agonising mother is depicted in considerably dehumanised terms:

Julia stared at the bed and saw her mother's body – a huge, shapeless mass under the sheet and blankets – and her mother's face against the white-frilled pillow. Dark-skinned, with high cheek-bones and an aquiline nose. Her white hair, which was still long and thick, was combed into two plaits, which lay outside the sheet. One side of her face was dragged downwards. Her eyes were shut. She was breathing noisily, puffing out one corner of her mouth with each breath.

(*Leaving* 70)

Yet, in its abominable materiality, this inert, “shapeless mass” awakens Julia's sympathy when she admits that “she was still beautiful” (70). Like the Levinasian “face,” this vision works as an index of both the human and the non-human: human in its vulnerability, but non-human in its radical alterity. At other times, the “face” seems to have lost any traces of identity, while still preserving its plea for compassion, as in the description of the Martiniquaise given by the *peintre* in *Good Morning, Midnight*: “she had been crying so much that it was impossible to tell whether she was pretty or ugly or young or old” (79). To a great extent, these characters' vulnerability and their susceptibility to the vulnerability of others represent, in Butler's terms, the condition of interdependence that lays the foundations for reimagining – instead of destroying – the possibility of empathy and community: “This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed” (20).

Rhys on Abjection


The episode of Julia's encounter with her dying mother contains two of the major elements of the abject as formulated by Julia Kristeva: death and the maternal. Since abjection is the second critical paradigm from which this study aims to revisit Rhys's interwar novels, I will now focus on those corporeal subjectivities explicitly invoking a fragmentary and prosthetic identity and the painful experience of social and psychological inadequacy. For Kristeva, the abject is essentially a somatic and symbolic feeling of repulsion against a threat that one considers external – and will try to keep at a distance – but that may also menace us from the inside (*Powers* 135). By remaining out of the signifiable, the containable, the abject threatens the integrity of the ego border and

compromises the notion of a coherent identity. This anxiety is recurrent in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* and *Good Morning, Midnight*, where it is addressed by means of grotesque imagery associated with the body: aging female bodies that are constantly inscribed and reinscribed by clothes or make-up to adjust to the social standards of adequacy and ultimately to masquerade normative femininity; maternal and agonising bodies simultaneously provoking repulsion and empathy; mannequins and amputees that conflate the living and the dead, the natural and the artificial. In all their filthy materiality, these figures represent the state of abjection in which the body becomes porous, open and irregular, thus generating a realm of ambiguity and destabilisation. Seen in this light, Julia's mother's white hair "laying outside the sheet" or "the corner of her mouth puffing out noisily with each breath" (*Leaving* 70) epitomise the abject body that repeatedly violates its own contours and exceeds the limits of what is clean and proper. Very much in line with Kristeva's ideas about the *excreta*, Jean-Luc Nancy considers that "the body's exteriority and alterity include the unbearable: dejection, filth, the ignoble waste that is still part of it" (157). Just as Kristeva's abject is attributed not to "lack of cleanliness or health," but to "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers* 4), Nancy's notion of *corpus* also operates in the interstitial spaces, in the fissures, gaps and prostheses of the body itself and of the philosophy and other disciplines addressing the body, which, according to him, confronts us with the fundamental anxiety of its being simultaneously familiar and alien to us: "Body is certitude shattered and blown to bits. Nothing's more proper, nothing's more foreign to our old world" (5).⁷

An interesting example of this association between abjection and liminality invoked by both Kristeva and Nancy can be found in Julia, when she is taking Horsfield to her bedroom one night. As the couple is climbing the stairs in silence, he touches her hand and Julia screams several times in terror. While demanding to know who touched her, Julia explains, "I thought it was – someone dead ... catching hold of my hand" (*Leaving* 165). As O'Keefe states, "the hallucination is likely caused by Julia's attendance at her mother's funeral earlier in the day, during which she had to confront the corpse" (85). If, for Kristeva, the primary source of the abject reaction is death – because it traumatically reminds us of our own materiality and dissolves the boundaries between subject and object – then we can assume that Julia's encounter with her mother's corpse has left such a strong impression upon her that the traumatic event is precisely re-enacted in the liminal space of the stairs, which represents the boundary between the living and the dead, the outside and the inside, the public and the private. Her anxiety illustrates what Kristeva identified as the subject's terror of reincorporation into the maternal body and of the loss of a well-defined subjectivity (*Powers* 34). In her account of the subject's psychosexual development within

patriarchy, the mother is left behind and thus separated from “the clean and proper,” which is regulated and repressed by symbolic language. For Kristeva, the filthy, disordered or uncivilised occupies the same abject space as the left-behind mother, and it is precisely this uncanny return to the undesirable realm we once occupied that might explain Julia’s apprehensions.

Other instances of abject corporealities can be found in Rhys’s allusion to mannequins and inanimate bodies that elicited particular fascination in the interwar period, when huge numbers of injured soldiers acquired arms and legs prostheses, thus imposing new ways of thinking the body and its limits.⁸ Sasha “looked at a shop window full of artificial limbs” (*Morning* 11) and thought of “a woman who had got her breast lifted” (53); in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Uncle Griffiths “had been informed that the best pickpockets wore false arms which they kept ostentatiously over their chests while the real ones did the job” (95). Both texts conjure up an artificial and fragmentary identity that starts with the blurring of the bodily contours. Inspired by his own experience as a heart transplant recipient, Jean-Luc Nancy illustrates this anthropotechnical process with prostheses, implants and grafts – which he considers as instances of physiological and philosophical “intruders” (161–170) and interprets this conflation of the mechanical and the subjective as the unavoidable condition of our new corporeality. In a similar light, Sasha’s contemplation of mannequins questions her very notions of what is human and what is not, and the entire episode stands as an ironic comment on the objectification of women in capitalist society:


I would feel as if I were drugged, sitting there, watching those damned dolls, thinking what a success they would have made of their lives if they had been women. Satin skin, silk hair, velvet eyes, sawdust heart –all complete. 

(*Morning* 16)

It is worth pointing out that, despite their ghostly dimension, Rhys’s female bodies are ongoing processes of self-construction that contest their passive positioning in the Cartesian binary system. In gaining or losing weight, in changing hair colour or clothing, in smoking and drinking too much or eating too little, the heroines transform their anatomies into various images, shapes and meanings. Just as the fragmentary style of her narrative has been interpreted as a symptom of the psychological inadequacy of her characters (Linett 2005), the protean nature of their corporealities both reveal and conceal aspects of a traumatised consciousness by, for instance, recurrent episodes of sexual violence or, in the case of Sasha, by the tragic death of her baby.⁹

Seen in this light, make-up is also indicative of a prosthetic identity, and the two novels’ narrators stress the frequency of its use or the

exaggerated and distorted image that results from its incorrect application. While the notion of the “mask” has been significantly addressed in postcolonial literature and criticism – notably by Franz Fanon – to explain the idea of mimicry in colonial contexts, it can also be adopted by Gender Studies to define femininity as artifice, thus implying the possibility of an alienated and performative personality – one that is evoked in very similar terms in these two novels: “She made herself elaborately and carefully; yet it was clear that what she was doing had longed ceased to be a labour of love and had become partly a mechanical process, partly a substitute for the mask she would have liked to wear” (*Leaving* 11); “Besides, it isn’t my face this tortured and tormented mask. I can take it off whenever I like and hang it up on a nail” (*Morning* 37). As Julia’s and Sasha’s looks become more and more grotesque and abject, Rhys seems to offer an ironic critique of patriarchal standards of female beauty. These heroines, who depend on sexual attractiveness to survive, display their femininity as masquerade in a patriarchal context in which female aging is perceived as an index of exclusion and a precarious existence:

She looked older and less pretty than she had done in Paris. Her mouth and the lids of her eyes drooped wearily. A small blue vein under her right eye was swollen. There was something in a background, say what you like. The suggestion of age and weariness in her face fascinated Mr. Horsfield. It was curious to speculate about the life of a woman like that and to wonder what she appeared to herself to be – when she looked in the glass, for instance. Because, of course, she must have some pathetic illusions about herself or she would not be able to go on living. Did she still see herself young and slim, capable of anything, believing that, though everyone around her grew older, she – by some miracle – remained the same? Or perhaps she was just heavily indifferent... 

(*Leaving* 65–66)

It is significant that most of the passages describing Julia are narrated entirely from the perspective of Horsfield and that it is his male gaze that objectifies and ultimately “abjectifies” Julia. Although, at the end of the novel, Horsfield looks at Julia with sympathetic eyes and sees her “not as a representative of the insulted and injured, but as a solid human being” (122), in his judgmental attitude he echoes the harsh realities of the 1930s: “Once you started letting the instinct of pity degenerate from the general to the particular, life became completely impossible” (34).

At the same time, the narrator mocks this type of thinking with such a comment, exactly because, as Alan Badiou states, one cannot care about the general if one does not take heed of the particular, and, in the field of ethics, we are always moved by an individual case that appeals

to our sympathy – remember how Julia is moved by the view of her agonising mother and thinks “she was still beautiful” (70). Recently revisited by the ideologists of the ethical turn, Alain Badiou contends that all humanity is rooted in identification with an Other, and as a consequence of that, there is no ethics in general or abstract terms, but an ethics that draws its maxims from the specific situation of a given individual. In a similar vein, Mr. Mackenzie regards Julia Martin in terms that one could relate to another philosopher of the Ethical Turn, Giorgio Agamben, and his notion of “bare life” – that in which certain subjects are exposed to the extent of losing defences and rights and for whom the claims made on behalf of our universal humanity are meaningless, simply because they are left outside and are made almost perversely complicit with their own destruction (133). My contention is that, when Sasha Jensen admits “[t]oday I have left my armor at home” (*Morning* 42) or when Julia Martin’s lover feels repulsed by her fragility – “Almost he was forced to believe that she was a female without the instinct of self-preservation ... He saw that the final stage of her descent in the social scale was inevitable, and not far off” (*Leaving* 20–21) – Rhys constitutes them as non-persons, or socially dead persons, thus producing instances of “bare life” presided over by different patterns of vulnerability – starvation, alcoholism, exile, prostitution, homelessness – and by their very exposure to the limits of (in)humanity. This vulnerability is often corporeally inscribed, because, after all, as Jean-Luc Nancy admits, “there is nothing more [bodily] signified/signifying than class, and suffering” (111); and this seems to be the case of Rhys’s deprived characters, whose bodies, in showing this precarity, are also offering different forms of resistance.

Conclusion

Although this exposure to precarious and abject conditions of life has been interpreted as part of the passive and hopeless attitude in which the critical reception has often entrapped the novelist and her heroines, I argue that the fact that these vulnerable subjects – ever-insistent figures demanding their access to the realm of the symbolic – are brought to the public eye implies a visibility that trespasses the *cordon sanitaire* of dominant representations. When Sasha suddenly cries “for the old woman with the bald head, for all the sadness of this damned world, for all the fools and all the defeated” (*Morning* 25) or when Julia dances with a skeleton-like male figure – in whom the threshold between humanity and inhumanity is again put to the test – their gestures can be interpreted as a move from abjection to commiseration. It is significant that the “bald-headed woman” and the “skeleton-like man” are primarily depicted as bodies, explicit instances of Nancy’s corporeal alterity: “*An other is a body because only a body is an other*. It has this nose, that

skin color, this texture, that size, this fold, tightness ... the inexhaustible *corpus* of a body’s features” (31).


After all, though solipsistic and self-absorbed, Rhys’s heroines – characterised by their constant involvement, gratuitous disinterest and disposition to self-expenditure (Gibson 169) – imply a drive towards commonality that cannot be overlooked, for example, in their claim that their suffering is everybody else’s suffering: “She was crying now because she remembered that her life had been a long succession of humiliations and mistakes and ridiculous efforts. Everybody’s life was like that” (*Leaving* 94). Following Kristeva, it could be suggested that Rhys’s characters obliterate their feeling of foreignness when they acknowledge that we are all strangers to ourselves and to others, and therefore we are joined by a shared solidarity. Just as their tragic exclusion has to be understood as being illustrative of other cultural discourses that challenge imperial certainties, I contend that Rhys’s fiction needs to be revised from the prism of Levinasian ethics – one that, as Gibson argues, “collapses identity into *sensibility*” (168) – because the uncertain, undecided and almost spectral subjectivity that she depicts in her novels is a subjectivity that ultimately depends on the “affect” of/by others.

The problematic representation of Rhys’s characters – usually manifested in their ghostly and shape-shifting identities and formulated through the rhetorics of the precarious and the abject – can be explicitly observed at the end of *After Leaving Mr. McKenzie*: “The street was cool and full of grey shadows. Lights were beginning to come out in the cafés. It was the hour between dog and wolf, as they say” (138). When confronted with this closing metamorphosis, we might conclude that the meek “dog” must, in the end, have given way to the aggressive and devouring figure of the “wolf,” if we thus understand this hybrid figure as an alternative to the normative and seemingly passive femininity advocated for in the interwar years as part of a reactionary campaign intended to restore the doctrine of the separate spheres that pre-war feminism had fought so intensely against. At the end of *Good Morning Modnight*, Sasha’s apocalyptic vision – “an enormous machine, made of white steel with numerous arms ...an eye, the eyelashes stiff with mascara ... But the grey sky, which is the background, terrifies me... And the arms wave to an accompaniment of music and of song like this: “Hotcha – hotcha – hotcha” (156) – culminates this exhibition of dehumanised, fragmented and prosthetic bodies and emphasises the aforementioned anxiety of the interwar period under the growing threat of Fascism.

As I conclude this chapter, I realise that both novels’ endings highlight this hybrid condition that makes representation – and by extension, our very notions of humanity – collapse. In announcing that “Venus is dead; Apollo is dead; even Jesus is dead” (156), Sasha Jensen might be anticipating Donna Haraway’s new humanity through the cyber-feminist predicament: “I’d rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (181). In

counterposing the abject – the cyborg being another figure of abjection – against the Symbolic – which represents the articulate social order – Jean Rhys might be showing the individual’s struggle against social alienation and, through this process, pushing the boundaries of moral, political and gender identities to unexplored territories.

Notes

- 1 “Of Heroines and Victims: Jean Rhys and Jane Eyre” (Porter); “Without a Dog’s Chance” (Naipaul); “Dark Smiles, Devilish Saints” (Updike); *Jean Rhys at “World’s End”: Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile* (Emery); *The Blue Hour: A Life of Jean Rhys* (Pizzichini); “Jean Rhys: Prostitution, Alcoholism and the Mad Woman in the Attic” (McDowell); and “Vagabunda y cautiva en París: Paisaje urbano de la vulnerabilidad femenina en las novelas de entreguerras de Jean Rhys” (Cortés Vieco).
- 2 Henceforth *ALMM* and *GMM* respectively. 
- 3 Several critics of Rhys’s work have related her fictional heroines to the figure of the zombie, as this creature epitomises the precariousness of identity, the alienation from former selves and the sense of displacement experienced by both the author and her characters (Druxes, Otto, Drake, Loe).
- 4 They are notably delved into in Thacker and Brooker and Thacker.
- 5 For a detailed analysis of the *flâneuse* in the fiction of Jean Rhys, see chapter two in Catherine Mintler.
- 6 Through her emphasis on ghostly, alienated and undecidable figures, Jean Rhys might be anticipating Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of the *stranger* as an unplaceable being outside space and time, who thus threatens the social order and reveals the fragility of those identities that modernity created and claimed to “fully exist and make a difference” (68).
- 7 In his hermeneutics of alterity (*Corpus*), Jean-Luc Nancy provides an interesting account of the body as the locus of experimentation, fragmentariness and metamorphosis, in a context where we can no longer conceive of a unified and coherent whole separated from and subordinated to the mind or soul, but where we have to start thinking about embodied experiences from where to address the problem of otherness and the reconfiguration of subjectivity.
- 8 In “Ecce Homo Prostheticus,” Mia Fineman explains how, during the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), “thousands of mutilated survivors of the war were routinely supplied with mass-produced mechanical limbs, retrained and re-enlisted in the service of an ever expanding industrial infrastructure” (88). Surely, amputation, prostheses and this new type of human being derived from the extraordinary development of these assistive technologies provided a rich ground for metaphor and analysis of bodies and subjectivities that was prolifically cultivated by interwar writers.
- 9 Sasha recalls the tragic episode of her baby’s death in terms of bodily erasure and denial: “And five weeks afterwards there I am, with not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease. And there he is, lying with a ticket tied round his wrist because he died in a hospital. And there I am looking down at him, without one line, one wrinkle, without one crease” (52). In a sinister twist to the motif of the virginal conception and birth of Jesus Christ, her lugubrious repetition – “not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease” – suggests the regret that she has no physical evidence of her having given birth to a son, just as she has no memories of her fondling and cradling him.

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