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### **Abstract**

Myth, as I use it in this context, implies a force in the universe that is untamed and untamable, but which subsists on paradox. Myth teaches us that sovereign gods and sovereign institutions are partial, partial in the sense that they are biased, but when they begin to penetrate their biases, they also begin to transform their fear of the other, of others, of other parts, in a larger complex of wholeness. In this medium of transformation, the unconscious psyche is in dialogue --- in rich marvellous dialogue - with the conscious mind. And out of this arises the living ongoing momentum of the imaginative arts.

# Carnival of Psyche: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Myth, as I use it in this context, implies a force in the universe that is untamed and untamable, but which subsists on paradox. Myth teaches us that sovereign gods and sovereign institutions are partial, partial in the sense that they are biased, but when they begin to penetrate their biases, they also begin to transform their fear of the other, of others, of other parts, in a larger complex of wholeness. In this medium of transformation, the unconscious psyche is in dialogue -- in rich marvellous dialogue -- with the conscious mind. And out of this arises the living ongoing momentum of the imaginative arts.

Now, the basic thrust of what I have to say in this talk has to do with myths that have secreted themselves in certain works of the imagination -- I shall confine myself on this occasion to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*<sup>1</sup> -- and of which the writers themselves are or were unaware. But before moving into that territory I think I should make a distinction. It is this: the imaginative artist who makes *deliberate* use of myth may in no way be inferior to the writer or painter or sculptor or composer in whose work one may find an *intuitive* body (or intuitive bodies) of myth.

Writers as varied as James Joyce, St John Perse, Miguel Asturias, David Jones, T.S. Eliot, Camara Laye, Ralph Ellison, Djuna Barnes, D.H. Lawrence, Pablo Neruda, Kathleen Raine -- to give outstanding examples -- have employed myth with deliberation, but in order to ask new questions, so to speak, of untamable reality. Yet even here -- however self-conscious the equilibrium between artist and myth -- unconscious variables secrete themselves in the live tapestry of word and image whose enigmatic manifestation lies in the future.

I find myself in agreement with critics and historians of the arts -- such as Anton Ehrenzweig, Herbert Read, William James -- who point to variables of unconscious motivation in the arts of which generations become differently aware, consciously and partially aware, with the

passage of time. Compositions of music, painting, fiction of a certain kind, sculpture, poetry, will address us differently with the passage of time because of unconscious variables of myth that leave apparent gaps, angularities, turbulences, opacities, in the live tapestry in which they function. Those gaps come to be curiously filled, opacities dazzle or lighten, angularities and turbulences become rich and intriguing, as if the life of works of art mutates in depth with changed perceptions and responses of later decades and generations.

Thus even the self-conscious usage of myth by individual imaginations involves a descent into unconscious variables whose manifestation affects the future. One of the novels I am teaching is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and you will find there that the Cyclopean giant Polyphemus possesses several hidden and manifest partial signatures. In one partial signature invisible man wears the Cyclopean mask himself in the corrupt boxing ring of history; on another occasion, the Cyclopean giant appears as a doctor in a hospital with a burning eye in his forehead with which he peers into the strange coffin in which Ellison's nameless black Odysseus lies. (It is fitting Homeric as well as Anancy paradox that Odysseus trails the shadow of no one or nobody with which to confuse the Cyclops, the shadow of no name or namelessness with which to confound the Cyclops.) Another significant partial signature of dread Cyclops is written into 'communist' Brother Jack in Harlem politics. New questions are being asked by *Invisible Man* of Homeric myth to mirror the hypocrisies and brutalities of feud in the sports — or boxing — arena, the sinister brain operations in medical theatre, the castrations of psyche in politics of ideology.

What is intriguing about *intuitive* usage of myth — and this is the primary substance of this talk — is that the artist may not perceive in his or her own work an activity or concentration which is other than daylight consciousness and which runs into the apparently unconscious past.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* varies the rainbow arc between cultures in profoundly intuitive spirit. To appreciate that variation we need to recall the bridge between sky and earth that is implicit in the rainbow arc from Central to South America in Quetzalcoatl (snake and bird) and Yurokon (Quetzalcoatl's Carib cousin). Then we need to revise that arc or bridge into a rather different compression of features. The foodbearing tree of the world, in Arawak and Macusi legends, reaches to heaven across forgotten ages, but suddenly we become aware of it as creation myth rooted in catastrophe. The tree is fired by the Caribs at a time of war when the Arawaks seek refuge in its branches. The fire rages and drives

the Arawaks up into space until they are themselves burnt and converted into sparks which continue to rise into the sky to become the Pleiades.

Let us note, firstly, the fire-motif in the creation myth, secondly, the ground of war and catastrophe in which the foodbearing tree is rooted, thirdly, the constellation of the Arawaks in 'the sky of fiction' (if I may so put it). All these features are *intuitively* woven into the tapestry of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. There is the persistent fire-motif that runs through the entire fabric of the novel. There are the legacies of slavery and catastrophe in the soil of the Caribbean which leave such deep scars on Antoinette and her relations. There is the re-dress of mad Bertha into the new burning constellation of Antoinette in the sky of fiction. Antoinette turns round and sees 'the sky — the tree of life in flames'. 'It was red and all my life was in it' (p. 155).

Mad Bertha of *Jane Eyre* is symbolically, if not literally, widowed by a husband to all intents and purposes dead and vanished. His presence is the presence of ornament and Jean Rhys straitjackets his 'death' into 'stone' (p. 94) in Antoinette's confession to her black Haitian nurse Christophine, as events begin to move towards their separation — Christophine is soon to be banished from Rochester's West Indian household as an evil witch or obeah woman — Antoinette is soon to live the 'lie' of a voyage from the West Indies and the setting up of home in England where she is deemed mad by Rochester and locked away in Thornfield Hall. Antoinette tells Christophine — 'as she pleads with her to mix a love potion to bring Rochester back to her bed — 'I hear him every night walking up and down the veranda. Up and down. When he passes my door he says, »Goodnight, Bertha.« He never calls me Antoinette now. And I dream ... *Then I beat my fist on a stone* ... Going away to Martinique or England or anywhere else, that is the lie' (pp. 93-4, italics mine).

The stone-masked Rochester is an ambiguous yet shrewd alteration by Jean Rhys of the stature — the almost Gothic stature — of Charlotte Brontë's creation. Carnival stone or death-in-life mask expressly mourns a hunger for the dance of life endangered in hunter and hunted, seen and perceived with such intensity by Antoinette *alone in all the world*, so to speak, that she begins to redeem the solitary plague of madness in herself which — in Jean Rhys's ambiguous novel — is nothing but the magic of faith in the subsistence of fiery love to redeem the terrors of the dance when the dance is conscripted into feud and war. The fire-of-the-war-dance-motif in the foodbearing tree casts its shadow of anguish and pain into Antoinette's plea to Christophine for a desperate love-potion to

bring the enemy (yet lover) in Rochester to heel.

Rochester's stone-mask appears to remain pitiless but it is now *psychically* affected by the creature he hunts into madness, the creature to whom he 'dies' after the honeymoon rape she endures. His symbolic conquest of her, yet 'death', his Anglo-Saxon stoicism, is now all at once altered by her uncompromising madness and perception of *his* needs in *hers*. Nothing — neither duty nor respectability nor the observance of codes of behaviour so formidably constructed into moral imperative in *Jane Eyre* — possesses quite the tone of necessity — that runs deeper than appearance and logic — with which Jean Rhys imbues Antoinette, and in so doing makes her madness essentially human, and Rochester's hard-hearted sanity a psychical debt to her inimitable passion that borders on precarious divinity. Hard-hearted sanity it is in him because it remains unconscious of the debt he owes to her that is infinitely greater than the rich dowry, in money terms, she brings to him.

It is this altered substance of indebtedness that leads one to perceive the *psychical and immaterial* re-marriage of Rochester and re-dressed Bertha into Antoinette in the 'sky of fiction'. In saying that it is clear that one cannot avoid the ambiguities that pull at that constellation and suppress it still into the sphere of symbolic widowhood on which we have already commented. These ambiguities are profound and need to be examined in order to keep ourselves subtly attuned to an arbitrating conscience between symbolic widowhood (entrenched in Antoinette's West Indian fortune that leaves her husband sated and deprived) and psychical honeymoon (woven into an ecstasy of hunger one cannot buy or sell).

I have spoken of Rochester's indebtedness to Antoinette but she too is indebted to shadowy, almost nameless, myths within the inarticulate heterogeneity of the Caribbean. May I pause for a moment to explain, in some degree, what I mean by 'inarticulate'. There is no short-cut into the evolution of new or original novel-form susceptible to, immersed in, the heterogeneity of the modern world. If we genuinely accept the view of variables of unconsciousness a handful of eminent thinkers has advanced, it will assist us, I think, to realize that the evolution of complex imagery secretes such variables of or from necessity, and that that secretion may sustain a wealth of beauty when it is perceived in its 'true' light by different eyes in other places or by other generations. That is the price of originality. Mere academic lip-service to creativity is useless whatever its militancy or piety or apparent clarity. Jean Rhys's significance, in 'inarticulate' Caribbean complex, lies in the immaterial, subtly

visible, pressure to alter the rock-fast nineteenth-century convention Rochester symbolizes. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written in nineteenth-century realist convention and as a consequence the subtle, ambiguous, poignant, disruptions of homogeneous cultural model may be misunderstood or misconceived as the logic of pathos, as a psychology of pathos, whereas their significance, as dialogue with untamable creation myth, is much more profound in their potential bearing on the evolution or original Caribbean or South American novel form.

We have already looked at the Arawak/Macusi foodbearing tree in which is secreted both physical need or hunger and a hunger for creation or renewed visions of creation. We need also to remember Jean Rhys's Anglo-Saxon yet Caribbean antecedents (she was born of a Welsh father and a white *creole* mother in the West Indies). Her imaginative insights are 'white' and 'black' in tone in their appeal to the catholicity of West Indians in whom are combined primitive religions — such as Haitian vodun myth (or obeah) — and fertile Christianity. Obeah is a pejorative term but it reflects significantly a state of mind or embarrassment in both black and white West Indians, a conviction of necessary magic, necessary hell-fire or purgatory through which to re-enter 'lost' origins, 'lost' heavens, 'lost' divinity.

It is Christophine, in particular, Antoinette's Haitian nurse, who symbolizes the forbidden obeah strain in Jean Rhys's imagination. It is she (Christophine) who mixes the love-potion for Rochester which Antoinette cries for, when Rochester finds himself torn by rumours of madness in her family and steels himself (or relapses into his ingrained Protestant rationality and fear of heretical ecstasy) to 'widow' or abandon her like a dead man, however formally alive, as he paces the verandah.

In strict Catholic context (in contradistinction to alchemy and catholicity of origins) we need to glance at the convent in which Antoinette spent an impressionable period after her home was set on fire by angry ex-slaves, a fire that precipitated a massive nervous breakdown in her mother Annette (also known as Bertha) and occasioned the death of Pierre, the youngest member of the family. It is here, in the convent, that we begin to perceive the depth of subversion or ecstatic hunger which begins to envelop Antoinette, to prepare her, so to speak, to become the bride of a spiritual obeah bull. (It may be intuitive design but no accident, I believe, that during the physical and doomed honeymoon between rock-fast Rochester and subversive Antoinette, before he abandons her and widows her on the marriage-bed, he is given a cup of 'bull's blood' by Christophine (p. 71) as a token of his conversion

yet retreat into 'stone' or 'relic' of ecstasy. Thus one of the portents of *psychical* alteration or stone-mask or death-mask is the obeah bull Rochester unconsciously wears or consumes. All this is so subtly woven into the tapestry of the fiction, it is never explicit, never stated, but lurks, so to speak, between the images in the alchemy of the word.)

It is in the convent that Antoinette is drawn into contemplation of the elusive life of precarious divinity in 'relics' (p. 45) as if in anticipation of the 'relic' of 'stone' Rochester wears after his symbolic death, a relic that undergoes *immaterial* re-animation in the 'sky of fiction' above 'the tree of life in flames' (p. 155).

The 'tree of life' appears in the convent and bears 'a rose from the garden of my Spouse' (p. 45). It is a rose saturated with indebtedness to the black soil of dreams in which Antoinette seeks 'to hold up (her) dress, it trails in the dirt, my beautiful dress' (p. 50). The dream continues:

We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden — I stumble over my dress and cannot get up. I touch a tree and my arms hold on to it. 'Here, here.' But I think I will not go any further. The tree sways and jerks as if it is trying to throw me off. Still I cling and the seconds pass and each one is a thousand years. 'Here, in here', a strange voice said, and the tree stopped swaying and jerking. (p. 50)

Antoinette's indebtedness to 'rose of my Spouse' and to 'soil of dreams' is a preparation for a dialogue with the 'other' in the garden, the strange dark terrifying voice she never forgets within her and without her. It is a voice that celebrates and mourns her coming betrothal and marriage. For it is less Rochester and more symbolically herself who drinks 'the cup of bull's blood' which Christophine gives to her insensible bridegroom. It is a voice that pushes her beyond the walls of convent or school in which she shelters. In the darkness of that voice the nuns in the school have 'cheerful faces' she resents (p. 50). They do not understand her magical 'spouse'. They do not perceive a richer catholicity beneath the formal Catholic education they dispense. Their religion — however evocative in its relics — has become respectable ritual, undemanding ornament, as undemanding or frozen in posture as the Greek or Roman goddess of the milky way from whose breasts the white fluid spurts across the sky into the calloused mouth of a consumer age.

Whereas the 'bull's blood' of art and religion is imagistic confession of cross-cultural labyrinth in which the transformation of apparently incorrigible bias in all mankind tests and challenges the imagination beyond ideal formula. It is the stigma of complex earthiness and exile from convention. It is raised with anguish into the stars. The incompati-

bility of consumer callouses and bull's blood holds out madness (if one is enmeshed in a religion of sensuality and mindless academic spirituality) or alternatively it holds out a genuine spiritual sensation that one needs to lose one's ritual soul to find life, and that this means prayer of such depth it is directed to god, however masked by innumerable or magical relics; Antoinette's madness is no less than a hidden surrender of life, a loss of soul to find soul, disrupted ritual callous, disrupted voice of convention in order to find (or begin to find) the voice in the foodbearing tree from the 'spouse' of otherness.

These considerations are never explicitly stated in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Their authenticity lies, I find, in a measure of confused force and anguish that drives her to say to one of the nuns before she leaves the convent: 'I dreamed I was in Hell.' The nun replies: 'That dream is evil. Put it from your mind — never think of it again' (p. 51).

But she was to dream and think of it again and again. And the nun's incomprehension is woven into Bertha's shroud and damnation. It was Jean Rhys's passion to illumine by fire Antoinette's essential humanity and precarious divinity.

I would like to say a brief word, before closing, about the implications that reside, I believe, at the heart of a revised novel-form genuinely susceptible to an evolution of images from within the heterogeneous womb of space in the modern world.

The emphasis in traditional comedy of manners novel sprung from homogeneous cultural models is *structuralist* in tone. Structuralist thinkers have, in various ways, stressed the deception which cultures play on themselves in articulating static gestalt that they cling to as total model. It becomes necessary therefore — in those who become aware of institutional partiality — to descend beneath the 'surface mind' of a culture into other *structures* that alter emphases upon vague and elusive formations suppressed by static gestalt institution. What is striking about such ego-corrective descent — however brilliant in its analysis of background and altered foreground features — is its commitment still to *structure* though much less static, much more demanding in depth, than surface mind gestalt; and because of this I find myself *not convinced* that descending structure (or for that matter ascending *structure*) is the profoundly revisionary strategy of perception it seems. Except that a paradox ingrains itself into descending structure. That paradox is the arousal of 'archaic' elements in depth which are nevertheless attuned to a sensation of comprehension of different times (past, present and future)

built into mobile structures beneath the surface mind. The paradox, however, tends to be stultified — I must emphasize — by the conviction of determined structure or system still which — in its very nature — would imply that one is left with no philosophical alternative but to build upon expectations of sovereign and ruling model in the heights or in the depths. An addiction to absolute power-politics is unsurprising in this philosophical context. Equally unsurprising, in a structuralist world society, is the escalation of violence from ego-fixated, fascist, left wing and right wing parties, and the immense danger to democracies whose consumer-orientation, geared by and large to the lowest common denominator in the market-place, makes them vulnerable prey in time of economic crisis.

What is less clear, I think, in all this, is the advance that nihilism makes in the West and in the so-called Third World; nihilism subsists on the *structuralization of feud* or incorrigible bias at the heart of existence.

What we can salvage from structuralism at its best, I think, is the descent it encourages the serious arts to make into 'inarticulate' layers of community beneath static systems whose 'articulacy' is biased. The 'inarticulate' layers may be equated with variables of the unconscious — as I have already implied — in which myth is untamable force or *unstructured* mediation between partial systems high and low. This is a view, I must confess, that runs counter to the tide of structuralism which ranges from Freudians to Levi-Straussians. Yet it (I mean unstructured mediation or untamable force) may be consistent with recent discoveries in science — enigmatic black hole, ungraspable neutron, quark etc. etc. — in which the term 'force' seems closer to reality, to ungraspable quantum leap, than 'structured and sovereign model'.

The distinction is a far-reaching one, to put it mildly. For within a conception of unstructured force that mediates ceaselessly, ungraspably, between inevitably biased or partial systems (wherever these occur in layers of cultural space) variables of the unconscious are less rooted in gaps, opacities etc., and more in the mysterious arbitration of untamable cosmos between institutions, man-made and nature-made, whose hubris of total model cannot be maintained in the light of truth.

Partial institutions or models may learn to yield to creative disruption and to evolutions of capacity that transform catastrophe or they may collapse into the chaos of blind regeneration and impose a fearful price upon those who dwell insensibly in their depths.

It seems clear to me that a narrative fiction which is immersed in these challenges begins, of necessity, to alter the 'commonsense realism' of the

novel in a world where the humanities are losing a complex faith in imaginative truth.

#### NOTES

- 1 . Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, first published 1966. All page references are to the Penguin edition and given in the text.