When the Pervert Meets the Hysteric: Jean Rhys’s Black Exercise Book

In 1938, Jean Rhys interrupted her composition of *Good Morning, Midnight* to write out an account of a “mental seduction” by a family friend that had occurred when she was 14. Calling the seduction “the thing that formed me that made me as I am” (cited in Thomas 27), Rhys describes the memory as intrusive and compulsive, noting that it was a great relief to set the novel aside and write it out. Rhys notes further that she has been drinking heavily, and that *Good Morning, Midnight* had taken on a compulsive life of its own, with words and sentences echoing over and over again in her head. To her surprise, she awoke one day to find that the novel had vanished out of her mind; instead, it was if she were back in Dominica, reliving her childhood. Rhys began to write out her memories, finding it a relief not to have to torture her material into the form of a novel and finding also that she didn’t need to drink as much. Although Rhys claims that she wrote the account for one, possibly two reasons, she never specifies what those reasons are. It becomes clear, however, that whatever reasons Rhys had in mind, her account of this mental seduction is an attempt to understand the compulsive and repetitious nature of what she termed her “doom,” a “motif of pain” that has pervaded her life and from which she cannot escape. The resulting narrative is a fascinating, firsthand account of childhood sexual trauma in 1905 and its subsequent far-reaching effects upon one woman’s life, as if Dora stepped out of the pages of a male-authored case history to claim her status as subject and her story as her own. Indeed, Rhys consciously and deliberately positions her narrative against that of an unnamed “gent”—almost certainly Freud—whose book on psychoanalysis she leafs through at Sylvia Beach’s bookstore in Paris. Yet Rhys’s foregrounding of the Mr. Howard narrative in the Black
Exercise Book has obscured another aspect of Rhys’s “doom,” the brutal punishment she endured at the hands of her mother and the way in which that punishment facilitated Rhys’s conviction that “pain humiliation submission yes that is for me” (cited in Thomas 27). Mr. Howard’s “mental seduction” of Rhys becomes, then, a moment of crystallization and recognition, one that draws together and simultaneously eroticizes diverse strands of her experience—her mother’s violence, her Catholic education, the racial tensions and inequities in Dominica—forming in Rhys the “kink” (her term) that would impel her to develop a distinctly masochistic aesthetic in her fiction.

Rhys’s account is particularly interesting given its close correspondence to the phenomenon contemporary researchers have named “recovered memory,” the reemergence of memories of childhood sexual abuse after years of dissociative amnesia. Yet, as if anticipating the skepticism of those who question the reliability of such memories, Rhys herself stresses the malleability of her memory. She repeatedly draws attention to her forgetting, noting of the seduction, “What happened was that I forgot it!? It went out of my memory like a stone” (cited in Angier 29; in the notebook the exclamation point and question mark are superimposed upon one another). Similarly, in a passage of her autobiography that seems to refer obliquely to these experiences, Rhys makes the following curious remark: “I shut away at the back of my mind any sexual experiences, for of course some occurred, not knowing that this would cause me to remember them in detail all the rest of my life. I became very good at blotting things out, refusing to think about them” (SP 50). At other times Rhys notes her capacity for fugue or trance states when under duress. Hence when abandoned by her first lover, Rhys describes “a complete blank” in which she apparently took a taxi ride, gave away his gift of a Christmas tree, and brought home a full bottle of gin (SP 100–101). During the crisis period following her third husband’s arrest, Rhys writes a friend that she is experiencing “one of my ‘trance’ days . . . the unreal feeling which is I suppose kindly Nature’s way when complete catastrophe arrives. Anodyne has always been my favourite word” (LJR 71).

These passages demonstrate Rhys’s prescient understanding of the way in which the mind can split off or dissociate during times of trauma or extreme stress. In fact, her description of blotting out the “mental seduction” by refusing to think about it—a process which she claims simultaneously and paradoxically preserves the events in question—anticipates contemporary findings on the mechanisms by which people actively inhibit memory retrieval. As Martin A. Conway notes,