

FICTIONS OF THE SELF: STUDIES IN FEMALE MODERNISM:

JEAN RHYS, GERTRUDE STEIN AND DJUNA BARNES

by

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## Abstract

This thesis considers elements of autobiography and autobiographical fiction in the writings of three female Modernists: Jean Rhys, Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes. In chapter 1, after drawing distinctions between male and female autobiographical writing, I discuss key male autobiographical fictions of the Modernist period by D.H. Lawrence, Marcel Proust and James Joyce, and their debt to the nineteenth century literary forms of the Bildungsroman and the Künstlerroman. I relate these texts to key European writers, Andre Gide and Colette, and to works by women based on two separate female Modernist aesthetics: first, the school of "lyrical transcendence"--Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf--in whose works the self as literary subject dissolves into a renunciatory "female impressionism;" the second group--Rhys, Stein and Barnes--who as late-modernists, offer radically "objectified" self-portraits in fiction which act as critiques and revisions of both male and female Modernist fiction of earlier decades.

In chapter 2, I discuss Jean Rhys' objectification of female self-consciousness through her analysis of alienation in two different settings: the Caribbean and the cities of Europe. As an outsider in both situations, Rhys presents an unorthodox counter-vision. In her fictions of the 1930's, she deliberately revises earlier Modernist representations,

by both male and female writers, of female self-consciousness. In the process, she offers a simultaneous critique of both social and literary conventions.

In chapter 3, I consider Gertrude Stein's career-long experiments with the rendering of consciousness in a variety of literary forms, noting her growing concern throughout the 1920's and 1930's with the role of autobiography in writing. In a close reading of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, I examine Stein's parody and "deconstruction" of the autobiographical form and the Modernist conception of the self based on memory, association and desire. Her witty attack on the conventions of narrative produces a new kind of fictional self-portraiture, drawing heavily on the visual arts to create new prose forms as well as to dismantle old ones.

Chapter 4 focusses on Djuna Barnes' metaphorical representations of the self in prose fiction, which re-interpret the Modernist notion of the self, by means of an androgynous fictional poetics. In her American and European fictions she extends the notion of the work of art as a formal, self-referential and self-contained "world" by subverting it with the use of a late-modern, "high camp" imagery to create new types of narrative structure.

These women's major works, appearing in the 1930's, mark a second wave of Modernism, which revises and in certain ways subverts the first. Hence, these are studies in "late Modernism" and in my conclusion I will consider the

distinguishing features of this transitional period, the 1930's, and the questions it provokes about the idea of periodization in general.

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## Chapter One

This thesis deals generally with women's autobiographical fiction in the Modernist period and specifically with the autobiographical novels of three female expatriates living in Paris in the 1920's and 1930's. I will treat Modernism as the distinct stylistic phase in literature, art and music which dominated England, Europe and America between 1914 and 1939. Modernism is a collective name for a number of movements--Impressionism and its aftermath, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Symbolism and Imagism, Vorticism, Dadaism and Surrealism--whose common aim was to subvert the Romanticism and Realism of the nineteenth century and to propel the twentieth century into the abstract.<sup>1</sup>

### Autobiography: Self creation

I wish to begin my study with the autobiographical impulse itself, and changing interpretations of it. Three major areas for theoretical consideration emerge. First, what is the relationship of autobiography to fiction? Is it possible to formulate strategies for turning autobiography into fiction? Secondly, can we distinguish specifically female strategies for this process? How is writing sexually differentiated? Finally, what distinguishes Modernist self-portraiture in fiction? Did styles and methods of literary self-representation alter with the waves of Modernism?

Forms of autobiography have altered throughout history in accordance with changing concepts of the self. It is



the self-conscious literary form, offering insight into the modes of consciousness of other men as well as oneself. Despite a certain wilful blurring of the divisions between literary forms in the twentieth century, it remains true that autobiographies are texts in which authors make themselves the subjects of their own works. Since the mid-eighteenth century, when David Hume looked "into himself," and discovered "only perceptions, no discernible separate self," and "Identity, capable of unifying disparate perceptions..." "merely a quality which we attribute to them," attempts at self-representation in the arts have undergone radical shifts.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary critical theory offers one possibly unifying perspective on these shifts in its claim that both the psychological self and the literary subject which embodies it are human constructions: they are fictive. In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche, echoing Hume's conclusion and extending it in his provocative critique of the self as subject in The Will to Power, said: "the 'subject' is not something given...it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is."<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche's belief that the psychological self is not a given that exists before we invent or project it forms the basis for contemporary critical views of autobiographical, and other, writing. The Western tradition of the "self," deconstructionists conclude, is a constructed tradition.<sup>4</sup> It is not self-generating or self-sustaining. It is

constructed from pre-existing and continuously changing sets of ideas and assumptions which saturate the language we must use to "think ourselves into being."<sup>5</sup> These critics, Nietzsche included, do not wish to undermine the notion of an individuated self; they simply remind us that "the central fact about subjectivity is that its previous formulations have the status of a fiction," in the history of an individual life.<sup>6</sup>

The idea that a writer can create a self as he creates a text--out of all previous systems of creation, most especially language--is brought up to date by Paul de Man in relation to autobiographical literature:

We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces consequences, but can we not suggest with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its respects, by the resources of the medium.<sup>7</sup>

The writer creates his image or idea of himself, and the imaginary construction of his life based on it, in and through his text. I do not mean to discredit the factual component in autobiographical writing; to underestimate the power of "lived experience" in a writer's work can inhibit an informed reading of the text. Before one is able to consider those qualities which have been, as Nietzsche put it, "added and invented and projected," one must be well aware of "what there is" in the foreground to begin with; and it is with the lives of the women whose

autobiographical fiction I explore, that I will always begin.

A fictional autobiography is a narrative in which the subject, that is the author and his life, is given the status of fiction, and acts as a starting point for narrative.

Examples are D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers and James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.<sup>8</sup>

In such works, the artistic representation of "facts," the process of selecting, ordering and transmuting if not translating them, has necessarily altered them in radical, imaginative ways.

Filtered through the writer's memory and an awareness of the autobiographical tradition in literature, they have ceased to be only the facts of a life. As Northrop Frye has put it, "Autobiography transforms empirical facts into artifacts: it is definable as a form of prose fiction."<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, as John Sturrock points out, "the untruths it tells may be as rich, or richer in significance, than the truths."<sup>10</sup>

One way of looking at autobiographical writing, then, sees a "fictive" self producing an imaginatively constructed life; logically such works must draw on the conventions of both autobiography and fiction. Nevertheless, in the Modernist period metaphor reigned over metonymy. Modernist fiction, with its clear ancestry in Symbolist poetry, is always essentially metaphorical writing, however richly a Proust or Lawrence will use metonymic detail. Both writers clearly valued "authenticity" of detail, but not an authenticity based solely on resemblance. David Lodge has said that "the central assertion of the modern novel [is

that] nothing is simply one thing....an assertion for which metaphor is the natural means of expression."<sup>11</sup> Even the self-portrait of the artist cannot be seen simply as "one thing," one self. To describe various kinds of self-portraits by artists in fiction, I will use James Olney's term "metaphors of the self," to describe what he has called "significant complexes characteristic both of a life and a work."<sup>12</sup> I believe that it is possible to identify and evaluate imaginative configurations which link the biographical and the textual self. If language represents being in autobiographical fiction, as it must, the self expresses and represents itself further by "the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by these metaphors ....[The artist] in....perceiving formal patterns.... transforms a myriad passing sensations into the single apprehensible and meaningful artifact."<sup>13</sup> The final pattern to emerge in the case of autobiographical novels, is narrative pattern, based on metaphor, rather than chronological and metonymic pattern as it would appear in strict autobiography.

The self is revealed in the pattern of metaphor, and in the objects perceived and seized upon to make up the metaphors. "We become, in our creative act, all the objects we behold, and more importantly, the order of these objects."<sup>14</sup> (emphasis added). Therefore it is their narrative or textual arrangements with which I shall be concerned, rather than with the changing epistemology of

of the subject. This thesis will focus on the idea of a depersonalized objectified sense of identity as the key to "metaphors of the self." I will examine the metaphorical self-portraits in narrative by a number of male and more especially female writers in the period between 1914 and 1939.

### Fictional Autobiography

I have said that all autobiographical writing is, to some degree, fictive or imaginative. Self-representation is already a form of self-fictionalization. But when a writer sits down specifically to write fiction, and at the same time to use his life as the basis for the metaphors he creates, then new strategies for transforming fact into fiction must be devised. One assumes that this impulse to combine the two originates with a desire to understand one's life as a story, to explore the kinds of explanations provided by the imaginative process of story-telling and to order events in a way that only art allows. This implies an ambiguous reading of the work, one which draws on both genres--the novel and autobiography. Philippe Lejeune would see interesting tensions created in the writer's "contract de lecture" with the reader specifically for the autobiographical novel; between the "pacte autobiographique" on the one hand and the novelistic pact on the other.<sup>15</sup> Lejeune distinguishes between "pure fictions," that is autobiographical novels based on a novelistic pact and "fictive fictions" in which there there is a fictional

attempt to introduce another perspective on one's own autobiography by creating a character in a novel."<sup>16</sup>

### The Novel as Portrait of the Male Artist

"As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies," Stephen said, "from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image....In the intense instant of imagination...that which I was is that which I am and that which in possibility I may come to be. So in the future, the sister of the past, I may see myself as I sit here now but by the reflection from that which then I shall be."<sup>17</sup>

In the first twenty-five years of this century, certain autobiographical fictions by men, narratives generated in discernible ways by the artists' lives, became virtual paradigms of modern fiction. I think here of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses, of Lawrence's Sons and Lovers and Women in Love and Proust's À la Recherche de temps perdu.<sup>18</sup> So paradigmatic have they become, that we often overlook the fact that they are personal stories. These writers sought to objectify aesthetically, through images, fictional correlatives and narrative structures, their real experience of the world and specifically, in a number of them, their development as artists. Their experiments with fictional strategies for the narration of lived experience took place against a background of philosophical unrest. The sense of self in history and in time was being radically revised. This was reflected in the writings of T.E. Hulme, William James and Henri Bergson.<sup>19</sup> Out of these works emerged a belief that

discontinuity was the only constant in science, history and art. The self had become a shifting concept, quite a long way from the dominating nineteenth century idea of self and world as realistically presentable in fiction. Relativism and artifice become the new rules, and the self could be explored in radical new ways in fiction. In an ironic, multiple - perspective self-portrait, for example, the autobiographical novelist is free to work with quite personal sets of textual conventions with which to objectify aesthetically his sense of self, his consciousness and his world, to create a "figurative" version of himself, the "sum of narrator, protagonist and other fictional artifacts."<sup>20</sup> In important respects, then, the narrative is de-centred. The figurative self we see in the narrative cannot always be taken as the "true" identity of the author. "A verbal artifact is and is not commensurate with its author; as a symbol it is both a dynamic equivalent of the self and a shabby substitute for the richness of the experiencing life."<sup>21</sup> This "figurative" version of the self is Modernism's disruptive answer to what one critic described as nineteenth century realism's "employment of the self as the principle of intelligibility" in the text.<sup>22</sup>

Paradoxically, in a number of Modernism's key autobiographical narratives written by men, the "figurative" self is based on two nineteenth century literary forms. One is the Bildungsroman, the story of the protagonist's education in life, as exemplified by Flaubert's and Balzac's

young men from the provinces travelling to the centres of culture. The other is the Künstlerroman, the portrait of the artist novel, in which the true self of the protagonist emerges from the education process as an artist. The quest for selfhood is dominant in both forms. Frequently that self is in conflict with society, church or current morality. An opposition between art and life is implied.

Lawrence, Proust and Joyce are primarily concerned, in Sons and Lovers, À la Recherche du temps perdu and Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, with telling us the story of how they became artists. In these texts, the psychological self becomes not only the literary subject, but the subject as artist and creator of such transformations, those Yeats would call, "Artificers of the Great Moments."<sup>23</sup> Notions of the self may be shifting, and certainly those altered notions are absorbed into these self-consciously aesthetic texts. But, curiously, these writers premise their self-representations on the fixed concept of the unchanging power and supremacy of the artist figure to command whatever material his period yields.

Certainly, in Sons and Lovers, D.H. Lawrence is very concerned with the representativeness of his life. "It's the tragedy of thousands of young men in England," he wrote to Edward Garnett.<sup>24</sup> In the novel, he simplifies the facts of his own life. He reduces his actual family, invents some situations and leaves out others, including, curiously, many of his most avid intellectual concerns in youth. He



writes of his protagonist, Paul Morel, in the third person, to single out, with attempted objectivity, the significant, the representative events of his life in social and ideological terms. But the point of his autobiographical format is to "uncover his uniqueness."<sup>25</sup> Of course that uniqueness is representative in a way, too, of all emerging artists in alienating social climates. Paul Morel's unique "emotional nexus" is, as Roy Pascal notes, his alone, and the novel's final scene makes clear that we are being shown a "process of self-creation in which the individual emerges quite distinct from the forces which go into his making."<sup>26</sup>

Proust's À la Recherche du temps perdu is also a self-creative work, one which the artist regards as redemptive; it has subsumed him, translating the transitory details of his life into an "eternal" work of art. Proust's whole career was an attempt to find a style and a structure adequate to the treatment of his own growth and development as a writer, from his early piece, Jean Santeuil (1895) to his death in 1922.<sup>27</sup>

Alors, moins éclatante sans doute que celle qui m'avait fait apercevoir que l'oeuvre d'art était le seul moyen de retrouver le Temps perdu, une nouvelle lumière se fit en moi. Et je compris que tous ces matériaux de l'oeuvre littéraire, c'était ma vie passée; je compris qu'ils étaient venus à moi, dans les plaisirs frivoles, dans la paresse, dans la tendresse, dans la douleur, emmagasinés par moi, sans que je devinasse plus leur destination, leur survivance même, que la graine mettant en réserve tous les aliments qui nourriront la plante. Comme la graine, je pourrais mourir quand la plante se serait développée, et je me trouvais avoir vécu pour elle sans le savoir

sans que ma vie me parût devoir entrer jamais en contact avec ces livres que j'aurais voulu écrire et pour lesquels, quand je me mettais autrefois à ma table, je ne trouvais pas de sujet. Ainsi toute ma vie jusqu'à ce jour aurait pu et n'aurait pas pu être résumée sous ce titre: Une vocation.<sup>27</sup>

Marcel is free to die once his text has been completed. He is in a sense, then, born into the text.

Proust's Marcel is a fictional version of himself. Joyce, in Stephen Hero, began with quite a detailed and literal portrait of himself in an almost nineteenth century realistic style.<sup>28</sup> In subsequent drafts he became, like Proust, more and more concerned with fictionalizing these details into consciously aesthetic designs. This process of moving away from the literal parallels on a thematic level, Stephen's own breaking away from the past in order to free himself to be an artist. The ultimate emergence of his essential self as an artist depends on the very creative process that will "forge" it.<sup>29</sup> This "forging" involves the creation of a new and fictionalized self as an artist. Joyce clearly believed that by writing about his growth as an artist, he would become one.

In order to focus on the idea that the freer Stephen is of his past, the freer he is to express himself as an artist, Joyce structures Stephen's liberation around his shifting relationship with language.<sup>30</sup> He flees the language of moribund Anglo-Irish culture and the dogma of the Roman Catholic church - the language of authority, in favour of the rhetoric of art, where words are free to take

on new meanings which only he as an artist can impose:

I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence and the only arms I allow myself to use -- silence, exile and cunning.<sup>31</sup>

Just as Marcel is ready to die as his text is about to be born, Portrait of the Artist concludes as Stephen Dedalus' career is about to begin.

In depicting Stephen, Joyce draws not only his own character and experience, selectively and economically arranged, but also on other artist heroes both in life and art. In doing so he constructs an archetypal image of the artist figure -- the symbolic Daedalus -- and in the process "carefully removed any traits of his own character which conflicted with the stereotype."<sup>32</sup> This inter-textuality reminds us that these three male writers, in their self-representations as artists, continue to base their portraits on essentially Romantic notions of the artist, as either the soaring metaphysical creator, transcending life in art, or the self-annihilating artist who "extinguishes" himself into his text. Either way, the traditional rhetoric of the artist and his vocation is preserved.

A writer who did all that he could to disrupt that traditional rhetoric in his fictional self-portraiture was André Gide. In this respect, I suggest, Gide acts as a linking figure between the modern and the post-modern in autobiographical fiction.<sup>33</sup> The three women writers at the

heart of this thesis, Rhys, Stein and Barnes are also linking figures and transitional writers in a similar sense. Gide was the most self-conscious of writers, acutely aware of writing against the realistic tradition. In his novelistic writings he was always careful to make the reader aware that he was presenting the fictional world not as reality but as an authorial construct, a fiction of the self. He was acutely aware of the problems of autobiography and the novel. Gide was writing his "confessions" (Si le Grain ne meurt...) at the same time that he was embroiled in the theory and practice of the novel. The full text of this "official" autobiography was published in 1936, the same year as his fictional self-portrait, Les Faux Monnayeurs, but the autobiography had been finished earlier.<sup>34</sup> Gide had written that he required of autobiographical writing that it must "présente comme successifs des états de simultanéité ... confuse."<sup>35</sup> Here he is referring to the kind of centrifugality and multiplicity of the self which he discerned and imitated in Montaigne, Baudelaire and Dostoevsky.

Gide chose the novel as the genre best suited to "succession." Autobiography he saw as limited, as a prisoner of the "real" where truthfulness is equated with veracity and its correspondence to "what really happened." It is a different kind of truthfulness he has in mind when he describes in his journal the novelist's prime purpose as being to express his self, therefore making him "le seul

garant de la vérité qu'il révèle, le seul juge."<sup>36</sup> We are reminded again in the male autobiographical fiction tradition of the artist seeing himself as a God-like creator, Yeats' "artificer of the great moments," even when he is showing us his methodology as Gide does.

Any such novelistic portrait of the artist can only be complete for Gide if succession and simultaneity are its structural principles. The "authentic" and "subjective" novelist Gide wishes to be, wrestling with the problem of self-creation through language, uses every one of his characters to represent some Gidean impulse, and never more completely than in Les Faux Monnayeurs.

The character of Edouard is the most striking reflexive device of this novel. He is a Gide-like figure engaged, and sometimes non-engaged in writing a novel called Les Faux Monnayeurs. Edouard is more than Gide's representative, however. He is the genuine incarnation of the artistic consciousness. Even his inadequacies and shortcomings as a writer are part of Gide's definition of the artist which is one of the book's central concerns. Neither Edouard the writer, nor Gide the writer, portrays himself in his novel; each creates himself as he creates his work. Identity is protean, a matter of "successions." Self-actualization for Gide must be dynamic. But there is a vast range of other characters and other stories than Edouard's, though many of them overlap, to make up one large, vitalistic portrait of the artist in fiction. Gide believed that the self was too

"rich" to express itself totally as one person; it must grow into a fictional world. Therefore Gide, the author, appears not only as Edouard, but also as Boris, the little boy who is bullied into suicide. At a structural level, the author is recognizable both as the occasionally omniscient narrator, and as the story-telling "je" whose voice can deceptively blur into a character's voice and disappear for a moment or a chapter. Behind all of these manifestations of the author, the first person narration serves to remind us that the story itself is very much the product of a story-telling consciousness.

But Gide also believed that "la création de nouveaux personnages ne devient un besoin naturel que chez ceux qu'une impérieuse complexité intérieure tourmente et que leur propre geste n'épuise pas."<sup>37</sup> Gide infuses himself into the host of characters in Les Faux Monnayeurs, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, child and adult, the object of desire and the one who desires. They are enclosed by his consciousness while appearing, in a pastiche of nineteenth century realism, to live. This technique of having his characters impersonate his myriad qualities, thoughts and ideas, culminates in a point of complete depersonalization in the novel.

In projecting himself so thoroughly into his characters, catharsis and self-creation are possible for Gide, whose aesthetic is essentially negative otherwise. He compares this goal of his to the accomplishment of Dostoevsky, "tout

eparpillé dan ses héros, sans se rassembler pourtant jamais dans un seul."<sup>38</sup> In this, Gide made sophisticated advances on the more traditional "portrait of the artist" of early Modernism as created by Joyce, Lawrence and Proust. Nevertheless, the lineage of the male Romantic God-like artist figure in full control of his fictional world and fictional self, is discernible in Gide's 1930's novelistic self-portraiture, however much the author enjoys playful intertextuality with his heritage. This, I would argue, is a male tradition. Women writers from the same period have, on the whole, stories other than "how I became an artist" to tell us.

#### The Artist as Woman

Before going on to discuss these stories, it is necessary to consider ways in which gender informs a writer's work. Early in the history of feminist literary criticism, female critics made strong efforts to prove that there were no discernible differences between male and female writing, and based their claim for sexual equality on this premise. This criticism focused largely on male writing, on pinpointing female stereotypes and general inadequacies in the artistic representation of women by men. A subsequent shift in focus has seen a new concentration on texts written by women themselves. The quality of female experience itself, rather than male views of it, now comes under scrutiny. Critics now discuss the distinctive features of a female text and the lineage of women writers; they

consider the intertextuality of women's writing within a semi-autonomous tradition. This allows for discussion of the differences between women writers as well as of their common qualities, as they are different from male writers. If the tradition of male writing is the dominant tradition in English literature, then a study of women's writing must see it as a reactive tradition, one which operates at almost every level within the context of male literary history, language and conventions. Therefore it is interesting and important to see the kinds of deliberate appropriations, revisions and subversions of male texts undertaken by women writers. As Cora Kaplan puts it, "The analysis of female talent grappling with a male tradition translates sexual difference into literary differences of genre, structure, voice and plot."<sup>39</sup>

We analyse the ways in which women writers revise and subvert prevailing themes and styles with a range of approaches: psychoanalytic, deconstructive, historical, formalist, generic and biological.<sup>40</sup> Different nationalities of female critics have handled the nature of sexual difference in writing within these categories in different ways. French feminist criticism has based itself on the biological notion of "écriture féminine," the inscription of the female body and womanhood in the language of the text.<sup>41</sup> English feminists have, on the whole, been more traditional in their critical approach, choosing to concentrate specifically on textual interpretation, particularly using Marxist and



psychoanalytic approaches.<sup>42</sup> American feminist critics have also focussed on textual analysis but with the emphasis on language and expression.<sup>43</sup> In each of these critical approaches the emphasis is on the woman writer and the female text. Elaine Showalter has called this "Gynocriticism" as opposed to the earlier "feminist critique" of male art which represented women.<sup>44</sup>

Within differing national approaches, critics have considered four models of difference, as to exactly what makes the woman writer and her text different from her male counterparts. First, the biological difference is seen by some to inform a woman's text. Talk of phallic and ovarian theories of artistic production, metaphors of literary paternity and maternity, the body functions as sources of imagery at a primal level, may all be considered crude and prescriptive, but become more viable when mediated, as they must be by linguistic, social and literary structures. The second model, then, concerns these linguistic and textual theories of women's writing, which ask the basic question of whether men and women use language differently. Does gender in fact determine styles of speaking, reading and writing? We have already noted that the literary tradition in English is predominantly masculine in discourse: When women speak or write, they are doing so in reaction to masculine norms and their implied ideologies. Women write as outsiders. The English critic Mary Jacobus has suggested that women's writing which works within the "male" discourse, necessarily

works "ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written." "The problem," she goes on, "has not been that language has been insufficient to express women's consciousness, but that patriarchal cultural norms have forced women into a position where they must use stylistic camouflage, euphemism, obliqueness and circumlocution."<sup>45</sup>

A third model of sexual difference, the psychoanalytic, locates difference in the author's psyche in relating gender to the creative process. A theory of the female psyche sees the self as shaped by the body, and by the development of language as well as by social and sexual training. A major stumbling block is the Freudian model which needs constant updating to make it comprehensible in gynocritical terms. With its central concerns of penis envy, the castration complex and the oedipal phase, women's relationship to language, fantasy and culture seem to be explained away. Jacques Lacan has extended castration to a total metaphor for female literary and linguistic disadvantage.<sup>46</sup> Lacan theorizes that the acquisition of language and the entry into its symbolic order occur at the oedipal phase, in which the child accepts his/her gender identity. This stage requires an acceptance of the phallus as a privileged signification and consequent female displacement, particularly in linguistic terms as Cora Kaplan explains:

The phallus as a signifier has a central crucial position in language, for if language embodies the patriarchal law of culture, its basic meanings refer to the recurring process by which sexual difference and subjectivity are acquired

....Thus the little girls' access to the symbolic, that is, to language and its law, is always negative and or mediated by introducing a subjective relation to a third term, for it is characterized by an identification with lack.<sup>47</sup>

The psychoanalytic model defines the woman artist basically as displaced, disinherited and excluded. Therefore the "difference" in women's writing is negative in its troubled relationship to female identity. The woman writer experiences her own gender as painful and as a debilitating obstacle or inadequacy. Recent developments in feminist psychoanalysis which do not focus on revising Freud have been somewhat more encouraging. Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (1978) emphasizes the development and construction of gender identities and focuses positively on the pre-Oedipal process of psycho-sexual differentiation.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, a cultural analysis of sexual difference discerns a female culture within the general culture, a kind of cultural colony. Attempts to locate precisely the cultural locus of female literary identity must describe the forces that intersect with an individual writer's cultural field. Such an approach raises interesting questions about the nature of periodization so prevalent in literary studies. If literary periodization--the study of supposedly self-contained eras--the Renaissance, the Modern period, the Post-modern, are based on men's writing, then women's writing must have been subsumed or forcibly assimilated. Was the Renaissance a renaissance for women? Were male

and female writers in the Modernist period, Modernists in the same sense?

As a critic who is interested in exploring a tradition of women writers and a female cultural continuum within the general culture, Elaine Showalter in A Literature of Their Own argues for a female sub-culture, emerging in literature as an "imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems and images from generation to generation....a literary subculture....unified by values, conventions, experiences and behaviours impinging on each individual."<sup>49</sup> This is a coherent approach to women's writing, and one which assimilates many of the points raised by other narrower critical categories. It avoids slippery and nebulous notions like "female sensibility" and "female imagination" while acknowledging that fundamentally, women's life experience is quite different from that of men, and it must influence their writing and appear in their texts in discernible ways. Showalter concludes that "a special female self-awareness emerges through literature in every period."<sup>50</sup>

While it is effective in certain respects, Showalter's schema does, however, provide the illusion that the tradition of women's literature is a seamless whole. It does not allow for the kind of cultural pluralism of outlook we recognize today as relevant to understanding the differences between women writers; differences of race, class, wealth, geography and sexual preference will matter every bit as

much to the artist as gender.

Showalter's focus is on the "ways in which the self-awareness of the woman writer has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and time span."<sup>51</sup> I propose in this thesis to extend this idea considerably to consider women writers who may occupy positions and record experience of even more problematical subcultures than that of "woman writer;" I think here of the exile, the demi-mondaine or the lesbian.

### Female Autobiography

The history of female autobiography indicates that women have most often approached the issue of self-definition evasively, if not obliquely.<sup>50</sup> Only in spiritual confessions have they been prepared to take centre stage like their male counterparts.<sup>53</sup> This has been the case up to and including some surprisingly recent autobiographies by Lillian Hellman, Golda Meir and Emma Goldman for example.<sup>54</sup> As documented by Patricia Meyer Spacks in her article "Women's Stories: Women's Selves," the overwhelming tendency has been for women to define themselves in terms of their relations with others; and to use those relations as methods of, and metaphors for, self-revelation.<sup>55</sup> Spacks comments on the remarkably "hidden," ego-less quality of autobiographies by even quite prepossessing women like Goldman and Meir who make much more accurate records of "the times" than "the life." This seems to be one recurring difference between male and female autobiographies.

There are certain formal differences in women's autobiography as well, as documented by Estelle Jelinek.<sup>56</sup> She sees women using discontinuous forms--often fragmentary but self-contained units of discourse, and their approach as fundamentally personal rather than professional and historical. Even with successful women's accounts of their lives, this leads to an emphasis away from their work to focus on family and personal relations. This contrasts with the prototypical male autobiography as outlined by Mary Mason. It usually involves "a dramatic presentation of unfolding self discovery where characters and events are little more than aspects of the author's evolving consciousness."<sup>57</sup> In other words, men and women distance themselves from their material in very different ways. In male texts, the self is prominent. The woman writer, on the other hand, reveals herself obliquely, through relation or identification with some other. Self-consciousness in women's autobiographical writing emerges, then, only in this kind of context, which involves sifting and sorting through lived experience for explanation and understanding rather than in any desire to impose dramatic ordering structures upon it.

In a more positive light, this kind of speculation connects with updated psychological concepts of the female identity as processive and thus a very different personality structure from the male. Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory sees this female identity "process" as leading the female artist to defy much more readily, for example,

conventional generic boundaries and traditional characterization. A second theory relevant here to the nature of women's self-representation sees female identity which presents "the hero [as] her author's daughter," a basically maternal metaphor of female authorship, which clarifies the woman writer's distinctive engagement with her characters and which indicates an analagous relationship between narrator, author and reader, and the representation of memory.<sup>58</sup>

Chodorow sees that throughout women's lives, the self is defined, as Jelinek observed, through social relationships; issues of fusion and the merger of the self with others are significant. The female personality is then rational, fluidly defined and cyclical as well as progressive rather than simply passive or evasive when compared with male autobiographical models. Twentieth century women writers have often communicated a consciousness of their identity through paradoxes of sameness and difference--from other women, especially their mothers, and here I think particularly of the French writer, Colette;<sup>59</sup> from men; and from social injunctions for what women should be, including those inscribed in the literary canon. This alternative formulation of female identity as processive stresses fluid and flexible aspects of women's primary identities. One reflection of this fluidity is that women's writing does not conform to the generic prescriptions of the male canon. As Estelle Jelinek typifies, recent scholars have concluded that autobiographies by women tend to be less linear, unified

and chronological than men's autobiographies. Women's novels are often called autobiographical and their autobiographies, novelistic. Mary McCarthy's Memories of a Catholic Girlhood and Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts are examples of this generic crossover writing.<sup>60</sup> Because of the continual crossing of self and other, women's writing may blur the public and private and defy completion. Thus we have writers like Dorothy Richardson, Colette and Anaïs Nin whose lives, letters, journals and fiction become almost co-terminous.

#### Female Autobiographical Fiction

Does it follow, then, that female autobiographical fiction will reflect these differences in characterization, distance from material and angle of observation? Fictional autobiography involves a particular kind of self-creation, we have said, one in which the writer may in a sense, "invent" himself in the fictionalizing process. The artist fashions an image for himself in his art work. As one of Djuna Barnes' characters puts it: "One's life is never so much one's own as when one invents it."<sup>61</sup>

One aspect of the dilemma women face, when they come to write fictional versions of some aspects of their lives, is that patriarchal society has traditionally regarded women as already existing works of art themselves. John Berger, the art critic, reflected on this phenomenon in more general representational terms in Ways of Seeing:



Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male; the surveyed female. Thus: she turns herself into an object--and most particularly an object of vision; a sight.... Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by being appreciated as herself by another.

In George Eliot's Middlemarch, Will Ladislaw comforts Dorothea Brooke when she despairs over her ability to become a poet: "You are a poem."<sup>63</sup> In Eliot's works as a whole, as Gilbert and Gubar rightly observe, a number of women characters deform their creativity "in their efforts to reconstruct their own images;" Dorothea Brooke certainly among them. In the process, they become less autonomous individuals than "character(s) in search of an author or a page in search of a pen."<sup>64</sup>

As Will Ladislaw's metaphor indicates, female sexuality is often identified with textuality. There is a discernible element of fear of the female body's power to articulate itself. It is far less fearful to think of the author/creator as male and of the art object/creation as female.

The critic Susan Gubar takes as a text which emblemizes the female sense of self as text and artifact, Isak Dinesen's short story, "The Blank Page."<sup>65</sup> Briefly the story tells of an order of Carmelite nuns in a remote community of Portugal who grow flax to make fine linen. The linen is used by royal households for bridal bed-sheets when princesses marry. After each wedding night the sheet is displayed to

attest the bride's virginity. Then the nuns reclaim it, remove the central stained area of the sheet, which they then frame and hang in a long gallery, along with name plates identifying the princess. Young women make pilgrimages to the convent to see these "faded markings," for "each separate canvas with its coroneted name plate has a story to tell, and each has been set up in loyalty to the story,"<sup>66</sup> The most fascinating canvas of all however, is the pure white, blank sheet after which Dinesen names her story.

The art objects in "The Blank Page" have literally been created by the bodies of the royal women, out of their private lives and their otherwise mute existences. The "decorative imperative" which compels so many women to turn themselves into aesthetic objects, has here obliterated any distance between life and art. This points again to the work of writers like Colette and Anaïs Nin whose forms of expression are always highly personal--the diary, the letter, and autobiographical fiction--and who clearly regarded their lives as art forms and their art as life forms.

When women do come to represent themselves in fictional forms, they have rarely done so in the form of a Künstlerroman or artist novel. There are very few female equivalents in Modernism of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, although the realistic Australian writers Henry Handel Richardson and Miles Franklin, the American Willa Cather and the French writer, Colette, have all written novels which incorporate this idea.<sup>67</sup> It has more often been the case, as Sharon

Spencer points out, that women "have turned away from the representation in fiction of women like themselves, women whose desire for self-expression is so strong and so consistent that they define themselves as artists."<sup>68</sup>

I have already discussed in relation to direct autobiographical forms, the possibility that women's attitudes to self-dramatization and self-revelation may be quite different to those of male writers. We have seen, too, that the woman writer may already see herself as an aesthetic object in a male text, so undermining her authority to create her own. Social stereotypes would have her as self-less rather than as self-expressive. I do not wish to fall into the trap, however, of creating any false distinctions between male and female writers. I am more concerned to explore a range of literary strategies for self-representation in fiction during this period by both men and women in England and on the Continent. My focus will be nevertheless on three women: Jean Rhys, Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes, for two reasons. Primarily, I believe that the interesting work done in autobiographical fiction by these three in the 1920's and 1930.'s has yet to be properly evaluated. Because they were women, and because Modernism was dominated by male luminaries, their work seems to have eluded the critical scrutiny devoted to works established as the Modernist canon, however unintentionally, by the likes of Edmund Wilson in his pioneering study, Axel's Castle.<sup>69</sup> But there is another reason, aside from their being women, for their omission

from the canon, and this is my second reason for taking them up. As I plan to show, Rhys, Stein and Barnes were writing autobiographical fictions that were quite different from those being written by either men or women in Modernism's first phase. The reasons for this I have already alluded to: that each of them was writing from within a sub-culture at an even greater remove from mainstream, masculine, establishment Modernism than that of the "woman writer." Rhys lived the half-life of the impoverished fringe artist, Gertrude Stein wrote from a position of intellectual and imaginative androgyny and Barnes as a lesbian. All three lived, during their most productive years, as writers and expatriates distanced from their native cultures and points of origin. From time to time each of them felt more an exile than an expatriate. These factors will have influenced what they wrote every bit as much as their womanhood.

### The Female Aestheticists

To assess properly the work of Rhys, Stein and Barnes, and the different kinds of fictional self-portraits they were to offer, let us first consider the woman who are usually discussed by critics as "female Modernists."

One strand of female Modernism--and many take it to be the only one because of the significance of the writers involved--Elaine Showalter has rightly grouped under the title--female aestheticists: they key figures here are Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf.<sup>70</sup> What is the status of the female self as artist, or simply

as person in their works? Their fiction, Showalter argues "created a deliberate female aesthetic, which transformed the feminine code of self-sacrifice into an annihilation of the narrative self....Their version of Modernism was a determined response to the material culture of male Edwardian novelists like Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells, but, like D.H. Lawrence, the female aestheticists saw the world as mystically and totally polarized by sex. For them, female sensibility took on a sacred quality, and its exercise became a holy, exhausting and ultimately self-destructive rite."<sup>71</sup> (emphasis added) In their works women are rendered as inevitable victims because of their agonizing perceptiveness and self doubt. This aesthetic vision is at once impersonal and renunciatory: either way, self-denying.

Dorothy Richardson, it is true, attempted a version of the "portrait of the artist" novel in her thirteen-volume sequence, Pilgrimage, whose first volume, Pointed Roofs, appeared in 1915.<sup>72</sup> Despite the clarity of her intention, to write a fictional study of the female artist's consciousness, I believe that she is undermined by unclear and self-defeating ideas: first that women live on a different plane of reality from men; and secondly, that "shapelessness" is woman's natural form of expression; "pattern," that is, any adequate sense of narrative of other design is suffocatingly masculine. Consequently the self as represented in her work is frequently paralyzed by "feminine impressionism," and constantly risks "ego death

from the state of pure sensibility."<sup>73</sup> This makes her self portrait as oblique and as "hidden" as any of the directly autobiographical women's writings discussed earlier. We find this to be the case as well in works by the other two "female aestheticists" as designated by Showalter.

Katherine Mansfield, who at one stage pledged herself to recreating in fiction the distilled essence of her New Zealand childhood, displays in her short stories a similar failure of nerve when it comes to representing her adult artist self in fiction.<sup>74</sup> She sees women as either myth-makers, dealing in essence and yearning for unity of self through a kind of dissolving into nature, or as crippled observers of life's incidental brutalities; frequently both. When one of the female characters approaches any new, transforming knowledge of herself, however, or any state approaching transcendence, she is cut down. Beneath the dreamy aesthetic surface of domestic transfigurations which principally occupy these characters, there is a certain sense of bitter inevitability and the same tendency as Richardson's text showed for the authorial self to disappear into the work.

Virginia Woolf is perhaps the quintessential case of the woman artist writing herself out of existence in her work. This formula is an echo of Joyce's at the end of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, where he talks about the artist "refining" himself out of existence in his text; in Joyce's case, however, this is blatantly untrue. Lily

Briscoe in To the Lighthouse is, it is true, a functioning artist. She does not, we are led to believe paint very well, however, and she yearns not simply to capture Mrs. Ramsay on canvas, but to be Mrs. Ramsay who, like Mrs. Dalloway before her, uses all her creative powers to transform domesticity into art--meals, gestures and arrangements of flowers and people. What of the "self" in these works? Consciousness in Woolf's novels operates at a level of "multi-personal subjectivity" as the critic James Naremore puts it. The text embodies not one person's emotional life, but a totality of the feelings of different characters. It is a composite consciousness, in which the characters yearn for the dissolving, if not extinction of personality; to be --as one of To the Lighthouse's most famous images has it-- "shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others...."<sup>76</sup>

The self wishes passionately to dissolve into the "androgynous mind," the community of feelings, nature, or any one of numbers of water images Woolf summons to embody this state. At its most extreme, in The Waves, the only clearly discernible voice (the six characters are almost indistinguishable emanations rather than individuated selves) actually belongs to the waves. James Naremore has called the world of Virginia Woolf's fiction "A World Without A Self."<sup>77</sup> It is not entirely true to say that she is not discernible in her texts; but her presence is haunting,

rather than controlling or focusing, as the "central consciousness" in a novel by Henry James would be. Virginia Woolf's essential self, as embodied in her set of works, can only be defined negatively--as that shared dark realm which she believes we all have in common, and to which she admits her characters only in moments of hypnotic revelation. Hers is an art based not only on the delicate recording of sensations and states of mind, but more fundamentally, on the tenuousness of the recording self, of identity and existence.

Despite the great beauties and accomplishments of works by the "female aestheticists", they unfortunately reinforce a number of crippling literary stereotypes for women: a mystical passivity, agonized perceptiveness leading to suicidal vulnerability and flight from the harsh material world. It becomes clear why these women, at least, did not write themselves into their texts as artist figures in full control of their lives and their art.

One woman who did was the French writer, Colette. She stands in relation to the female aestheticists of the English tradition much as Gide, in my earlier comments, did to Joyce and Lawrence. She was centrally concerned with the idea of self-representation in fiction, but unlike Woolf, Richardson and Mansfield, expressed the power and pleasure of female consciousness with great confidence. Like Gide, she addressed earlier eras in French literature, while simultaneously taking the novel, and the autobiographical



novel in particular, onto new ground, beyond Modernism.

It would be difficult and even undesirable to slot Colette neatly into a continuum of women writers such as Showalter's, not so much because of the French writer's subject matter, making her an exemplar of feminine sensibility and perception, but because she wrote when she did, and at such a successful and independent tangent to mainstream literary culture in France. She lived and wrote on the boundaries of social and artistic respectability; yet a time when the best-known of women writers in England portrayed themselves only in the most oblique fashion, Colette placed her own search for identity, the multiplicity of ways this might be captured in fiction, her sexuality and her profession as a writer, firmly at the centre of all she wrote.

La Vagabonde of 1911 is the study of a woman's discovery and affirmation of herself, largely through an awakened sense of vocation--writing and stage performance--which provides her with an autonomy which love can only compromise or destroy.<sup>78</sup> Throughout the novel are images of self-revelation and self-representation, notably the mirror. When Renée, the protagonist, at the end of a theatrical performance is left alone to face the dressing room mirror,

...je vais me trouver seule avec moi-même, en face de cette conseillère maquillée qui me regarde, de l'autre côté de la glace....J'ai devant moi, de l'autre côté du miroir, dans la mystérieuse chambre des reflets, l'image 'd'une femme de lettres qui a mal tournée.'<sup>79</sup>

For Renée as a writer, that same "femme de lettres," the writing on the page can also act as a mirror.

...écrire, c'est se facile!...lancer à travers des pages blanches l'écriture rapide, irrégale qu'il compare à mon visage mobile, surmené par l'exces d'expression. J'en espère un soulagement, cette sorte de silence intérieur qui suit un cri, un aveu...<sup>80</sup>

These imagistic reflections of the heroine remind us of Lacan's discussion of the "mirror stage" in the process of self discovery and the "identification of the self through the otherness of the image."<sup>81</sup> For Lacan, the reflection is the paradoxical self/other alienated at the moment of inception. In the last pages of La Vagabonde, when Renée Nerée decides that she will refuse to see the world and herself as reflections in her lover's eyes, she focusses on an ephemeral arrangement of objects, including a cheval mirror on her writing table. Lacan would well understand the primordial relation Colette sets up at this moment between the mirror, the possessions which objectify the self, the woman writer herself, and the letter she compares rejecting her lover and restoring herself to herself. Lacan would describe this configuration of elements as one based on language restoring the "I" its function as subject, here an autonomous female subject, the "woman writer."<sup>82</sup>

La Naissance du Jour is Colette's most complete and yet most elusive self-portrait, an enigmatic mixture of autobiography and fiction.<sup>83</sup> Around a fictional love story are arranged countless autobiographical details of her real life in the south of France in the 1920's. At the centre of

the novel is "Colette," a successful and professional writer in her middle years. Despite the delicately manipulated elements of "fabulation" in the text, it is nevertheless primarily an exercise in self-definition, as La Vagabonde had been seventeen years earlier. The novel's epigram is

Imaginez-vous, à me lire, que je fais mon  
portrait? Patience: c'est seulement mon  
modèle.<sup>84</sup>

The text is a "self-referential fiction," autobiographical in tone and content but not in form.<sup>85</sup>

In this novel Colette acknowledges that she defines herself more and more in life by remembering and imitating her mother. For this woman writer then, the creation of the self and the creation of the text merge in images of motherhood and creation, artist and text. Letters from the mother, Sido, to the daughter, Colette, reminding her of her origins and her legacy, frequently are the text, and they are real letters. As Colette shares them with us, we are to understand that she is showing us what she has become as the result of Sido's nurturing and sensibility. Hélène Cixous has spoken of the woman writer's need literally to "write herself," and this is what Colette is doing here.<sup>86</sup> In the character of Colette who is also the daughter of the real Sido, she is inventing a figurative textual self, a living fiction, and a projection of the real self in writing, simultaneously a metaphor of the self and an actual self-portrait. Thus, as her epigram indicated, she can use herself as a model, a metaphor for an exploration of female

identity. This she does with a number of reflexive forms traditionally regarded as feminine: letters, journals, the epistolary novel and the inner dialogue.<sup>87</sup> She put these conventions to work for her in quite untraditional ways, however, using them for her characters' self-expression rather than the repression, the silencing and the self-abnegating of women characters in the hands of the English female aestheticists. And this is the link I wish to draw between Colette and the women I go on to discuss--Rhys, Stein and Barnes.

Just as Gide has shown with his hybrid forms in literary self-representation where the autobiographical novel will go after Modernism, after the traditional "portrait of the artist," so Colette shows where female self-representation in fiction can go after female aestheticism. Rhys, Stein and Barnes are examples in the English tradition of the woman writer, more common in the 1930's than the 1920's, who is newly empowered to go beyond the search for the "woman's sentence," to remake the language and structures of fiction so that it might more adequately reflect their female experience, if not that of all women, "while revising conventions so that female artists might, as Stein put it, 'Reject' what was oppressive in tradition, [both female and male traditions] 'Rejoice' in what was possible for the future, and 'Rejuvenate' what was stale in the present."<sup>88</sup> Rhys, Stein and Barnes are such newly empowered women of the 1930's writing in ways that could not receive mainstream

recognition, because they were rejecting the touchstones of Modernism as it flourished in the '20's as inappropriate to their idiosyncratic needs. They rejected especially the precious and defeatist works of the female aestheticists of the earlier decade.

What did they do instead? Jean Rhys, in her urban European novels, takes up the female victim, but uses her as the basis for a damning critique of the social and sexual forces that made her a victim. She offers a Kafka-like exposé from the female perspective of expatriate life and of the bourgeois infrastructure beneath bohemian appearances. As an outsider, an expatriate from the Caribbean, both to Europe and to the literary and moneyed élites of the day, she is able to present a counter-vision: first, to the male Modernist mainstream, whose portraits of female consciousness she obviously considered misconceived and misrepresentative; and secondly, to the female aestheticist tradition, which genuinely embraced female self-annihilation as a fictional structure. One sees in her works, like those of the thirties' male writers, the grim detail of survival on the fringes of the social order, providing a cynical response to the female "lyrical transcendence" writers like Mansfield and Woolf. All was not fluid and beautiful, she said. Much was ugly, uncontrollable and unignorable. She was concerned always with the horror behind the beauty, in a way in which the female aesthetics would not, or could not be. She is a radical and unique voice in the Modernist tradition,

pointing the way with her "ahead of its time" psycho-social style, to Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Renata Adler and other contemporary Post-Modern writers.<sup>89</sup>

Gertrude Stein frequently declared herself one of the founders of the modern. During her life-long experiments with prose, she established new rules for the rendering of consciousness and the representation of self. She sought to eliminate the psyche, the memory and the past and future tenses from art. She declared narrative meaningless, while continuing to turn fact into fiction. In her autobiography of 1934 she set about to wilfully "deconstruct" (her term) the form, providing herself with a cubist self-portrait, a multi-faceted, imaginative, unreliable record of her own "continuous present." In the process she reinterpreted the conventions of autobiography, turning herself into a work of art and her life into a fiction.

Underlying her self-portrait however, is a fiercely androgynous consciousness, one which sought, paradoxically, the kind of ego-dominated artistic control of a Proust, Joyce or Lawrence. In recording the details of her life as a lesbian, she was forced to "do it all with mirrors," or shifting cubist planes; such information was not for public consumption in 1934. Therefore it must become a cerebral joke. Metaphors must be found. The central comic metaphor is of course that her autobiography masquerades as that of her lover, Alice B. Toklas. Nevertheless, the self-protective exercise suited her artistic principles

well. She wrote the only kind of autobiography she believed is possible to write, and in so doing, transformed the genre.

In her late-modernist masterpiece, Nightwood, Djuna Barnes journeys metaphorically into the dark spaces of the female mind, specifically, the lesbian mind. She is concerned with the expressive possibilities of poetic language as it signifies for a woman at odds with her world. This woman is, like Rhys's protagonists, marginalized by poverty. Like Stein, she is a member of a sexual sub-culture which has no official literary tradition. The narrative of the self which she creates out of these life circumstances explores with layers of rich night-world imagery, the spiritual and aesthetic ideal of androgyny, and the final irrelevance of gender.

## Chapter Two

Portrait of the Artist in Exile

When Jean Rhys came to write an autobiography acknowledged as such, her main problem, according to her friend and editor, Diana Athill, was that most of her life had been "used up" in her novels. "They were not autobiographical in every detail...but autobiographical they were, and this therapeutic function was the purging of unhappiness....Once something had been written out, she said, it was done with and one should start again at the beginning."<sup>1</sup>

A solution to her problem was to adapt, as an autobiographical form, the style with which she had begun her writing career--the vignette. In Smile Please: an unfinished autobiography, she attempts to "catch the past here and there, at points where it happened to crystallise" linking them impressionistically to form a kind of "fragmentary continuation," an instinctive whole.<sup>2</sup>

As Rhys commented herself in an interview with the critic Thomas Staley on her methods as an artist, the autobiographical impulse in her writing was strong. "I always start with something I feel or something that happened and then in the middle it becomes something else. I add and subtract."<sup>3</sup> Her first concern as a writer, Athill confirms, was to get experience down as accurately as possible. But "I like shape very much," she said. So



an instinctive leaning towards the truth in what she chose to write about was tempered by a highly developed sense of form. "...If the novel was going to work, then it would soon start to have its own shape."<sup>4</sup> In her novels neither textual detail nor the often intricate arrangement of them took her very far from the experience of them. This is not to diminish Rhys's formal achievement in writing out of her life's experience. Nor is it, on the other hand, to accept the views of critics who have included her in a very limiting category of fiction writers--that of the pathologically narrow autobiographical voice, compounded in its narrowness, in these critics' eyes, by being female as well. Rhys does far more with her autobiographically based material than confess.

In her acute re-reading of Good Morning, Midnight, Judith Kegan Gardiner describes Rhys as a "novelist of alienation," a female Kafka; her alienation, however, according to Gardiner, is socially determined--the specific historical result of social polarizations of the period in which she wrote about sex, class, morality and race.<sup>5</sup> Rhys's female protagonists are alienated from themselves and from society and others for the very specific reasons that they are female, sexually active and above all poor. Kegan Gardiner sees these women at the further disadvantage of being "misdefined by a language and literary heritage that belong primarily to propertied men."<sup>6</sup> In other words, if the Rhys woman is a "chronic victim," she is a victim of

the state of European society after World War One, and of the polarizations within it which worked to oppress women and the poor. This oppression was reinforced in Gardiner's view, by bourgeois and male domination of language and the literary tradition. I believe that Rhys was fully aware of this and that her fictions are indictments.

This feminist reading of Rhys considers the most radically original aspects of her "autobiographical fictions" as a radical critique of the hypocrisies and imbalances of sex, money and morality as they determine lives, particularly women's lives. Unlike the female aestheticists Woolf and Mansfield, Rhys never occupied the financial, class or cultural position to "transcend" the limitations of ordinary life. The "bourgeois polarizations" which Gardiner accurately identifies can induce in their victims a passive despair which is ironically compliant to the status quo. But this too can be seen as an indictment of the paralyzing effects of poverty and depression. There is another element at work in Rhys's fiction which suggests the comparison with Kafka made earlier; it is a quality of existential despair that is not entirely socially determined and only partly the result of social defeat, alienation and exile of various kinds. This underlying and unremitting bleakness bears little relation to the disengaged ironies typical of the male Modernist writers. In every novel of Rhys' her female characters reach existential impasse when their lives collapse into long-anticipated disorder and futility. At

this point, there is no question either of redemption by lyrical transcendence as Woolf or Mansfield would have it.

### The Caribbean

If the major focus of Rhys' fiction is what it is like to be a woman in Europe in the period between the wars, then the sensibility with which she perceived and recorded this was formed in an entirely different place and time. The Caribbean, where she spent her first sixteen years, had left its mark. Her first sense of what it is to be a woman was formed here. In an already oppressively closed white minority culture, women in Dominica in the first twenty years of the century were expected to live the lives of Victorian hot-house flowers. They were to be passive and domestic, possessed and provided for. Reminiscent of the women of another slave-based colonial culture--the Old South of the United States--well-bred Dominican women were bored, ornamental and unskilled at anything but gentility.<sup>7</sup> Although they formed an intensely sheltered and privileged group, these women were in certain respects as much victims of their circumstances as the native slave population. Authority in this colonial culture rested firmly in the hands of English male conservative forces. Their power managed to contain in both groups--women and natives--a potentially rebellious, sensual "female" element, kept largely in check by the force of English convention, even in the tropics, and sheer economic dominance. These two elements of her native culture--convention and money as

determinants of power--Rhys recognized early in her life, and went on to despise and expose them in her fiction. As in much Victorian fiction, however, the power structures endure; self awareness merely cripples her women, who for a variety of disabling reasons, continue to be complicit victims who give every impression of allowing their oppressors to determine their well-being.

The idea of power, what determines it and how it is used, clearly seized Jean Rhys early in life. Her first exposure to formalized power was in the ambivalent race relations she saw around her as a child in Dominica. She remembers being uneasy with her automatic authority over black servants, and at the same time mesmerized by their arrogance and sensuality, their subtle ways of avoiding submission while appearing to do as they were told.<sup>8</sup> The life force seemed to invest them with mystery and danger, though they lived as servants and underdogs. Rhys appreciated their instincts for skirting humiliation, and as a fellow-outsider to the power structure, at least by temperament, she identified with this strain in her native culture, and appears to have been significantly formed by it. Several of her women characters in fictional Caribbean settings are struck and frightened by that source of demonic energy for the natives--obeah--which provided them with an authentic source of power and a separate white-defying code connecting them with the living dead, curses, potions to affect love or death and nocturnal souciantes.<sup>9</sup> Despite the sympathy the white Rhys woman, like her creator, feels for the blacks--often a longing to be black and to

renounce the structures of an inauthentic ruling class, the natives will not have her. So the Rhys woman is at a third remove from the polarized elements in the culture she was born to.

So Rhys took from her Caribbean childhood as life concerns the nature of power, the experience of the underdog and a loathing for the self-perpetuating strategies of the middle class--principally the English middle class--which maintained these structures for power. It is not surprising then that she both saw and sought out the underdog wherever she went. In Paris, which she saw as a kind of spiritual home, her fiction led her instinctively toward a long literary tradition in France which originated in the "demi-monde"--the shadowy periphery of the respectable world, one of kept women, the criminal fringe, starving artists and students, hangers-on and strays. In English one of the few clear examples of this kind of writing is George Orwell's Down and Out in Paris and London and though his submersion in this world of hunger and doss-houses is undeniably authentic, it is also an intellectual experiment; this is not his natural or inevitable milieu.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that in her perception of reality Rhys might have more in common with late Modernist male writers like Orwell, Huxley and Graham Greene than with her female peers, Woolf and Mansfield.

Like no other English writer, Rhys takes up the French tradition, in both her style and content, of drawing a

psychological portrait of this underworld from within it. There are traces of Colette, Flaubert and de Maupassant in her style, but the psychological veracity with which she speaks links her more profoundly with François Villon and his descendants, the symbolist poets--Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine. Rhys' link to this tradition is undoubtedly the French poet, novelist and critic. Francis Carco, whose novel of the French criminal underworld, Perversité, Ford Madox Ford arranged for her to translate into English in 1927-28. Despite the fact that the book later appeared with Ford credited as the translator, his biographer verifies that the translation was Rhys' work.<sup>11</sup> Carco had written at length on Villon and the symbolists, and their preoccupation with the morally outcast is evident in his novel. Many of Rhys' concerns are there, too. It was a very appropriate novel for her to translate, and no doubt influenced and confirmed the world view she took to her early short stories and novels. Carco's novel is the sordid final act in the life of an aging French prostitute, Irma, her thuggish pimp boyfriend, Bébert, and her simpleton brother, Émile. Bébert tyrannizes the other two into submission by incidental acts of brutality, usually at Émile's expense. The woman becomes addicted to the mistreatment, continues to hand over all her money to her increasingly absent lover, and is powerless to intervene when Bébert sadistically wounds Émile in a knife attack. Bébert's final victory comes when Émile kills his sister, perhaps accidentally,

with the gun he had intended to use to murder his tormentor. Perhaps he intended to end his sister's degradation.

Perversité finely explores the sadomasochistic elements of love which were often to preoccupy Jean Rhys and her characters. "Is love no more the wish to torment another?" one of Carco's characters asks.<sup>12</sup>

Carco's work links Rhys, as well, with another major French tradition--existentialism. Carco focuses in his work, as did Villon before him, on his characters' primitive preoccupation with survival in the present--a room, food, warmth, sex--or the little of these available to a socially displaced person. Both Carco and Rhys would tell us that economics determine respectability. Those without money live from moment to moment. In this, one is reminded of later French writers of the existential school--Camus in L'Étranger and more precisely, in connection with Rhys, Marguerite Duras, who in Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein, has her female protagonist survive with a drugged resignation reminiscent of the Rhys woman.<sup>13</sup>

There is always in Rhys, however, at least early in the novels before her women characters are finally defeated, a redemptive trace of her other major French influence, Colette, who also created highly polished selective mosaics based on life. Colette and Rhys the most sordid of rooms and the worst despair, can be redeemed momentarily, and transformed by the aesthetic perception of objects--a silk dress hanging behind a door, the way light falls on a

table, a vase of cheap flowers, a glimpse of tree or street. They share a saving grace for objectification of the self when it is in danger of being extinguished.

### Expatriation

The perspective which Rhys took with her to England was a Caribbean one. But her West Indian childhood and adolescence had not equipped her for adulthood in Europe. She was unsuited for survival there in very specific ways. She had been raised essentially as a Victorian woman. When she found herself alone in England at 16 without any of the traditional supports for women--family, money or skill, she quickly slipped into a *déclassé* existence. Despite the years of hand to mouth living which followed, the legacy of "unpreparedness" in her background did provide her, when she began to write, with an exotic perceptual slant. It reminds us of the angle of Orwell's vision of England after his alienating colonial experience. For Rhys this slanted vision often provided, in her writing, a point of departure or rupture in her observation of the apparently seamless status quo, in England especially. Rhys' fiction is implicitly subversive in that it involves a perception of human affairs and attitudes to life that is at odds with urban European society, its unwritten laws, social hierarchies and moral codes. It is in content rather than form that Rhys writes at a tangent to her male and female Modernist literary counterparts. Her connections to the social criticism novels



of the 1930's are much stronger.<sup>14</sup> It is a pity that her literary reputation seems to have been lost between the generations.

In her most powerful and accomplished novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, which is set almost entirely in the West Indies, she returns to the setting of her childhood and the forces which formed her sensibility, to confront with maturity the "terrified consciousness" one critic ascribed to the culture there.<sup>15</sup> It is this consciousness which underlies both her power as a novelist and her difference from other men and women writing at the same time. In this last work, she succeeds in integrating all of her fictional causes and in providing the most radical, thorough and universal of all her critiques of human affairs.

### Autobiographical Fictions

#### Character

The central creation of Rhys' fiction is, to varying degrees a distilled self-portrait in the expressionist style.<sup>16</sup> The Rhys heroine exists in Paris, London or Vienna, alone except when supported by lovers, utterly at the mercy of men and circumstances for patronage. She moves from hotel to hotel room, lover to lover, with diminishing resources, the self a little further extinguished with each shift. She works as a chorus girl, mannequin, guide and English teacher for short periods until her unsuitability is exposed. Her minimal existence is reduced to man, money,

drink and sleep, the simple aesthetics of a room or a new dress. These women in Rhys' novels "share a central nervous system."<sup>17</sup> There is really only one woman. She is the single urban woman who has nothing and fits nowhere. She does not fight for survival, but simply to keep herself together. The most she hopes for is stalemate. She is essentially dispossessed and consistently denied. She is an exile several times over as an impoverished foreigner, aging and apparently talentless. "The society is closed: the isolation of the expatriate, the woman, the outsider, is complete; she exists in a void."<sup>18</sup> She is a sexual creature and her only currency is her looks. Her life prospects depend on money and sex and both diminish as she ages. Both desert the Rhys woman when she needs them most, leaving her vulnerable and unarmed. As one critic has observed, [she is] slowly driven out of [her] wits by the harshness and unnaturalness of the world...and men who are 'spoilers'...in an unequal war."<sup>19</sup> Such men are portrayed as bourgeois philistines, and the Rhys heroine is constantly coming up against them in her love affairs. Relationships between these characters in her novels are chilling sexual and financial transactions, each one costing the heroine more of her innocence and sanity. She is often reduced to trading a moment of warmth or sex for dinner, a room or pathetically needed cash.

Essential to Rhys' powerful social critique is this exposé of the connections between sex and money: it underlies all her portraits of emotional exploitation.

Power in society Rhys sees as essentially masculine. Society she sees as set up to conceal and facilitate the multiplicity of subtle ways in which money enslaves. Her novels are studies in subjection--either the manipulation of innocence or passivity, the controlled withholding of love or money (or both), and the subjugation of victims of sexual obsession. The Rhys woman is however, no simple victim. She understands her enemies too well. "Victims are necessary," says Marya in Quartet "so that the strong may exercise their will and become more strong."<sup>20</sup> Rhys does not often tell us that the strong ever discover that cruelty is inherent in privilege.

Respectability, from which the Rhys heroine is excluded, she both despises and craves. She wants to rebel against it and is at the same time helpless in the face of it. The psychological state that this inevitably produces oscillates between rage and despair. She is free of these only when she is resigned to hopelessness, and feels that she has nothing further to lose. At other times she drinks or sleeps to escape consciousness.

She is a victim of time--of age and fading looks, and of exile wherever she goes. But she is a strangely complicit victim. There is a perversity in her compliant passivity, which almost puts her in league with her oppressors to ruin her. Sometimes the Rhys woman almost courts our disgust in her apparent willingness to be mutilated; it is as though the author wishes to make clear in this, that sympathy for the underdog can be cheap, a facile reader response. Rhys

is interested in eliciting a far more radical awareness in her reader than that. And this is where her stature as a writer of alienation draws close to Kafka. "To be wretched to the very roots of existence and yet to be coolheaded, watching the wretchedness, is the fate of these women."<sup>21</sup> Every tortuous detail of their suffering--hunger, abandonment, sordidness and nightmare is drawn with a chilling precision and lack of sentimentality. Lovers are interchangeable in their inadequacy and casual brutality; all of the rooms are the same shabby prison. The woman is always haunted by her past, often a dead child and a failed marriage. When times are good, the woman is dressed in a fur coat, many times pawned and recovered, the last trace of a temporary former affluence. The woman is an exile from life, at a loose end in Europe, broke, aging and alone. This is the underdog Rhys created out of her experience.

### Vignette

Although childhood and adolescence in Dominica did not equip Jean Rhys for womanhood in Europe, it provided her with the rebellious force needed to "expatriate" herself, and to try to focus her life in Europe once she was there. From her earliest vignettes in The Left Bank, however, it is clear that she was unable to avoid using the West Indies as a fictional counterpoint to her new landscape.<sup>22</sup> One of these fragments, "Trio," describes a moment of homesickness in a Montparnasse café, as her Dominican narrator glimpses three Antilles natives at another table. They inadvertently

break free of the restaurant code of behaviour with their "noise" and "gusto,"<sup>23</sup> their pleasure and innocent unconcern in eating and talking. The moment turns into one of exotic license-taking when one of them, a young girl, beautifully naked beneath a red dress, begins to dance alone and excited in the restaurant. It is this moment of liberty and sensuality which forces the Rhys narrator to recognize her "compatriots" on foreign soil. Another vignette, "Mixing Cocktails," records the progress of a day in a young girl's melancholy and dreamy Dominican childhood. It is set in the mountains, a refuge from the heat. The child peers down at the valleys, the jungle and the sea through a telescope set on the verandah. She passionately resents any interruption to her day-dreaming and her observation of this "wild place, Dominica, savage and lost:"<sup>24</sup>

So soon does one learn the bitter lesson that humanity is never content just to differ from you and let it go at that. Never. They must interfere, actively and grimly between your thoughts and yourself with the passionate wish to level up everything and everybody. (p. 89)

This will provide almost a paradigm for female consciousness in the later Rhys fiction, as it struggles to survive with its own gentle, alien equilibrium in different climates from its own. She does, even as a child however, mix a good cocktail--her one successful social gesture, at the end of a hot and languid West Indian day. It is "something I can do" (p. 92).

"Again the Antilles," the third of the Caribbean vignettes in The Left Bank, tells of a public argument

between a black newspaper editor in Dominica and a white plantation owner. Their feud is conducted in letters to the newspaper, and is ultimately to do with "the conduct of an English gentleman" as established in the works of Shakespeare and Chaucer and then transported to the West Indies.<sup>25</sup> At one stage the words "the ignorant of another race and colour" are discreetly substituted by the editor for "damn niggers" (pp. 96-97). The story is of course about the power of the English in Dominica with the full weight of literature behind it.

What these three fragments--juvenilia really--show us about Jean Rhys' early expatriate writing can be summed up as follows: at a remove from Dominica she often unexpectedly remembers and misses in a complex way the black spirit in the West Indies, though technically she was part of a class that exercised power over it and defined itself against it. These moments leave her exposed and vulnerable in a chilling white culture. "Mixing Cocktails" tells us of the formation of a female consciousness in isolation, even on homeground. The mature writer, who will later focus most clearly on those things in people which separate and drive apart, was formed in peculiar, highly-charged seclusion, obsessed with the beautiful but equally treacherous Dominican landscape. Judith Thurman in a 1976 article comments that there is in Rhys' fiction "a yearning...for a lost warmth, for a place where everything is brightness or dark."<sup>26</sup> The polarities of the place--"bright" and "dark," sensual and repressive,

tantalizing and claustrophobic, sent Rhys to England, but these polarities remained with her.

### Voyage in the Dark

In her 1934 novel Voyage in the Dark, Rhys deals with her transition from one world to another, the Caribbean to Europe; the book's central image is the literal voyage from one to the other and the two-way voyage of memory between them.<sup>27</sup> In a hauntingly autobiographical narrative, Rhys places her heroine, Anna Morgan, a young woman of indeterminate social background, in England in 1912. She leads a makeshift existence as chorus girl in down-at-heel touring companies. She has been orphaned and brought to England two years earlier by her step-mother. She is picked up on the pier at Southsea by Walter Jeffries, a moneyed older man, who later meets and seduces her in London. He looks after her when she is ill and reduced, and she falls in love with him. After a year, Walter tires of the affair and ends it with a cheque. Abandoned, Anna breaks down and begins to drift, accepting money for sex from various men and finally becoming pregnant. Uncertain of the father, she begs Walter for money to pay for an abortion. The novel ends with Anna's near death as the result of the operation, and her bitter sense that another, more informed beginning is now possible.

Louis James in his essay, "The Caribbean in a Cold Place," observes that Rhys' characters are rarely at rest in the physical present wherever it is. "The immediate exists as part of the remembered past, the past as part of

the present."<sup>28</sup> In this novel she uses exile and memory in very specific ways to interpret the present place and time--that is, pre-World War I London. Memory images of Dominica and Anna's childhood there, operate like photographs or cinematic stills interspersed among London scenes, undercutting and counter-pointing them. Details of the West Indies are sharp and sensuous, accumulating meaning and resonance throughout the text. They have the effect rupturing the power of the present over Anna.

Rhys has her narrative design rest on the impossible polarity in Anna's mind of these two worlds, and of the states of mind each requires. In the conflict which follows one place serves only to disrupt and distort the other. The novel begins with the break with the earlier world and time in Anna's life and the alienation that such a radical shift produces:

It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colors were different, the smells different, the feelings things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy.<sup>29</sup>

From the first there is a radical perceptual difference in her appreciation of the two countries. Dominica is in her mind, in high focus, in bright sun-light. "...the sea was millions of spangles...purple as Tyre" (pp. 7-8). She can still smell the place--"...niggers and woodsmoke and



salt fishcakes fried in lard...fragipanni and lime juice...  
cinnamon...cloves...and incense" (p. 8). England is pale  
and mean by comparison:

--this is London--hundreds of thousands of white  
people white people rushing along and the dark  
houses all alike frowning down one after the  
other all alike all stuck together--the streets  
like smooth shut in ravines and the dark houses  
frown down--oh I'm not going to like this place.  
(p. 7)

More significant even than the brutal contrasts between  
the two places is Anna's complete inability to integrate them  
in any way, to contain them both in her experience.  
"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" (p. 8). At the mercy of these two irreconcilable  
forces, and deeply alienated from her present environment,  
Anna falls into her first love affair with an utterly  
conventional specimen from the alien culture--Walter Jeffries.  
Anna in her youth and inexperience is simply grateful for the  
substance his respectability and concern seems to offer.  
She experiences only momentary confusion when he begins  
discreetly, to pay her for sleeping with him. She accepts  
it as a kindness or the style here. It is principally about  
the subtle powers of money that she learns as the love  
affair progresses. For one thing she gets used to accepting  
it, comes to depend on it, and sees for the first time that  
sex and money are intimately connected. She begins to learn  
too about the inexorable social laws of wealth and poverty:

"The poor do this and the rich do that, the world is so-and-so and nothing can change it. For ever and for ever turning and nothing, nothing can change it" (p. 43). One of Anna's hard-nosed chorus girl friends puts it more cynically:

...have you ever thought that a girl's clothes cost more than the girl inside them?...You can get a very nice girl for five pounds, a very nice girl indeed; you can even get a very nice girl for nothing if you know how to go about it. But you can't get a very nice costume for her for five pounds....People are much cheaper than things." (p. 45)

This bitterness about money and the power that it gives men over women is one of the most significant that England teaches Anna. She does not learn it properly until Walter Jeffries withdraws first love and then money, leaving her without either, and leaving them inextricably connected with one another in her mind. There is one powerful episode in the novel where the full psychological effect of Anna's violation is made clear. It draws on primal images and memories in Anna's consciousness, in which maleness, terror and the unknown merge, suddenly to rupture and tear reality for her. As she stands in her hotel room reading the letter from Walter's cousin delegated to tell her that the love affair is over, a moment of childhood terror inserts itself into her mind. On her Dominican verandah, she remembers as a child approaching her sleeping and trusted uncle.

...Uncle Bo moved and sighed and long yellow tusks like fangs came out of his mouth and protruded down into his chin--you don't scream when you are frightened because you can't--after a long time he sighed and opened his eyes and clicked his teeth back into place and

said what on earth do you want child--,...  
 I thought, 'But what's the matter with me?  
 That was years and years ago, ages and ages  
 go. Twelve years ago or something like  
 that. What's this letter got to do with  
 false teeth?' (p. 92)

What has happened in both cases is that Anna's psychic equilibrium has been suddenly shattered in an ugly and unexpected piece of male behaviour horrifying in its intensity for her.

Dismissal by Walter feeds into a strong current of despair already present in Anna's character. She associates this new pain with a lifelong knowledge that it would happen to her again and again. The moment when this is confirmed threatens to consume her. "There's fear, of course, with everybody. But now it had grown gigantic; it filled me and it filled the whole world" (p. 96). This state and a final scene with Walter involving money induce a kind of trance in Anna, of long periods of drugged sleeping and sensory dislocation. She floats back into chorus girl circles and with new knowledge and less feeling, and makes love with stray men for money. In her dream state of simultaneous withdrawal and compliance with the world, Anna's second violent confrontation with respectability comes, this time with a woman, Ethel Matthews. She is a rather worn and scheming middle-aged woman with social aspirations. At first she enters Anna's life as a potential protector, comforting her when she is ill. Soon, however, she puts a financial proposition to her--a share in a "Swedish Massage" business, masquerading as an offer of somewhere to

live. Anna succumbs to another alliance where she is financially and emotionally exploited, in this case by Ethel Matthews' neurotic fears, financial swindling and a hysterical concern for appearances should her shabby prostitution be revealed. Anna's ultimate reaction to her treatment by the other woman is to behave badly, to drink, to bring home random men and finally to break up all the cozy furniture in her room before leaving.

With Ethel Matthews, Rhys has reminded us that hypocrisy and cruelty are not restricted to male members of the respectable classes; members of either sex can be vain and greedy. In fact, Rhys' portraits of women tend to be more grotesque than those of male equivalents. In this novel, Ethel's viciousness is magnified by a knowing quality, a self-awareness, which Walter Jeffries does not have. Neither of her apparent protectors is of any use to Anna when her "voyage" reaches its psychic destination; she becomes pregnant by one of the men she has allowed to pick her up, and with whom she has haphazardly slept. She panics and collapses into surreal dream voyages into the past.

I dreamt that I was on a ship. From the deck you could see small islands--dolls of islands--and the ship was sailing in a doll's sea, transparent as glass. Somebody said in my ear, 'That's your island that you talk such a lot about.'

Anna's two worlds merge in nightmare as she looks at her island to find English trees, "their leaves trailing in the water." Op. 164) She tries to make her way up the sloping deck to grasp one of the English branches to the shore, but

her "flying strides" were no match for the expanding deck. At that moment someone falls overboard "and there was a sailor carrying a child's coffin" (p. 165)....The abortion which follows forms a particularly grotesque and nightmarish climax to the novel and to Anna's journeying. She has arrived at the worst that can happen to her. The termination of the pregnancy involved the killing of the foetus, with a two to three week delay before the dead baby is expelled after a period of labour. The interim is a waiting for death, and in labour, Anna comes close to it herself. One of the novel's most striking Caribbean images invades her consciousness in hallucination, in labour. Again she is a child in Dominica looking at one of their black servants dressed for the Masquerade in a hideous mask. The servant approaches the child and she suddenly "put out her tongue at me through the slit in her mask....and the slobbering tongue of an idiot will stick out--a mask Father said with an idiot behind it I believe the whole damned business is like that--" (p. 184). At this outer edge of pain, endurance, and abandonment, humanity takes on the proportions of the evil mask with its terrifying tongue, its apertures dangerous slits through which violence can escape without warning. In memory, she is swallowed up by the natives' hysterical parade, falls and finds that she is falling from a horse on a Dominican mountain path. There are no stirrups on the horse to help her, and while the wild music and dancing go on about her, the horse turns into a rocking

horse and as she approaches consciousness, she finds herself in terrifying shadows where as a child she knew that the old disfigured woman with yaws waited for her. As she delivers her dead child, a supercilious English doctor reassures her:

"She'll be all right," he said. "Ready to start all over again in no time, I've no doubt.... You girls are too naive to live, aren't you?"  
(p. 187)

What sets this novel apart from Rhys' other fiction is the elegiac incorporation of the Caribbean into an otherwise European "getting of wisdom" study. All of the force of memory in Voyage In The Dark is located in Dominica. All of the novel's potent imagery comes from here, to become wild and surreal in an English context. As well this imagery inspires an inevitable critique of a corrupt urban society where respectability creates tyrants, both seen here through the distorting lens of the natural world. The novel marks too the establishment of an important fictional pattern of Rhys': that of collapsing polarities. Childhood memories of Dominica should comfort Anna; instead they terrify, alienating her from the past as well as the present while making this present more unbearable. Power and fear are the same in both places, and Anna's final awareness of this has made her a creature of duality for the first time. Because her topography is fundamentally that of the alienated consciousness rather than geographical place and real time, Rhys turns the England/Dominica dichotomy in Anna's life into a dialectic; what is terrifying in both worlds meets in her subconscious and work together in fruitful opposition.

Within this fearful dialectic of past/present, childhood/adulthood, male/female, black/white, nature/city, home/exile, there is greatest fear when the absolutes collapse into one another and the protagonist is consumed by justified paranoia.

### Wide Sargasso Sea

The novel Wide Sargasso Sea, published in 1966, brought Jean Rhys fame for the first time. It appeared after a thirty year absence from print, and an accidental resurrection.<sup>30</sup> It is her most polished and successful work. In it she abandons the focus of Europe from her middle period, and returns to the West Indies. It is in artistic terms an attempt at circularity--a rereading of the past on the basis of new knowledge and of thirty years' difficult existence in Europe which had taught her that alienation is not always to do with place.

The novel is a brilliant fictional prologue to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. It cleverly takes many of Brontë's details and works backwards from them, reconstructing their origins in the past, setting them in Edward Rochester's mysterious Caribbean interlude prior to his return to England with his mad wife and his meeting with Jane Eyre. Rhys' protagonist is "the mad woman in the attic" in Brontë's novel, called Bertha there, but given her full family name--Antoinette Cosway in Rhys' book. It tells of her childhood, her ruined family, and of her marriage to Edward Rochester, the Englishman who had come to the colony to make money. The first section of the novel is told in Antoinette's

voice. The second section cleverly switches to Rochester's voice to describe the intensity of his unexpected seduction after marriage, by the exotic creature he had married for money, and by the landscape she exposed him to. The novel's violent final section and climax is filtered through the now maddened consciousness of Antoinette, in exile in England where she is to die.

The historical background to Rhys' novel, about which she is very accurate, is quite telling. Kenneth Ramchand in The West Indian Novel and its Background spoke of a "terrified consciousness" which informed that minority group, the White West Indians.<sup>31</sup> Both Jean Rhys and Antoinette Cosway were the offspring of this Caribbean minority, its history and consciousness. In 1887 one historian said of this group--"The English of these islands are melting away."<sup>32</sup> The emancipation of the slaves in Dominica in 1832 had fully revealed the spiritual and economic failures of the plantation class there. Many were ruined. Rhys' novel is set in this class and in the period immediately after emancipation, when the process of "decolonization" was at its most uncontrolled and violent; this sudden release of native force put under direct attack the terrified presence of white colonials in a beautiful but alien landscape which they had attempted to usurp. In obviously cast grave doubts too on the status of those tenuous links between the races under plantation culture:<sup>3</sup> the long-serving negro family servants; in Rhys' novel this



figure is simultaneously the children's nurse and the dangerous "obeah" woman, an occult power figure. If the consciousness of the white colonials had been "terrified" of the Caribbean before this time, then this element was profoundly magnified when the natives began to riot and burn down their houses, revealing for the first time the horror and violence which had been the underside to an apparently gracious colonial culture. Phyllis Shaffley, another Caribbean writer and contemporary of Rhys', describes Dominica in these terms: "Beauty and disease, beauty and sickness, beauty and horror; that was the island."<sup>33</sup>

It is my suggestion that what Rhys returns to in her only "Caribbean" novel is this "terrified consciousness" of the alienated white in a dangerous place. Beauty and its underside, horror, sickness and disease provide the key to the earliest alienation Rhys saw and experienced. It provided a paradigm too for what she saw later in her life in European cities and in human behaviour everywhere. Acquired in her youth it inspired the critique her fiction levelled against the bourgeois culture of appearance which falsely tried to deny or to level out these polarities in human nature. Rhys' more general conclusions about the state of human nature and the world then have been grounded in a time and place where relations between human beings could actually be categorised according to race and the master/slave balance of power. Given this primitive polarity, it is not altogether surprising that Rhys sees

much apparently civilized human behaviour in these terms; her characters are generally capable of no more than a troubled blend of polarized reactions to one another alternating attraction and repulsion, sympathy and hatred.

In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys finally faces and reveals that the "specific" terrified consciousness of the historically marooned white West Indian, is in fact a universal heritage. It is the consciousness with which all her characters have had to live, of the horror behind the beauty. Antoinette Cosway describes the garden around her family home as she remembers it in childhood:

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. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered--then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep-purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it.<sup>24</sup>

The forces in conflict in Wide Sargasso Sea--reason and the unknowable, male and female, the civilized world and the tropics, make up two mutually exclusive worlds; in the marriage of Edward Rochester and Antoinette Cosway they meet head on, and the familiar paradigm of master/slave and beauty/horror emerge. Rochester arrives in the West Indies as a "colonizer" ready to take what he can and to use up

what is best in the place. Instead, he finds himself seduced by the pleasures of the place, antithetical in its sensuousness to England. Finally, however, he is not able to yield to it completely the caution, self interest and reason of his training; his expectation of betrayal by "the foreign" fulfills itself. He leaves with more than he came, the temptations of the place exorcized.

In this war of worlds the imagery of the landscape--and for this Rhys used Dominica, though it is not named--provides a powerful subtext. From the first the spirit, even the look of this place confuses and disquiets Rochester. When he marries a woman who is deeply at ease with it, who goes so far as to call it her place, he quickly identifies woman with landscape, making of the island a natural, psychological and sexual terrain. It is a lush and fragrant jungle, with waterfalls, emerald pools, mysterious forests, and flowers that look both fragile and deadly. On the way to the estate where they will honeymoon, Rochester is disturbed and distrustful of this "...wild place. Not only wild but menacing. The hills would close in on you....'What an extreme green', was all I could say....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" (pp. 69-70). At this stage of his "marriage" to woman and place, his thoughts are still predominantly material--of the mercantile world and the dowry he has to collect.

...Dear Father. The thirty pounds have been paid to me without question or conditions, no provision made for her (that must be seen to.) I have a modest competence now.

...I have sold my soul, or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl it thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet... (p. 70)

At Granbois, the estate where Antoinette had spent holidays as a child, Rochester is quickly intoxicated, first by the freshness of the air and the abundant flowers, and as he stays longer, he succumbs to its "disturbing secret liveliness." "I'd find myself thinking...I want what it hides" (p. 92). He succumbs as well to his exotic wife, as though his senses had been drugged. He forgets caution and curses himself for his former weakness. Only when he senses danger does he fall back on what is worst in his Englishness; then he becomes imperious when he is challenged by the servants, or Antoinette, or changing perceptions of the place. Then "...they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal" (p. 102). When he receives Daniel Cosway's letter telling him of his wife's family history of madness, and of the possibility that she has sexually betrayed him with a negro relative he recoils into his Europeanness, his alienation vindicated. At the nadir of his withdrawal from his wife and the place, he becomes lost in a hostile jungle forest. He is mistaken by a screaming child for one of the living dead and becomes himself, in a state of profound disturbance,, obsessed with the idea of death in life, and how at least for him, this island seems to embody that idea.

The trees were threatening and the shadows of the trees menaced me. That green menace. I had felt it ever since I saw this place. There was nothing I knew, nothing to comfort me.  
(p. 150)

When his mind clears and his reason is restored the matter becomes much simpler; the place had simply turned out to be a "false heaven;" a place which he had finally failed to usurp, or as he sees at other moments, into which he had failed to gain admission. "Sane...I hated the place...I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know...I hated the mountains and the hills--for what I had lost before I found it (p. 172). So he abandons the island, and takes with him to her English abandonment, his West Indian wife. He has succeeded in usurping her.

If Rochester in Rhys' novel is one world, then Antoinette is the other. Rochester was right when he met her, to say that she was of the place; she understood it and respected it. Speaking of his fear of it, she says that such a reaction is irrelevant. "It is not for you not for me. It has nothing to do with either of. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else. I found that out long ago when I was a child" (p. 130). In fact, it is as a child, that Antoinette has first defined herself against the English. When she observes her English step-father, Mr. Mason, display minimal understanding of the West Indies and especially of the natives "...They are children--they wouldn't hurt a fly"--she knows that he is a fool, however kind. As Creoles, Antoinette and her mother are at a remove

from both the blacks and the English. Antoinette takes her cue from her mother "...so without a doubt not English, but no white nigger either: (p. 23) ...She grows up excluded from both groups, but especially despised by the blacks as "tainted" whites--"Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger," they tell her as they burn down the Mason house once they have been set free.

So Antoinette has grown up susceptible to the incredible beauties of her birthplace and at the same time, aware of and susceptible to the hostile forces at work in it. When she falls in love with Rochester she wants to share the best of the place with him; in return she requires that he unconditionally enter this world of her. For a time, aided by wine and summer nights, she wins him. But the cost to her is high. When he turns on her, fearing betrayal, her sense of security in her place is most damaged:

Do you know what you've done to me?....I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it. It's just somewhere else where I have been unhappy. (p. 148)

While it is true that the Englishman in Rochester, quite directly in a sense, ruined Antoinette Cosway by what he was incapable of doing and feeling, and by his need to destroy what frightened him, Antoinette, like all Rhys' heroines, contributed significantly to her own downfall. Her consciousness had been formed in the midst of profound

cultural alienation. Her childhood was a neglected, decaying, Victorian affair. The psycho-historical context of this childhood was steeped in violence, upheaval, and tragedy, inspiring in her some dreams of safety and substance. She is, when Rochester meets her, a creature of fear, who needs from him dramatic affirmation of her world, grim and dying though it is. As one critic describes it "In both myth and reality the whites of the island feel as though they are in the heart of Eden after the fall," their existence requiring confirmation.<sup>35</sup> Antoinette's psychic legacy from her class and family is unstable, unfocused and full of fear and passion. Details of her life cannot help but reflect the complex and malignant psycho-sexual relations between the races on the island. When her mother goes mad, her guardians are blacks who sexually abuse her; the former mistress is sexually subject to her servants. When Rochester seduces a native servant girl to free himself from Antoinette's sexual hold on him, he too falls into this disturbing legacy of slavery.

Rhys' almost incantatory descriptions of the landscape which takes over Rochester's mind and senses, she carefully invests with the dual powers of beauty and horror. Behind the lush seductiveness and apparent fragility, is the potentially malignant and terrifying natural world, reflecting in a kind of spiritual correspondence, the behaviour of the characters. Rochester certainly sees his West Indian wife as a creature of place, in these dualistic terms: as both compellingly beautiful and as fatally diseased. Though she

denies that place has any effect on their behaviour, Rhys makes clear that it does, although in quite opposite ways. In Rochester, the place has aroused previously closeted instinct and an erotic sensitivity. In Antoinette is exposed a desperate need to draw Edward into her exotic private world, one which operates according to natural rhythms and the harmony of the senses. In the novel the moon is her objective correlative. It is of course a world beyond Rochester's comprehension. Her need of him simply adds to his fear. "It was not a safe game to play. Life, Death came very close in the darkness" (p. 94)

Recurrent Rhys themes are here: the desperate power struggle, in the sexual relationship between Antoinette and Rochester, of female passion and male fear; the urgency and obsession of the woman met by hesitation and withdrawal in the man. This state of things finally returns the heroine to that state of despair and isolation which is Jean Rhys' principal subject matter once her angry social and sexual critiques have exhausted themselves. Rochester takes his wife into a cold exile in England. She becomes maddened by despair in the attic of his country house. Antoinette Cosway's story--exile and madness--leaves room for only one final gesture of resistance to the forces which have all but extinguished her. In a self-annihilating but transcendent moment, Antoinette summons up all of the fire and radiance of her Caribbean past, and burns down her English prison, Rochester's house, as the Dominican natives



had ruined the houses of their masters once they had been set free. The cost is her life.

### Europe

In my readings of Voyage In The Dark and Wide Sargasso Sea I have attempted to suggest ways in which the "terrified" West Indian consciousness threaded through Rhys' otherwise pastoral childhood, and informed the fiction which had, as its base, memories of the Caribbean. She translated this impulse into a critique of social and individual behaviour based on sex, money and power. The universe Rhys envisions in these works is a malevolent one, and never more so than when her characters ignore these fundamentally irreconcilable distinctions, and imagine that connections between their private worlds are possible.

In three novels written in Europe between 1928 and 1939, Jean Rhys provides a different focus and a far more ambivalent setting for despair. These are urban pieces, and while memory plays a significant role in characters' lives, there is not the attempt to piece together the past and present as wholly as Voyage In The Dark and Wide Sargasso Sea attempted. Quartet (1928), published in the United States as Postures, After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (1931) and Good Morning, Midnight (1939) take, as their form and subject matter, the precarious free-floating existence of the vagrant expatriate between the wars. A critique of that condition is implied as surely as that informed by her Caribbean experience, but the consciousness underlying her critique here is that of

impoverished exile, rootless and existing entirely in the present tense.

Typically, Marya Zelli's life in Quartet is described as "...haphazard. It lacked, as it were, solidity; it lacked the necessary fixed background. A bedroom, balcony and cabinet de toilette in a cheap Montmartre hotel cannot possibly be called a solid background."<sup>36</sup>

The best description of Rhys' world at this time is provided by the Australian painter, Stella Brown, lover of Ford Madox Ford, in her memoirs, Drawn From Life.<sup>37</sup> She records her meeting with Jean Rhys honestly, I think, despite a certain retrospective emotional antagonism, based on Ford's subsequent involvement with the young writer. Rhys also records the meeting, with her own biases, in Quartet. But young Jean Rhys:

The girl was a really tragic person. She had written an unpublishably sordid novel of great sensitiveness and persuasiveness, but her gift for prose and her personal attractiveness were not enough to ensure her any reasonable life, for on the other side of the balance were bad health and destitution, shattered nerves, an undesirable husband, lack of nationality, and a complete absence of any desire for independence. When we met her she possessed nothing but a cardboard suitcase and the astonishing manuscript. She was down to her last three francs and she was sick.

[Nevertheless]

...She took the lid off the world that she knew, and showed us an underworld of darkness and disorder, where officialdom, the bourgeoisie and the police were the eternal enemies and the fugitive the only hero. All the virtues, in her

view, were summed up in 'being a sport,' which meant being willing to take risks and show gallantry and share one's last crust, more attractive qualities, no doubt, than patience or honesty or fortitude. She regarded the law as the instrument of the 'haves' against the 'have nots' and was well acquainted with every rung of that long and dismal ladder by which the respectable citizen descends towards degradation.<sup>38</sup> (emphasis added)

This is a portrait of Jean Rhys the writer, and I do not wish to blur biography and literary output. But it is the idea that a position of utter degradation can fuel a talent to expose that I concentrate on--"She took the lid off the world that she knew." This world is the impoverished artistic/criminal fringe, in which Rhys' three autobiographical heroines, Marya Zelli, Julia Martin and Sasha Jansen are marooned.

Each of these novels tells the same story of love and abandonment, expectation and betrayal, and for the heroine, isolated and desperate survival at the edge of the social order. The three women are chronological developments of the same character, progressively more broken by what happens to her. In each novel, what is destructive in the world becomes more revealed and more undeniable. Despair becomes more profound. Good Morning, Midnight, the culminating work in this series of three novels, is Rhys' darkest work, and precedes a thirty year silence.

Structurally, these works are perceptually fragmented, and certainly they deal with social and psychic fragmentation; yet they are carefully formed, structurally precise works, relentless in their dual focus: that is to explore the

private worlds of their female protagonists and to confront the bourgeois world in which they will inevitably be victims. These concerns are brought into high focus in precise human terms when Rhys portrays with great cynicism, the fatal cross-purposes of men's and women's behaviour toward each other. Men and women provide the psychological poles Rhys wishes to explore, just as London and Paris, the two alternating settings in these novels, are both geographical and psychological poles. For Rhys, London is always the centre of crushing respectability and Paris, the dream landscape where at least some things are possible.

Marya Zelli, the earliest of these heroines, is the most innocent as well. She is a bewildered expatriate, whose marriage to a foreigner has robbed her of her own sense of nationality without providing her with a new one. It has cast her off into European society but not provided any of the resources needed to keep her there. With her husband in prison and no money, she is at her most reduced until she is "saved" by H.J. and Lois Heidler (as Rhys had been by Ford Madox Ford and Stella Brown), two luminaries in expatriate literary circles in Paris. When taken up by these two apparent benefactors, Marya wrongly believes them to be "internationalists" and therefore natural allies, fighting, like her, by instinct, against respectability, monotony and "the soul destroying middle."<sup>29</sup> When she falls in love with Heidler, and his world is more fully revealed to her, she quickly sees through the experimental lowlife

of the expatriate artists in Montparnasse--"The Beautiful Young Men, the Dazzlers, the Middle Westerners, the Down and Outs, and Freaks who would never do anything, the Freaks who just possibly might" (p. 129). She denounces especially the literary hangers-on and poseurs, "Imagining they know anything when they know its name" (p. 130). Underneath a bohemian veneer were the same orthodox, class-determined individuals as everywhere else. For them in Paris, "even sin was an affair of principle and uplift if you were an American, and of proving conclusively that you belonged to the upper classes, but were nevertheless an anarchist, if you were English" (p. 62).

The Heidlars above all, maintain Bohemian appearances, beneath which "they were inscrutable people, invulnerable people," and Marya "hadn't a chance against them, naive sinner that she was" (p. 101). The apparently agreeable ménage à trois into which she is lured with them is in fact a power play for the Heidlars--H.J. to have a woman he wants, and Lois to keep the man--very conventional orthodoxies of the middle-class married. Marya is "safe" with them as long as she plays by the rules of their lives. Finally, she cracks under the pressure of their respectable cannibalizing of her life and of her genuine and pathetically dependent love for Heidler. When she begins to make trouble for Heidler, Heidler drops the cosmopolitan facade and begs her to play according to the rules, and not to make his life difficult or disordered. Marya gives in "to have a little peace," and subjects herself to a degrading interlude, also

conventional, in which she is set up in a cheap hotel, where Heidler visits her intermittently for sex in "an atmosphere of departed and ephemeral love [which] hung about the room like stale scent" (p. 111). It is this subjection that precipitates her descent into despair. "I feel as if I had fallen down a precipice" (p. 112). Now her victimization becomes horrifyingly clear to her, as does her awareness that she is powerless to stop it. Her role in the social fabric is becoming clearer to her, too. She remembers being told by a sculptor that "victims are necessary so that the strong may exercise their will and become more strong" (p. 73). When Heidler pays her to stay away, finally discarding her, "she was quivering and abject in his arms, like some unfortunate dog abasing itself before its master" (p. 131). Heidler, the "large, invulnerable, perfectly respectable" Englishman is forced to reject Marya, the genuine demi-mondaine who fills him with fear and forces him to behave badly. "I have a horror of you. When I think of you I feel sick," he says in parting, "...what did you do when the man you loved said a thing like that? You laughed obviously... 'So this is the café fine of rupture'" (p. 78).

There are flaws in this first novel of Rhys'--certain lapses in narrative force, an occasional failure to synchronize, a degree of self-indulgence, and a rather unbalanced conclusion--Marya's abrupt murder at the hands of her husband, just as things are beginning to unravel. Yet the novel has displayed for the first time Rhys'

distinctive style, and the major concerns of all her later fiction. We see for the first time, that disturbing trick of narration--and her distinguishing feature as a writer who links the modern with the post-modern--a deliberate cultivation of distance between the cool, brittle surface of the work, the apparent narrative voice, and an underlying complicit voice. Subjectivity is at once both the form and the substance of the work, so that characters are revealed not simply by what they do, or confront--this makes up Rhys' social critique--but also by the style in which their consciousness is rendered. In this representation of consciousness, Rhys is unsentimental, understated and ironic, both terse and elegant. This is especially important in making comprehensible the extreme passivity of her central women characters and its larger implications. What happens to them is readily understood. It is not difficult to be partisan when Rhys portrays in a matter of fact way and therefore damningly, socially pre-determined behaviour, but it is difficult to understand sometimes the degree of willingness to suffer, with which Rhys endows her heroines. When they manage to escape direct assault, they seem to drift into disaster and paralysis by their own momentum. But at the heart of their passivity is fear.

It was a vague and shadowy fear of something cruel and stupid that had caught her and would never let her go. She had known that it was there--hidden under the more or less pleasant surface of things....Always. Ever since she was a child. (p. 33)

Marya is in some sense, a natural victim then, ever at the mercy of anyone who detects it. Despite her victim status and occasional delusions however, she is like her creator, clear-eyed and acute in her observation of others, particularly her tormentors. Their behaviour is such that the writer need do no more than transcribe their words and actions completely unadorned, to damn them. And at this, Rhys and her heroines are particularly gifted. This talent tends to add to her heroine's difficulties. For her characters, the pain of surviving ugly and brutal behaviour requires a certain blurring of the facts, a moving from rescue to rescue if one is to continue living. Only in a kind of dream state can Marya accept the unbearable present in unredeemed isolation. The interior monologue within this trance becomes a key figure in Rhys' fiction. It is at this level that the complicit authorial voice functions below the surface of the text. These monologues reveal both the character's private world and the impossibility of communicating it to anyone. As Marya falls further and further into despair and disorder, Rhys subtly alters the pattern of images and rhythms used to convey this state of alternating dream/nightmare. In these we see beyond the primitive patterns of dependence that seem to trap her character, into something larger--a broader human vulnerability than pathological passivity would imply, and a brutally clear sense of who and what is to blame. As Marya's options narrow, her mind becomes less and less stable; she sees herself as a trapped animal. This image of



confinement, of life lived at a primitive level beyond our control, is to be a key idea in Rhys' other fiction, where powerless characters battle to survive in a mercilessly deterministic universe. This is the ground-level at which characters in her novels are oppressed; all other conflicts between classes, races and the sexes--are echoes of it. At its most extreme, this metaphor of oppression rivals Kafka's images of horror, fear and disorientation.

She was trying to climb out of the blackness up an interminable ladder. She was very small, as small as a fly, yet so heavy, so weighted down that it was impossible to hoist herself to the next rung. The weight on her was terrible. She was going to fall. She was falling. The breath left in her body. (p. 162)

Such passages do more than render consciousness. They stylize it. This nightmarish quality invades the detached surface realism of the novel. Marya's only escape from fear at this pitch is to drink, to sleep and to engage in temporary fantasies based on love and money, ordering with absurd precision every minute of her waking existence, which in its futility, is reminiscent too, of Kafka.

Rhys' focus in the novel is narrow, but it is disciplined to provide shape for an all-encompassing theme: that beneath her critique (that men are spoilers and that bourgeois society mutilates), all are victims. If men are blind and selfish, driven by fear and lust, then women are their accomplices, driven by a desperate and life-denying need for protection. This is the distilled interior of the novel working in complicity with, (though in apparent

opposition to) the detached surface of the work. This narrative tension is at the heart of the dialectic between consciousness and critique which informs all of Rhys' fiction.

She refines it further in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (1931), where the brittle surface becomes a glassy objectivity.<sup>40</sup> In keeping with this, her heroine is an even more anonymous exile than Marya. Julia's "career of ups and downs has rubbed most of the hallmarks off her, so that it was not easy to guess at her age, her nationality, or the social background to which she properly belonged" (p. 14). Her world is harsher, her status clearer. In "organized society" she "had no place and against [it] she had not a dog's chance" (p. 22). Julia too has impaled herself on her love of a conventional Englishman, who, she discovers too late, "was perfectly adapted to the social system" (p. 24). Julia is the force of "the other" in his life; he is tempted by the perversity of his attraction to this demi-mondaine. One of his love letters to her had begun, "I would like to put my throat under your feet" (p. 28). At all other times, however, "He wanted to establish a sane and normal atmosphere." His conventionality, and its underside, "smashed [her] up." Julia is without resources--"too vulnerable ever to make a success of a career of chance" (p. 14). She is not without toughness and endurance, but as before it is passive:

Of course you clung on because you were obstinate. You clung on because people tried to shove you off, despised you, and were rude to you. So you clung on. Let quite alone, you would have let go of your own accord. (P. 180).

But when her conventional lover spurns her, Julia confronts in him all that she despises in "organized society" and finds herself still capable of rage. "If all good, respectable people had one face, I'd spit in it. I wish they all had one face so I could spit in it" (p. 135).

The narrative monitors Julia's existence as she endures despair. It is at a further remove from crisis than Quartet --a study of aftermath, of "clinging on." For Julia the game is temporarily over. This is Rhys' first expanded study of female consciousness in impasse--"the abandonment of fatigue" (p. 78). Here random sexual encounters are a search for any human connection rather than for love. Julia's expectations are minimal, but even then she is disappointed. When a lover leaves quickly before she wakes after a night together, she looks at the note he leaves. It is "as if she were reading something written by a stranger to someone she had never seen" (p. 157). Quartet declares all its characters victims; After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie focuses on the inevitably abortive attempts of these victims to connect with one another. They are profoundly isolated, living alone in "the hour between dog and wolf" (p. 190).

#### Good Morning, Midnight

Despite the fact that Jean Rhys has concerned herself consistently in fiction with the private rather than the public world, with consciousness rather than history, there are several important senses in which Good Morning, Midnight

is a novel of its time. It appeared in 1939. The novel completes the portrait of her woman protagonist in decline over four novels. Sasha Jansen is the last of these incarnations, with, for the moment, slightly more money than the others, but much less control. Judith Kegan Gardiner's reading of his novel sees it as "goodnight to Modernism," the literary mainstream of the day: Thomas Staley connects its central anxieties with "the broad economic decline and the sense of impending disaster that was part of the 1930's."<sup>41</sup>

The central character is "beached," but alive.

I stayed there, staring at myself in the glass.  
 What do I want to cry about?...On the contrary,  
 it's when I am quite sane like this, when I have  
 had a couple of extra drinks and am quite sane,  
 that I realize how lucky I am. Saved, rescued,  
 fished-up half-drowned, out of the deep, dark  
 river, dry clothes, hair shampooed and set.  
 Nobody would know I have ever been in it.  
 Except, of course, that there always remains  
 something. Yes, there always remains something  
 ....Never mind, here I am, sane and dry, with my  
 place to hide in. What more do I want...I'm  
 a bit of an automaton, but sane surely--dry,  
 cold and sane. Now I have forgotten about dark  
 streets, dark rivers, the pain, the struggle and  
 the drowning...<sup>42</sup>

As the title taken from a poem by Emily Dickinson implies, the heroine is dispossessed: of day, order, light and love.

Sunshine was a sweet place.  
 I liked to stay--  
 But Morn didn't want me--now--  
 So good-night, Day!<sup>43</sup>

In Dickinson's poem, times of day and night and degrees of light are spoken of as though they are placed, persons, states of mind. Though dispossessed, this initial speaker seems to be willing herself away from light and acceptance.<sup>44</sup>

There are many literary instances--not least from this period, Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (and I think in certain senses that this novel of Rhys' is a cynical reply to Woolf)--of a woman's space as a metaphor for the condition of the woman herself.<sup>45</sup> In Good Morning, Midnight Sasha's room is given a voice--"Quite like old times," the room says. "Yes? No?" (p. 9). It has power, and is all of the rooms of her past superimposed on one another. This room is austere and shabby. There is a cell-like finality, a clarity about its details although no city or quarter is specified:

There is two beds, a big one for madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur. The washbasin is shut off by a curtain. It is a larger room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible. The street outside is narrow, cobble-stoned, going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What they call an impasse. (p. 9)

There is no description of the building which contains the room. The eye moves from room to street. It is as though the room is suspended in air, out of ordinary context. The street itself is like a detail from a dream or a children's story--cobble stones turning into stairs rising up to end in impasse.

We then hear of the temporal impasse in which the heroine is living:

I have been here five days. I have decided on a place to eat in at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in after dinner. I have arranged by little life. (p. 9)

She presents her entire existence as an interstice, but within it the timing of the minutiae of her day has been

arranged with geometric precision. There must be no gaps in which the past might intrude on sanity. We find that the heroine has recently recreated herself, changing her name to Sasha to try to improve her luck. We never know what her other name is. She invents herself and her current condition. She is a woman in fading middle age, living in Paris at the expense of a friend who had come across her in London, broken down and without resources. She likes Paris because she has survived it in other lives. "Paris is looking very nice tonight....You are looking very nice tonight, my beautiful, my darling, and oh what a bitch you can be! But you didn't kill me after all, did you? And they couldn't kill me either" (p. 16). Her "film mind," her consciousness functioning like cinema, constantly draws her back into memories of past loves and other failures in this, the only city where she has ever had any luck. Her life within its stalemate is rigorously arranged according to her private survival code based on luck, experience, and association.

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 never shall be, looking glasses I look nice in, looking glasses I don't, dresses that will be lucky, dresses that won't, and so on. (p. 46)

The thing is to have a programme, not to leave anything to chance--no gaps. (p. 15)

We understand that the gaps would be quickly filled up with bloodied images of the past--with defeat in the present and despair for the future.

In this novel, the now familiar dialectic between the world and the self, at the base of Sasha's paranoia and obsession, becomes war, which she cannot even be sure of surviving. In this Rhys does not mean to localize her critique of the social order to either the male sex or to the bourgeoisie. She means us to understand that these people are both predators and prey because they are party to that social contract whereby some must always dominate over others. Their freedom is as likely to be lost as anyone else's. Her focus is power and its effects--and this can express itself in language as well as action:

"Why don't you drown yourself in the Seine?"  
 These phrases run trippingly off the tongues of the extremely respectable. They think in terms of a sentimental ballad. And that's what terrifies you about them. It isn't their cruelty, it isn't even their shrewdness --it's their extraordinary naiveté. Everything in their whole bloody world is a cliché. Everything is born out of a cliché, rests on a cliché, survives on a cliché. And they believe in the clichés--there's no hope.  
 (p. 42)

The cliché is of course the bourgeois life which Sasha both envies and despises; and of course at times it is important for her to appear to be living this cliché too--whenever she is an employee for example. "Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you" (p. 106). But her ultimate failure to do so is also strikingly captured in language--when language is appropriated by the moneyed, and the powerful, before whom she falls silent, only to rage internally later and to imagine what she might have said if she could have found

her voice. This happens to her when she is working in a fashion house in Paris. Profoundly alienated by the kind of work involved, she collides head on one day, with the new boss--"the real English type...Bowler hat, majestic trousers, oh-my-God expression...I know him at once" (p. 19). He at once attacks her for lacking the languages her job requires. Her mind free-associates wildly while he lectures and interrogates her. She is incapable of any but the most elementary or absurd response. She panics, and in her anxiety botches an errand he sends her on; the failure is actually his--he mispronounces the French word for cashier, and she becomes lost in the building looking for someone who does not exist. She stumbles through the language trap that she imagines he has set for her--"dozens of small rooms, passages that don't lead anywhere, steps going up and steps going down" (p. 25). When she gives up and returns to him he humiliates her for her incompetence. "God knows I'm used to fools, but this complete imbecility....This woman is the biggest fool I've ever met in my life. She seems to be half-witted....Just a hopeless, helpless little fool aren't you?...Well, aren't you? "Yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh yes" (pp. 27-28). Terror silences her.

Later, alone, when she recovers her composure, she imagines what an effective response to him might have been:

"Well, let's argue this out Mr. Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain,



slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky....Isn't it so Mr. Blank? There must be the dark background to show up the bright colours. Some must cry so that others may be able to laugh more heartily. Sacrifices are necessary....Let's say that you have this mystical right to cut my legs off. But the right to ridicule me afterwards because I'm cripple--no, that I think you haven't got. And that's the right you hold most dearly, isn't it? You must be able to despise the people you exploit."

"Did I say all this? Of course, I didn't. I didn't even think it (p. 29).

The power of this incident keeps it in Sasha's mind long after the event. It enters the narrative as memory--remembered powerlessness. It is one of the sharpest outbursts against exploitation anywhere in Rhys' fiction.

Good Morning, Midnight is the only novel of Rhys' where there is a male equivalent in experience and sensibility to her female protagonist. The young gigolo, René, is Sasha's double. He too is of uncertain origins, an obscure past, "no papers, no passport...the slightest accident and I'm finished" (p. 76), a troubled present and doubtful future; like Sasha he lives off the temporary affections of strangers and his looks. Given their qualities in common, they should be allies...even lovers; certainly Sasha is attracted to René, glimpses again the almost abandoned possibility of connection with another.

René wishes to tell her everything. But because he too has become a creature of circumstance who invents his life from minute to minute, she can believe nothing that he says. She worries most about their possible involvement when "they start believing each other" (p. 174). She must distrust his opportunism because she recognizes it so well. She is convinced that he only approached her in the first place because of her fur coat, many times pawned, and now worn as a reminder of former well-being. René imagines that she is an aging wealthy woman who will pay for a younger man. For once, in the face of this, she is fearless. "He is out for money and I haven't got any. I am invulnerable" (p. 76). At the simplest level she mistrusts him too because he is a man, one who can at will switch back into the brutal male stereotype with which she is so familiar; at these moments he believes that intelligent women are monstrosities and that sexually reluctant woman should be gang-raped. In her state of psychological impasse, she manages to balance her polar reactions to René--those of alternating attraction and repulsion--until the climax of the novel where the impasse is broken.

This final scene is Rhys' last comment on the relations between the sexes, and a powerful parting metaphor for the maimed consciousness at war with the world; she is not to take it up again, and never in quite this way, for thirty years. The climax involves three people: Sasha at a hysterical pitch of need and physical desire for René before

he disappears, René trying desperately to claim a moment of intimacy from her, and the nameless "commis voyageur," the spectre of a displaced travelling salesman who lives in the hotel room next to Sasha. He has haunted her throughout the novel--a deathhead--"in his beautiful dressing-gown, immaculately white, with long, wide, hanging sleeves...He looks like a priest, the priest of some obscene, half-understood religion" (p. 34). He looks like death waiting for her; he is at the same time simply an unsavoury character trying to proposition her. To succumb to him would mark her lowest ebb. It is René's last night in Paris. He cannot believe that Sasha will not take him to her bed. "But why shouldn't we believe each other just for tonight?... Something must have happened to make you like this." "It took years," she thinks. "It was a slow process" (p. 175). As they drive towards l'Hotel de l'Espérance she remembers a lifetime of mistreatment by men. When her need is greater than her fear, she embraces him, and begins to make love to him, despite her better judgment. At that moment things start to go wrong and her crippling self-consciousness returns--"the room springs out at me, laughing, triumphant ...Les Hommes en Cage...Exactly" (p. 178). She drinks and the room becomes more grotesque. "The damned room grinning at me...Qu'est-ce qu'elle fout ici, la vieille?" (p. 179). They struggle. He tries to take her sexually. Intimacy is finally short-circuited when she fobs him off--tells him not to bother with the sex, simply to take the money and go.

While her voice is clear and deadly, her "film mind" screams renunciation. When he goes, he does not take the money, nor does he come back.

Rhys then gives us a final monologue for Sasha, as powerful in reverse as that provided by Joyce for his heroine, Molly Bloom, at the conclusion to Ulysses.<sup>43</sup> Where finally, Molly opens herself to her husband as a gesture of reconciliation and regeneration, the Rhys heroine in a gesture of supreme self annihilation, opens herself to sexual negation, a new kind of death. "The last performance of What's-her-name And her Boys...Positively the last performance" (p. 184). In her "film mind" she sees René, the genuine object of desire returning to her. In this vision she opens the door to him, undresses and lies in bed, like Molly, trembling with expectation. "I lie very still, with my arm over my eyes. As still as if I were dead..." (p. 190). In René's place, in fact, comes the spectral commis voyageur, in his death-like white dressing gown. It is to this degraded transient whom she abhors, that she responds with Molly's life affirming cries of "Yes--yes--yes..." (p. 190).

It is Rhys' darkest moment, and the closest that she brings her European heroine to the annihilation of self. "I look straight into his eyes and despise another poor devil of a human being for the last time. For the last time..." (p. 190). It is tempting to see this episode as Judith Kegan Gardiner has done, as Jean Rhys' response to

the mythologizing and misrepresentation of female consciousness at the hands of the male Modernists. Where Joyce has portrayed sexual union and the mystically regenerative powers of women in transcendently charged, life-affirming terms, Rhys sees them in the end as the stuff of final nightmare, at least for women, if honestly portrayed. It is possible to see Good Morning, Midnight as a potent critique of some of the major myths of Modernism. Rhys' characters and her fiction, bear the full weight of impoverished existence.

The style of all her works has denied at every turn, too, the disengagement and the irony of mainstream Modernism. As A. Alvarez in his 1974 reappraisal of her work noted "She makes you realize that almost every other novel, however apparently anarchic, is rooted finally in the respectable world."<sup>46</sup> Although Jean Rhys first appeared in print in Ford's transatlantic review along with Pound, Hemingway, Richardson, Stein, Barnes and Ford himself, her work was not, even at that early stage, typical of the review or of her Parisian expatriate peers. In many respects, Rhys' writing was not particularly "of its time." It has often been noted that the novels share a peculiarly timeless quality--a deliberate and dreamlike exclusion of temporal and geographical explicitness. Some of her themes link her with Woolf, Richardson, Mansfield, and Nin, but her preoccupation with the sordid and the demi-monde gives her more in common with Henry Miller and later, Céline.

When Rhys first arrived on the continent, she cannot have been unaware of the experiments of Proust, Joyce, Pound and Eliot, with literary form--with the interior monologue, "stream of consciousness" and time shift. There were many expatriates in Paris in the twenties when Rhys was there, as attested by the scores of literary magazines and reviews which emerged, providing an immediate forum for this literary experiment. Rhys however, was a rather different kind of expatriate from most others. As V.S. Naipaul has put it, she writes "outside the tradition of imperial expatriate writing in which the metropolitan outsider is thrown into relief against an alien background. She was an expatriate but her journey had been the other way around, from a background of nothing to an organized world with which her heroines could never come to terms...This journey, this break in life, is the essential theme of her five novels."<sup>47</sup>

Rhys' general reaction to Paris' literary expatriate population can be quickly deduced from the searing portraits in Quartet. Beneath a thin veneer of "bohemianism" she sees the same moneyed, bourgeois hypocrisy that she saw and loathed in the middle class everywhere. Ford Madox Ford, as remarked earlier, provided the raw material for one of her most damning portraits--H.J. Heidler in Quartet. In life, however, he was rather more useful, providing for Rhys a link with contemporary literature. He in fact served as a mentor, and was an influential editor of Rhys' work as it began to appear in print. She must inevitably have been

influenced by his views on fiction, especially in matters of form. He undoubtedly conveyed to her the value of an impressionistic style, which he himself had perfected in The Good Soldier.<sup>48</sup> This novel's narrator, John Dowell, constantly revises and recreates his perception of events as he acquires a deeper understanding of their significance. Just as impressionistic painting relies on the shifting play of light, so in literary impressionism according to Ford, narration will shift according to the narrator's angle or distance from the events. Ford saw this quality already in the works of Flaubert, de Maupassant and Henry James. Just before the publication of The Good Solider, Ford pointed out the supreme paradox of this kind of writing: that while the novel's effectiveness depended entirely on the "impressions" accumulated and dispensed by the writer, nevertheless the writer must be careful "to avoid letting his personality appear in the course of the book."<sup>49</sup> In impressionism, the author's "whole book, his whole poem is merely an expression of his personality, which is the rendering of experience through this distillation of certain recorded phenomena that capture the essence of that experience."<sup>50</sup> On a formal level this may be true, but the Kafkaesque critique runs counter to it. There is a distinct self involved.

Rhys is nonetheless, on a purely stylistic level, true to the model, and it provides an interesting key to her autobiographical fictions. Her novels are at once

impersonal, formally controlled and cool, and on the other hand, saturated with the intensely personal and private. Impressionist writing at its best, according to Ford, should be "minimalist". In this mode and central to Rhys' sensuous notation of experience, is the emotional ellipsis, which marks her characters' most subtle shifts. Ford advocated and Rhys perfected, non-sequential dialogue, stressing the ironic discrepancy between speech and feeling--speech when it fails to be any kind of objective correlative. In effect, Rhys stylistically takes much from her Modernist antecedents and denies much of what they have to say.

Writing outside the moneyed and cultural mainstream, Rhys was also outside the transcendental element in Modernist fiction, as taken up by the aestheticists of either sex. The aesthetic in fiction resided for her, almost entirely in the realm of form; and in this she is one of the most elegant and purest writers of the twenties and thirties. She is primarily however, a novelist of alienation. Despite a formal element of "timelessness" in her narrative, one of the reasons her fictions are so effective as alienation studies, is that they are so exact; the Rhys woman embodies all outsiders at the mercy of privileged, social configurations in Europe between the wars. She focuses precisely on the way language works, both in society in which her victims struggle to survive and in the literary world of the Modernists in which she struggles to function as a pure stylist in the European tradition of Flaubert



and Turgenev, and as an alienated female voice which does not speak to an appropriate audience. As a writer, Jean Rhys functions outside the disengaged ironies of Modernism though using several of its key forms--principally the autobiographical novel. In other words I would suggest that alienation in Rhys' fictions functions at two levels--social and existential. She compounds the alienating facts of her characters' lives by treating them finally outside a social context, as universal facts of existence; in so doing she seals their fates and creates a devastatingly complete portrait of life lived in despair, where the polarities which torment her characters--of sex, money, power and race, will never be resolved.

To conclude, then, Rhys' autobiographical novels of alienation written from a female expatriate perspective do much to disrupt fixed notions of neat literary chronology--impressionistic fiction followed by the Modernist novel giving way to the post-modern anti-novel. Perhaps this is the reason she is not often discussed as a significant woman writer of her day, or as "belonging" to a particular decade or school, or even nationality. The "self" she brought to fiction was a rootless international creature, haunted by Caribbean power structures from another century, artistically influenced more by the French and the Russians than the English in whose language she wrote, and seeing literature as a vocation, but one at which she could never

earn a living like the comfortably off and widely respected Mrs. Woolf. Her studies of justified paranoia, obsession and defeat, exposées of the English bourgeoisie and its capacity to maim and tyrannize, portrayed with the precision of a nightmare, would not have won her a popular readership in the 1920's. In the 1930's she was regarded as stylistically out of touch, a Georgian sensibility in the shadow of the politico-documentary style of Isherwood, Greene and Orwell. She was lost between the two decades as the antipathetic and uncomprehending reviews she received well indicate.

She is, however, a fascinating and an important transitional writer in several respects. She was a far more subtle ideologue than the male writers of the thirties and at the same time offered far greater social awareness than her female contemporaries. Her damning social critiques were written with such vividness that they take one into the world of universal and inevitable terror, Kafka's world, where one's only response is the "nausea" of a Sartre. An important consideration is that she is a woman's Kafka, offering expressionistic nightmare canvases which illuminate the grotesque consequence of power, cruelty and masochism based on sex and rendering love and life meaningless.

I do not believe that it is possible to dismiss Rhys stylistically on the grounds that she was a Georgian writer trained by Ford, either. Here too, in the area of style, Rhys is an interesting crossover writer. She wrote with

the formal purity of Turgenev or Chekhov, writers she admired. There are strong echoes of Colette's lyricism too. But there were strikingly original and forward-looking aspects of her style which confused her critics. The formal purity, the cool and exquisite precision of her detail, editing and narrative structure, create an air of surface calm for her fiction. There is, at the same time, a chilling irony to the play of tensions between this calm elegance and narrative poise, and the psycho-nightmare which collapses all reliable order beneath it. There are hints here of the kinds of post-modern stylistic pastiches to which we have become used in the works of writers like Muriel Spark, Renata Adler, Saul Bellow and Italo Calvino.

Like these contemporary writers, Rhys brought a range of literary and perceptual styles--expressionism, impressionism and realism--to bear on her issue, the psycho-social fragmentation of women between the wars. In a highly self-conscious and controlled way, she made of the autobiographical novel something much more open; she made it do more, while preserving its essential opaqueness as a personal document.

## Chapter Three

Self Portraiture as Cubist ArtificeExile or Expatriate

While Jean Rhys drifted towards Europe, Gertrude Stein was a determined expatriate for cultural reasons, much as Henry James had been in the nineteenth century. In 1903, Stein made a premeditated personal decision to move to Paris, a cultural climate that was kind to artists. She preceded, by nearly twenty years, the much more self-conscious and theatrical displacement of an entire generation of other young Americans who went to Paris "to write." Always quick to remind that she was an American, Stein made it clear that she did not think of herself as in any way in exile, that is, living at a disadvantage, or without choices. She was a voluntary expatriate, on good terms with her country, who lived in Paris because it suited her and provided her with a suitable audience for her writing. America, she had decided early in a literary career almost religious in its daily application, was not a practical place for her to live and write. In answer to a questionnaire published in the Paris literary journal transition which asked "Why do you live abroad? Gertrude Stein replied that "the United States is a country the right age to be born in and the wrong age to live in...a rich and well-nourished home but not a place to work in."<sup>1</sup>

Malcolm Cowley in his book on the twenties, Exile's

Return, supports this verdict on America as a place to leave if one wants an artistic career.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, he describes an America that is a full decade and a half on from the one Stein left in 1903, but one senses that many of the trends he describes so passionately lay behind Stein's comment:

Almost everywhere, in every department of cultural life, Europe offered the models to imitate in painting, composing, philosophy, folk drinking, the drama, sex, politics, national consciousness--indeed some doubted his country [the U.S.] was even a nation; it had no traditions except the fatal tradition of the pioneer. As for our contemporary literature...it is indeed one long list of spiritual casualties....One can count on one's two hands the American writers who are able to carry on the development and unfolding of their individualities. Year in, year out, as every competent man of affairs carries on his business (writers) have lapsed into silence or have involved themselves in barren eccentricities, or have been turned into machines...poets...extinguished... novelists...unable to grow up, remain withered boys of seventeen...everywhere there is no scope for individualism; ignorance, unculture, or at the best, mediocrity has triumphed....The highest achievements of our materialistic civilization...count as so many symbols of its spiritual failure.<sup>3</sup>

Gertrude Stein did not every speak out as fiercely as this against her country. She simply decided that it was no country for writers, and not for her. Yet she regarded herself as fundamentally and at all times an American. To live in France was a creative decision. She did learn French to a level of competence, and one of the first exercises she set herself on arrival was to translate

Flaubert's Trois Contes; but she paid no particular attention to either the language or literature of France, the country she virtually adopted until her death in 1946, leaving it only to go on occasional holidays.

Thornton Wilder, lecturing on Stein's work after her death, makes an interesting case for interpreting Stein's absence from the country she was so passionately concerned with, and periodically (The Making of Americans and Four in America) wished to interpret for the benefit of other Americans. He suggests that perhaps she is an offshoot of a "reclusive tendency" in American writing. His chief example is Emily Dickinson, a writer who wished to isolate herself from her natural audience, the better to distill what she had to tell them.<sup>4</sup> Stein was in no normal way reclusive, far from it, hers was an intensely social life. But in some central artistic sense, French society did not count for her. It did not intrude on her, shape or inhibit her. She lived in isolation from both American and French culture, her roots and all the automatic points of reference her adult consciousness might seek out at home.

But America was frequently on her mind. "America is my country, but Paris is my home town."<sup>5</sup> Within her idiosyncratic historical and geographical frameworks, America's position was unique. She saw it, quite curiously as "the oldest country in the world because by the methods of the civil war and the commercial conception that followed it, America created the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> One

senses her strong identification with America's power as an innovator. She did see a connection between geography and character. "After all, anybody is as their land and air is."<sup>7</sup>

If American interested her in the abstract, she was enchanted by it in actuality when she revisited it for the first and only time in 1934 after The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas had been a best seller there. When she returned to France after the trip, she was quoted in the New York Herald Tribune as saying, "I am already homesick for America--I never knew it was so beautiful. I was like a bachelor who goes along fine for twenty-five years and then decides to get married. That is the way I feel--I mean about America" (May 13, 1935). A similarly emotional chord was struck when Stein was asked to speak to Americans by radio from an army camp near her home in newly liberated rural France at the end of World War II. She began "I can tell everybody that none of you know what this native land business is until you have been cut off from that same native land completely for years. This native land business gets you all right."<sup>8</sup> It is as though war reminded her of her Americanness. "Gertrude Stein always said the war was so much better than just going to America. Here you were with America in a kind of way that if you only went to America you could not possibly be."<sup>9</sup> This was undeniably an emotional response. But intellectually, she was very clear that America was not the place for her to be. In Four in America, her analysis of the American character,

she states her basic assumption about American existence: That it "has no context, no organizing boundaries, lacking a substantial limited environment, Americans find themselves free-floating. Therefore they are...perpetual pioneers, every building, never completing....All Americans have is air."<sup>10</sup>

She regarded herself primarily as an artist and only secondly an American. So the appropriate milieu for her work mattered more than her instinctive allegiance to her country. "I was essentially a writer's writer. My audience in France, that was a perfect audience."<sup>11</sup> She claimed in Paris France, her tribute to her home town, to need to live there just as other major creators of the new art in the twentieth century needed to be there. In her explanation of this, she provides a virtual manifesto for literary expatriates.

After all everybody, that is everybody who writes is interested in living inside themselves in order to tell what is inside themselves. That is why writers have to have two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really. The second one is romantic. It is separate from themselves, it is not real, but it is really there....Of course, sometimes people discover their own country as if it were the other...but in general that other country that you need to be free in is the other country not the country where you really belong.<sup>12</sup>

But why France? She explains: "The English Victorians were like that about Italy, the early nineteenth century Americans were like that about Spain, the middle nineteenth century Americans were like that about England, my generation the end of the nineteenth century American



generation was like that about France."<sup>13</sup>

In the opening line of her tribute, she declares that "Paris, France is exciting and peaceful."<sup>14</sup> Both concepts, of stability and permanence on the one hand, and the possibility of upheaval and radical change on the other, seem necessary to Stein. Dwelling lovingly on what is enduring and therefore always compelling about France for the foreign artist and intellectual, she elaborates:

The reason why all of us naturally began to live in France is because France has scientific methods, machines and electricity but does not really believe that these things have anything to do with the real business of living. Life is tradition and human nature....And so in the beginning of the twentieth century when a new way had to be found naturally they needed France....French people really do not believe that anything is important except daily living and the ground that gives it to them. Tradition...and private life and the soil which always produces something, that is what counts.<sup>15</sup>

In a paradoxical sense, however, it is exactly this permanence, belonging to another country, another culture, which provided Stein with a background of "unreality" which was, she said, "very necessary for anybody having to create the twentieth century."<sup>16</sup> France with its contradictory settled/unsettled nature, could free foreign artists from tradition and the past. Paris was a city where the natives' "acceptance of reality is so great that they could let anyone have the emotion of unreality."<sup>17</sup>

France was good to foreigners, she reported, accepting them, leaving them alone and providing them with the kind of background they needed. It was especially good to

Americans, who in Paris could "look modern without being different."<sup>18</sup> And, of course, the French respected the profession of letters, according painters and writers certain privileges, sensibly aware, Stein wrote, that "after all the way everything is remembered is by writers and painters in the period."<sup>19</sup>

This was France's time, according to her. Different countries, she declared, were important at different times in history. England had "gloriously created the nineteenth century" but was steadfastly refusing the twentieth, "American knew the twentieth century too well to create it," therefore Paris, France from 1900 to 1939 is "where everybody has to be to be free."<sup>20</sup> Her evidence for this in Paris France is, as always, anecdotal--souvenirs based on encounters with and observations of individuals and families. She offers no cultural analysis. We get narrative scraps and verbal photographs of France's dogs, farms and potted histories of French cooking. She makes no effort to relate her observations and her conclusions. She does not analyse French behaviour. She is not concerned with how and why things are. As an artist she records what she sees. She wants above all to recreate things being--things as they are at the moment of observation. Her tribute is addressed more to the people of France and the ways in which they have chosen to live, rather than to the place itself. She has chosen, however, conversations and events that somehow to her are French, that embody certain qualities in French

culture and in the country's permanent sense of itself. Her book evaluates what is of value there.

The text is not simply a tribute, a travelogue or an informal memoir. It continues Stein's career-long experiment with prose forms. While basing itself on the personal, the autobiographical, it is also a cultural, historical meditation. Fact and fiction interweave.<sup>21</sup> Although there are specific historical references, these are recorded as far as possible, in the tense Stein invented to describe the nature of events in the twentieth century--the "continuous present." Events then are not selected or linked in the normal ways. They are chosen and arranged as fictional material would be. To consolidate this timeless, aesthetic version of place and existence there, she concentrates far more on the visual, spatial and linguistic aspects of it, rather than the temporal or strictly historical. Most often she provides a visual or aural metaphor for the advantages of being anywhere.

One of the things that I have liked all these years is to be surrounded by people who know no English. It has left me more intensely alone with my eyes and my English...as she says eyes to her were more important than ears...it has been so often said that the appeal of her work is to the ear and to the subconscious. Actually it is her eyes and mind that are active and important and concerned in choosing.<sup>22</sup>

Place is always privileged over time in her writing. In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas for example, it is place and time which is the central marker in recording experience. The photographs in the book are labelled

according to place, not year. The experience of a place clearly has little to do with the duration of that experience in calendar time, e.g. "Gertrude Stein was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania" and "she left it when she was six months old."<sup>23</sup> In the same spirit, photograph titles include "Gertrude Stein in Vienna," "Gertrude Stein at Johns Hopkins Medical School," and "Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in front of Saint Mark's, Venice." No dates are provided.

Place is never simply a specific in Stein's writing-- Paris, 1903. It is frequently a powerfully charged abstract, given almost phenomenological significance, over time. It can be described personally, autobiographically or impersonally, as an abstract background. She speaks of Paris almost as a stage set for the theatre of the avant-garde. This dual sense of place/space invests much of Stein's writing with a liberating dimension of timelessness. Surrounded by the French culture and language, which she was able to observe and appreciate while never giving herself over to them, Stein was free to operate more intensely as an American writing in English.<sup>24</sup> It bothered her a great deal to think that anyone might mistake her for an exotic or foreign "coterie" writer. "There is for me only one language and that is English."<sup>25</sup>

It suited her idiosyncratic literary purposes very well "to be surrounded by people who have no English. I do not know if it would have been possible to have English be so all in all to me otherwise. No, I like living with

so very many people and being all alone with English and myself."<sup>26</sup> One is drawn to the idea that the kind of English Stein wrote under these circumstances amounted to a kind of foreign language, so often did it break with the laws of normal usage. One must first grasp her "alphabet" and "vocabulary" before coming to terms with her overall design. It certainly requires of the readers sympathetic "translation," like any foreign language.

In a curious way, Stein's highly idiosyncratic expatriation managed to sustain quite refined "abstractions" of both her homes--American and France--in her mind at once without having to compromise one at the expense of another. In a sense she lived in France to function more purely, at least intellectually, as an American. She was someone who clearly preferred to be an American abroad, than one at home. She was free from any of the distractions of nationalism, and from having to fight any cultural battles she did not wish to take up. She was free too, to live the kind of personal and creative life that may not have been possible in the U.S. prior to 1920. She was one of the very few Americans who remained in Europe after the thirties when it was no longer fashionable. Her life plan as an expatriate was a very personal one. It is curious to think about whether she would have done what she did to the English language--that is to put it under a microscope and then fracture it--if she had lived in an English speaking country. But it seems paramount to her that she did not.

She needed to work in a kind of language isolation.

She clearly needed and responded to the stimulus of other forms of radical art being produced around her. Paris met an essential requirement for cross-fertilization that resulted in some of her richest forms, e.g. the word portrait in direct response to early cubism, and the poetic opera under the influence of musicians like Virgil Thompson. Stein did not ever wish to detach herself from her American origins and sensibility to become entirely the free-floating internationalist, however, and many of her readers believe there to be something distinctly American about her art.

Stein would have us believe that her expatriation, like her art, was an entirely intellectual matter. One unintellectual aspect of her life intrudes at this point, however, and that is her lesbianism. Lesbianism was far more sympathetically regarded in Europe than in America in 1903. Stein was much freer in Paris to live as a self-declared lesbian intellectual. Her lesbianism, like Jean Rhys' poverty, put her in a different subculture than that of simple expatriate or woman writer. We should note as well, though, that Stein was an independently wealthy expatriate lesbian, so radically distinguishing herself from Rhys. When we read Stein's version of autobiographical fiction we must be aware of this aspect of her private life, which provided a personal and creative starting point. Many of the "metaphors of the self" she uses for her cubist self-portrait are distorting mirrors intended to deceive,

to entertain, to deflect and to reveal in the only way she genuinely believed possible--as a confusing and potentially contradictory totality. The portrait was the objective correlative of an internationalist, androgynous mind. Stein was multi-faceted, playing the American "card" when it suited her, just as at other times, she played the lesbian "card" to suit.

#### Autobiography: Cubist Self Creation

Soon after its publication, a denunciation of Gertrude Stein's The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas by some of those who saw themselves as the book's victims appear in the influential arts publication, transition.<sup>27</sup> Among others, Matisse, Tristan Tzara and Andre Salmon accused her of ignorance of the facts, and in some cases of pathological lying. Matisse, at one time a close friend of Stein's, went into more detail:

Her book is composed, like a picture puzzle, of different pictures which at first, by their very chaos, give an illusion of the movement of life. But, if we attempt to envisage the things she mentions, this illusion does not last. In short, it is more like a harlequin's costume the different pieces of which, having been more or less invented by herself, have been sewn together without taste and without relation to reality.

Many consider these very qualities to be the book's strengths rather than its weaknesses. Matisse inadvertently chooses one of the central images in the post-impressionist painting of the period to symbolize the book--the harlequin, made famous in many of Picasso's canvases of the period;<sup>28</sup>

and the image is an appropriate one. It reminds us that Stein was a key figure in the avant-garde of both the literary and art worlds in the first forty years of the century and it is only in this context that her work can properly be assessed.

Along with writers Joyce, Pound and Eliot, painters Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso and musicians Schönberg, Satie and Stravinsky, Gertrude Stein sensed at the beginning of the twentieth century that traditional forms for representing reality in art were exhausted. A new mimesis was needed. In order to re-establish artistic representation on a new set of first principles, these artists set about deliberately to "deconstruct" as Gertrude Stein described it, traditional artistic structures. This meant a thorough dismantling of both the structural principles of a subject and the traditional unexamined habits of its perception, preparatory to a complete reconstruction of the object. In Stein's case, techniques for deconstruction and reconstruction are so closely related, however, that they can virtually be simultaneous movements of her mind.<sup>29</sup> She and others were responding to philosophical breakthroughs in the works of Henri Bergson and William James which had led to the realization that the structures within which artists had always worked were in fact received conventions which could be manipulated, radically altered or ignored.

In the visual arts, Picasso challenged the laws of perspective in his paintings of the first twenty years of the century, Matisse--the traditional use of colour and



dimensional space--Cézanne, the nature of representational form. These artists made it clear that art no longer need be bound to a mimetic recording of reality. Stein too wanted her work to be free of art's traditional responsibility to the "real world" to hold a mirror up to it. She wanted her literary pieces to be completely self-determining and self-contained artifacts. Throughout her career, as a result, her style becomes more and more abstract. She began with a kind of scientific naturalism, proceeded to a Jamesian stylization of reality, and finally to a point of fragmentation where her words cease to convey conventional meaning of any kind.<sup>30</sup> They become, as one critic has called them, "plastic counters to be manipulated purely in obedience to the artist's expressive will, just as painters manipulate semantic line and colour."<sup>31</sup>

Stein may have failed to match the achievements of painters whose aims she wished to parallel in her writing; it may not be possible to write "cubist prose" that works. Nevertheless, she herself cited modern works of art as analogues for her own verbal experiments. In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas for example, she discusses Matisse's early "Femme au Chapeau" and "Bonheur de Vivre."

It was in this [latter] picture that Matisse clearly realized his intention of deforming the drawing of the human body in order to harmonize and intensify the colour values.... He used his distorted drawings as a dissonance is used in music or as vinegar or lemons are used in cooking or egg shells in coffee to clarify.<sup>32</sup>

By her references to "deforming" and "distorting," Stein must have meant "abstracting." In the same spirit she intended to use verbal "distortions" of language to "clarify" it. The painters, and for that matter, the sculptors (and in different ways, musicians) with whom she associated herself, did not ever have to face the problem of "meaning" as a writer must. Their concerns were as always, form, mass, colour, texture and line.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Stein's work if it is to be properly understood must be considered in relation to the attitudes and practices she purposefully shared with the cubist visual artists. J.M. Brinnin highlights this connection in his study, The Third Rose: Gertrude Stein and Her World.

In most previous associations of poets and painters, and in all previous comparisons of their work, identifications and congruencies had for the most part hinged upon similarities in subject matter and attitude....When the cubists jettisoned subject matter, liaisons between poetry and painting on the old basis were no longer possible....When the literary content of painting was omitted in favour of freely conceived mathematical/intuitive exercise of purely plastic values, Gertrude Stein also attempted to drop subject matter in order to concentrate freely on the "plastic" potentialities of the language itself.<sup>34</sup>

So, from 1910 onwards, Stein "buries" narrative beneath an art of the surface, a surface that is non-mimetic and "plastic" where words, letters and sounds are manipulated as colour, texture and line are refashioned in the canvasses of Picasso, Braque and Juan Gris. Of course, it is understood that the comparison of one art with another is at best, a metaphor.<sup>35</sup> But in this case it is a

necessary one.

Stein applied her principles of "composition" freely to both the visual and literary arts. In fact composition is her word for culture. In "Composition as Explanation," a lecture given to the Cambridge Literary Society in May 1926, she put forward her thesis that generations were "all alike --nothing changes except what is seen--that is the manner of composition. Composition is determined by the manner in which life is being conducted at any given moment." How literature was being conducted in the first quarter of the century has been documented by many in their attempts to "place" the modern. David Lodge, in an important essay, "The Language of Modernist Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy," neatly codifies the qualities of "Modernist" fiction as exemplified by three of its figureheads in prose--James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Marcel Proust.<sup>37</sup> Lodge defines modern fiction as "experimental or innovatory in form," "clearly deviating from other modes of discourse, both literary and non-literary;" it is "much concerned with consciousness" and the workings of the subconscious. "External 'objective' events"--the stuff of traditional narrative--are diminished in scope, and when present, are rendered "selectively and obliquely," leaving more room for "introspection, analysis [and] reflection." The modern novel defies the "beginning-middle-end" structure of traditional narrative, plunging us instead into a "flowing stream of experience." A good deal is asked of the reader.

By a process of "inference and association" he is asked to piece the puzzle of the prose together. Other modes of aesthetic ordering of detail than those of traditional narrative construction are given prominence: "allusion or imitation of literary models or mythical archetypes or repetition--with variation of motifs, images, symbols, a technique often called 'rhythm,' 'leitmotif' or 'spatial form.'" Modern fiction abandons straight chronology as an ordering principle and the use of a traditional omniscient narrator. Instead there is a new relativism of perspective and potentially, a multiplicity of viewpoints. The manipulation of time as a fictional construct takes on a new experimental significance. In English, Joyce, Stein and Virginia Woolf display nearly all of these qualities.<sup>38</sup>

Stein preceded these literary developments largely of the twenties, by some years. She began to base her writing on practices of this kind as early as 1909, with The Making of Americans.<sup>39</sup> The contemporary with whom she is most readily comparable is James Joyce, another resident expatriate of Paris for whom the place was largely irrelevant. Their intentions would appear to be similar, to overthrow the existing literary canon. They shared the basic view that art should transcend reality, that works of art should be autonomous, highly integrated in texture and structure, and that all facets of the work should be of equal importance; hence the Modernist premise that to understand anything about their novels, we must know everything about them.

This shared intention for literature was almost the only thing they had in common as writers. Their sense and use of language was almost diametrically opposed. Their handling of time separated them even further; though they both believed that only the present moment has any real historical significance and that the past and future are significant only in their power to interpret the present. Joyce's present moment is an intense, specific and ornately textured one; for Stein it is possible to abstract the present and to deal with units of time that are discrete and autonomous.

Stein brought this contrast to bear on her major work, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, her "self-portrait" which displays all of the qualities which David Lodge identifies as "Modernist." Curiously it was a best seller as well, which certainly sets it apart from work by Joyce, Eliot, Pound and Woolf, whose popularity was limited to an appreciative cultural élite. Yet Stein's text remains an enigmatic one. While it demands much of the reader, it can be read as nothing more than entertaining memoir, one of a great many written about life in Europe in the twenties and thirties. There is no doubt that Stein wanted it to sell. She had made little or no money from her books, often having printed them at her own expense. Nevertheless, it is also clear that in it, she wished to continue her life-long literary experiment. In fact, she constructs her self-portrait as a Modernist novel and as a cubist painting, incorporating the expected architecture of memoir or

autobiography into a large, more sophisticated, hybrid design.

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is the only one of her books that many consider readable. She wrote it against her better judgement, distrusting profoundly the principles and practices of traditional memoir and even of the highly complex, transmuted autobiographical fiction of Joyce and Proust, in which memory is invested with enormous resonance as a literary tool. Just as she had needed to depart radically from the naturalistic nineteenth century fiction with which she had started her career, Stein could not imagine writing either an actual or a transmuted autobiography in 1932 which acknowledged in any way, what she would have considered the "revisionist" power of memory to record reality accurately or imaginatively. In a peculiar way she wanted to create a new, heightened "realism" which was also modern, and had nothing to do with memory. After great prompting, she wrote her version of a literary memoir in six weeks, and it appeared in 1933. It may not be any kind of verifiable record of the life of Gertrude Stein, the woman and artist, but it is a telling memoir of the richest period in French and international cultural history, this century: Jean Cocteau called it "the heroic age of cubism."<sup>40</sup> The book spans the years from Stein's arrival in Paris in 1903 until the "present" time of writing--1932. She allocates a brief preliminary chapter to her childhood and adolescence in the U.S.A. But the book focuses above all on the circle of artists, writers and musicians who were known

and entertained by Stein and her companion, Alice Toklas. These included many of the luminaries of the day--Matisse, Picasso, Satie, Pound and Hemingway--all slyly revealed in apparently artless anecdote and wickedly telling incident. The heart of the book, however, is the alliance formed and sustained during that period between Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas.

Stein's Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, I will argue was written in the same spirit as Ford Madox Ford's It Was the Nightingale and Ernest Hemingway's A Moveable Feast, two other memoirs documenting Paris at this time.<sup>41</sup> All share a rather elusive sense of the author as reliable voice; there is in each case, however, a discernible and dominating ego selecting and arranging detail. All of these are cleverly wrought fictions, and declared so by their authors, where reality and narrative confront one another and interweave constantly. Ford's autobiography declares itself fictional in its preface, and Hemingway directs his reader towards an appreciation of the "novelistic" techniques he has employed. Stein's title provides her clue for readers as to the true nature of her book. Throughout, and much to the horror of some of the real people she portrayed, she treats facts whimsically, selecting some and ignoring others which do not interest her, highlighting some characters when they were in favour with her and diminishing them again when they had faded. She merges some detail--kaleidescoping whole years into a

single evening--and, to sustain the autobiographical aspect, places herself centrally in most stories, whether she was or not.<sup>42</sup> As George Wickes points out, "The myth of the Modernist movement was more important to her than actual facts."<sup>43</sup> So, from the beginning, her treatment of people and events was novelistic, and her presence of central narrative importance. But it must be said that in certain important respects, the book operates outside the commonly accepted laws of the novel genre as well as those of autobiography. There is no plot, for example. True to her principles, Stein tries to tell what happened without telling stories. Characters do not develop; they "inhabit" shifting verbal landscapes she provides for them.

Generally speaking, the book operates between the known forms of memoir and fiction, offering quite deliberate challenges to both. Her elaborate pretensions to objectivity (i.e. historical record) notwithstanding, it is quickly clear to readers that it is a distinctly subjective, indeed idiosyncratic work, which is neither strict narrative, nor a strictly accurate record of her time, but manages a little of both.

I will argue that the work is considerably more fictional than it is historical; that its proper category is the autobiographical novel. Narrative, strictly defined, had always "bothered" Stein.<sup>45</sup> In "Narration," she had defined narrative as "a telling of what is happening in successive moments of its happening."<sup>44</sup> One thinks here



of Gide's idea of "succession" as the only adequate method for capturing experience. Stein no longer believed it possible in the modern world to rely on a coherent sequence for events.

"Moving is in every direction" (p. 19). To her, strict narrative was inadequate for dealing with the world as it now existed. Ambivalent about whether to attempt a deviant version of it, that is to try to subvert it from within, or to abandon it altogether, she decides in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas for the former, in the guise of something else. Using fictional constructs, she bases her text, as Boswell did before her, on intimate factual knowledge of her subject, herself, and the world as she saw it.

Stein's parting reference to Robinson Crusoe at the end of the autobiography is her clear concluding indication that her intention has been to blur the distinctions between fact and fiction, art and life. Her "autobiographical novel" is so constructed that it is frequently difficult for the reader to tell exactly where facts stop and invention begins; this is precisely what the author intends. Her joke is that a novel is inevitably an autobiography and vice versa.

Alice's narration of the book is a fiction, or in Stein's terminology a translation. One of the central jokes of the book is that the actual authorship is not made clear until the last page, where we are also confronted with the same photograph which served as the book's frontpiece to remind us that it has all been a delightful, circular game.

Not only is the text without a reliable narrator, another joke on the whole idea of self-portraiture; there is no clear principal subjects as such. Stein's imitation of Alice is an acknowledged tour de force; her prose is frequently identical in tone and vocabulary to that of Alice's own later memoir--and it is the only work of Stein's ever to sound like this. The text is, among other things, a composite portrait of both women--each of the other, and it is as close as Stein will come to a representation of her "self." As it exists at that time, her "self" lives with and through the agency of Alice Toklas, and must be represented essentially as doing so. The book is a tribute, a work of love, as well as an intellectual joke at the expense of established literary traditions. It is a parody of both the traditional autobiography and the portrait of the artist novel.

On a stylistic level the book mirrors this blended portrait of the two women. Alice's domesticity, her love of gardens and cooking, her whimsy mixed with acidic precision --have a much needed "translation" effect on Stein's rather intractable tendencies to repetition and digression. Often in the text, it is unclear which of the two is speaking. This is both deliberate and Stein hints, unavoidable.

This is her autobiography one of two  
But which it is no one can know.<sup>45</sup>

In a particular psychological sense, it is Alice's story, in that it records her gradual and then, life long dedication to Stein, who became the focus of her life.

Therefore any portrait of Gertrude is also a portrait of Alice. As one critic has noted, if Alice Toklas had written the book, we would expect it to have much the same focus.<sup>46</sup> So it is a mediated portrait, of each by the other, maintaining to quite a high degree, something of the psychological veracity of both. The supposed autobiography has fulfilled the traditional expectations of the genre-- that is a degree of self-definition.

Stein preferred to call her text a "translation" rather than narrative or autobiography. In 1930 she had agreed to perform an actual translating exercise, which in fact provided her with a methodology which she could accept for the writing of an "autobiography," something she had always considered a spurious exercise, and only undertook after considerable goading. She was to translate into English, poems by the young French poet, Georges Hugnet. She got as far as a literal translation of the first line before her ego intervened. She then departed compulsively and imaginatively from the test for good, "and I finished the whole thing not translating but carrying out an idea that was already existing."

And then as a joke I began to write The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. And at that moment I had made a rather interesting discovery. A young French poet had begun to write, and I was asked to translate his poems, and there I made a rather startling discovery that other people's words were quite different from one's own, and that they cannot be the result of your internal troubles as a writer. They have a totally different sense than when they are your

own words...and this brought to me a great deal of illumination of narrative, because most narrative is based not about your opinions but someone 'else's....Therefore narrative has a different concept than poetry or even exposition, because, you see, the narrative in itself is not what is in somebody else's...and so I did a tour de force with The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and when I sent the first half to the agent, they sent back a telegram to see which one of us had written it! But still I had done what I saw, what you do in translations or in a narrative. I had recreated the point of view of somebody else. Therefore the words ran with a certain smoothness.<sup>47</sup>

A translation would provide precisely the kind of "disembodied" narrative Stein wanted to create. The idea frees her to reconceptualize narrative as thought written by someone else--as analogous to an act of translation. In the process she is free to write about herself outside the inhibiting limitations of the autobiographic genre--of chronology and the idea that identity as it exists in the text, is shaped by it.

In stylistic terms, too, she adapts this principle of "translation" to her purposes. In weaving actual events into a modified form of narrative, she provides stylistic equivalents of facts--repetition, for example, which she uses to bolster her notion of the "continuous present" as the only appropriate tense for writing in the twentieth century. By this she does not mean "continuous" in any normal sense--rather an absence of that quality of continuity which embraces past, present and future.<sup>48</sup> If possible, and she tries, the writer must use words without the associations of the past, in fact without any quality

which ties word to experience. It means a stripping away from language of all its associational power--based on social or emotional or archetypal connotations. To fully achieve the "language of the moment," even quite ordinary semantic or syntactical expectations must be eliminated. She wishes to recreate, not describe, the process whereby the realization of the identity of an object is actually happening in the mind. It is to be recorded as it happens--her version of "stream of consciousness"--because process matters infinitely more to Stein than representation after the event, which at any rate, she does not consider to be, if it is truthful, possible:

I found out that in the essence of narrative is this problem of time. You have as a person writing, and all the really great narrative has it, you have to denude yourself of time so that writing time does not exist. I did it unconsciously in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas....There should not be a sense of time, but an existence suspended in time.<sup>49</sup>

Stein's emphasis may define her as a Modernist, but her practice sets her clearly apart from other major writers of the period working in "time composition"--Joyce with his epiphanies and Proust's "impressions bienheureuses." Rather than transporting the reader through time in myth and symbol, Stein wants instead to seal off time--to separate the present from the past as completely as possible. She distrusts the supposed power of memory to throw up images of narrative structure, she is free to perfect the

"continuous present." She has a range of devices for trying to sustain it in her prose. On a syntactical level, her time connectives are simple, but lateral rather than chronological, e.g. "from time to time" and "later or once," typical of non-specific time. She consistently forces the reader back to the present, to begin again. This is hammered home by a persistent use of the present participle--again non-specific, action that is on-going. Her tone of the faux naif reminds the reader of a child who can only operate in the present tense--innocent of all but immediate sensations and perceptions.

In reality, there can never be less than two "present tenses" in this rather disingenuous writing strategy--that of time recorded, which is historical time, no matter how many present participles there are and how "immediate" its rendering, and the time of actual writing. So her challenge is to stop things from getting "fixed" permanently in either time or language, which would limit and ultimately nullify them. Bergson's notion of "la durée" was always an important one for Stein.<sup>50</sup> She said that the subject of a painting was only truly alive if its "movement would propel it out of the prison of its frame."<sup>51</sup>

If The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is more fiction than personal or historical record, it is so without the usual structural aids of narrator, plot and chronology. What does the narrative consist of? The book's architecture is essentially that of the memoir. The chapter titles at

least, rely on chronology and they are in order. Chapter one concentrates on Alice's life before she came to Paris. It is very short. Chapter two documents her dramatic arrival in Paris, its drama centering on her meeting with Stein and the subsequent redirection of her life. Stein certainly edits her account of this meeting with flair, and a sense of history, if not too close an observation of the facts:

This was the year 1907. Gertrude Stein was just seeing through the press Three Lives....Picasso had just finished his portrait of her...and he had just begun his strange complicated picture of three women, Matisse had just finished his Bonheur de Vivre....It was the moment Max Jacob has since called the heroic age of cubism.<sup>52</sup>

And at this moment, with these luminaries arranged in a veritable constellation, Alice arrives, and proceeds to tell us "what I saw when I came." This is a refrain throughout--echoing Stein's conviction that all that can be told is what is seen. The rest is up to the reader. To the innocent eye, as Alice's apparently was, what there was to see was overwhelming--avant-garde art shows that took Paris by storm, Picasso's squalid studio, and the Stein's home at 27 rue de Fleurus, combined salon and studded private gallery. "The pictures were so strange that one quite instinctively looked at anything rather than at them just at first" (p. 8).

She meets the major artistic figures of the period. Picasso--the hero of the book if Stein is the heroine--is described first of all in terms of his voracious eyes "which had the strange faculty of opening wide and drinking

in what they wished to see" (p. 11). His status at the centre of the constellation is clear. "He had the isolation and movement of the head of a bull fighter at the head of their procession" (p. 11). At one stage Matisse is reported to have said, "Mademoiselle Gertrude, the world is a theatre for you..." and chapter two is ample evidence of her talent for stage management. At the end of the chapter we come to the true subject matter of the autobiography.

And now I will tell you how two Americans happened to be in the heart of an art movement of which the outside world knew nothing. (p. 26)

Modern art was generated here, and Gertrude Stein wants to make it clear to us that she was one of the people with whom it began. Picasso, she tells us, began it in his painting, and she in her writing:

...the story of Melanctha the negress, the second story of Three Lives which was the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature. (p. 50)

Chapter three documents Gertrude Stein in Paris from 1903-1907, her first art purchases tied to her first writing in Europe, her life with her brother, Leo Stein, Picasso and his love life and the Stein salon with its endless visitors; Paris in winter--Italy in summer. Up to 1914 and the close of chapter five, "It was an endless variety. And everybody came and no one made any difference" (p. 116). After the war had begun, cultural life was eclipsed in some fundamental way, however, and "the old life was over" (p. 134). Chapter six details Paris and



France during war time, describing Stein's and Toklas' volunteer work. As about most things, Stein took a highly personalized and somewhat apolitical line on the war. The war, she claimed, made everyone "not only contemporary in act, nor only contemporary in thought but contemporary in self consciousness."<sup>52</sup> The excitement of this coupled with a streak of heretofore latent Americanness, could explain her tone when describing the war's end with an allied parade down the Champs Elysées, "...and peace was upon us" (p. 181).

In chapter seven, "After the war 1919-1932," the constant seeing of people continues; they include the twenties stars in Paris--Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Joyce, Sylvia Beach, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Robert McAlmon. T.S. Eliot visited once. Picasso came and went. In 1925, Stein records again "the beginning of modern writing" when Robert McAlmon published a Contact edition of The Making of Americans.<sup>54</sup> As circles of young men fade in interest with the decade, summers at Bilignin in rural north eastern France become the centre of Stein's and Toklas' lives. Select devotees they receive there, but for Stein, the light of Paris in the twenties, dominated by those two geniuses, Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein, who between them, had discovered the twentieth century, had dimmed. This was one reason for considering possible glory in England and the U.S.A. rather than just in her adopted homeland in the anxious years before World War II. We leave the autobiography with Stein rather mournfully casting about

for Picasso's successor, as the centre, the generator, of what is newest in the present.

More than half the book deals with the pre-war years and seeks to place Stein in context in the turbulent creative history of that period. She skillfully weaves the international and the domestic--daily notes on painters' lives and the history of modern art, to show both the surface artifice and the domestic substructure of artistic production. This is also reflected in the story she wanted to tell of the success of the Stein/Toklas menage behind the Stein genius, and this it does.

So the book is apparently ordered according to time and event. But within this framework the basic narrative units are the anecdote and the remark, the conversation and the encounter. This is where the text ceases to be memoir and becomes invention. She begins with a fake narrator and pretended objectivity, and we are meant to see all that happens in this comedic light. The existence of a real Alice Toklas serves as a constant reminder that the planes of reality may shift at will. Once this is understood one gains a sense of the text as "humorous cubistic artifice."<sup>55</sup> In his chapter on "The Cubist Novel" in From Rococo to Cubism, Wylie Sypher discusses the cubist experiment in art, based on the assumption that reality is a series of "continual transformations where fiction impinges on fact, where art intersects with life."<sup>56</sup> In this study his exemplary novelist is André Gide:

Much of Gide's "fiction" is a factual record seen from a certain angle and thus transformed. As suggested in Les Caves du Vatican 'fiction is a history that might have taken place, and history if a fiction that has taken place.<sup>57</sup>

This is very much the spirit in which Stein wrote her "autobiography." In 1891, Gide had made an early attempt to overlay a fictional dimension onto autobiography with his Les Cahiers d'André Walter. Both Stein and Gide, it can be said, were centrally concerned with the cubist problem of "the distance of art from actuality."<sup>58</sup> As in cubist paintings of objects where the relations between the painted object and the real object are ambivalent, so the relations, for these writers, between plot and autobiography are "unresolved and reciprocating." Les Faux-Monnayeurs is Gide's inquiry into "the innumerable transitions between the object and the conception of the object." Gide's art, Sypher concludes, was the successful practice of "counterfeit," which is a "camouflage" of the "document (the journal)" and a representation of the document at some uncertain level of fiction.<sup>59</sup> (emphasis added) And so it is with Stein's autobiography, whose facts are "camouflaged" and transformed by fictional handling.

The book, then, is an "invented memoir." Stein had already denounced memory and association as fictional constructs and possible aids in her "camouflage" process. Despite this, however, and perhaps because it is impossible to avoid, the book is organized, albeit erratically, on an associational matrix. One of the main means of connecting

events, and simultaneously of breaking up conventional time units, is by a process of sustained interweaving--of digression, afterthought, future projection, circle and return to the initial statement. By these means Stein plays with chronology rather than submitting to it; thus, in her fashion, she transcends it. In the description of Alice's first soiree, for example, within a few hundred words, there are more than half a dozen references to times other than that of the party. The mixture of tenses and times is remarkable and apparently artless:

The room was soon very full and who were they all. Groups of Hungarian painters and writers, it happened that some had once been brought and the word had spread from his throughout all Hungary; any village where there was a young man who had ambitions heard of 27 rue de Fleurus and then he lived but to get there and a great many did get there. They were always there. (pp. 12-13).... I did not know what it was all about. But gradually I knew and later on I will tell the story of the pictures, their painters and their followers and what this conversation meant. (p. 14)....And now the evening was drawing to a close. Everybody was leaving and everybody was still taking... (p. 15)

It is recollection, but the shifting tenses and the disembodied associations do contribute to a sense of simultaneity--of past with present, both then and now. Above all, the evening is created in the text as physical/spatial configuration--a multi-dimensional one with the strict focus on what was seen and the subsidiary category of what was heard. Space is frequently what Gertrude Stein, as alive to the visual as to the verbal or written, substitutes for time. Her "continuous present" is defined

in Lectures in America as "having to do with a sense of movement in time included in a given space."<sup>60</sup> In the Autobiography, the "space of time" of an event or a conversation replaces chronological progression in narrative --leading to a multiple vision of events and people and of given moments in the narrative, with the emphasis on their shape.<sup>61</sup> This mirrors in prose the work of cubist painters like Picasso (at that time), Braque and Gris, and specifically challenges the idea that narrative must "fix" what it describes. Her willed digressions force narrative to begin again and again, so foregoing any claim to naturalism or permanence.

The first soirée is typical and representative of the way information is given in the book--anecdotal configurations, and of its use of players, speech, time and narrative information. It is a spatial formula, not a temporal one. "Facts" are included for our information, but they are not connected in the usual ways. Logic is abandoned. There is no causal connection provided between one fact and another nor between events. (This is Stein's version of Modernism's relativism.) All of the elements of the chatty memoir are there--gossip, memories and opinions, fashion notes, contentious remarks and value judgements. But the lack of causal connection between any of these puts Stein's prose into quite another category than memoir. Objectivity and truth are, she believes, impossible to render. She substitutes multiplicity, accurately recorded. The

"continuous present" is a kind of structural metaphor for the ambiguity inherent in any fact or event and for the necessarily compromised attempts of any genre be it biography, autobiography, diary or social memoir to record things as they were. Stein enjoys the full potential of the ambiguity, rather than trying to deny it as many a traditional writer has done. She exploits and manipulates it, playing with it to the point of self parody, because finally it is her own "continuous present" that she is recording, not Alice's, because that is unknowable.

As an extension of her replacement of the temporal with the spatial, so further undermining memoir and creating, in effect, fiction, Stein has carefully selected illustrations for the book, which the critic, Paul Alkon in a fascinating article, has said make up a separate, complementary "visual rhetoric."<sup>62</sup> The photographs she chose provide images for the text. Their arrangement, Alkon claims, serves to further reverse and blur traditional time structure, based on clear distinctions between past, present and future. They are visual clues for what the reader will find in the text, though they are never clearly attached to or explained by the text. True to her principles, Stein provides no context for them, and no explanation of their significance. We are left to assume that a photograph of Picasso and Fernande Olivier, his mistress early in the book, is included merely to give it its cultural bearings, as if to say "these are the kinds of people I know." Similarly, the

the photograph of a sturdy young Gertrude Stein peering into a microscope at John Hopkins Medical School is there to convince us that she has had a solid intellectual background despite what the American critics said about her in print throughout the twenties.

The most striking and well-known of the illustrations is the Man Ray photograph which serves as the book's frontispiece. It is intended to be emblematic of the whole text. It shows the heavy form of Gertrude Stein writing at her Renaissance desk, with Alice Toklas illuminated from behind in an open doorway leading into a room where Stein is working, and shedding light on it.

One of the central games Stein plays with text and reader is revealed in the illustrations. The book acknowledges at the outset that photographs are as much works of art as paintings. She nevertheless draws an interesting distinction between photographs and paintings, which reflects on the distinction sometimes disguised, in her work, between factual representation and invention. Paintings she declares art, while photographs seem to show things as they are. Alkon goes on to note in connection with this distinction, that in successive illustrations, there is "...a gradual--but not complete displacement of photographs of reality by photographs of paintings and at the end, the photographs of a manuscript page. Photographs of reality give way to photographs of works of art. But as this happens the distinction between art and reality

collapses, because whatever can be photographed must be real."<sup>63</sup>

Stein uses the illustration for other purposes as well. Sometimes they act as a corrective for the text. Illustrations of rooms full of paintings but empty of people will face pages full of visitors and parties. Photographs of particular paintings remind us that she cites these paintings e.g. Matisse's "Femme au Chapeau" and "Bonheur de Vivre" as analogues for her own work. One of her key ideas in writing is that it is only possible to write what is seen; that makes the issue of viewpoint or angle vision important in the illustrations, which often provide metaphors the text does not. Stein's stated aim was to present the inside from the outside, and this the illustrations also do. They also highlight her favoured idea of simultaneity with camera angles showing Stein for example, from both inside and outside rooms; or in another case providing a different but nevertheless essential version of Stein, not in the flesh, but in Picasso's portrait of her on the wall of one of the rooms photographed. Thus visual metaphors are provided for the idea that the text is asking us to consider the subject, (Gertrude Stein) through the eyes of an assumed other. "The self in this case is presented as another."<sup>64</sup>

Stein is very concerned with the metamorphosis of reality into art. Of the crowded social blur after the war, she has "Alice" describe it thus: "I cannot remember who came in and out, whether they were real or whether they



were sculptured but there were a great many" (p. 251). The book's final illustrations blend the real and the sculptured, photographs and paintings. This marks a progression which "mirrors" a final transformation, within the autobiography, of both Gertrude and Alice into works of art. "Whether they were real or whether they were sculptured becomes harder to tell and matters less."<sup>65</sup> Alkon notes in conclusion a literary declaration by Stein in the June 1929 issue of transition under the headings--"The Revolution of the Word" and "A Proclamation," consisting of twelve articles printed in capitals. Numbers four and ten potentially sum up, he believes, what Stein achieves in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:

- (4) NARRATIVE IS NOT MERE ANECDOTE, BUT THE PROJECTION OF A METAMORPHOSIS OF REALITY...
- (10) TIME IS A TYRANNY TO BE ABOLISHED<sup>66</sup>

Stein has powerfully integrated the verbal and visual in her autobiography in a radical attempt to challenge the power of time over the genre. She proposes a dramatically different "representation of self" than the genre traditionally makes available, one which could admit a fictionalizing of time, a "spatializing" of life and the "painting" of an identity.

So, if this text is then by design, more artifact than autobiography how representationally true can it be considered to be? Roy Pascal in a pioneer work, Design and Truth in Autobiography, put forward the idea that the autobiographical conscience had an "obligation to oneself,

to one's own truth."<sup>67</sup> The "truth" of autobiography, he said, "lies in the building up of a personality through the images it makes of itself, that embody its mode of absorbing and reacting to the outer world" (p. 188). Perhaps the key word here, if we try to relate these ideas to Stein's fictional autobiography and what it represents, is mode-- the style of representation, and indeed of perception. Perhaps, as the Swiss critic Jean Starobinski has commented, style can be taken as an indicator of a kind of truth:

...a l'autoréférence explicite de la narration elle-même, le style ajoute la valeur autoreférentielle implicite d'un mode singulier de l'élocution.<sup>68</sup>

The autobiographical writer's style acts as an "indice" --a clue to his sense of himself in his time and how he would like to be seen. By implication then it is relative, as one's sense of self changes with circumstances, and a writer therefore cannot justly be charged, as Stein so vehemently was, with "misrepresentation," when all she ever intended with her text and an assortment of players, was an imaginative representation of herself, or at least of her consciousness and how it perceived the world. In her case, "misrepresentation" was highly conscious and one of the energising principles of the text. She deliberately uses the reader's expectation of autobiography to provide a slightly ingenuous construct for the representation of self that can never be, she believes, "true" in any absolute sense, but true as photographs and paintings are "true"

at the time of painting, according to the desire of the artist, light, arrangement and audience. She stylizes realism to display the process whereby art emerges from life. She turns the self into artifact, precisely as she uses the detail of the domestic, personal lives of the artists to enrich and offset a sense of the complexity with which their art emerged, incorporating and in collaboration with, their daily lives.

Thornton Wilder in his Introduction to Four in America describes Stein's tendency, in the accuracy of her record of the movements of her consciousness, to include

...the irruption of daily life....She may suddenly introduce [into her text] some phrase she has just heard over the garden wall. This resembles a practice that her friends the Post-impressionist painters occasionally resorted to. They pasted a subway ticket to the surface of their painting. The reality of a work of art is one reality; the reality of a "thing" is another reality; the juxtaposition of the two kinds of reality gives a bracing shock....It refreshes in the writer the sense that the writer is all alone, alone with his thoughts and his struggle and even with his relation to the outside world that lies about him.<sup>69</sup>

It may not be "truth" with any moral connotation or sense of responsibility to events, which Stein records, but she does display an almost exhaustive desire for accuracy of a scientific kind, when it comes to recording the fluctuations of her own consciousness. This makes her an autobiographical writer, in the same sense that Montaigne is an autobiographical writer.<sup>70</sup> Stein's attempt is, as one of her leading critics, Richard Bridgman has put it, never less than to "represent her consciousness in its actual

state of existence" so providing us with "an outpouring of verbal responses to her experience mixed with fantasies generated by the primary experiences and with words stimulated by the appearance or sound of other words already on the page or still in her head."<sup>71</sup>

As for existence in the external world, Stein holds fast to the idea that writers can only write what they see, but an accurate record of what they think and perceive is possible, if it is treated in the same way as visual subject matter, whose existence can be photographed or painted. She divests authorial consciousness of the God-like power to control through narration (Joyce, Flaubert, James). Consciousness as Stein perceives it can finally express nothing but its own continuous flow of thought, feeling and the idiosyncratic perceptions of objects and people; (which places her much closer to Beckett and the writers of the nouveau roman) and it is the perception of these things as process which we are given instead of narrative based on their objectively accepted existence. (One is reminded here of Nancy Chodorow's theory of female identity as processive.) Perceived objects and people, Stein says, can only exist in consciousness and she will not allow memory and convention to force consciousness into any palatable, artificial patterns other than those emerging from its own internal structure. In recording what Bergson and William James might call "the immediate data of consciousness," Stein never ignores the implicit limitations of language in ever coming close to

describing the human consciousness. Language can only play at the idea. She requires simply of language that it be as alive to its challenges as the best paintings are alive,-- "moving out of their frames."

The idea of writing autobiography in any strict sense of the word would seem to go against all of Stein's literary principles. (But then so would fiction/narrative as a fixed literary mode.) Throughout her career, she managed vigilantly to avoid the issue of memory, which dominated the fictional masterpieces of her day, and would direct her necessarily, if she undertook anything like a conventional memoir. T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Marcel Proust and Ezra Pound were, compared to her, obsessed with the past and with the artistic forms of the past. Stein was firmly a member of the Paris-based European avant-garde, and was perhaps apart from Gide, the most successful writer to take up its revolutionary implications for all of the arts. As a part of her platform as a polemical writer, she distrusted above all memory as a creative agency and tried to eliminate all time-based associations whenever possible. "The minute your memory functions while you are doing anything it may be very popular but actually it is dull."<sup>72</sup> Notions of identity are false when they are based on repeated behavioural traits or localized habits. Identity "destroys creation," as does memory. Both offer false and misleading strategies, she suggests, for "demystifying" the essential strangeness and unknowableness of others. Memory and identity,

as traditionally conceived, succeed only in translating what is essential about others into more familiar terms by stressing the patterns in their lives and in overlaying and substituting the past for the present. To fully live or write in the present, the idea of identity based on memory must be broken down. But then how is anything the least bit autobiographical to be written? It must deal with the past and it must presumably operate on some notion of identity that does not change from minute to minute, even if Stein's aim is not to verify but to record.

Stein's relation to autobiography (and fiction?) is finally parallel to what she says of the relation of a genius to time. He or she must "accept it and deny it by creating it."<sup>73</sup> In her exploration of the formal dilemmas of the genre, this is precisely what she does with autobiography--accept it, as a construct at least, deny it, by substituting fictionalized or at least modified information transmuted by her consciousness for factual account, and in the process, create it, at least her vision of it, which, after all, represents herself very well indeed.

But The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is not just a representation of self. It is also a still life portrait of "a life," that is a shared life, a separate complete entity whose other half was Alice Toklas, as indicated by their shared "authorship." This life was described precisely as Stein described all discrete objects--its component parts

--daily events, conversations, meals, etc. It is a "memoir" of the world of modern art and of Paris which she and many others had declared to be at the centre of that world. It is a memoir too, of Picasso, or at least of almost thirty years of his life. He is always the hero of the piece; even when absent he is the spoken and unspoken example of the success of the modern artist, and of a genius at work in interpreting the world for others to follow behind in a kind of procession. It is a memoir and a tribute to France and its capacity to endure, as one of the central players in the theatre of the World War I. Stein's is certainly the most important memoir of any Modernist, principally because it is alive with literary invention. In it she has created a most viable myth of Paris as the seat of modern art in the twentieth century.

The style of the book, where it is arguable that its "truth" resides, has been whimsical, digressive, repetitive and highly stylized. It is self-declared and self-conscious artifice, while in the process recording a dynamic and eclectic self, functioning almost metaphorically as that self functions. While it is a memoir that does justice to the time it addresses, the book is at the same time, a fictional and quite personal construct of that time, and of the self seen at its centre.

## Conclusion

Perhaps for the very reason that so many had read The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas as a conventional memoir of Gertrude Stein, she found herself unable to let drop the role and implications of autobiographical writing in her oeuvre. She was until her death very concerned, in ironically quite traditional ways, to render her own consciousness effectively on the page--not necessarily in "fictional" form as she had done in The Autobiography, but to examine in other ways as well, the continuous process of transforming reality into art--which included the data of her own life. Her aim in writing between 1932 and her death in 1946 she expressed well in Everybody's Autobiography: "There should not be a sense of time, but an existence suspended in time."<sup>74</sup> In her final works she was if anything more concerned with what she called that "last touch of being" that only personal record can provide. And she certainly could not rest with the idea that The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, success or no, was to be her "last touch of being." It was, to her, inauthentic in too many ways. She had had to compromise too many of her artistic principles to write it. She felt undeniable joy at recognition and acceptance, but horror at "commercial" success which she had always loudly denounced. Most of all she was in deep confusion about issues of identity, recently reawakened for her by her first trip back to America in thirty years. It culminated in a combined writer's block and identity crisis which paralysed her. When she broke



through it, her next project was one which she used to probe her way back to clear-headedness about matters of identity. The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Nature to The Human Mind was a book of geographical and literary meditations drawn from her recent American trip.<sup>75</sup> She was determined to distinguish in the book between what she called Human Nature and the higher Human Mind, in her quest to grasp and clarify her own identity as a writer and to better understand the writer's relation to his audience. Stein's audience had recently delighted her by praising her on a huge scale for the first time, and simultaneously, had disappointed her profoundly by embracing that particular book, whose origins were something of a "commercial joke."

She had mentioned first in a lecture to an American audience the difference between writing for "God" and writing for "mammon." Writing for "God" both requires and is a function of the Higher Mind; "it must be direct, the relation between the thing done and the doer must be direct."<sup>76</sup> Writing for "mammon" which may be defined as "'success'... [or] a pleasure [the writer] has from hearing what he himself has done, mammon may be his way of explaining, mammon may be a laziness that needs nothing but going on, in short mammon may be anything that is done indirectly."<sup>77</sup> In other words, it is writing in full awareness of an audience. Such an awareness can only invite concessions and undermine creativity. Stein is very anxious in these meditations to get beyond the idea of identity as it seems

to be inevitably bound in traditional works to an audience and memory. The notion of identity, like autobiography, she finds weak and falsely reassuring when it is the product of Human Nature. She prefers the possibility of transcendence for the writer, a purer state from which to create. She never managed to resolve this issue in theoretical terms, but believed herself nevertheless to be writing from this transcendent height in all her later work.

This realignment of her direction necessitated denouncing her earlier work, in particular The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas which she now saw as an inferior work written "for mammon." All subsequent expressions of her identity were to be works of the Higher Mind. There were to be no compromises. As a corrective gesture, she began a new autobiography in March 1936. Everybody's Autobiography was to be the all inclusive autobiography.<sup>78</sup> In it she dropped the authorial pose of writing as Alice Toklas supposedly would have. While she wanted the book to have the same successful blend of famous names and local colour as the earlier book, this one was to be written in Stein's familiar authentic style; as before, it was conversational, energetic, warm, repetitive and somewhat unstoppable. Most of the events recorded in it were quite recent, to do with her American tour and return to Europe. It still managed to display an amusing number of errors in memory just as the earlier book's critics had accused her of there. It was published by Random House in 1937. It did not succeed as the first memoir had. Though

neither creates nor the general reader embraced it, Stein was more than pleased with it as an autobiographical piece entirely in keeping with her literary principles. By contrast

The first autobiography...was a description and a creation of something that having happened was in a way happening not again but as it had been which is history which is newspaper which is illustration but it is not a simple narrative of what is happening....And now in this book I have done it if I have done it.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, the earlier book had dealt in too factual a manner (though she does call it a "creation") with what had happened, and not with what is happening. Everybody's Autobiography operates more consistently within Stein's "continuous present." She believed herself to be with this work, one step closer to assimilating the autobiographical act with her aesthetic principles, which so often seem to be at odds with it.

In her next work, A Diary, she takes up that most autobiographical of forms, the journal, for the first time.<sup>80</sup> She proceeds to sabotage it by refusing to locate its entries in time. Entry headings are for example, "today," "the day before," and "the day after," in an effort to keep them firmly in the "continuous present." This did present problems. "Should a diary be written on the morning of the day described or before?" she wrote.<sup>81</sup> Like all writing, however, "A diary should simply be."<sup>82</sup> And what should it be? "A diary should be instantly in recording a telegram. Also in recording a visit also in recording a conversation also in recording embroidery also in recording having wished

to buy a basket. That is it."<sup>83</sup> To be true to its purpose then, a diary should record everything "instantly;" an impossible task of course, unless it also fictionalizes or distills, because events follow their own natural chronology.

Wars I Have Seen is a further attempt to abstract event, to take it out of time and into the "continuous present" of the Higher Mind, by reconceptualizing temporal or historical fact into a study of its timeless essence.<sup>84</sup> In this case it is war. In an earlier work it had been Paris, France. Both studies play havoc with time. Paradoxically, Stein wants to locate both works in terms of the twentieth century, but by that one can assume that she merely means "the present"; the twentieth century here is an abstraction, a background tableau appropriate to her action. She is concerned with time--"now in 1943" but only as it located the present isolated moment, not as it forms part of any time continuum or causal relation in history. She does not discuss the wars she has seen in any relation to history at all. She presents instead a meditation on the essential nature of war and cites examples--The American Civil War, the Spanish American War and the two World Wars this century. Obviously she has not "seen" the earlier two; she reflects on war as narrative, as stories told to children. "War is more like a novel than it is like real life and that is its eternal fascination. It is a thing based on reality but invented, it is a dream made real, all the things that make a novel but not really life."<sup>85</sup>

She is still very interested in the ways we transform actual experience by invention, into fiction, in an attempt to capture and translate the essence of the experience, making it transmissible to other times. While fully aware of this inevitable "fictionalizing aspect" in her writing, Stein must still face the old problems of memory and selection. "I do not know whether to put in things I do not remember as well as the things I do remember."<sup>86</sup> "How much shall I make up?" she asks.

Her conclusions to both meditations--Paris France and Wars I Have Seen--are a contradictory blend of the timeless and the temporal. Throughout she has discussed the timeless qualities of these phenomena--country and war. In a strange attempt (explicable only by her very odd concepts of history when she did think of it) to combine these two essences in some way, these two central experiences of her life, she comes up with the conclusion that if France was the necessary background to the twentieth century, then war was the agency for pushing the world into the twentieth century.

#### End Note

The writer, who is concerned to transform the workings of consciousness into artifact, must face the inevitable problems of rendering the self on the page. These are principally to do with form. In Gertrude Stein's case, to incarnate herself in language according to her own literary principles, required the creation of new literary forms--

the autobiographical novel, the non-sequential journal, the non-historical meditation on time and place. In these works, she wants to describe life as far as it is possible to do so, in the "continuous present"--as it is being lived. She wants to eliminate confessions or psychological revelation from her rendering of identity. She therefore "depersonalizes" her autobiographies, first by using a transferred narrator in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and by including all of mankind in Everybody's Autobiography. Certainly, in the former, Stein exists in the text as a third person whose life is being recorded from the outside, however intimately; as Shirley Neuman has neatly put it, "The third person is a fictional person."<sup>87</sup> By making fiction out of autobiography as she does in this book, she sidesteps a number of issues which would compromise her otherwise impersonal stand as a writer: truth, the subconscious, the emotions. The liberties she takes here, arranging the data of her life as an experimental novel, allow her to play off the inevitable relativity of truth in a memoir against the inevitably artificial logic of fiction.

Stein wrote in autobiographical forms the better to record the processes of a life and the activities of a consciousness, specifically the consciousness of an artist going about the process of writing. Her works as the result, are highly self-conscious and self-reflexive in that one of their principal subjects is always the process of their being written. One is reminded repeatedly of

Montaigne's attempt to record as much as he could grasp of himself at the moment of observation.

All that can be told, Stein says, is what is seen. Roy Pascal has said that autobiographical truth--the effective rendering of consciousness--is determined by the accumulation of images a personality makes of itself to embody the self and its mode of seeing and reacting. Each of Stein's autobiographical "fictions" is one of these images or "pieces" of an identity, each invented by herself; together they form, as Matisse perceived, a whole "picture puzzle" or a literary "harlequin's costume."

We have said that Gertrude Stein belonged to several social sub-cultures beyond that of woman writer; she was an American expatriate, independently wealthy and a lesbian. Each of these played a role in her most serious contribution to the literature of the period, and that is her challenge to gender as a significant category in human experience. Stein declared that her subject would be human nature and the functioning of the human mind. Her stance was essentially philosophical; she had been a student of Santayana and William James and was the friend of Alfred North Whitehead. She was interested in character, and her radical belief was that character was not at all determined by gender. "I think nothing about men and women because it has nothing to do with anything. Anybody who is an American can know anything about this thing."<sup>88</sup>

She shared a belief with Virginia Woolf that the human

mind was without gender. Both women believed that in the twentieth century, a period of confusion, masculinity had gotten out of hand. They both saw androgyny as a powerful creative force, and it was as an androgynous writer that Stein saw herself making a contribution to Modernism that other women writers could not make. She dismissed H.D.'s commitment to myth (Helen of Egypt) and Woolf's to realism and plot.<sup>89</sup> By avoiding these literary conventions, as she felt she must, Stein also avoided presenting the sexes as they conventionally experience themselves. She preferred to see them and record them from a gender-free perspective. She dealt with human types rather than genders. This she saw as necessary if she, as an intellectually androgynous woman, was to convey her experience as a human being. If her literary voice was authentically to represent her perspective--that of a woman, a lesbian and a Jew--then she could not afford to fall back on the literary conventions. Stein's focus as an artist was consequently very different from her contemporaries'. The confidence to act as a literary free-agent that her androgyny allowed her, may well account for the confusion of critics in her day, and for her lasting impact on several generations of writers.



## Chapter Four

Djuna Barnes: The Patterned SelfOrigins

"I wish every man were beyond the reach of his own biography."<sup>1</sup>

"It will take him, as it will the others, all his life to unravel the tangle of his upbringing."<sup>2</sup>

"You can bury your past as deep as you like, but carrion will out!"<sup>3</sup>

Djuna Barnes began her career as a poet, journalist, illustrator and short story writer. In her first collection of stories, poems, one act plays and sketches, A Book, American content was high. So was the raw material of her early life. Many of these pieces are set in her birth-place, Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, or its symbolic equivalent, with characters living in peculiar, highly charged isolation, doing immense amounts of damage to one another as her family had. Many of her later concerns are here in embryo, as she "writes out" her origins. In a style which curiously anticipates that of Harold Pinter's plays in the second half of the century, Barnes is already in 1923 urgently concerned with what she perceived to be the failure of language to embody experience or to connect people. Communication between her characters is often no more than surreally civilized chat, hardly masking primitive connections and an ever present possibility of violence. "Three From the Earth,"

an early one act play in this collection, has three young men visit an aging actress to tell her of the death of their father, who it seems, had at one time been her lover.<sup>4</sup> What at first appears to be a case of "the lady" entertaining "the peasants" is quickly stripped away by vicious word play to expose a situation of old and violently sexual complicity in another generation. The suddenness of the reversal from civilized to primitive, and the crazy dialogue which skirts it, are highly reminiscent of Pinter's The Homecoming, where sex underlies every comment and is capable of pushing any situation over into physical violence.<sup>5</sup>

Themes of mingling decay and desire pervade the lives of her isolated characters. Often simple-minded men try to claim with passion women who are "beyond desire" by virtue of what they know of life. Helena in "To the Dogs" responds to her would-be lover with "Death from you, will begin where my cradle started rocking."<sup>6</sup> She, like many other female characters in these early pieces, is concerned instead only with the preservation and arrangement of the "beauty of object." One is reminded here of both Colette and Jean Rhys and their reliance on moments of "objectification" and perceived beauty to redeem appalling situations. "I want the beautiful thing to be, how can logic have anything to do with it, or probable sequence."<sup>7</sup>

In Barnes' early fiction, some of these women devote themselves obsessively to decor and decoration, others become hard and beautiful in death as the jewels they had

worn in life. Still others are empty rooms waiting to be occupied. "Indian Summer" tells of a plain woman, a "clean room...exposed by the catching back a heavy and melancholy curtains" who is transformed late in life into a "salon" full of exotic objects. "One by one the old and awkward things went, leaving in their wake Venetian glass and bowls of onyx, silks, cushions and perfume."<sup>8</sup> Presently she entertains a lover there for the first time and takes him "as she would have taken a piece of cake at a tea party."<sup>9</sup>

On the whole, the pieces are Chekhovian with a Dostolievskian undertow, a play of tensions reminiscent of Jean Rhys' strategies for dealing with the breakdown of beauty into horror. Many, in their focus on death and the grotesque joke it makes of life, prepare the way for Nightwood, her later masterpiece. One early character when asked by another for guidance, responds with a flood of defeated loquacity much as Matthew O'Connor will respond to Nora's despair in the later work.

I'm incapable...mystified. Death would be a release, but it wouldn't settle anything.... How do I know but that everything I have thought, and said, and done, has not been false, a little abyss from which I shall crawl laughing at the evil of my own limitation.<sup>10</sup>

The tone of these pieces is very much one of "what are we doing here? Are we all mad or merely overwrought?"<sup>11</sup>

All of these themes are incorporated and made large in Barnes' first novel, Ryder, published in 1928.<sup>12</sup> Over fifty disconnected chapters she parodies with picaresque

flamboyance, her own strange but humble origins, well disguised beneath elaborate and accomplished literary pastiches of the King James Bible, Chaucer, Sterne, Fielding and of course, more recently James Joyce, who had made her a gift of the proofs of Ulysses which bears more than a passing relation to this text. The book concerns an eccentric rural patriarch, Wendall Ryder, his relations with his two "wives," his eight children and his mother who all share a house in the country. Society is hounding Wendall for his idiosyncratic lifestyle and in particular for refusing to send his children to school, saying that he can teach them better himself. When he manages to fight off the school board, he is persecuted for living with two women. As the novel closes, he must face the fact that he cannot decide between them. But the work is far more a stylistic tour de force, pushing the genre of the novel to its limits, than it is a successful narrative. It is only when the shattered units of poetry, prose, illustration, and dramatic monologue are considered whole as a fable or parable, that the work succeeds, and in this it reminds us of many post-modern pastiches indebted to Joyce, where the idea of authorial sincerity has become meaningless, to be replaced by layers of style, existing in playful cohabitation and producing only composite meaning.

But there is a serious matter in Ryder as well. It can be read, for example, as a tragi-comic study of the eternal lot of women. However, the central character, Wendall Ryder,

chief perpetrator of their suffering, claims some of our sympathy as well by living in a much closer and more creative alliance with nature than conventional human beings, and receiving the support of his author for it. In a grotesque and comic fashion, Wendall is a kind of cosmic man fending off women, children and authorities while passionately wishing this his farm animals would communicate with him, so preoccupied is he with exactly what the presumed difference between man and animal is. His concern with the nature of "the Beast" introduces us, however, to some highly serious and poetic reflection on the notion of a dream-time pre-history, when the rational and the bestial elements in man were in perfect balance:

In the beginning was the jungle, with thick flowers and thick leaves, and the roots of things went down into a heavy tiger-pawed earth, and on the branches sat the puma, duke of the morning, and through blood red lillies went the wild cat, and the slender hoofed deer, and wild cows, whose teats had never served man, and the bellowings and trumpeting and the roarings and screechings, went forth in one sound that was a band of strength against the unknown quantity that was, one day to be the slayer. There time rotted on the stem of night and day, and the water ripened on the branches of the ocean; there with the weight of unseen swift flying, making terrible his feathers, came the nightbird through the thick gloves, and clove them as oil is cloven and records not the break, and stood and pecked softly and swiftly at the earth that trembled under no footfall of man and pecking, went his way with little speckled feathers dwindling into the dark.<sup>13</sup>

This is to be the primeval time and landscape to which Barnes returns again and again with a painterly eye.

Ryder is one of a series of large, experimental Modernist

works to appear in the twenties. In its ebullient artifice, its breaking up of the traditional novel's surfaces and its playful manhandling of space, time and language, it follows on stylistically not only from Ulysses, but also from Eliot's Wasteland and Pound's imagist poetry.<sup>14</sup> As with these key Modernists texts, Barnes' readers too are put to the test. A lot is expected of them, with the text's frequent leaps, without bridges, from simple speech and narrative at one moment, to eccentrically elaborate, baroque syntactic flourishes and streams of consciousness riddled with word play. At first glance the text appears to be studded with archaisms, but of course her taking up of abandoned forms, as George Steiner said of Eliot, was the height of Modernism.<sup>15</sup> Her stylistic chaos has been delicately planned, as she broadly parodies not only her father, her young self in Julie Ryder, who "Becomes What She Had Read," but also the church, marriage, sex and literature. It is in fact, a harlequin suit of literary styles and tones of voice sewn together with remarkable seamlessness and bravado. It marks an interesting stage of "writing out one's life" in two senses, one personal and the other professional, operating as she was in a context of international Modernism in the 1920's Joyce, Eliot, Pound and Proust were setting the standards in harlequin costumes.

### Expatriation

If Barnes' first collection and her first novel were imaginatively set in America, a collection of stories which

appeared in 1929 after nine years abroad was distinctly European in texture. Collected under the title A Night Among the Horses, these fictions richly and strangely combine old and new worlds.<sup>16</sup> She had always been inspired by the European masters--Chekhov, Strindberg and Dostoevsky as well as Joyce and the Irish playwright, J.M. Synge.<sup>17</sup>

Setting is always important for Barnes; in these pieces, America is still visible, but it is an America heavily populated with immigrants--many Russians and a strong European Jewish mix of heavily ethnic names. Almost all of the significant characters are from somewhere else, and those who are not are alienated in their own lands.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the cast includes many people on trains between European cities, the permanently "lost generation" of Paris café residents, children of nature adrift in cities, and disengaged men and women fighting for supremacy over one another in the face of rootlessness and despair on an international stage.

However, Barnes is interested in their expatriated condition more than their historical or geographical circumstances, and this is psychic rather than determined by locale. She found it a natural symbol, particularly in the 20's, both for her own lesbianism and, on a larger scale, for man's essential Angst. At its best, though, she points out that this "middle condition" of belonging nowhere in particular can be beneficial, even liberating. This is the sort of freedom to which both Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf referred, in their very different ways,

when they talked about the power of spiritual and intellectual androgyny. In her opening story, "Aller et Retour," Barnes' central character, Madame Von Bartmann has been liberated in this way.<sup>19</sup> She is one of Barnes' strong, wise women who lives "in the stream of time," with a "manner at once careful and absent," looking about her on her travels with an even gaze at whores, sailors, churches and incidental brutalities, "neither pleased nor displeased."<sup>20</sup> She is a woman of "vigorous understanding" who is capable, when required, of an "excellently arranged encounter with estangement."<sup>21</sup> In this case it is with her now grown daughter, whom she has not seen for seven years. Unaware that the child has an utterly different temperament, and that it is in any case, too late for her words to have any effect, she returns to offer counsel on the basis of what life and travel have taught her: that life is "filthy...frightful" but that in it, there is everything..."murder, pain, beauty, disease and death." In the face of this she advises, "You must know everything, and then begin." Detached by travel, she has learned not to judge. "I do not want you to turn your nose up at any whore in the street; pray and wallow and cease, but without prejudice."<sup>21</sup> Passion she warns, serves only to "season the horror." Ironically, the girl has already signed herself over to a passionless life by agreeing to marry a sterile young clerk who will certainly try to curtail any later desire to put her mother's advice to use. Hence the irony of the title--aller et retour--a round trip



to where madame began, allowing time out for this perhaps unnecessary detour.

This has been a gentle little story about the condition of the expatriate. But when this same condition is part of a general disintegration process, and is death-bound, it becomes nothing less than the "halt position of the damned."<sup>23</sup> For characters in this position "the ground is not low enough...it is suffering without a consummation...alien to life...lost in still water...Darkness closing in...the interminable discipline of learning to stand everything."<sup>24</sup> Here actual expatriation--the abandoning of origins, a surreally exaggerated contact between people without context, lives lived without any of the integrity of simple isolation--produces figures who are estranged even from themselves, their attempts to locate order, to find love, to transcend themselves, fumbling and abortive. In stories of this kind, the world Barnes presents is truly one of radically displaced persons.<sup>25</sup>

In these pieces, expatriation lines up within a range of overwhelmingly negative forces which predetermine men's lives: estrangement, sex, disease, godlessness and finally death. They provide a script, a narrative with which the characters can only comply. Life is cyclical; men are as powerless as insects; passivity is the principal means of survival.

In the meantime, "The real the proper idea--is design, a thing should have a design; torment should have some

meaning."<sup>26</sup> Art, Barnes says, is the real middle ground, where a certain amount of dispassionate observation is possible, even if the pattern we observe is tragic and irreversible. It is this detached patterning of experience that Barnes' recurring images and concerns appear: sex, power and death, nature at war with civilization and the idea of living "beyond the end." Women of indeterminate sexuality are always her central characters, regardless of their age, class or nationality; where they are not central, they are still the determining forces in men's lives; it is never the other way around. Sexual combat is always a central theme. Women adapt men to their needs, and rarely allow them to intrude on their often autonomous wills.<sup>27</sup> In the two stories with male protagonists, "The Rabbit" and "A Night Among the Horses," the women manipulate male destiny and become in the process synonymous with death.<sup>28</sup>

These stories are primarily about levels of knowledge; in each case the man has possessed knowledge of the natural world, and the woman has tried to goad or torture him into a social sense that can only corrupt him. In the first of these stories, a little Armenian tailor is advised by friends and neighbours to go to New York to become "educated," "a man of the world." Too gentle even to protest effectively, he leaves for the big city, which alienates him profoundly, its activities exemplified for him by the butcher shop across from his own, "its colours..a very harvest of death." But

it takes the woman with whom he is involved to initiate him into this "harvest." She requires of him, to take him at all seriously, a nameless "heroic" deed, which he intuitively can only have to do with death. He kills a creature--a rabbit with his bare hands. After the deed, he begins to walk. He "did not seem to know where he was, he had forgotten her. He was shaking, his head straight up, his heart wringing wet."<sup>29</sup>

"A Night Among the Horses" is Barnes' most complete statement of this theme. Strongly influenced by Strindberg's Miss Julie, it tells of a young hostler tormented by his landowning mistress who desires him and torments him "with her objects of 'culture'."<sup>30</sup> When she humiliates him in public, he flees into the night, and it is here that we first see him in the story, clearly visible in the darkness and as still as a piece of sculpture, Barnes' powerful image for those lost between classes, countries or cultures:

Toward dusk, in the summer of the year, a man in evening dress, carrying a top hat and a cane, crept on hands and knees through the underbush bordering the pastures of the Buckler estate. His wrists hurt him from holding his weight and he sat down. Sticky ground vines all about him; they climbed the trees, the posts of the fence, they were everywhere. He peered through the tricky tangled branches and saw, standing against the darkness, a grove of white birch shimmering like teeth in a skull...the man struggled for breath, the air was heavy and hot, as though he were nested in a pit of astonishment....If he married her...what would she leave of him?...absolutely nothing, not even his horse....He wouldn't fit in anywhere...he'd be neither what he was nor what he had been; he'd be a thing, half-standing, like those figures under the roofs of historic buildings, the halt position of the damned.<sup>31</sup> (emphasis added)

He, in this position, trampled to death by his horses.

This condition of loss and damnation taken to its extreme leads to life lived "beyond the end," that is, after an awareness of the fact that it is life that is inchoate; pre-determined and relentlessly punishing rather than death. This Barnes explores in two of the collection's most intriguing stories. Both offer human representations of death. For Katrina Silverstaff in "The Doctors" it is the travelling Bible salesman she takes up just before killing herself: "some people drink poison, some take the knife, others drown. I take you."<sup>32</sup> In a paradoxical inversion, her embrace of death can be seen as a quest for "life" because she chooses it as embodying meaning. The death figure in "Spillway" is Julie Anspacher, a woman with a terminal illness who has lived on borrowed time for five years. She returns home to her husband from the sanatorium with the child she has had by one of the other patients there, who has since died. The child too has the disease. Julie feels that her real disease is that she is without conscience, so she returns, hoping that her husband will inspire some guilt, some feeling in her which it might then be possible to expiate. "There just isn't the right kind of misery in the world for me to suffer, nor the right kind of pity for you to feel; there isn't a word in the world to heal me; penance cannot undo me." Her condition is "a thing beyond the end of everything."<sup>33</sup> Instead of healing or changing the design of her life in any way,

it inspires her husband's suicide. She survives, paradoxically; her knowledge of her imminent mortality is her strength, and it kills her husband before it will kill her.

The female characters in these stories are finally enigmatic and unfathomable, as is the detached third person narrator. One thinks again of androgyny as a creature of force. These opaque characters exist not only between countries and classes but also on some middle ground between the sexes, and it gives them tremendous strength which they frequently misuse. This Barnes woman appears in two of the stories as an older woman, recently arrived from America, listening to a younger woman's story in a Paris café. She is simply an auditor. This curious passivity inspires a similar sense in the reader, before these parables of a pre-determined universe. The characters in their extremity and androgyny have a peculiar and perfect autonomy and are as repelled as their creator by a disruptive and potentially fatal need for love. Passion, in fact any act of kindness, serves only to "season the horror." Not only are characters dissociated from their pasts, but they are permanently isolated in the present by the unremitting ironies of their destinies. It is a key element in their condition as expatriates from ordinary life, that they can accept nothing that is ordinary, or "daily" from existence. In reaction to it, some die, others move on.<sup>34</sup> The non-committal narrator is shocking in her remoteness from these characters.

In this there is a most effective correspondence between matter and manner--between life and design.

Barnes uses these stories to distil and to pattern the images thrown up by expatriate life in Europe in the 1920's. From the first, she felt compelled to extricate from these experiences a satisfactory image for herself, one that would embody her and her state of mind, that of an expatriated and often impoverished American, bi-sexual woman. In the process she provides a visual and verbal equivalent for the knowing, detached observer of tragedies in her short stories, the kind of observer she would wish to be--the silent woman whose "middle condition" has freed her from engagement. In her earliest published journalistic sketch of Paris, "Vagaries Malicieuses" she finds such an image for herself: that of the Paris church:

Notre Dame somehow leaves you comparatively untouched, you may not remember her for fear of intruding....She is a lonely creature by preference. She is not disturbed by those devotees who fall into two classes; those going toward and those coming from faith. She is in the centre condition, where there is no going and no coming. Perhaps this is why, for me, there was something more possible in the church of Saint Germain des Pres, the oldest church in Paris. It is a place for those who have "only a little while to stay" --it too is aloof, but it has the aloofness of a woman loved by one dog and many men. And here one takes one's tears, leaving them unshed, to count the thin candles that rise above the feet of the Virgin like flowers on fire.<sup>35</sup>

## Nightwood

Nightwood can be thought of as a female Modernist autobiographical fiction in the same sense that Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses, Lawrence's Sons and Lovers and Women in Love, and Proust's À la recherche du temps perdu are considered Male Modernist autobiographical fictions.<sup>36</sup> In each of these texts there is some writing out of the author's life and origins, some manipulation of the tension between an autobiographical and a fictive pact with the reader. These male writers chose to represent themselves in their works through an artist figure, a synthesizing consciousness whose perspective we as readers come to rely on in interpreting the events of the text. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Lawrence's Paul Morel and Rupert Birkin and Proust's Marcel function as artists or transmuting consciousnesses within the text, and serve to indicate the ways in which the fictional work is a construction of the authorial consciousness.

As I have noted earlier, female Modernist writers do not usually provide an equivalent intermediary or artist figure in their works. There is none in Nightwood, perhaps the most accomplished novel by a woman in the period. It is not self-effacement or passivity on Barnes' part that she does not provide such a figure. I will argue that her artistic intentions are simply quite different from those of her male counterparts. She is concerned with presenting a de-centred narrative in order to portray as accurately

as possible a world where meaning and perspective are profoundly fluid and relativistic. Therefore no image of it can be fixed, and no character or voice empowered to fix it. Narrative coherence is provided by the patterns of poetic connection the reader is asked to make from these images. The design of the novel then is essentially figurative. The author is represented in her text only in oblique aesthetically "objectified" form--as object, design or artifact--the product of creation, rather than in the figure of a creator within the narrative.

I argue that if Nightwood is a "fiction of the self," it is not confession; nor is it thinly veiled autobiography. Like the work of her contemporary, Jean Rhys, it incorporates many details of her life and times, but it is an aesthetic construct, a fiction of the self--one version of a segment of life in the form of many images of herself and others. Like Rhys, Barnes' intention, apart from the strictly aesthetic, is to transcend those life details by transmuting them out of the realm of the strictly factual: in other words, to write an escape from the self. Like Gertrude Stein, Barnes attempts to represent authentically a self that is part of a sexual sub-culture which had no official literary tradition; she too must do a certain amount of it with mirrors if she is not to give herself away. Barnes' biographer is, I think, justified when he says that it is "a fundamental error to claim as Frank does that Nightwood lacks a narrative structure in the ordinary sense and cannot



be reduced to any sequence of action for purposes of explanation....There is a simple main story...and it is, moreover, a story which repeats rather closely a series of events which really did occur. That story is the profound and impossible love of a woman who contemplates for a woman who rages and destroys."<sup>37</sup> He documents the fact that the chronology of Nightwood is verifiably that of the Djuna Barnes/Thelma Wood love affair as evidenced by Barnes' letters. He goes on to ask as the result of all this "verifying"--How many facts does a life story require? What is a fact and what is a life story? There is an answer to his question given in Nightwood: "The more facts we have about a person the less we know."<sup>38</sup> Field maintains, however, that it is important to know about the well-documented love affair between Barnes and Wood in order to understand the important connection between the love and the "highly stylized" relationship in the novel. "The one came out of the other," but like the portrait of Dr. O'Connor based on the real Dan Mahoney, Barnes has "sea-changed" inchoate experience into patterned art.<sup>39</sup> The tone of doom, however, seems to have carried over from real life events quite intact.

I would draw attention to the "stylization" of relationships--the techniques for their representation, rather than struggle, as Field has done, to identify whether textual data are "true." Art gives, it is true, undeniable power over real people and events. Barnes

seems to see it as capable of perpetuating a kind of "bloodless murder."<sup>40</sup> There is a life story underlying Barnes' imaginative work. It is unmistakable. But the work of art serves as an ornate mask for it--serving to disguise it, and only obliquely to represent it.

As a fiction, Nightwood provides a poetic narrative for a group of expatriates living in Paris between the wars. It explores the impact of one of them--Robin Vote--on the others --Nora Flood, Felix Volkbein, Matthew O'Connor and Jenny Petherbridge, whose lives she moves through as though in a trance. The novel begins at an earlier time in history in Berlin with studies of Felix's parents, and ends at Nora's familial home in upstate New York. The "present" in the novel is taken to be Paris, 1920, though we are made quickly aware at the novel's opening that "truth is ahistorical."<sup>41</sup>

The plot involves the marriage of Felix Volkbein to Robin Vote, the birth of their child Guido, and Robin's abandoning of both of them; her subsequent meeting with Nora Flood in America, their return to Europe, and ten year love affair in Paris; Jenny Petherbridge's "stealing" of Robin from Nora, Robin's acquiescence and finally her flight to America with Jenny. The novel concludes with Robin's return to Nora at a later time, in America.

### The Divided Self

In this narrative the "self" is represented as a mosaic of images and metaphorical utterances. The aesthetic

surface and patterning of these elements are given prominence over their intrinsic qualities. But at the simplest narrative level, the self is seen as fatally divided--the self and its double, the self and the other, the alienated self and love as a primeval search for narcissistic complementarity. That man is a divided creature Matthew O'Connor tells us early in the novel--"born damned and innocent from the start."<sup>42</sup> The doctor should know, because he himself, is a creature of tragi-comic contradictions--man/woman, doctor/abortionist, seer/fool. His ferocious monologuing style is dualistic too; he appears to be saying a great deal, and as a poet he does, but in the end he acknowledges that language is futile. It is not that he knows little of the world. It is rather the reverse problem. He functions as a one-man Greek chorus in the text reminding characters that it is pointless to look to man or God for completion or transcendence. His advice--to hang on by the last remaining muscle--"the heart" (N. p. 263). Called a "defrocked priest of words" by one critic, he falls back on language as his only recourse, and he is aware as the Modernist writer Barnes must have been, that it is degraded spiritual and creative currency: Modernist discourse as self-consuming artifact.<sup>43</sup>

O'Connor is Tiresias/Cassandra; no-one hears or believes his predictions or counsel.<sup>44</sup> They cannot, as long as they hope to be completed by another and thereby redeemed. Nora needs to believe that her love for Robin can save them both.

Felix thinks that if he can unite himself with history he will legitimize himself as a Wandering Jew in the twentieth century. Only union with the unknown "other" can invest the unbearableness of daily life with significance, as Death transfigures life. It is of course one of the novel's great paradoxes that most of the characters approach transcendence through willful degradation rather than a call to God. Catholicism, Barnes seems to suggest by the force and beauty of her imagery for the Church, might have been expected to provide, where sexual love cannot, some bridge between the despairing individual and a higher order. She concludes, however, that the gap between man and God is too great, too grotesquely comic; all that man can do in the face of it is to join Matthew O'Connor, a yearning, sinning Catholic, in his blind appeal to his maker. "Pain increases in direct proportion to consciousness," however.<sup>45</sup> There are echoes of this gap between divine order and human degradation throughout the book. It is the same gap that separates the intensity of characters' psychological horror at events from any capacity to express or confront it directly. There are few violent revelations or dramatic confrontations in the novel. Instead, there are strained, frozen encounters and endless "introspective monologues," spilling over into desperate speech to a third person in the form of confession. There is the failure to properly articulate suffering in word or action, a sense of incurable disease, from which no release or resolution is ever

possible.

The quest for an "identity" in the face of inevitable duality is one of the central concerns of the book. Barnes renders this psychic predicament in a number of figurative oppositions reminiscent of Jean Rhys' literary structures, beginning with the rational world of the day and its irrational and considerably more powerful and dangerous reverse, the night world. In contrast to the world of daylight, control and order, the night is a jungle and the forces man faces there, in dream for example, are bestial and primitive.

As Alan Williamson points out, Barnes is much concerned with Eden--not the Christian version, though she certainly adheres to the idea of the Fall.<sup>46</sup> He suggests that her myth is rather in the "hermetic tradition according to which man was created in the union of conscious mind and animal matter, as a single hermaphroditic being, whose fragmentation into separate sexes occurred at the time of the Fall."<sup>47</sup> Adam was "an ideally unified entity," or as Barnes puts in Nightwood, exists at "the moment of the beast turning human" (N. p. 262). It is the moment which haunts her narrative and much of its imagery, as the moment when the unconscious (the passionate animal vitality) acquired rational consciousness, the moment of fragmentation into male and female, leaving androgyny as a lost ideal, a vision of wholeness. Barnes, in the images of her characters' yearning, repeatedly strains back to this moment which she

describes in Jungian terms as "a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory" (N. p. 262). In the post Edenic world, she tells us, the Hermetic Adam lives on only in idiots, the insane, the defeated victims of the night and in creatures like Robin Vote, who lack "human qualities." Knowledge of this loss is the universal malady of which Barnes writes.

Robin Vote is the character in the novel who is "the beast turning human." She compels the attention of all of the other characters by her power to suggest in her provocative and sensual silence, images which they desire and which they are convinced will complete them as both men and women. With her ruthless talent for self-preservation, she is able to survive as a timeless, aesthetic object, created by them. As long as she is perfectly self-contained and has no memory of the beds she leaves, she can survive both as a creature of real time, the night, and as an embodiment of the ancient moment when the beast turns human. Her attention, Felix reflects, seems perpetually absorbed by something "not yet in history." (N. p. 267). Her essence then, is pre-time just as it is pre-moral. She listens to "the echo of some force in the blood that had no known setting" (N. p. 267). Intimacy with her is simply an acknowledgement of this fact. When she is pregnant, she is cataleptically calm, newly aware of some "lost land" in herself (N. p. 268). She wanders through the countryside, and to other cities, and

finally into churches. She prays monstrous prayers based on no judgement, no morality. She gives birth, crying out in affirmation and despair "like a child who has walked into the commencement of a horror" (N. p. 270). Such is life in Barnes' terms.

Robin's duality is extreme--often hovering, the somnambule, between life and death, day and night. But versions of this same division are true of all the characters; they differ only in degree. Even Nora Flood, whose equilibrium is the most detached, bases her poise on alternating states of savagery and refinement. This is the chord then that the utterly savage Robin strikes in her with her love. This is precisely what Nora needs to love. It is at her peril that she does so and she is destroyed by it. In her need to possess and claim such a creature, it is not difficult to see Nora's need for self-possession, for control of her own sub-conscious, her "night-self". In her anguish at losing Robin, she cries out to O'Connor much as one of her literary ancestors, Catherine Ershaw had cried out to Nelly Dean, "She is myself. What am I to do?" (N. p. 127)

Of course, Robin can only sustain her existence and sanity if she remains impervious to such claims from others. "She managed in that sleep to keep whole" (N. p. 142). Nora, who virtually "slaps" Robin awake into consciousness, becomes a kind of Madonna figure for her--both loving her and filling her with guilt, while offering the only chance for her redemption. When Robin is broken at the end of the

novel, and at the moment of turning back from human into beast, she comes to Nora to offer herself up at her feet.

Felix too takes up the powerful imagery that Robin invokes and embodies. He expects it to complete him and to transform his destiny. He recognizes the ancient quality in her and mistakes it for nobility with which he can align himself. So while he senses danger in her involvement with the past-- she is "an infected carrier of the past"--it is still for him overwhelmingly "as if this girl were the converging halves of a broken fate, setting face, in sleep, toward itself in time, as an image and its reflection in a lake seem parted only by the hesitation in the hour" (N. p. 262). So Robin silently throws up images to each of the characters in which they see their needs mirrored; she evokes in each their particular version of the "eternal wedding" between time and the timeless, animal and human, grace and sin, man and woman. In the face of her they are all "human hunger pressing its breast to the prey" (N. p. 262).

For all this, Robin is, as Joseph Frank rightly states, a "figure" rather than a character, "since character implies humanity and she has not yet attained to the level of the human."<sup>48</sup> We meet her as a somnambule at the moment before she is awakened. For all that we ever know of her past life and origins, she could be being born at this moment--an image coming out of nowhere, about to be taken up by those who discover her, as a metaphor by an artist. She symbolizes that "state of existence which is before rather



than beyond, good and evil...she is both innocent and depraved." She glides through life as though it were a dream, a "formless meditation."<sup>49</sup> To awaken would be to admit consciousness and an awareness of moral value. She is both supremely egotistical and without secure identity. "She knows she is innocent because she can't do anything in relation to anyone but herself" (N. p. 347). The doctor tells Felix, Robin's abandoned husband, that Robin had written from America saying "Remember me." "Probably," he remarks, "because she has difficulty remembering herself" (N. p. 327). She is the self out of time, amoral and therefore innocent of all but elemental creaturely vanity --the momentary vanity of a figure captured in a painting. The doctor describes her as "outside the human type,...a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain." As one critic astutely puts it, Robin is best realized as the fictional counterpart of a real person.<sup>50</sup>

Both Felix and Nora "love" Robin. Love then seems to be the obvious means for their self-completion. Barnes is interested, as her later play, The Antiphon indicates, with the antiphonal nature of love as a final attempt to make whole. This idea sees love as that between two halves of the same identity as man's main hope for transcendence of his debased position:

...as the high plucked banks  
Of the viola rend out the unplucked strings below  
There is the antiphon.

I've seen loves so eat each other's mouth  
 Till that the common clamour, co-intwined  
 Wrung out the hidden singing in the tongue  
 Its chaste, economy--there is the adoration  
 So the day, day fit for dying in,  
 Is the plucked accord.<sup>51</sup> (emphasis added)

In that play Barnes' pessimism has the antiphonal relationship between mother and daughter end in mutual destruction. In Nightwood, Robin wants from Nora, despite herself, a love that will break through her cataleptic trance, to make something of her, to make her capable of antiphonal love. In its doomed nature, however, Nora can only offer a kind of sacrificial love, as a parent for a child who will certainly leave, O'Connor tells her--"You should have had a thousand children and Robin...should have been all of them" (N. p. 311).

Love might have succeeded where language fails in giving the characters something to enact; but love for Barnes most often seals characters off more terribly than before. Most frequently she deals with versions of love which are not at all likely to free the lovers i.e. incestuous, familial or homosexual love. Some are likely to dismiss such a stand, but I think it reasonable to see it as important and universal a version of love in extremis, as one might find in an Expressionistic painting of similar subjects. Barnes' suggestion is that for characters hungering for Edenic completion, the most perfect and appropriate love should involve a mirror image of the self found on the same basis of identity, in blood or sex. Early in her writing career,

Barnes expressed this idea in an elegiac poem to a dead lover--"Six Songs of Khalidine."

It is not gentleness but mad despair  
That sets us kissing mouths, Oh Khalidine  
Your mouth and mine...and one sweet mouth unseen  
We call our soul...<sup>52</sup> (emphasis added)

Nightwood offers another version of this key to Barnes' representation of herself in art: "A man is another person-- a woman is yourself caught as you turn in panic; on her mouth you kiss your own. If she is taken you cry that you have been robber of yourself. God laughs at me, but his laughter is my love" (No. p. 344). Homosexual or incestuous love is Barnes' most perfect image for recovery of the lost self. Man is always the other.

But neither Felix nor Nora is capable of self-transforming love, even if Robin were capable of adequate response, because they are fatally flawed by divisions within their own characters. Nora Flood, the observer, who like Matthew O'Connor watches the night rather than be one of its victims, is as much a victim of her own contradictory attitudes as of circumstance. She was "by temperament an early Christian' she believed the word; this meant that she robbed herself for everyone...wandering people the world over found her profitable in that she could be sold for a price forever, for she carried her betrayal money in her own pocket" (N. p. 273). Her American salon is a parody of the Parisian salon for the culturally elect; it is populated by paupers and social outcasts. She is described

not as a woman of the world, but in images of the American west. These and references to her puritan temperament base her seemingly naive spiritual attitude on the historical innocence of the American people and their belief in the inherent goodness in man, and in the possibility of change, along with, in Joseph Frank's words, "an indiscriminate approbation of all forms of ethical and intellectual unconventionality."<sup>53</sup> Godless as she feels herself to be, it is simple Christian pity that draws her to Robin. She expects both to win her and to save her by enveloping her in an unjudging love based on goodness. But the inevitability at work here has nothing to do with Christian justice. In Barnes' world, she has "given herself away" in the ferocious externalizing of her love, and she has therefore brought about her own ruin.

Nora's reaction on meeting Robin at the circus runs parallel to that of the lioness who "recognizes" a fellow wild creature temporarily tamed. "Being neither animal nor human, Robin evokes pity from both species."<sup>54</sup> Nora too responds intuitively to Robin, taking her hand and leading her away from this tragic "recognition" scene which is clearly distressing her. Robin is virtually a mute character in the novel, yet at this meeting she is compelled by another primitive recognition to ask Nora to set up a home for her, "aware, without conscious knowledge, that she belonged to Nora, and that if Nora did not make it permanent by her own strength, she would forget" (N. p. 276).

And this Nora manages to do for a time. In the process Nora is able to ease "the tension in Robin between the animal and the human forces which are tearing her apart."<sup>55</sup> In the end, however, unconditional love and acceptance fail to "give Robin permission to live," as Felix puts it (N. p. 324). Love has broken down her elemental vanity and threatened her trance-like equilibrium, so she must leave it. As a wild creature, partially tamed, she is terrified of leaving her protected state. She clings to Nora desperately during their protracted estrangement, tortured by a newly awakened sense that she may be required to make moral and emotional choices after all.

In the process, Nora is, as O'Connor puts it, "dismantled" herself. Her carefully balanced equilibrium is shattered. "Love has fallen off her wall," he continues. "A religious woman...without the joy and safety of the Catholic faith...take that safety from a woman and love gets loose and into the rafters...Out looking for what she's afraid to find--Robin. There goes the mother of mischief, running about trying to get the world home" (N. p. 311). Like a displaced and grief-stricken madonna, trying to administer comfort to Robin, to the world, when she is the abandoned creature.

As she and Robin fall apart, Nora's puritanically repressed subconscious rises up against her in dreams, which offer valuable imagistic keys to her psyche invisible at any other time, images of the tormented sexual self.

Asleep she dreams of her grandmother, of the old woman's fading possessions, of her past, of sex, of her childhood house and of the instruments of Barnes' own craft--" a plume and an inkwell--the ink faded into the quill" (N. p. 281). When Robin enters the dream Nora tries to bring her upstairs to her grandmother's room, a place which is "taboo." A submerged, incestuous, familial self-love becomes hopelessly merged with the fading love for yet another version of herself--her female lover. In her dream the grandmother appears in a variety of costumes--one of them a man's. She looks at Nora with a "leer of love," calling her "my little sweetheart!" (N. p. 282). Nora's own lesbianism seems to originate here in this former version of herself, with waves of an incestuous suggestion still felt in adult life, when she loves Robin in her boy's clothes. One cannot help but remember Nora's words on entering Doctor O'Connor's room late at night to find him sitting up in bed wearing a woman's nightdress and a crooked wig. "God, children know something they can't tell; they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed!" (N. p. 295). The only element missing from her reflection here is the grandmother. In the adult Nora, is it the covertly lesbian and devouring grandmother who appears in dream to undermine her younger version of herself?

It is only through sub-conscious playing out that Nora comes to see, at the very edge of sanity, what she has been doing. "I struggled with her [Robin]...as with

the coils of my own most obvious heart. I thought I loved her for her own sake, and I found it was for my own" (N. p. 351). One aspect of lesbian influence during this period is discussed by Susan Gubar in her article: "Blessings in Disguise" Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists."<sup>56</sup> This she discusses as a particularly influential style among women, especially women artists living in Europe between the wars. She sees it as an alienated expression of selfhood, but at the same time, a confident expression of love for other women, and by extension, the female self. Robin Vote is a reasonably discreet cross-dresser by comparison with Matthew O'Connor, the novel's most tortured homosexual. He has none of Robin's power over people, yet he is frequently consulted as an authority on the nightworld. He is the principal voicer of its images.

In fact, the novel could well be O'Connor's imagined story. Most of the narrative consists of his commentary on the events and their cosmic implications. As T.S. Eliot says of Tiresias in The Waste Land, what he sees is the substance of the piece.<sup>57</sup> Like Tiresias, he seems to have experienced it all, which gives him the right to act as confessor to the novel's night creatures. For this reason Nora comes to him with her question, "Watchman, what of the night?" At first he appears to be outside the suffering his discourse explores, while at the same time fully aware of the practical futility of his knowledge.

But we become quickly aware that he is helpless, and even more hopeless, than the other characters, talking because there is nothing else that can be done. "...telling my stories to people like you to take the mortal agony out of their guts...I talk too much because I have been made so miserable by what you're keeping hushed" (p. 339). We learn that he is centrally concerned with his own mortal agony and that this is what makes him such an authority. He occasionally becomes hysterical with the effort. In an outburst to Nora, who in her obsession is not listening-- he cries "Do you think there is no lament in this world but your own?...A broken heart have you! I have falling arches, flying dandruff, a floating kidney, shattered nerves and a broken heart!...Am I going forward screaming that it hurts, that my mind goes back, or holding my guts as if they were a coil of knives?" (N. p. 353). In fact he occupies the middle position which Barnes elsewhere calls "the halt position of the damned." He is god of the night who would be Christ, or at very least, Dante, In his mortally compromised position, he is capable of both profound detachment, and deep complicity with the universal misery of ours.

#### The Designing Self: The Self as Design

There is in the portraits of Nora and O' Connor, the two "registering consciousnesses" of the novel, a fascination with disorder and depravity under the oppression of the



Christian ethic, as though perversity and Christianity were the only two natural poles for human behaviour. Nevertheless, Barnes' narrative is not itself subject to the same laws as her characters' lives. She assigns tragic value to their experiences and then proceeds to insist on pattern in their desperate struggles with inevitability and dissolution. Experience may be grotesquely random, but in the artistic processes of trying to gather the fragments, one guards oneself against ruin. There is design in these degraded dualities, which provides the novel with the qualities of an artistic parable. But while the characters fail, and, finally the author falls silent, matter has been distilled. transformed, and therefore in some sense redeemed:

We were created that the earth might be made sensible of her inhuman taste; and love that the body might be so dear that even the earth should roar with it. (N. p. 314)

Just as the loved object can be transformed and "made sensible" by the investment of imagery and value, so it is possible that the experience of living can be redeemed in like manner in works of art.

The overall design of the novel has been described by Andrew Field as that of a "verbal art deco construct."<sup>58</sup> It also draws on other visual arts styles--surrealism, expressionism, rococo and the grotesque, all influential styles in representation in the 20's and 30's when Barnes was travelling around Europe, and to which, she as a painter and illustrator must have responded. Barnes' test

is verbally, and through its "spatialized" images, visually ornate. She frequently substitutes pattern and texture for traditional novelistic constructs, which makes her use of ornament far more subversive and compelling than her fin-de-siècle "beauty in barbarity" heritage alone would imply. (Her early illustrations were very much in the "Yellow Book" Beardsley style, though in the twenties, with Ryder, she moves curiously closer to Blake.) Of these visual arts styles, it is the grotesque that most thoroughly and intricately infiltrates the text. Ruskin had defined the grotesque in connection with Roman grotto painting as "a series of symbols thrown together with a bold and fearless connection of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way."<sup>59</sup> It is easy to interpret in the work of Barnes, a "painterly" writer, the same sense of "silences...encrustations...humour...and at base ...horror before life" which the grotesque tradition in art embodied.<sup>60</sup>

The grotesque, according to Wolfgang Kayser, is the primary artistic expression of "estrangement...alienation, the absurd [and] the incomprehensible."<sup>61</sup> In it the laws of nature are suspended, the inanimate comes to life and life is at the mercy of unseen forces. Its fifteenth and sixteenth century origins stressed above all a certain ornamental style, one interesting aspect of which, in relation to Barnes, is the blending of animal, plant and human forms. The world of these grotesque designs is

meant to form "the dark and sinister background of a brighter, rationally organized world...a world where...the laws of statics, symmetry and proportion are no longer valid. The sixteenth century synonym for the grotesque is 'the dreams of the painters' [sogni dei pittori] involving the dissolution of reality and the participation of the observer in a different kind of existence."<sup>62</sup> It is not very far at all, it seems to me, from this description of an artistic archetype, to its very specific application in Barnes' creation of such a dreamlike, sinister night world full of attenuated creatures.

It was Montaigne, the ancestor of all imaginative attempts at self-representation, who transferred the term from fine arts to literature. Speaking of his own essays, he called them "monstrous bodies, pieced together of the most diverse members, without distinct form, in which order and proportion are left to chance."<sup>63</sup> The twentieth century preoccupation with the grotesque can be seen in works as diverse as Wedekind's Erdgeist (Earth Spirit), which deals with the Beast or primitive force [Urgestalt] as the real self, to the works of the Italian playwrights who formed the "Teatro del grottesco" (1916-1925); most famous of them was Pirandello, whose personal creed, paralleling that of his contemporary, Djuna Barnes, could be stated as:

The absolute conviction that everything is vain and hollow, and that man is only a puppet in the hand of fate. Man's pains and pleasures as well as his deeds are unsubstantial dreams in a world of ominous darkness that is ruled by blind fortune."<sup>64</sup>

Both of these sets of artists--Wedekind and the German Expressionist dramatists, and the Italian theatre of the grotesque were contemporaneous with Barnes' work in the 20's, and there are undeniable similarities in world view and approach. We should not be, with any of these writers, overly distracted by the "fantastic" element of the grotesque or lose sight of its primary purpose in the twentieth century. Thomas Mann reminds us that "The grotesque is that which is extremely true and excessively real, not that which is arbitrary, false, unreal and absurd."<sup>65</sup>

If this is the core, as I argue, the radical purpose of Barnes' text, it is important first to consider the wilfully non-naturalistic methods for its embodiment: the artifice of the novel, in which, if it is to succeed, the "formal" value of the text must be shown "to be an accurate expression of the inner value, in such a way that duality of form and content ceases to exist."<sup>66</sup> One of the principal means of dissolving this duality is by objectifying the subjective in new ways. And this is what, I propose, Barnes intended with the images in her text. They were to embody a world, a state of mind, a version of herself in aesthetic forms that the traditional novel did not allow. This operates in two ways: first--on the larger level of the forms of which the narrative world of Nightwood is composed--ordering frames/tableaux, essentially as Joseph Frank concludes, spatial units of perception, rather than temporal or psychological ones; in a second sense, and one which operates

more intricately and thoroughly--like coloured threads running through the text--character, relations and states of consciousness too are objectified into aesthetic forms as objects, images or arrangements, as metaphorical or poetic constructs. This produces a remarkable sense of design in the work, uniting visual and thematic components into an elaborate and highly ordered collage or tapestry of sensibility.

These poetic ordering techniques do not simply "embellish or flesh out narrative," as the critic Louis Kannenstine notes. They achieve a far more radical intention: to "reformulate narrative design."<sup>67</sup> (emphasis added) It is more than a matter of suffering made tolerable by art; the narrative is freed from the traditional restrictions of sequence and causality as the principal means of encoding aesthetic meaning. Here, meaning is given form in image; and patterns of meaning are based entirely on the novel's metaphorical patterning. Such patterns "objectify, the subjective...worldify the imminent" as Ortega Gasset puts it.<sup>68</sup>

There is a new approach to character implicit in such an ordering process. Characters may embody certain ideas or forces, but referential detail about them based in reality, is irrelevant to Barnes' purpose, and is therefore not provided. They become figures of a mythic perspective rather than an historical or psychological one. Barnes' objectifying process, focusing as it does on catalogues of

objects, streams of description based on patterns of association of clothing, rooms and furniture, works to subvert any "naturalistic" reader involvement with the text, characters or "human" situations. By eliminating a realistic surface, we are left to face the text passively, as her characters must confront the fantastic tableaux that surround them--frozen emblems of a world in extremis with the "freakish contours of a dream."<sup>69</sup> In this dream world transient detail becomes transmuted as though under sudden spotlight, into pure metaphor whose literal or narrative reference ceases to matter.

This realm of pure metaphor is a verbal world whose order is symbolic, and whose frames of action are frozen into emblematic tableaux as highly charged, and intricately coded as any painting where design and purpose are one. As is only appropriate to such a design, there is a static quality to the action within these frames. Language serves to illuminate, in tragic idiom, timeless frames in which it is understood that change, for any character, is impossible. There is necessarily a gap between language and action. Introspective monologue and confession take the place of enacted confrontation or resolution in the novel. Instead of resolution, Barnes offers ceaselessly revised perspectives, "substituting one identity among differences for another in an infinite process of emergent meaning"--a classic modernist achievement in the Joycean style.<sup>70</sup>

T.S. Eliot recognized this metaphorical design in

Barnes' novel when he wrote in his introduction to its first edition that it would "appeal primarily to readers of poetry."<sup>71</sup> He quickly qualifies this by saying "I do not mean that Miss Barnes' style is 'poetic prose.' But I do mean that most contemporary novels are not really 'written!'" He then focuses on what he calls the compelling "pattern" of the book. "The book is not simply a collection of individual portraits; the characters are all knotted together, as people are in real life, by what one may call chance and destiny, rather than by deliberate choice of each other's company: it is the whole pattern that they form, rather than any individual constituent, that is the focus of interest"<sup>72</sup> (emphasis added.)

While agreeing entirely with his remarks about the sense of design in the novel, I disagree with Eliot in his conclusion that Barnes' style is not poetic. It is poetic prose, and moreover, the world of Nightwood could only have been created by a poet. I agree with Ralph Freedman in his study of the lyrical novel which places Barnes along with Joyce and Woolf at the apex of the "novel as poem."<sup>73</sup> In the works of these writers, "the world is transformed into the soliloquist's images (including those of the author) from which character and action are made to emerge."<sup>74</sup> What differentiates lyrical from non-lyrical writing Freedman says, is "a different concept of objectivity... independent designs in which awareness of men's experiences is merged with its objects. Rather than finding its

Gestalt in the imitation of an action, the lyrical novel absorbs action altogether and refashions it as a pattern of imagery."<sup>75</sup> This is precisely Barnes' narrative strategy in Nightwood. Her "principles of composition" are based on "the intricate cross-reference of image and symbol."<sup>76</sup> A later remark by Eliot is relevant in this regard. "It seems to me that all of us, so far as we attach ourselves to created objects and surrender our wills to temporal ends, are eaten by the same worm"<sup>77</sup> (emphasis added). The compulsion to "attach ourselves to created objects" is a universal malady which serves as the basis for Barnes' poetic designs. It is precisely this almost biblical sense of a man's material existence and of his inevitable mortality on which Barnes constructs her novel.

To better establish this sense of metaphorical structure, I will examine a number of the novel's key tableaux. Its opening frame, for example, clearly places the action, at the outset, in historical time. It is quickly injected with a sense of timeless metaphorical resonance, however, from history to fable in two pages. It is "early in 1880" when Felix Volkbein's imagined mother--a familiar androgynous Barnes female type--a "Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty" surrounded by the heavy Hapsburg decor of her time and status--"a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson" beneath a feather coverlet enveloped in satin, on which "in massive and tarnished gold threads stood the Volkbein arms, is engaged in an act of central



concern in all Barnes fiction--that of giving birth (N. p. 233). Birth and death are always in close proximity in Barnes' writing, and the decor of characters' lives serves merely to furnish the interim spaces. Here the tarnished crest is no guard against the mortal risk of trying to perpetuate the line. Barnes never fails to remind us of what curses women--here--the grotesque contortion required to produce life--"the genuflexion of the hunted body makes from muscular contraction, going down before the impending and inaccessible, as before a great heat" (N. p. 234). The woman's husband had died some months previously--childless, and "impaled" on his wife the Christian Hedvig, himself an Italian Jew who had done all he could to "be one with her" and failed. This too is a Barnes paradigm for human relations, and points to other unsatisfactory alliances we well--with God for example. Hedwig's militariness reminds us of the fact that the novel is being written in the 30's when elements of German expressionism, Nietzschean vitalism and political fascism were taking military shape in Europe. This woman too had some of the heroic qualities of Shakespeare's cross-dressing heroines, reminding us of the lesbian intelligentsia which was at the centre of Barnes' social and intellectual life in Paris after World War I. "The feather in her hat had been knife clean and quivering as if in an heraldic wind; she had been a woman held up to nature, precise, deep-bosomed and gay....She personified massive chic" (N. p. 236)

The metaphorical house of Felix's imagined parents is the first stage setting of the novel. It was a "fantastic museum" of the encounters that took place there--with its rococo halls, "giddy with plush, whorled designs in gold... Roman fragments, white and dis-associated" (N. p. 236). As a salon it could not but overwhelm with its shields, birds and massive pianos. Beneath the huge bulk of the furniture and the gleaming surfaces, there is a strong suggestion of violence, blood and uncontrollable force, barely contained. There is underfoot a "thick dragon's blood pile of rugs from Madrid" (N. p. 237). In the room were "two rambling desks in rich and bloody wood." Both feature in ornamental design reminiscent of fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian grotesque, animal figures, hammered out of silver to form "a lion, a bear, a ram, a dove, and in their midst a flaming torch" (N. p. 237). In this intensely coded decor, there is a profoundly disturbing and destabilizing juxtaposition of images, of on the one hand immovable substance and the power of history, and on the other, of blood, fire and lurking animality below the surface. As if we were ourselves spectators in this fantastic room, our attention is drawn toward a painting of the dead husband's mother. There is in its description, the usual Barnes high focus on clothing as possessing a great deal of disembodied information about the wearer. The reader's gaze is directed from the subject of the portrait's sumptuous visage and "overt mouth," to "pearled sleeves" and "stiff lace"

framing a "conical and braided head." Below it, "the deep accumulation of dress fell about in groined shadows; the train, rambling through a vista of primitive trees, was carpet thick" (N. p. 237). Here Barnes uses the power of clothing to mask, with almost Elizabethan formality, and at the same time to suggest powerfully, both sex and identity. The dress is described as an "accumulation," an accretion of meaning added to the wearer in layers; the train rambles almost independently of the wearer, through what appears to be an earlier, or possibly the same timeless version, of the nightwood in which all of the novel's later characters will be lost.

The power of his opening tableau--this "fantastic museum"--is in no way diminished by the announcement at its end, that it is a fake, "fictional." The woman's painting was purchased by Felix as an alibi to help account for origins unknown. We are in the realm of personal fiction, decorated with the objects Felix Volkbein has chosen, later, after adult reflection, to represent him. This is the room he might have, would like to have, been born in. This is the kind of Old European scenario he would have chosen to appear in. It helps to explain and objectify his condition, and the mystery of his life, which he experiences as a kind of Immaculate Conception, making a more poignant comedy than ever of his lot as the twentieth century Wandering Jew. After this associative excursion into "history" we return to the "present" of narrative time--1920. Felix is a dandy

in Paris, stuck in the fin-de-siècle style, looking for "anyone who looked as if he might be 'someone'" who will perhaps remind him of the actors in the stage setting of his birth, and back through it into history, with which he craves union (N. p. 240).

I have dwelt for so long on this opening scene of the novel, to establish an immediate example of Barnes' densely imagistic ordering process. I do not want simply to catalogue images. Every line of the book would have to be considered, so intense and crafted is the writing in its poetry. Barnes is doing more than presenting us with a Byzantine wall of superb images--though she does simultaneously do that. She is establishing this reliance on pattern, juxtaposition and cross-reference of image and symbol to give us all of the essential narrative information of the text. We receive it, as we would receive, passively and having to translate for ourselves, the meaning of a painting. It is at once distilled--the images are frozen and clear--and expanding out into timeless resonance, through texturing and layering, choreographing, nuance and counterpoint.

Felix himself is constantly searching for images or tableaux that will both distract him from his obsession with the past, and like the paintings of his "ancestors," provide him with further visible "objective correlatives" for his existence. The diversion that Barnes provides for him--the objectification of all diversionary activity in the decadent capitals of Europe between the wars--is the

circus, the night theatre of Berlin. This makes up the novel's second major tableau. Felix had since childhood been caught up with the pageantry of the circus. The version he encounters as an adult does not feature the kings and queens he had imagined as a child, but wonderful fakes, the circus nobility of false princesses, lying kings and pretend duchesses, wonderful titles for "gaudy cheap cuts from the beast life"--decorating themselves with an aristocratic overlay barely concealing their reeking, animal vitality. Their titles were only meant to "dazzle boys" and to make life mysterious (N. p. 241). These people take their props and sets with them, moving between sham salons all over Europe. It is their shameless, flaunting falseness which wins Felix's heart, and he "became for a little while a part of their splendid and reeking falsification" (p. 241). Thus is encapsulated one of Barnes' favourite dualities--the splendid pageant, the brightly coloured, the vital, the ornamental and the ephemeral miraculous show--and its underside--the rank, the degraded, the decay beneath the illusion.

In the circus, sex and animal vitality merge--the warm smell "stronger than the beasts" (N. p. 241). This world provides a natural scenario for Felix; in it he finds "a sense of peace which formerly he had experienced only in museums" (N. p. 241). His existence has found, for a time, a perfect set of objectifications--and he cleaves to them with "humble hysteria" and a profound sense of recognition.

The decaying brocades and laces" he remembers from his imagined past, the "old and documented splendour" (N. p. 241). His love for his world where the beast roams free is that of "the love of the lion for its tamer--that sweat-tarnished spangled enigma that, in bringing the beast to heel, had somehow turned toward him a face like his own... [it] had...picked the precise fury from his brain" (N. p. 241).

Felix loves, too, the "emotional spiral of the circus" --familiar yet unknowable (N. p. 241). It provides him with a script. He detects that the cast, the audience and above all, the action in the centre ring, re-enact a primeval drama from the racial unconscious, a potentially comic, monstrous replaying of the tragic material of ancient amphitheatres. The performers are rendered larger than life, more than themselves, in their performance. The androgynous aerialist, Frau Mann the Duchess of Broadback, is "preserved"--defined forever by her performance. As she survives by skill in the alien element of the air, she becomes a kind of performing bi-sexual artifact.

She seemed to have a skin that was the pattern of her costume; a bodice of lozenges, red and yellow, low in the back and ruffled over and under the arms, faded with the reek of her three-day control, red tights, laced boots... they ran through her as the design runs through hard holiday candies, and the bulge in the groin where she took the bar...was so solid, specialized and as polished as oak. The stuff of the tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll. The needle that made

one the property of the child made the other the property of no man. (N. p. 242) (emphasis added)

It is not difficult to read this as a feminist inspired version of the objectification of womanhood via costume and performance. The irony comes only at the end, that the costume and the tricks unsex as they provide identity. The woman who is intent upon denying gravity, cannot be possessed. The description of the aerialist provides valuable clues as to the kind of representation Barnes is interested in. The pattern of her costume, its colours and markings, form a design which seems to "run through her" to the core, indistinguishable from herself. They do not form an artificial covering--the skin and the coloured pattern are one. She is a performing work of art, sexless as a marionette, but defiantly the "property of no man," because she is half-man. She is what Angela Carter in her recent novel Nights at the Circus, might have called her flying, harlequined heroine, an "acrobat of desire."<sup>78</sup>

We hear too, from Matthew O'Connor on his entrance in the narrative, of another version of the artifact/performer --Nikka, the bear-fighting negro, "tattooed from head to heel with all the ameublement of depravity! Garlanded with rosebuds and hackwork of the devil...over his belly...an angel from Chartres; on each buttock...a quotation from the book of magic...across his knees...'I' on one and on the other 'can'...Across his chest, beneath a caravel in full sail, two clasped hands, the wrist bones fretted with point

lace. On each bosom an arrow speared heart." There is ornament on literally every part of his body with words spilling down his armpits and his legs covered in vine-work and rambling roses. Even his private parts were guarded by tattooed words of warning. "Why all this barbarity?" O' Connor asked him. "He loved beauty and would have it about him," we hear (N. p. 245).

This circus world is one where the currency for meaning is strictly visual, and where there is an extravagant, almost a vulgar excess of significance; a parody of the text itself? Is the tattooed wrestler, the harlequined aerialist, the creative artist "embodying" himself in his artistry?

It is in this world of performing metaphors that the novel's central love affair is initiated, and it too follows distinct patterns of objectification. At the lovers' emblematic meeting, Nora has taken a front row seat above the timeless arena of the circus ring. She is aware of the primeval charge beneath the traditional smears of colour in clown face and costume; it is both ancient and sexual--barely containing animality in man or beast. As she looked, the clowns "were rolling over the sawdust, as if they were in the belly of a great mother whale where there was yet room to play" (N. p. 275). (emphasis added) This is the excessively illuminated comic ring in the centre--the play of signification--beyond it darkness, silence, and inevitability. The creatures are tense, the horses trembling on hind legs before the trainer's whip. The lions--their



tails heavy and dragging as they are let out of their cages, make "the air seem full of withheld strength" (N. p. 275). As Nora takes this in, her attention is caught by the girl sitting next to her, whose hands are shaking as she lights a cigarette. This moment of one woman turning to face the other--the longed-for second self--is finely choreographed as the seeming climax for which the animals' tension has provided the momentum. "She looked at her suddenly because the animals going around and around the ring, all but climbed over at this point" (N. p. 275). The animals' eyes sought out the girl like searchlights. Nora had turned just in time to see one powerful lioness in her cage come over to a point exactly opposite the girl; "she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars and, as she regarded the girl, as if a river were falling behind impassible heat, her eyes flowed tears that never reached the surface. At that the girl rose...up" (N. p. 275-76). Nora rescues her from this primitive "recognition" scene and leads her away. From that time on "they were so 'haunted' of each other that separation was impossible."

The circus is a potent figurative construct in Barnes' novel. Often the action seems to take place in just such an unnaturally illuminated arena as this, with characters spotlighted as they speak, or "perform" for one another. Lesser versions of this arena are the rooms the characters occupy, particularly when, like the one that opened the

novel, they seem to "generate" the character, in a sense. We first see Robin Vote, for example, unconscious or asleep, in her hotel room. O'Connor is brought in when she cannot be roused. When first seen, she is placed, beautiful and lifeless, in virtually a Douanier Rousseau canvas. The room seems to speak of her origins; it is a jungle room with red carpets, "a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds." Her head is turned away from the spectator and "threatened consciousness" (N. p. 259). She is dressed in flannel trousers and her legs are frozen in the position of the dance. Her hands frame her face. This is what is seen. Next we are told what she evokes, as one studies her, looking for information to make sense of her. What is received is primarily a perfume that her body seems to exhale, of

earth-flesh, fungi...captured dampness...yet... dry, over cast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea, making her seem as if she had invaded a sleep incautious and entire. Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleepworn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. About her head there was an effulgence as of phosphorous glowing about the circumference of a body of water--as if her life lay through her in ungainly deteriorations. (N. pp. 259-60)  
(emphasis added)

In her prostrate, almost annihilated state, she evokes effortlessly, as a figure in a painting or an image in a poem evokes--ancient life--smells--plants--light in water

--decay. When Felix looks into her eyes because of their startling colour, he sees "the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye" (N. pp. 261-62).

This tableau of what seems to be the essence of this woman's existence, reminds us of one of the key messages of the whole novel--that "the woman who presents herself to the spectator as a picture forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger" (N. p. 261). The central metaphor for Robin's existence resonates out of the room and into the mythic landscape which it suggests:

Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person's every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey....Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past...she is eaten death returning... (N. pp. 262-53) (emphasis added)

The room contains in its ornamental imagery all of these signs of "the way back" (N. p. 264).

When Nora and Robin live together in Paris in an apartment on the rue du Cherche-Midi, they decorate its interior to provide material verification of their alliance, aesthetic objectification of their love. Once more, rooms are metaphorical designs for experience:

In the passage of their lives together every object in the garden, every item in the house, every word they spoke, attested to their mutual love, the combining of their humours....There were circus chairs, wooden horses from a ring of an old merry go round. Venetian chandeliers from the Flea Fair, stage drops from Munich, cherubim from Vienna, ecclesiastical hangings from Rome, a spinet from England, and a miscellaneous collection of music boxes from many countries. (N. p. 267)

Such was the "museum" of their life together. When they begin to fall apart it is this very "personality of the house" which torments Nora--"the punishment of those who collect their lives together" (N. p. 277). She fears that if she disarranges anything, Robin may become confused and "lose the scent of home" (N. p. 277). Once this level of suffering enters, love itself is open to re-interpretation and re-objectification. If it had existed previously in their shared collection of objects, it must now take new form, as it comes to exist only in Nora's desperate imagination, "love becomes the deposit of the heart analogous in all degrees to the 'findings' in a tomb" (N. p. 277). Love tokens and death tokens are to merge.

As Robin had reminded Felix of amber preserved through time in Nora's heart she is the "fossil...the intaglio, the engraved design of her own identity--kept alive by Nora's blood." As amber or fossil, "Robin was now beyond timely changes, except in the blood that animated her" (N. p. 277). Without the animating blood, that is, without Nora, who has become the necessary supplier of objects tying her to time,

she will be out of time altogether.

In Nora's haunted imagination is the "fixed walking image of Robin" in the night, as though in sleep, nightmare or death. As Nora battles to sleep herself, she falls back into the "tide of dreams...taking the body of Robin down with her into it, as the ground things take the corpses, with minute persistence, down into the earth, leaving a pattern of it on the grass, as if they stitched as they descended" (N. p. 277). (emphasis added) Love has become death, with only the pattern of the transformation left visible.

Nora receives all of these images of her experience with great and painful accuracy. Because she is not an artist, she is helpless before them. Hers is a sensibility which absorbs and reflects, like a piece of polished metal --a gunbarrel, whose vision is seen as a weapon of destruction; but she merely reflects; she does not judge. She is hyper-responsive, the eyes and ears at least of the woman writer, recording and receiving play-opera-music with the force of a weapon trained upon them. Her consciousness reproduces them "in a smaller but more intense orchestration"--the poetic image (N. p. 274). She is an agonized viewer of experience, a translator not a creator. In pain she receives, then translates and distils. Her sense of herself and any vanity is absent; "the world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside, and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem" (N. p. 275).

If Robin is an abandoned figure in a Douanier Rousseau canvas, Nora's "image" is that of a Klimt design, carefully masking a chamber music sensibility.

Wherever she was met, at the opera, at a play, sitting alone and apart, the programme face down on her knee, one would discover in her eyes, large, protruding and clear, that mirrorless look of polished metals which report not so much the object as the movement of the object. As the surface of a gun's barrel, reflecting a scene, will add to the image the portent of its construction, so her eyes contracted and fortified the play before her in her own unconscious terms. One senses in the way she held her head that her ears were recording Wagner or Scarlatti, Chopin, Palestrina, or the lighter songs of the Viennese school, in smaller but more intense orchestration (N. 274).

If Nora is not an artist and therefore not Djuna Barnes, how then is the authorial self represented in the text? If there is a character whose utterance and whose patterns of objectification most closely resemble the authorial consciousness in Nightwood, it is Matthew O'Connor, as we are reminded by Alan Singer.<sup>79</sup> Certainly their views of the world coincide. Among the things expected of him in the text is the difficult task of "explaining" Robin Vote to all the other characters. He fails to do this, and more importantly, in the process fails to be a voice or synthesizer for Barnes, because of the fundamental break with traditional characterization that Barnes makes. O'Connor is no more a "realistic" or psychologically probable character than any of the others. The more he says (the traditional means of "rounding out" a character), the more

we become aware that both he and Barnes are offering no more than weary and self-conscious artistic illusions. When Nora and Felix ask him anguished questions, he can only respond obliquely by providing further and often tangential metaphors for their situations. Because he has no answers, because he is in the same predicament, he must be evasive. His responses, because of the essentially figurative (rather than referential) design of the book, must therefore primarily address the reader, who is making poetic or associative connections where the characters cannot. When Nora says to him in desperation: "What am I to do?" when she is unable to decide whom she has loved more--Robin or herself--he responds with "Make birds' nests with your teeth" (N. p. 333). We are to think of all the other birds in the novel. By the poetry he provides instead of any kind of solution, or even a direct reply, he paradoxically and quite powerfully revises the context of the question put.

Barnes provides, through O'Connor's failure to explain and his connected metaphorical evasions, a level of purely imagistic coherence in the novel, which supports the idea that there is deliberately to be no artist figure in the text, because Barnes simply does not interpret the roles of author and character in any way. By investing objects with the significance of characters, and by arranging characters and situations as visually imagined rather than as possessing psychological authenticity, she makes the image itself

the container of meaning in the text. And it is not a fixed image. Because there is no-one particularly to control or synthesize them, the reader is left with a de-centred narrative, where images are constantly being revised, their meanings subtly altered with every accretion, and producing a level of meaning and a perspective that are profoundly fluid and relativistic. We have noted the interiority of the text, the absence of dramatic confrontation or event. I suggest that it is a metaphor which supplants action as the energising force in the text. This makes it a very different kind of "self-creating" narrative than other Modernist texts.

I do not mean to imply, as Alan Singer accuses many critics of doing, that the poetic image in Barnes' hands contains the "mirage" of metaphysical truth. Nor do I mean to invoke "poetic prose" as being of transcendent value because of the "irreducible quality" of poetry. Both approaches make of poetry a false god. I do not claim that Nightwood is a novel of supreme value because of the metaphysical truth or irreducible quality of its poetic writing. I claim instead that one of its remarkable aspects, and a major contribution to Modernism by Barnes, is that through her manipulation of strictly poetic design and strategies for revelation, she is able to liberate the text from a number of narrative conventions for coherence, and in the process create a self-contained and independent artifact. She is very concerned not to be visible in the



text in order to, in Singer's words "nullify the internal (dramatic) and external (authorial) levels in the novel."<sup>80</sup>

If Nightwood is to be seen as a structure or construction of the authorial self, it is remarkable for the divestment of the artist's ego. That self is articulated not in the omnipresent sense of the author's presence, but in objectified form in every utterance, by every character in each frame of the book, in the form of densely textured, but utterly coherent sets of relations between character, event and image.

### Conclusion

A limited and traditional reading of lesbian fiction in English sees Nightwood as one more novel of damnation written by a suffering outcast. I prefer a more positive view of Barnes' contribution as a female, late Modernist writer.

It is possible to take as one important set of distinctions between Modernist writers, the ways in which they used the idea of gender. Male Modernists, like their female counterparts, were frequently very concerned with ideas of sexual representation: Lawrence in his "male and female worlds" in The Rainbow and Women in Love and especially in short stories like "The Fox;" Eliot's Wasteland in which sexual disorder is at the heart of the Unreal City; and in Joyce's Ulysses, the key episode is

"Nighttown," a Walpurgisnacht of comically grotesque, sexual inversions.<sup>81</sup> These male writers play with the idea of sexual chaos, inversion and misrule, but strictly within a conventional appearance-reality dichotomy, which finally results, in each case, in a restoration of hierarchical social order, traditional cultural paradigms and patterns of male/female distinctions.<sup>82</sup> These fictions of the self, when they take sexual form, are very conservative. Feminist fictions of the sexual self from the same period are far more imaginatively radical. And this is the essence of Barnes' contribution to late Modernist fiction.

Barnes' objectification of the self was based on an androgynous vision. Well beyond Eliot's "objective correlative," are the metaphors Barnes used to embody and communicate a view of the self and world which put her outside tradition. This metaphorical rendering of self was far more than just an imagistic ordering process, as Joyce perfected it. Her metaphors had to do more than disrupt traditional narrative forms; they had to communicate an expression of inner values and versions of the self which the traditional novel and traditional society did not know how to accommodate. Scenes of sexual inversion and sexual transformations of all kinds proliferate in her novel. Disembodied elements of male and female behaviour and perspectives shift constantly within and between characters and scenes as they search for balance, epitomized in the androgynous ideal. Whereas Joyce's "Nighttown" is one

episode of apocalyptic sexual confusion in an essentially daylight world, harmoniously resolved when Leopold/Ulysses finally goes home to his Molly/Penelope who says "yes" to him, sexual disorder and the night are Barnes' whole world.

In this night world of permanent misrule, there can be no fixed or single self for author or characters. Androgyny for Barnes is a gender-free reality which may inhabit many selves. This accounts for the absence of the author in the novel as character or artist figure; for Barnes there can be no Leopold Bloom or Stephen Dedalus. She is writing in the dangerous air outside the realistic tradition, or even the disrupted realistic tradition of Modernism in its first wave. In Nightwood, psychological authenticity matters little; objects convey as much meaning as people.

Barnes offers us in Nightwood a set of imagistic reflections on gender, which share certain common qualities with another late Modern fable of androgyny, Virginia Woolf's Orlando.<sup>83</sup> Where Nightwood is a Greek tragedy however, Orlando is an enchanting and entirely positive fairy tale which skates through time, sex and identity, effortlessly creating, in its central character, the kind of richly dressed and magical "third sexed being" behind gender and myth, happy and free, that Barnes can only dream about in her 30's European despair.

Both Orlando and Nightwood display the radical, imaginative freedom of "androgynous" works, wildly and

fluidly choreographing the ancient play of male and female within and between characters, rather than relying on the traditional sexual and imaginative patterns of a social order which, to Woolf and Barnes, seemed both fallen and misguided. The novels were both written in the thirties. Woolf had moved away from her early Modernist works like Night and Day and The Voyage Out towards a more fragmented, objectified style in To the Lighthouse, The Waves and Between the Acts.<sup>84</sup> One of the most positive developments for Woolf in her mature phase was, I believe, a movement away from the sense of a self extinguished in her early fiction, to the marvellously free, androgynous self-portrait in Orlando. Despite Barnes' tragic vision of her self and her world, she was permitted a measure of freedom, at least stylistically, in breaking away from literary and social norms. She takes metaphor further than the male twenties' writers in putting it to more radical use, to capture the androgynous ideal of a pure, objectified and gender-free self and the cynical, compromised versions of the alienated self when the idea is lost. These are positive artistic contributions. With consummate artistry still, but on the negative plane, she reflects, as a late-Modernist, the dying belief in the thirties that language was a powerful and redeeming force in itself. In the mouths of her characters, it is degraded currency, with a decade of extravagant talk and waste behind it. In Barnes' thirties' world, both language and people are self-consuming artifacts.

## Conclusion

I have suggested in this thesis that one reason for the critical neglect of Rhys, Stein and Barnes is that their best work appeared in the 1930's, a period that is generally regarded in twentieth-century literary chronology as a "lapse period" for fiction. The poetry of the period, particularly that of the "Auden generation" has gathered more respect. There are two points I would like to make, one that runs counter to the idea of the 30's as a "lapse" period, and the other which addresses the idea that the three women writers under consideration must inevitably suffer by comparison with the acknowledged "great writers" of canonical Modernism, generally accepted as covering the period from 1910-1925.

I believe that it is facile and unhelpful to draw artificial distinctions between literary periods, to say that Modernism ended in 1925 or 1930. Culture, including literary culture, is a continuum, not a series of stops and starts. It is tempting to "periodize," to declare a group of artists a "school" because they were contemporaries, and to declare for the sake of intellectual neatness, some writers and events "important" simply to facilitate the making of patterns and theories. There have certainly been stages in Modernism, but what is to prevent Post-Modernism being seen as a culminating point or apotheosis of Modernism, rather than any kind of reversal?

If, as I argue, we look at twentieth century writing as a

continuum, proper value must be attached to its transition periods, periods of marked historical change when literature of course reflected that change in new concerns and evolving styles. Rhys, Stein and Barnes are, I suggest, writers of such a transition period, whose works both revise the touchstones of pure Modernism and point to later developments beyond it. They are "later Modernists," along with the Virginia Woolf of Orlando and Between the Acts, Christopher Isherwood, Ivy Compton-Burnett, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, André Gide and Italo Svevo.<sup>1</sup> The fictions of this period certainly indicate a changed state of mind in response to a changed world. Stephen Spender, speaking for his generation, describes his attempt to "turn the reader's and the writer's attention outwards from himself to the world."<sup>2</sup> There is, in the late Modernist fiction, a level of engagement with the world for which the metaphysical self-absorption of the 20's had no room. At one extreme is Christopher Isherwood's fictional "reportage," docu-fiction designed to capture the immense build-up of social tension and military pressure in that decade; but at another point on the spectrum of thirties writing, that same level of engagement, of seeing the world as a mirror of self-concern, rather than the reverse of ten years' earlier, can be seen in a text like Woolf's Between the Acts.

After the world slump of 1929, the unworldliness of the earlier decade no longer seemed appropriate as an artistic style. A more political and documentary slant incorporated

ideas from psychology and sociology into a style which mixed Modernist norms with increasing doses of realism and surrealism, to present a vision of a disturbed and disordered world. This was a period of serious political and social transition and European fiction captured the uncertainty of direction and the state of tense irresolution in the world's affairs. Christopher Isherwood spoke of the "fantastic realities of the everyday world,"<sup>3</sup> and it was the novelist's problem in the 30's as to how to address them. The 20's obsession with "consciousness," transcendence and turning inward, had led to a displaced perception of the world. Novels of the 30's made a variety of attempts to break out of this impasse. Even a "high Modernist" of the 20's like Virginia Woolf, along with Marxist writers like Edward Upward, sought to engage with the social reality of the times.

There was a mounting sense of depersonalized control in the 30's. The rise of totalitarian regimes and the rapid development of science, technology and communications systems all posed a massive threat to individuals. One critic, Alan Wilde, has said that writers of fiction in the 30's undertook, of necessity, "to remake the functions of language and literature," seeing it no longer in the symbolist tradition "as a means of declaring and evoking some final and ultimate 'Truth,' but as a way of releasing the 'self' and of thereby making the phenomenal world once more the scene of purposeful action."<sup>4</sup> This desire to

move beyond the consciousness-obsessed "self" of the 20's artist, inevitably led to changes in self-representation. A sense of engagement with the world, with things as they really are, led to "a curious tension between situating and at the same time voiding the particular identity of the self," an "equivocal treatment of the self" which attempts to "exploit and minimize the facts and also the subjective resonance of the author's private life."<sup>5</sup> Autobiography provides a "surface" in these works. Style is less aesthetically radical, perhaps giving in to exhaustion, and replaced by a need to come to terms with the world and the self in it.

I said in my introduction that works of high Modernism by male writers were frequently autobiographical fictions, where a mask of impersonality failed to conceal an artist figure or designing consciousness within the text, which reflected an élitist, self-generated and conservative sense of order. In the 30's, an element of authorial self-reflexiveness that prefigures post-modern works by writers like Capote, Adler, Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Beckett, Sarraute and Handke emerges.<sup>6</sup> The massive threat to individuals by militarism and technology leading up to World War II was reflected in literary styles of representation as a kind of "dehumanization," leading to a radically revised version of the authorial self, and characterization generally. Fragmentation, neurosis and an atmosphere of threat, fear and violence had to be accepted



and assimilated; this, in the face of Modernism's long-standing faith that, in the hands of a good writer, the essential unity and truth of the world, and the fundamental "intactness" of character, would be revealed. Alan Wilde called this a preoccupation with "depth" as it is linked, in terms of psychological veracity, with truth. Now in the 30's we move from "depth" to a distrustful preoccupation with "surface." This accords precisely with my term "objectification" as describing 30's styles of fictional self-representation throughout this thesis. "Dehumanization" is another way to describe it, and it marks a significant shift in sensibility between the 20's and 30's. With this new concentration on linguistic surface comes "a relinquishing of complexity in favour of contradictions embodied in metaphors that are hard, bright, inorganic facets of character," very much the objectified "metaphors of the self" I have described.<sup>7</sup> (emphasis added)

It becomes clear that Post-Modernism, incorporating the strategies and presuppositions of Modernism, emerged in an evolutionary way in this period of transition. Modernism was, then, subverted by a number of writers in the 30's who shared a state of mind which concluded that the day of Forster's "round" character, and the artist figure as a means of self representation, was over; that personality was "a mere locus for experience."<sup>8</sup>

If 30's writing often adopted an autobiographical "surface," a stylistic objectification of the self in the

world, and at the same time engaged with that world and things as they really are, then how do Jean Rhys, Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes resolve this apparent contradiction in their late-Modernist fictions? Do they remain hold-overs from pure Modernism? Or are they precursors of Post-Modernism? In what senses were they late-Modernists and therefore significant "transitional" writers as I have defined that term? Each of them was representative of her time in that she absorbed what she wanted to use from 20's Modernism and added important variations of her own, that did, in each case, prefigure later writing developments. I want to focus on what I consider to be the principal factor which connects the three writers, and that is that in the 30's their autobiographical fictions revealed an ideological element which acted not only to revise Modernism, but to subvert it. This subversive element was both stylistic and substantive. Its focus was gender, the representation of the sexual self in an objectifying, metaphorical way. In their diverse works, they represented in an engaged way, their world and themselves as mirrored in it, as sexual, class and geographical exiles. Their strategies were different but the ideological focus is common to all three.

For the male Modernist, gender was most often the ultimate reality, while for his female counterpart, an ultimate reality exists only if one journeys beyond gender.<sup>9</sup> The radical revisions of Modernism undertaken by these three women involved, at an ideological level, a questioning, a

subverting, even a repudiation of the conservative, hierarchical views of their male predecessors. Though the ideological impulse has a sexual base, many of its implications are social. They question, with their styles of sexual representation, the ethically orthodox and the fixed social order of the male aesthetic which had dominated in the 20's. As Sandra Gilbert concludes in her article, "Costumes of the Mind," it is not surprising that

a male Modernist should have wanted the consolation of orthodoxy...for it is, after all, only those who are oppressed or repressed by history and society who want to shatter the established paradigms of dominance and submission associated with hierarchies of gender and restore the primordial chaos of... genderlessness. Such political devotees of the 'third sex' wish to say 'I am not that fixed self you have restrained in these net tight garments. I am all selves and no selves.'<sup>10</sup>

The ideological element which links three such different writers as Rhys, Stein and Barnes centres on the idea that, in their diverse autobiographical fictions, they look beyond gender for ideas and metaphors of the self, for author, character and even reader. In "the process whereby the self creates itself in the experience of creating art, to read...portraits of women entangled in familial and erotic bonds, we must join the narrator in reconstructing the other women by whom we know ourselves."<sup>11</sup> Each of them, in her fictional representation of self and world, explored the assumed conformity between gender ascription and all other aspects of personality.

In Jean Rhys' autobiographical novels, she offers a

decidedly anti-romantic treatment of heterosexuality. Her "gender identity" seems to have been one of the few secure aspects of her existence, but in her dispassionate recordings of her protagonists' efforts to keep alive through another day, she makes a profound challenge to traditional, and specifically Modernist, representations of the sexes. In formal and stylistic terms however, she was in most respects a high Modernist, mistress of the impressionistic Georgian vignette and the polished surface; she had perfected the interior monologue, stream of consciousness and cinematic time shifts. But this was the "surface" of her work, and it is precisely the play of tensions between surface and depth in her novels which takes her beyond Modernism. Stylistically, hers is an elegant, aesthetically cool and dispassionate voice. It was her disturbing narrative trick, however, to cultivate, deliberately, a sense of distance between the cool, ironic surface of the text, whose voice is poised and controlled, and its underlying voice, which is that of the alienated female consciousness, mute with horror, yet possessing a brutally clear sense of who and what is to blame. This stylistic gap, between surface calm and psycho-nightmare beneath, reminds us of the leit-motif of many of her novels: the horror beneath apparent beauty. And it is basically content rather than form which puts Rhys at odds with her Modernist forbears, male and female. If, in the beauty/horror dichotomy, we were to substitute convention/the status quo for the apparent surface reality

and the primitive nightmare existence of the victim of tyrannical and predetermined social and sexual forces for the horror, we can see the subversive social implications of her work. If we were to go further and substitute male for apparent reality and female for horror, at least in terms of experience, we can see the subversive sexual implications of her work.

The existence and survival of her impoverished and declassée female protagonists in geographical exile on the criminal, artistic fringe of respectable society, act as indictments of both the bourgeoisie and the bohemians. As an outsider to both, the Rhys woman exposes them as equally conventional, hierarchical and hypocritical. Her position of exile gives her an oddly privileged angle of vision on them. Because she wishes to subvert and expose them, she makes the dramatic moments in her texts moments of rupture, when the horror smashes through the surface calm. Because this artificial calm is so frequently maintained by the men in her books, at great cost to women who are generally living the horror, she provides a radical counter-vision to the mainstream Modernists' representation of the sexes and the patterns of order implied. She saw in male Modernist fictions a false mythologizing and misrepresentation of female consciousness, a false sense of "resolution" in sexual union and a misplaced sense of restored order, when for example, at the end of Ulysses, Molly finally gives in. Rhys intended

a great deal more in her rendering of the dispossessed female consciousness than the traditional Modernist examination of the gap between speech and feeling. In her works, she passionately denies the cultural truisms for appropriate sexual emotions and behaviour as the male Modernists have reflected them, and never more clearly than in her last novel of the 30's, Good Morning, Midnight, described accurately by one critic as "Good Night to Modernism."<sup>12</sup>

The novel is a quintessential work of late-Modernism, embodying the sense of impending disaster of the 30's; the protagonist's whole existence is recorded as an interstice. Her total concern is with survival. She is at war with the world even as the world becomes increasingly the landscape of her alienated mind. Freedom, and the power of uncontrollable outside forces to crush it, are central concerns. The characters, citizens of Europe, are exiles of uncertain identity--"no paper, no passport...the slightest accident and I'm finished."<sup>13</sup> The book ends with a sex scene which reads like a grotesque parody of Joyce's at the end of Ulysses, and thus returns us to the ideological component of Rhys' writing which fuelled her damning critique of class, sexual and social power structures. Her character, Sasha Jansen, allows herself to be sexually taken by a spectral death's-head figure, the "commis voyageur" in the sordid boarding house rather than the man she cares for, because she is despairing and

exhausted and because she finally admits that, to the outside world at least, she and the ugly and solitary travelling salesman are equals. When she says "yes" to him, it is the stuff of ultimate nightmare for author and character. This is Rhys' explicit commentary on Joyce's conclusion to Ulysses, a traditionally life affirming scene, which is, she says, false to the core. This episode of pure self-annihilation marks the onset of a 28 year silence for Rhys.

Jean Rhys had attacked the power structures of conventional society as they immobilized and misrepresented women. She did so from what feminists would call "a secure gender base," however, Gertrude Stein offered a very different challenge to gender and its representation in art. Her challenge was a psychological one. Her refusal in narrative to "psychologize" characters or to ascribe motives, combined with her powerful belief in androgyny as an ideal intellectual and artistic position from which to write, meant that she refused to consider her own or her characters' alienation from the gender conventions of their culture. Alienation was not a concept she bothered with. Like Rhys, Stein was an expatriate, but one who was a central figure in her adopted culture, largely due to her independent wealth. Like Rhys' poverty, Stein's lesbianism may have put her into a less than privileged sub-culture, but by adopting the persona of the wealthy, independent androgyne, she refused to be marginalized. She was able to create a

powerful sense of herself in the present on terms which suited her. As her self-portrait embodied her artistic principles, we see her forcibly eliminating the psyche, the memory, past and present from her rendering of her own existence and consciousness. She turns herself from a three-dimensional being with all these qualities into a flat, one dimensional work of visual art, a portrait made up of reflecting cubist planes. This exercise is very much in keeping with a move from "depth" to "surface" stylistic representation typical of late Modernist novels in the view of critic, Alan Wilde.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless there were some rather murky depths to Stein's deceptive self-portrait. She claimed, as an intellectual and as an artist, to be genderless, while living as a lesbian and frequently acting like the Grand Old Man of Modernism, and in the process as an Artist Figure. It is paradoxical that as a profound disbeliever in poetry and metaphor, she had to use them in her autobiography; she was forced to encode/inscribe herself in the metaphors she chose to reveal only selected glimpses of her actual life.

Her challenge to gender representation in literature is subversive and successful precisely because she considers it irrelevant. Human nature and the workings of the human mind are her declared subjects. Character and creativity, she believed, have nothing to do with gender. This philosophical belief required her to ignore a great number of literary conventions that would have bound her to



Modernism and made her a less influential writer. Because she portrayed herself and others from a gender-free perspective, she made it clear that she was dealing with human types in a non-psychological, non-realistic and non-mythical manner. Her belief that consciousness is finally able to express nothing but its own continuous flow of thought represents artistic anarchy after the sense of a controlled reality which the writers of the 20's attempted and valued.

Like Rhys, Stein was in the 30's, a writer in transition. The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is, in certain stylistic respects, a perfect Modernist text. But in addition to its subversive qualities as a self-portrait beyond gender, there are other aspects of the work which point beyond the period. As a Modernist, she had continued to "stylize" reality, but by 1934 she had taken this stylized reality to the point of fragmentation, where words cease to convey conventional meaning of any kind. "Deconstruction," her principle of composition since 1927, which involved ignoring, manipulating or altering received conventions, she now applies to 20's Modernism, as well as to the impressionistic period before it. The particular brand of literary minimalism she develops at this stage links her with much later developments in twentieth century writing, notably with Beckett and Sarraute and other writers of the French nouveau roman, and with the entire body of post-modern, self-reflexive American fiction.<sup>15</sup>

A purely stylistic reading of Djuna Barnes' classic, Nightwood, sees her as the prose poet of Modernism, combining the strengths of Eliot and Joyce. However, her challenge to Modernism, those qualities that made her a late-Modernist and an important transitional writer, were not in matters of form, but like Rhys, in content. Like Stein, she offered an androgynous challenge to the prevailing Modernist sense of order--sexual, social and literary. The civilizing power of art in her works, including, one senses her own mastery of metaphor, fails to conceal the primitive and its violent threat to apparent order. Her masterpiece is set entirely in this primitive nightworld, where the beauties of intricate surface design and the metaphorical inscriptions of meaning signify Modernism exhausted, and the human spirit approaching collapse into war, similarly exhausted.

Like both Rhys and Stein, Barnes was an exile from conventional society several times over. The product of a alienated and sexually eccentric family, Barnes was another displaced American in Paris in the 1920's and 30's. Frequently impoverished like Rhys, she too was a cultural fringe dweller, rather than a central figure like Stein. But she shared with Stein the desire, as a lesbian intellectual, to display, in her fiction, how irrelevant conventions about gender are. Her motives were different from Stein's however; where Stein saw herself above gender, Barnes saw it as an irrelevant consideration in the face of the abyss of human desire generally. Her transvestites.

simply embody the worst of the male and female lot. Like Rhys and Stein, Barnes refused to internalize or reflect, in her work, the patriarchal view of her self and her position as a sexual or social being. The human position, especially as it faces the gun once more in the 30's is her concern. Its metaphorical landscape is the "night wood," just as the characters, regardless of their sex, are metaphors of human desire. And all of these are metaphorical representations of Djuna Barnes' sense of herself and her world.

Like its close contemporary, Rhys' Good Morning, Midnight, Nightwood is also a farewell to Modernism in several important respects. It begins as a fictional self-portrait of a spirit facing extinction, showing the conventions of sexual desire as just one more torture, and pure being, beyond gender and time, an ideal that fell with Eden. The novel is, as well, a brilliant metaphorical portrait of Europe, wasted by the corruption and indulgence of the 20's, doomed and sliding hopelessly towards war and ruin. Finally and most compellingly, the book also marks the fall of what was rich and powerful in the language of the Modernist masters, into the degraded, irrelevant chatter of her characters. Djuna Barnes, like Jean Rhys, also fell silent after this novel, for many years.

The multiple and metaphorical self-portraits in fiction by Jean Rhys, Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes indicate a much larger re-definition of subjectivity in fictional forms

in the 1930's. Their decentred narratives allow the author to move in and out of the personal, breaking with mimetic disclosure as the principle concern of autobiographical writing. So begins what Roland Barthes has called a "conscious deconstructing of the self, an alert rejection of wholeness or transcendence, showing that the psychoanalytic function of self-representation has given way in the modern period to a consciously philosophical and deconstructive one."<sup>16</sup> The three women who have been the subjects of this thesis were part of this deconstructive process in the ideologically subversive expression of their refusal to be artist figures in their texts, or to be the extinguished selves of earlier female aestheticism. Instead, they metaphorized, in fiction, the real ingredients of their lives, lesbianism or poverty and exile, so exposing the falsehoods of the "unified, whole spiritual self" which was the male Modernist ideal.

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18 Suzanne C. Ferguson, "Djuna Barnes' Short Stories: An Estrangement of the Heart," Southern Review, Jan. 1969: 38.

19 Djuna Barnes "Aller et Retour," Selected Works of 3-11.

20 Barnes, "The Doctors," "Aller et Retour," Selected Works of 54.

21 Barnes, "Aller et Retour" 9.

22 Barnes, "The Doctors" 55.

23 Barnes, "Aller et Retour" 9.

24 Barnes, "A Night Among the Horses," in Selected Work of 32.

25 Barnes, "Spillway," in Selected Works of 65, 68, 69.

26 Field, Djuna 93.

27 James B. Scott, Djuna Barnes (Boston: Twayne, 1976) 25.

28 Barnes, "The Rabbit," in Selected Works of 53; "A Night Among the Horses," in Selected Works of 29-36.

29 Barnes, "The Rabbit" 53.

30 Barnes, "A Night Among the Horses" 32.

31 Barnes, "A Night Among the Horses" 29, 32.

32 Barnes, "The Doctors" 58.

- 33 Barnes, "Spillway" 65.
- 34 Ferguson 40.
- 35 Djuna Barnes, Vagaries Malicieuses (New York: Frank Hallman, 1974; originally in The Doubler Dealer, New Orleans, 1922).
- 36 See Ch. 1 Note 18.
- 37 Field 155.
- 38 Field 155.
- 39 Field discusses the real and the fictional Dan Mahoney 145-147.
- 40 Barnes, Nightwood 348.
- 41 Field 86.
- 42 Barnes, Nightwood 327. All other references to this novel will be included parenthetically in the text.
- 43 Charles Baxter, "Nightwood and Modernism," Journal of Modern Literature, 3 (1974): 1176.
- 44 In his "Notes to The Waste Land," T.S. Eliot explains that "Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character,' is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem;" Collected Poems 1909-1935 (London: Faber & Faber, 1951) 80. Cassandra, when she had been loved by the god, Apollo had been given the gift of prophesy by him. When he was later offended by her, he rendered her gift useless by ordaining that her predictions should never be believed. See C.M. Gayley, The Classic Myths in English Literature and Art (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1939).
- 45 Field 240.



- 46 Alan Williamson, "The Divided Image: The Quest for Identity in the Works of Djuna Barnes," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction 7 (1964): 58-74.
- 47 Williamson 62.
- 48 Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature (Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963) 32.
- 49 Frank 33.
- 50 Alan Singer, "The Horse Who Knew Too Much: Metaphor and the Narrative of Discontinuity in Nightwood," Contemporary Literature, 25 no. 1, (1984) 65-74.
- 51 Barnes, The Antiphon 214.
- 52 Barnes, "Six Songs of Khalidine," A Book 145.
- 53 Frank 38.
- 54 Frank 39.
- 55 Frank 39.
- 56 Susan Gubar, "Blessings In Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists," Massachusetts Review, Autumn 1981.
- 57 T.S. Eliot, "Notes to The Waste Land."
- 58 Field 214.
- 59 Field 33.
- 60 Field 33.
- 61 Wolfgang Kayser, The Grottesque in Art and Literature (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1963) 20.
- 62 Kayser 21.
- 63 Kayser 24.

64 Kayser 132.

65 Thomas Mann, Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen (Reflections of an Unpolitical Man) in Kayser 135.

66 Wilhelm Worringer, Form in Gothic (London: Putnam & Sons, 1927) 7.

67 Kannenstine 87-8.

68 Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art and other Writings on Art and Culture, trans. Willard A. Trask (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956) 35.

69 Kannenstine 101.

70 Singer 67.

71 T.S. Eliot, "Introduction" to Nightwood in Selected Works of Djuna Barnes 227.

72 Eliot, "Introduction" 230.

73 Ralph Freedman, The Lyrical Novel (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963).

74 Freedman 278.

75 Freedman 1-2.

76 Melvin Friedman, Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955) 261.

77 Eliot, "Introduction" 231.

78 Angela Carter, Nights at the Circus (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984).

79 Many of these basic ideas and connections have been suggested by Alan Singer, "The Horse Who Knew Too Much: Metaphor and the Narrative of Discontinuity in Nightwood," Contemporary Literature, 25 no. 1, (1984): 65-74.

80 Singer 68.

81 Sandra Gilbert, "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature," in Abel, Writing and Sexual Difference 214.

82 Gilbert 195-6.

83 Virginia Woolf, Orlando (London: Hogarth Press, 1940).

84 Virginia Woolf, The Voyage Out (London: Hogarth Press: 1915); To the Lighthouse (London: Hogarth Press, 1927); The Waves (London: Hogarth Press, 1931); Between the Acts (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1941).

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Late Modernism see Alan Wilde, "Surfaces of Late Modernism," Boundary 2 8 (1980): 212-25.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Spender, The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs (Philadelphia: Albert Sarfer, 1953) 205.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Isherwood quoted in foreword to Edward Upward, "The Railway Accident," New Directions in Prose and Poetry 11 (1949): 34.

<sup>4</sup> Wilde 212-25.

<sup>5</sup> Wilde 215.

<sup>6</sup> See Harry Levin, "What Was Modernism?" in Burnshaw, Varieties of Literary Experience (New York: Knopf, 1962) 307-19.

<sup>7</sup> Wilde 219.

<sup>8</sup> Wilde 221.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Gilbert, "Costumes of the Mind," in Abel 195-6.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert 196.

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Burke, "Gertrude Stein, the Cone Sisters and the Puzzle of Female Friendship," in Abel 221.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Kegan Gardiner, "Good Morning, Midnight: Good Night Modernism," Boundary 2 9 (1982): 23-242.

<sup>13</sup> Rhys, Good Morning, Midnight 132.

<sup>14</sup> Wilde 214.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of post-modern autobiographical fiction see Paul Jay, Being in the Text (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes quoted in Jay 167.

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