Jean Rhys (1890–1979) was born in Dominica. Her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother, in the terminology then current, “a white creole,” that is, a person of European ancestry who was born, and lived, in the Caribbean. Rhys came to England at the age of sixteen and, to quote from the biographical statement on the first page of the Penguin edition of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “drifted into a series of hopeless jobs.” Her early publications, such as *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), attracted some attention, but with the outbreak of the Second World War, they and the author were forgotten. Time passed, and many assumed that she had died, when she made a startling reappearance with *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), winning the Royal Society of Literature Award and the W. H. Smith Award. She was then seventy-six, and felt the acclaim had come too late. Six years after her death, Francis Wyndham edited and published her letters.

Postcolonial literature has given voice and value to the voiceless and the disregarded. In doing so, it has provided other perspectives, extended awareness and broadened sympathies. Jean Rhys was indignant at the portrayal of Bertha, the madwoman in the canonical *Jane Eyre*—one who, like her, had been brought to England from the Caribbean—and wanted to give this shadowy and frightening creature the opportunity to tell her story, to establish herself as a human being, and to discredit Rochester’s dominant—male, European—discourse. (*The First Mrs Rochester* was one of the titles Rhys considered for her novel.)

The intention here is to read *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a text which deals with movement—with voyages and journeys—and with alienation. The influence of Foucault’s work will be evident. The contrary of movement is immobility, associated with entrapment, but the novel undermines facile dichotomies. In movement there is imprisonment and, within entrapment, journeys both physical and mental. These elements of movement, entrapment, and alienation are related to the central concern of madness, which, in turn, can be read as a going away, a journey.

The novel consists almost entirely of two juxtaposed fragments of narrative, the major one being Antoinette’s, and the other that of her unnamed husband, whom I will refer to as Rochester since the novel is predicated on intertextuality, on a reinscription of *Jane Eyre*. Bertha, alias Antoinette, marginalized and denied a voice in the nineteenth-century novel, spoken about rather than speaking, is here enabled to “tell the other side” (106), so that lies will not be perpetuated (108). Deprived of mirrors (147) but rejecting reflections of herself offered by Rochester and others, Antoinette attempts to tell, not his story, but hers, to recover her identity through recollection and narration. From a Lacanian perspective, Antoinette cannot return to the mirror-stage but must remain in the realm of the symbolic, that is, of language—and language is unstable, elusive, and ultimately alienating.

In their respective voyages of recollection, Antoinette and Rochester neither address each other, nor anyone specific. The one narrative (that of a prisoner) being secretive and the other private and self-justifying, neither wife nor husband intends her/his voice to be heard. They recollect and relate, but not in order to be understood by the other. Indeed, Rochester assumes that his wife would join the many who had secrets to tell, but could not (141). Silent, even surly, Antoinette covertly discourses with passion, and the resulting text is a powerful indictment, yet another example of “the irruptive inclusion of the speech of the excluded.”[2] In contrast, Rochester is often cryptic in his memoir, playing the reticent English gentleman with the stiff upper lip. So it can be said that, in speaking, he is silent, and that Antoinette speaks eloquently in her overt silence, a witness to her own life and that of her mother, Annette. Appropriating Edward Said’s words, Antoinette becomes “a witness to a
horror otherwise unrecorded.” That is “[a]ll I will remember” (113), Rochester writes. Remembering has become an act of will, selectively, to permit the free movement of some past events, and to arrest and suppress the return of other memories. Rochester chooses his memories, chooses what to remember, and what to forget: “that is all I will remember” (113).

Though Antoinette says she is “not a forgetting person” (110), she, like her husband-jailer, attempts to put the past behind her, in that sense to forget, by recalling and narrating. The word “memoir” is associated with memory, and memory with a journey, reliable or not, to the past. Recording is a process of clarification, to oneself and to others, and Antoinette’s act of narration, the only weapon available to her, is an attempt to confront and understand the past in order to cope with, and combat, the present. [4] Given the context of date and gender, that Antoinette should attempt to narrate her own story is, in itself, an unusual, rebellious act. [5] To “express” in speech or writing is to externalize, and Antoinette attempts in this way to explain and indict, to get it out of herself. Her urgency suggests a desperation to remember before she forgets, before sanity slips away: “Quickly, while I can, I must remember” (44). Paradox is a marked feature of this work. For example, if she wishes to forget, why does she strain to remember? The answer which turns contradiction into paradox is that she wishes to remember, fully and clearly, so that through explanation and vindication she can truly put the past behind her. She drinks in order to “remember more” (147), and reassures herself that she “will remember quite soon now” (153)—forgetting her wisdom that telling may make things real and, once told, one may be unable to exorcise them. Such is the potential power of words. Having been articulated, traumatic experiences—such as her mother’s poisoned horse under the frangipani, its unseeing eyes black with flies—become a reality that accompanies her.

Antoinette remembers her mother, Annette, talking to herself and to the phantom visitants of her deranged mind. Annette’s physical presence had become the mark of a mental escape, a signifier of absence. Antoinette, on the same path, asserts that “words are no use” (111), retreats into non-vocalization, but then returns secretly to words which create understanding, become her weapon, and bring a belated, inadequate measure of justice. But remembering is also painful; memories can be damaging, and so there is the contrary impulse to evade, to move away—and not only with individuals. For example, something must have happened for the place known as “Massacre” to have got its name, but there is a flight from remembering, at least on the part of the novel’s Creole community: “And who was massacred here? Slaves?” “Oh no. Not slaves…. Nobody remembers now” (55), replies Antoinette, who comes from a family that once owned slaves. Having to take our bearings on the basis of what an unreliable, homodiegetic, and confused narrator says, we are not sure if the Africans also have forgotten the historical origins of the Massacre, whether it is a matter of guilt on the side of the Creoles and former slave holders, and sorrow on the part of the once enslaved, together making for a salving amnesia. Antoinette hopes that that which she had forgotten in her life, or that which was not spoken about, will cease to exist, as if it had never existed—similar to the way Europe tried to obliterate from memory the part it had played in the brutal history of the Caribbean. [6] Though in the case of the place now known as Massacre, the collective unconscious has contrived to erase history, Annette and her daughter do not succeed in arresting the return movement of personal memory: “some things happen and are there for always, even though you forget why or when” (68–69). Ironically, Antoinette desires desperately at the end to remember in order to narrate her story. These contrary impulses to remember and to forget, to speak and yet to be silent, are linked to other “movements” and to entrapment. The adjective in the novel’s title, “wide,” has connotations of space and freedom. “Wideness,” however, can have the opposite effect and produce the feeling of being cut off and marooned like little islands in “separating expanses of water,” [7] and thus strengthen the sense of entrapment. Prefiguring her final incarceration, Antoinette as a child had nightmares of being lost in a forest and of being trapped and imprisoned “in an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall” (50). The open sea symbolizes freedom, but while sailing to England, Antoinette is confined to her cabin, and on reaching land she is imprisoned in an attic. Arrival in her case does not signify reaching a desired destination but means the end of an enforced journey into captivity. Even their “sweet honeymoon house,” precariously perched at two thousand feet, looks as if it feels trapped. The leaning
structure seems to cringe away from the threatening forest behind, to reach toward the sea and escape to the sea and escape (60). Rochester, soon to sentence his wife to life imprisonment, feels himself menaced with entrapment: “Those hills would close in on you” (58).

But for a novel of entrapment, there is much movement, voluntary and involuntary, physical and non-physical. Trapped and despairing, Mr. Luttrell, Annette’s only friend, shoots his pet dog and swims out to sea. The physical movement and the freedom this seems to imply leads only to Luttrell’s death. Annette, trapped but high-spirited, restlessly paces up and down the glacis of her house, since to leave it, to venture out, meant encountering the jeers and insults of the emancipated slaves. Her walking is a sign not of freedom but of her caged existence. During her last days, distressed and deranged, Annette is confined in a small house, and made sexually available to others by the couple who were supposed to care for her. However, she escapes from physical confinement, exploitation, and an unendurable present and mentally journeys to the past (see 111). Rochester travels to Jamaica from England; Antoinette’s Aunt Cora sails out to England and, later, journeys back to the Caribbean. Christophine—the only person who, apart from Aunt Cora has attempted to protect and care for Antoinette—is bought and brought to Jamaica from Martinique. Given to Annette as a child as a wedding present, Christophine stays on with the family after emancipation. Rochester and Antoinette sail to one of the Windward Islands for their bitter honeymoon. There are shorter journeys, too, such as Antoinette’s flight into the convent, from which she emerges stripped of her religious beliefs, free but vulnerable (48). Antoinette, her mother, stepfather, Aunt Cora, and Christophine ride away from Coulibri, their torched house, boxed in a carriage, surrounded by a murderous mob. Rochester journeys from the mountain—a place associated with truth and the place where his marriage with Antoinette was consummated—down to sea level to meet Daniel, a distant relative of Antoinette, a malicious man, envious of her happiness with Rochester. The Africans had been brought by force to the Caribbean to work as slaves, and now Antoinette is forcibly taken away in yet another voyage into captivity. Christophine, realizing that Antoinette is trapped by forces stronger than herself, walks away. The novel’s last words are of Antoinette walking “along the dark passage” to vengeance and escape.

But if there is movement within entrapment, there is also entrapment within apparent movement. Mr. Mason, Antoinette’s stepfather, becomes a widower, though Annette is alive—in her case, there are two deaths, “the real one and the one people know about” (106). Trapped in unhappiness, Mason travels restlessly until his early death, one which leaves Antoinette unprotected. Rochester, wandering in the woods, is suddenly blocked by Baptiste, one of the employees, who insists: “No road” (87, 88). Journeys seem to be futile, mere movement without real escape, and Antoinette wonders whether safety lies in flight or immobility: “Everything would be worse if I moved” (20). And yet what recurs in nightmares is our inability to move. The first words of Rochester’s memoirs are of advance and retreat—a financial advance and a moral retreat. He marries Antoinette for her inheritance, marries without love a young woman who is a total stranger to him. (Here, as in Jane Eyre, his attempt is to regain his father’s regard, if not love.) He is a site of contesting impulses, but here the victimizer, believing to be from a superior culture, sees himself as the victim deluded into marrying an unstable girl with a family history of insanity (cf. 140); imperialism was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. Antoinette’s brief decision not to go through with her marriage is an instinctive attempt at flight, “her effort to escape” (76). Even growing old is seen as a journey, a going away: “Oh Christophine, do not grow old. You are the only friend I have, do not go away from me into being old” (94). Every night Antoinette dreams and whispers, her dreams are voyages both within and of entrapment.

Both Antoinette and Rochester acknowledge the beauty of the island, “beautiful as that garden in the Bible” (16), “the most beautiful place in the world” (108). Nature, however, is as indifferent as God (107), and its beauty contrasts with, heightens, and makes more unfortunate human cruelty and folly. The Christian story is of a fall into sin, resulting in expulsion and wandering, and of Christ’s journey to Calvary in order to redeem humankind. But His death has not brought rescue from restless journeying to the Antoinettes of this world, and to them to feel foreign is native, in the sense that it
seems to be the normal, natural order of things. *Wide Sargasso Sea* asserts that some are doomed to wander and that their journeys will not end in arrival. Existence is predicated on “foreignness,” and happiness is lost even before it is found (141).

Rochester comes to the Caribbean looking for a wealthy heiress, penetrating the barriers of sea, cliffs, and high mountains (cf. 23). The woman he marries and with whom he goes on honeymoon remains for ever “a stranger” (59), someone he observes askance. Even the “natives” are not native to the place but are foreigners, the descendants of those who were forced to make terrifying voyages from Africa on slave ships, people to whom the Emancipation Act had not brought real emancipation, for they were set adrift in a useless freedom. And so the overriding desire of the young servant, Amelie, one who is said to belong to the island (82), is to journey out of it. Antoinette and her husband remain foreigners to each other (78), and she wonders: “Who am I and where is my country and where do I belong” (85). To the English, she is a Creole, one of the “white niggers”; to the Creoles, she is a non-Jamaican; and to the Africans, a white cockroach. Caught in different representations, Antoinette feels confused, a foreigner to her own self. Names matter, says Antoinette (147), and her several names—Cosway, Mason, (Rochester?), Antoinette, Bertha, Antoinetta, and Marionetta—reflect and exacerbate identity problems. If Christophine’s charms and potions can change people, giving names is Rochester’s *obeah* to transform Antoinette “into someone else” (121). The question the parrot with the clipped wings keeps asking (“*Qui est la?*”), until the flames of Coulibri consume it, is a difficult one for Antoinette to answer. Rochester notices her ignorance about the immediate environment and concludes that the island is foreign to her. Still, it is the place she loved until it was made hateful by becoming associated with her husband’s deliberate and flagrant infidelity with Amelie. Thereafter, she is even more foreign, without “place,” without the wider, external habitation. Her final, incendiary act is the revenge of one who is dispossessed and silenced. The exslaves, in an act of historical revenge, had torched Coulibri Estate, and Antoinette in her turn wreaks revenge by burning down Thornfield Park. Her action is also an attempt to burn down and break free from the prison-mansion, and return to a house which has never been fully a home.

Journeys and “foreignness” lead to the central concern of madness, which, as Shakespeare’s King Lear knew and feared, is a journey from others, an alienation from one’s “real” self. Toward the end, briefly escaping from her room, which is damp and dark and both windowless and “mirrorless,” Antoinette believes she has seen a ghost, a woman with streaming hair, and does not realize that what the mirror had reflected was herself. She has been made a stranger to her earlier self. Antoinette does not know and cannot recognize Bertha. The text presents madness in terms of journeys and resulting estrangement. Antoinette’s memoir is “for [her] mother … wherever her soul is wandering” (47). Christophine explains that when Annette lost her son, she lost herself (129), like someone losing the path. Rochester feels self-pity, tied to “a drunken lying lunatic—gone her mother’s way” (135), and Grace Poole uses the same metaphor on Antoinette—“You are too far gone to be helped” (153)—echoing an earlier (ambiguous) observation of Rochester: “She’s far along the road now” (141). Thus madness is described in terms of going down a road, of journeying, and of being in a foreign region, unable to return. Antoinette finds only that she is lost; she feels that somewhere, somehow—in ways she begins to understand belatedly and in the very process of narration—the course of her marriage changed, and now she was “lost” (148). Realizing that journeys cannot be unmade, she tries to understand the paths taken by her mother and herself, and thus, paradoxically, madness is also the beginning of her voyage toward understanding and truth. Madness here, as Foucault has shown, is the truth of the human laid bare.

But the novel also suggests that truth is often deferred, arriving too late to be of use (96). Knowledge is *post* experience, and may not be of real use since certain opportunities and situations do not repeat themselves. And so life to Antoinette becomes recollection and narration, a voyage within entrapment. Her present is foreign to her; the way in which she is seen, false; the manner in which she is treated, unjust: reality is unreal. Salman Rushdie writes that emigrants and exiles are haunted by the past and keep looking back, even at the risk of being turned into pillars of salt. The past is home; the present is foreign. Creole Antoinette’s mother had come from French-speaking Martinique.
and was resented by the Creole ladies of Jamaica, because she was a foreigner and because wealthy Mr. Mason had married her, rather than one of them. Her mother’s increasing mental instability led to her neglect of Antoinette and, later, to violent rejection. So home (whether Jamaica or Coulibri) had never been a real home to Antoinette. She had always been, and felt, a foreigner. Foucault, in his *Madness and Civilization*, refers to The Ship of Fools carrying the insane, carrying a cargo of secular pilgrims in search of sanctuary and sanity. Confined to a ship, they sail in restless freedom, never arriving. Antoinette, taken captive and sentenced to solitary life imprisonment in a foreign land, voyages in her memories, trying to remember in order to forget. Imprisoned, she escapes through destruction and death in the belated self-assertion of one who had not been rebellious earlier. Though trapped within severely restricted boundaries, she accepts existential responsibility, exercises choice, and journeys out of entrapment into the peace of death.

NOTES

[1] Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 1968) 90. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and will be noted in parentheses. All emphases are my own. Warm thanks to Professor John Hillis for technical help gladly given, and to Liebetrut Sarvan for her continuing and unfailing support.


[4] Bessie Head wrote to me from exile saying that she was looking back on her life, trying to understand where she had gone wrong: “I have looked back on my life here with extreme agony.” Charles Sarvan, “Bessie Head: Two Letters,” *Wasafiri* 12 (1990): 14.


[11] In V. S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (London: Penguin, 1987), the voyager desperately rushes to the quayside and finds that the ship, the only vehicle of escape, has sailed away.
