

## **The dialogic potential of "literary autism" Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* (1989) and Marie NDiaye's *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009)**

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### **5.1 Approach and terminology**

Like most areas of research, English studies is an unsurprisingly tribal domain. As a scholar working mostly under the banner of postcolonialism, I had until recently only a vague idea of what dialogue analysis was about, and in particular the study of literature as dialogue. For years, this area of knowledge had all the features of a mysterious, foreign field, until I was invited to venture into it at the conference organized by the International Association for Dialogue Analysis in Turku in April 2012. Without being an exemplar of the "rhetoric of blame" -- a label which has become one of the most frequent, if sometimes reductive ways of describing the field of research in which I situate myself (Said 1993: 19, quoted in Sell 2000: 19 and 2011a: 6) --, my own critical practice had so far focused on questions of social and historical representation, on identity construction, on revisionist imaginaries, and on power dynamics: in short, on issues that depend as much on a text's context, both of production and of dissemination, as on the text itself, even if these two aspects of the literary object are difficult to separate.

If the dialogical interchange between the literary text and those who read it had not been very central in my postcolonial preoccupations, I had nevertheless paid at least some attention to questions of form, but mostly with a specific purpose in mind. I had certainly had some interest in questions of dialogicality and polyphony, often in the wake of Bakhtin's theories (Ledent 1992 and 2005), for instance, but I had used those theories less in order to understand the process of communication between the writer and the reader than to unravel or dismantle the ideologies exposed by narratives, particularly ideologies associated with slavery or colonialism.

In spite of the epistemological differences between postcolonialism and dialogue analysis, to my inexperienced eye dialogue analysis now seemed to offer an approach well worth exploring, precisely because it allowed an examination of literary works outside the contextual straightjacket. To some extent, the need to contextualize can indeed be seen as the Achilles heel of the postcolonial approach, in that the inevitable focus on the elements which have shaped the work of so-called postcolonial writers may draw attention away from their art's universality. Given this risk, what Roger D. Sell has called a "humanized dialogue analysis" in the literary field struck me as all the more promising, because it was still not totally immune to the world outside the text. On the one hand, this approach can "[assess] the ethical character of any kind of interchange, quite regardless of whether ... political factors play a role" (Sell 2011b: 80); on the other hand, the approach "never excludes the possibility that a political explanation will be appropriate or partly appropriate" (Sell 2011b: 81). To me as postcolonialist, this offered the best of both worlds, suggesting possible bridges between two branches of English studies which had, in my experience, been at a distance from each other. It gave yet another meaning, interdisciplinary this time, to the phrase "literature as dialogue".

To test this hybrid approach-in-the-making, I shall now bring together two literary texts which would be ideal material for a strictly postcolonial reading (providing that such a thing exists), but which I think can also be profitably studied from the perspective of their dialogicality, or rather non-dialogicality: *Higher Ground* (1989) by the Anglo-Caribbean author Caryl Phillips, and *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) by the French writer Marie NDiaye (which has been translated as *Three Strong Women*). Published twenty years apart by two artists of African descent and complex backgrounds, these books can be viewed as prime examples of what I would tentatively, and slightly provocatively, describe as "literary autism", since, at least on a first reading, both of them seem to suffer from an inability to communicate successfully with their readers.<sup>1</sup>

My use of the term "autism" in this context no doubt requires some explanation. Lisa Zunshine, who has a cognitive approach to the reading process and to the way readers understand literary characters' states of mind, warns critics against casually pronouncing some texts, individuals or groups autistic; the issues involved are very complex, she points out, and it is risky to apply "our still-limited knowledge of autism to the literary critical analysis of reading and writing practices" (Zunshine 2006: 11). Accepting this warning, and perhaps at the risk of inaccuracy, I still find it helpful to think of the books by Phillips and NDiaye in terms of autism, but shall apply the concept in a generic sense which draws upon its power as a metaphor, a power which, as Stuart Murray (2004) points out, derives from a widespread, yet uninformed fascination with autism within present-day society. My aim is not to be judgmental, or to view the texts in question as signalling some kind of "cognitive impairment", since the point has more to do with their apparent inscrutability or, to use Murray's phrase, their "radical otherness", which in turn may affect readers' ability to decipher and understand them. Nor do I mean that the many different questions -- generic, textual, epistemological, and cultural -- with which these enigmatic texts confront their readers are simply frustrating and unrewarding. On the contrary, readers' initial perplexity in face of the autistic features can be catalytic, I shall argue, for an ethical initiation into the complexities of our common humanity. The only caveat is that a reader does need to be willing to enter into imaginative dialogue with these two texts, and to recognize their otherness -- a notion which, as suggested in Maurice Friedman's Buberian understanding of human relationships (Friedman 2009: 410), is at the very heart of dialogue.

Perhaps I also need to explain what I mean by "reader". As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains in her now classic *Narrative Fiction*, the meaning of this word, whether used concretely or in a more theoretical manner, varies greatly from one scholar to another (1983: 118-119). My own construction of the term relates to a real, not particularly informed or experienced reader, whom for want of a better phrase I would like to call the "average reader". My assessment of the average reader's likely response to the text will be close to what Leona Toker has called "audience response", an expression that she prefers to the more sophisticated "reader response" because it seems less loaded. "Audience response", she explains, involves an "automatic estimation of the completeness or incompleteness of the information available at any given moment of reading and attempts to correlate the presented and assimilated data, to arrange and rearrange the material, extrapolate, make gap-filling conjectures, form and adjust expectations" (Toker 1993: 3). Such tasks are the basic reading skills of which I shall expect the average reader to be capable.

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Ethics of Literary Communication: Genuineness, Directness, Indirectness* (Sell, Borch and Lindgren 2013), what I here call 'literary autism' is one of the phenomena discussed under the label "indirectness".

## 5.2 Ambiguities of genre and title

*Higher Ground* and *Three Strong Women* are baffling books from the very start of the reading experience. Presented on their title pages as novels, they are in fact both made up of three loosely linked novellas or short stories, depicting disparate situations and evoking distinct atmospheres which the reader is supposed to connect together with little or no help from the writer, who in both cases is not visible in the narrative itself and does not openly exert "authorial control" (D'Aguiar 1989: 287). Phillips's book is more precisely subtitled "A Novel in Three Parts", and each of the three parts has its own title ("Heartland", "The Cargo Rap" and "Higher Ground") and takes place at a different time and in a different place. But there is a vague thematic unity to the whole, since all three parts deal with isolated individuals who are literal or metaphorical prisoners and "trying to survive a journey" (Phillips 1989: 218). The three untitled but numbered sections in NDiaye's novel also concentrate on three lonely people and present different settings and situations. But here the three story-lines are contemporary, almost contemporaneous in fact, and are tenuously bound together through passing allusions in each of the narratives to common locales and common (minor) characters. In both books the generic ambiguity between a single novel and three novellas is likely to generate a sense of puzzlement in readers, who may well end up wondering what brings the stories together and whether they are bound by some kind of subterranean unity.

Somewhat similarly, misleading expectations, and subsequent disappointments, are likely to be set in motion by the two novels' deceptive titles. *Higher Ground*, far from depicting individuals who have reached some kind of superiority, whether physical, mental or ethical, focuses on three characters who have hit rock bottom: the first character, an unnamed African interpreter working in an eighteenth-century slaving fort on the African west coast, ends up a slave on the other side of the Atlantic; the second is Rudy, an African-American who has been in a high-security prison for several years in the late 1960s and drifts into dementia as he finds it difficult to cope with his captivity; the third is Irina, a mentally fragile Jewish Pole who, having escaped the Holocaust, ends up alone in the London of the 1950s, on the verge of madness. As for *Three Strong Women*, its three protagonists are women of African descent who, for all their moral strength, prove singularly powerless:<sup>2</sup> Norah, albeit a lawyer, cannot really escape her father's lifelong ascendancy and cynicism, and leaves her native France so as to help him with a family problem in Senegal; Fanta, born in Senegal, lives an unfulfilling life in provincial France, trapped in a failed marriage to a neurotic Frenchman; and Khady, a childless Senegalese widow, is cast out by her dead husband's family and, after terrible ordeals, embarks on a fatal trip to Europe.

## 5.3 Narrative ambiguity

Needless to say, the ambiguity which pervades the two books' paratexts is not unique. Something similar can be found in many other novels, often an indication of some inbuilt sense of irony or, more generally, of literariness. But in these two cases, there is more than just a conspicuous reluctance to communicate. The impressions of uncertainty conveyed by the unclear generic status and misleading title are confirmed, strengthened even, by the narrative itself. The narrative of both novels communicates in a way that may positively alienate those I am describing as average readers, who are perhaps inclined to be a bit lazy, and usually prefer texts to be neatly

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<sup>2</sup> The discrepancy is clearer in the French title which contains the word "puissantes" ["powerful"] rather than "fortes" ["strong"], as the English translation suggests.

signposted. To such readers, a certain lack of clarity might easily seem like an unbridgeable informational gap, a pitfall against which more thoughtful readers will tend to guard themselves (Toker 1993: 6).

How in practice, then, do Phillips's and NDiaye's novels impart this diffuse sense of indeterminacy? The three sections of Caryl Phillips's novel are open-ended, concluding with their protagonists on the verge of acute despair or madness, but admittedly with some of their human dignity restored, since their individual predicaments ultimately come to be viewed in the context of a collective experience of suffering, whether resulting from the slave trade, slavery or the Holocaust. While not making much of a difference to what they have been through, and in a sense bestowing an even more tragic character on their own misfortune, this insertion into the collective confers on their single tragedies the strength of numbers, slightly alleviating their intense isolation. This goes some way towards explaining the paradox arising from the book's title, but is also indicative of the hermeneutic quandary in which its readers find themselves at the close. A similar confusion occurs for readers of Marie NDiaye's novel, but in this case it is compounded by the fact that each of the three open-ended sections finishes with what is called a "counterpoint" which, in just one short paragraph, provides a different perspective on the story that has just come to a close, thereby casting doubt on whatever conclusions readers may have drawn by that stage. The third section, for instance, is narrated entirely from Khady's perspective, and records her brief relationship with Lamine, a young man who, like her, is desperate to leave Africa for Europe, and who ends up deserting her after stealing the money that she has earned by selling her body. Even if Khady to some extent understands the shame he feels after their first failure to escape, and even if she is not judgmental towards him and sees his act as "just another of fate's cruel blows" (269), readers may well be shocked at his apparently heartless behaviour. The fourteen-line counterpoint that closes the novel, however, shows Lamine doing menial jobs in France, leading an uncomfortable life there, and full of guilty feelings *vis à vis* Khady, to whom he feels grateful, and with whom he now has imaginary conversations. Conveying the migrant's deflated dream, and the pointlessness of the painful journey, Lamine's mini-testimony can also prompt an ambivalent reading of the links between those who escape Africa and those who are left behind. Far from clarifying the story's message, this counterpoint adds a layer of further complexity to an already opaque main narrative, and the same is true of the novel's other two counterpoints as well.

The structural and thematic parallels which can be drawn between the three sections of each book, and which to some extent inform their indeterminacy, call for a reading of their narratives which brings them together into a whole, even if they could each be easily understood on their own terms and, in the case of Phillips's novel, have actually been so analysed (Najar 2012). As early commentators of *Higher Ground* pointed out, when its three sections are put side by side "there emerges a significance which no one part by itself can communicate with such clarity and force" (Sarvan and Marhama 1991:40). NDiaye's tripartite novel, too, has been described as "a textured whole that is greater than its parts" (Williams 2002), or as "more than the sum of its parts" (Jaggi 2012).

Phillips's and NDiaye's preferred narrative strategies can make a reader's task very difficult. What they offer is a partial, truncated view of situations, which are seen exclusively from the limited point of view of one protagonist. A case in point is the second section of *Higher Ground*, entitled "The Cargo Rap", which is made up

of the censored letters which Rudy, as an inmate in a high-security prison, sends to his family and acquaintances. "The Cargo Rap" does not divulge his addressees' responses to his letters; Rudy merely alludes to them in his own replies. This means that facts are left unstated and that the novel's readers get only a partial picture of the prisoner's everyday life, of his behaviour in detention, and of his relationships with his correspondents, even if the text contains discreet indications of what is going on around him. For example, Rudy refers several times to an arm injury which affects his handwriting, but he is not allowed to explain how he came by it (105, 108, 133), which the novel's readers can nevertheless guess. Whatever its exact cause, Rudy's injury is a sign of the extreme violence of prison life, and a metaphor for its ability literally to break a man. In other words, prison censorship obliges the readers of the novel, in the same way as it obliges Rudy's own father, "to read between the lines of [Rudy's] work, to re-interpret [his] phraseology and pauses for in everything there is meaning" (83). The second section of *Three Strong Women*, likewise, is not narrated by Fanta, one of the three women mentioned in the title and composing NDiaye's fictional triptych -- an additional puzzle for the reader --, but by her French husband, also called Rudy, as it happens, who displays evidence of mental imbalance, including persecution mania and hallucinations, and who, pathetically and pathologically insecure, is never "sure what was true and what was not" (151). Although Fanta is represented again and again in her husband's self-centered and one-sided narrative -- either as an unresponsive wife or as a victim, "a small hen with clipped wings" (110) -- she is not actually given a voice and is therefore a mere background presence, which is in itself suggestive of the couple's difficult marital relationship, their lack of communication, but also more generally of the way the African other is perceived in France's national narrative.

#### 5.4 Psychological clues

The other sections of the two books follow the same pattern as those I have just commented upon, often reading like interior monologues through which the reader is guided by a single subjective narrator and therefore given only a limited number of the pieces necessary to complete the narrative jigsaw puzzle with any kind of confidence. Admittedly, the stories do also contain clues about the characters' psychology. But these are hardly accessible on a first, cursory reading of the text. If they are to be unearthed, a reader has to invest a considerable effort of empathy.

In *Higher Ground*, for instance, although we learn that the narrator has been separated by his captor from his "wife" and child (13), this is reported in a conversation rather than actually depicted, "thereby denying readers ... direct access to his private emotions regarding this separation" (Halloran 2009: 92), even if he later suggests, perhaps in a self-absolving way, that his feelings for his family were not as strong as those he had for the girl he meets in later life (Phillips 1989: 60). Yet the "irreparable break within the African family structure" that is showcased throughout "Heartland" (Halloran 2009: 93) does give readers at least some measure of the trauma undergone by the narrator when he had to leave his own family. In somewhat the same way, Irina's narrative contains veiled hints of her possible abuse by her father when she was still living in Poland, so reinforcing the theme of sexual exploitation that pervades the book as a whole, and the motif of Irina's victimization by men in particular.

Irina remembered how Papa's unrequited kisses would burn her cheeks. He would stare back

at her, his child with wild bright eyes, unable to touch her through the protective film of her adolescence. And then he sent her away. "Papa, you hurt me." (177)

This is relatively clear. Yet even so, the fact that her interaction with her father is shown only through the haze of her own mentally disturbed and traumatized mind makes such hints easier to overlook or simply misread. The hurt that she mentions could very well be caused, not by abuse, but by the fact that her father sent her away from Poland to protect her.

Similarly, Norah, the focalizer of the first section of *Three Strong Women*, is prey to nagging doubts and even delusions. Not only does she question her own assessment of her relationship with a German man called Jakob, sometimes viewing him as a reliable partner, sometimes as a source of confusion in her life, but she actually has memory lapses, as when her father has to remind her that ten years earlier she had for a while lived in Senegal, a part of her life which she seems to have blotted out completely. So even if at the end of her narrative she says that "everything is falling into place at last" (67), which is her way of talking about the familial "whodunnit" at the heart of her story, readers may feel that the mystery remains -- that the family waters are just as muddy as ever, to borrow a phrase that Norah uses to describe her own father's way of doing things ("why had he tried to muddy the waters with that story" (64)). The story of unassuming, self-effacing Khady, too, is viewed from "a kind of mental stupor which stopped her understanding what was going on around her" (222). A strategy of survival on the part of the unfortunate girl who was abandoned by her parents and then later by her in-laws, and also a means of escaping her "atrocious present" (259), her mental torpor gives her story a foggy vagueness and repetitiveness, the only certainty being her awareness of her own singularity. This she expresses through an almost obsessive but moving repetition of her own full name, Khady Demba.

### **5.5 Challenges of language and style, subject matter, culture and intertextuality**

In both novels, readers are supposed to navigate among the uncertainties and ambiguities of the text and compensate for them by coming up with their own reading of the narrative. But if the two authors' predilection for subjectivity can come in the way of fruitful communication, so, too, can their books' peculiar linguistic and stylistic makeup: they combine some very different registers, in a prose which is alternately pared-down and complex. The first section of Phillips's novel, for example, is partly written in a recreated version of eighteenth-century English, containing elevated words such as "sedulity" (21), "evanescent" (22) or "abhor" (29), terms which readers may be surprised to find in the mouth of someone who was taught "the principles of [the English] language" (44) by his captor, and which might rather convey the bookishness of a language learned "by the application of much effort" (55).<sup>3</sup> NDiaye's book is written in long, convoluted sentences, full of unusual-sounding adjectives (for example, "rancorous", which is used in all three sections (6, 209 and 220)). Its language is potentially difficult to follow, albeit more so in the French version of the text, perhaps, than in the English.

Both books make a reader's task even more complicated by their disregard for political correctness, their focus on extreme human suffering, and their penchant for taboo practices such as masturbation -- a motif running through *Higher Ground* -- or for intimate, embarrassing conditions that are not usually shared -- in

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<sup>3</sup> Such "discoursal verisimilitude" and its effect on the reader have been discussed in relation to *Cambridge*, another novel by Caryl Phillips (Kuurola 2007: 131).

*Three Strong Women* Norah is prone to urinating under stress, Rudy is constantly afflicted by painful anal itching, and Khady suffers from vaginal soreness.

For some Western-based readers, moreover, the overall inaccessibility of both novels is compounded by the fact that several of the life stories they contain take place in Africa or in the African diaspora, and also by a strong element of intertextuality which, despite its resistance to easy detection and interpretation, is very much part and parcel of the books' intriguing otherness.<sup>4</sup> The three sections in Phillips's novel, for example, "write back" to such famous genres as the slave narrative, the prison narrative, and the Holocaust narrative (Ledent 1996; Fligel 2011), in addition to echoing Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Najar 2012) and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, to mention only two of the main intertexts. As for NDiaye's book, in the first story Norah might be an allusion to Henrik Ibsen's heroine in *The Dolls' House* (Jaggi 2012), while Rudy's narrative contains quotations from the complaint of mediaeval author Rutebeuf, which only an informed reader could pick up and dialogize with.

### 5.6 Overall effect

Of course, none of these features can on their own be taken as unquestionable expressions of non-dialogicality. But cumulatively they do endow the two novels with an aura of difficulty, stimulating readers to use their own imagination and fill in the many blanks left by all the weird undecisiveness. In fact some of the situations to be interpreted are so unusual or even repulsive that readers will need a certain amount of courage in facing up to them. So *why*, we might ask, have Phillips and NDiaye taken the risk of baffling and alienating their readers in these ways? Why have they offered readers texts of such "writerliness" (the quality which Barthes (1990 [1973]) found in literary works whose full comprehension called for a reader's own interventions)? Allow me to venture a few interrelated, by no means mutually exclusive explanations. Even if some of the interviews with Phillips and NDiaye have shown them to be fully aware of their writing's difficulty (Phillips 2012: 288; NDiaye 2009b),<sup>5</sup> I shall not examine the complex issues of intentionality (Herman 2008) or artistic freedom raised by their texts, but shall rather explore the *effects* which their textual characteristics could have on the way they are read -- on their inability to get across to readers and dialogize with them.

My first observation is that the literary autism of these two novels includes a performative component in that, on the level of the reader-text relationship, their non-dialogicality can be said to reproduce and therefore reinforce the isolation, the lack of communication, and to some extent the violence which blight the lives of all their protagonists. Most of them are indeed displaced individuals, "marooned" between different cultures (Phillips 1989: 22), physically or mentally cut off from their families, and unable to establish any satisfying dialogue with the people around them.

Each of the narratives of *Higher Ground* contains a scene where the narrators express their difficulties in making sense of language, or where words, especially in their written form, are a source of alienation rather

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<sup>4</sup> Kuurola also deals with Phillips's use of intertextuality as textual strategy in *Cambridge* (Kuurola 2007: 136).

<sup>5</sup> Phillips has repeatedly placed stress on the importance of form in his writing and on how textual disjunction is necessary to address diasporan lives. Paradoxically, NDiaye has expressed her intention of writing *Three Strong Women* as a book which would be more accessible to the general reader than her former production.

than dialogue. The interpreter of the first section is unable to understand a passage from the Bible because he fails to grasp the context (51); Rudy, in "The Cargo Rap", not only develops an eye condition which makes his reading difficult, but also alienates his family by using, in the letters he writes to his apparently uneducated mother, words such as "excoriate" (75), "senescent" (127) or "thralldom" (139), which bear witness not only to his wide-ranging reading, but to the distance at which he really stands from his family; and in the last part of the book, Irina conveys her inability to communicate with Mr Lawrence, the man in charge of the library where she works for a short while, in meaningfully linguistic terms, she perceives Mr Lawrence's lectures to her "as words running and racing like rivers, one moment clinging together, the next breaking up into ungrammatical tributaries" (182).

The characters in NDiaye's novel, too, fail to engage successfully with the world around them. Norah's father, for example, comes across to her as an arrogant, "evasive" (32), "unfathomable man" (11) with whom she "literally can't communicate" (12), while her brother Sony, who rarely gives "a straight response to anything" (39), is always described in terms of his inscrutability, whether because of his "vague expression" (49) or because the photos his father takes of him in Senegal and sends to the mother and daughters in France are "always blurred" (37), which may also symbolically suggest the difficulties for any dialogue between the two cultures, French and Senegalese, to which the characters belong. Like Norah's story, Rudy's bitter and tormented narrative is full of examples of miscommunication, in both the past and present, and within his family circle as well as in his professional life. Tellingly enough, he perceives Fanta, his wife of several years, as a "strange" and "unfathomable" (88) woman with an "impassive face" (87), a person with whom he fails to connect properly. A similar inability to bond plagues his relationship with his young son Djibril, to whom he is "unable to offer ... his unconditional love" (201), because in Rudy's eyes the child seems to be afraid of him, his father, and therefore stays at "arm's length" (98), even if at the end of his narrative there might just be a possibility of connection between father and son after all. As for Khady, like the other characters in NDiaye's novel, she lives very much in a world of her own, finding dialogue with other people difficult, albeit for different reasons. While the absence of dialogue that marks her relationship with her husband is clearly caused by her obsessive but unfulfilled desire for pregnancy (219) and signals, on her husband's part, a form of respectful "forbearance" (219), the uncommunicativeness that characterizes the rest of her life comes from her efforts to protect herself from her in-laws' hostile indifference, or from other people's positive contempt towards her. So if her teacher at school "did not pay the slightest attention to her" (234), Khady in return "would simply let the litany of indistinguishable words, uttered in a toneless voice by the woman with the unlovely face and annoyed expression, wash over her" (235), thereby precluding any exchange and any chance of being noticed.

Within the two novels' narrative these overall failures in communication are further suggested by a number of leitmotifs: that of the unanswered or blank letter in *Higher Ground*, that of the missed phone-call in two sections of *Three Strong Women*, and more generally in both books that of a pervasive silence, indicative of a gap or lack of interaction between the fictional characters, yet perhaps also hinting at communicational possibilities between the novelists and their readers. As John McLeod has shown in regard to *A Distant Shore* (2003), another novel by Caryl Phillips, silence does not always "signify absence or failure" (2011: 11) but can in some cases be interpreted as "a non-verbal process of understanding" (11), one



that brokers compassionate connection while recognising the limits of the threshold; that engenders compassion while admitting the blindness and insight of one's standpoint; one that neither calcifies nor liquidates difference in the contact zone of intercultural encounter. (12)

In other words, silence in *Higher Ground* and *Three Strong Women*, though part and parcel of their "autistic" nature and capturing their characters' difficulty to communicate, could also express the limits of consciousness in relation to the reader, which in this case does not preclude dialogue, but rather creates one which is not built upon sameness but on difference, as Friedman puts it.

As Stef Craps has already contended in relation to *Higher Ground*, the two novels' specific makeup, with their fragmented structure and relatively inaccessible characters, might therefore be seen as part of a strategy of "estrangement" (Craps 2008: 192) whereby the novelists manage their readers' empathy for traumatized characters in such a way as to prevent any facile identification with them, and therefore any glib appropriation of their suffering. But while there is some validity in Craps's argument -- which was developed more specifically in regard to Phillips's combined treatment of slavery and the Holocaust in *Higher Ground* -- I have misgivings about his rather hasty rejection of what he calls a "humanist-universalist" reading of the novel. Such a reading would, he suggests, take *Higher Ground* as "a triumph of the sympathetic imagination, which is seen to successfully extend the writer's and the reader's ethical horizon to include racial and gendered others that may previously have been beyond it" (192), and which apparently "[invites] the reader to recognize a common human essence that persists across space and time" (195), an interpretation which would for Craps lead only to a form of "crude empathy" (192). In my own view, Phillips's novel, because of its lack of resolution, its juxtaposition of discrete stories, and its refusal to communicate directly, compels a motivated reader to try and look for such a general meaning, which (at the risk of sounding old-fashioned) I would still call humanist. In other words, readers who want to make sense of the book have no choice but to bring its different sections into dialogue with each other, even if, as Craps claims, the singularity of Phillips's characters tends to qualify first impressions of facile commonality, and thereby keep at bay any temptation to blind universalization. Nadine Flagel reaches fairly similar conclusions when she writes that Phillips's readers have a responsibility to "find symmetry deeply, polyphonically, structurally" between the different narratives (Flagel 2011: 57), while she also insists that, on Phillips's own part, there is a "deliberate failure ... to transcend trauma into universal meaning" (42).

I would broadly apply the same line of reasoning to *Three Strong Women*, since the novel both underlines the characters' common experience of suffering and generates a form of empathy for their misery,<sup>6</sup> while at the same time cultivating a strangeness that is likely to distance readers not only from the protagonists but from the text itself, as can also happen with other works by NDiaye (Asibong 2009; Letsch 2010). That said, NDiaye's novel, focusing mostly on the family circle, is less historically-minded than *Higher Ground*, and contains a magic realist dimension which is completely missing in Phillips's book and makes the Frenchwoman's text even more uncanny. These differences aside, both NDiaye and Phillips -- who are also playwrights, as it happens -- very much insist on their protagonists' singularity, for instance by their constant concern for the

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<sup>6</sup> The empathy generated by NDiaye's text has mainly been viewed by commentators in terms of "her relationality to the plight of Africa and Africans" (Thomas 2010: 153), but I would like to contend that this empathy is of a more universal type, as in Phillips's text, if only because

question of naming, by their recurrent attention to their characters' bodily functions, but also by their inclusion of less than perfect human beings such as the two Rudies, whose occasionally obnoxious personalities -- Phillips's Rudy is misogynist and homophobic, while NDiaye's Rudy is annoyingly self-pitying -- cannot but trigger some negative reactions on the part of readers, yet can paradoxically appeal for empathy as well, as both Rudies have a moving vulnerability which cries out for understanding.

### 5.7 Genuine interaction

Clearly, then, the two novels' autism is much more than just a mimetic strategy or means of managing of empathy. In the final analysis, it actually bespeaks a respect for the books' potential readers, since it empowers them and, strangely enough, provides the only way towards a genuine interaction with the text -- by which I do *not* mean the superficial kind of interaction that might result from a more reader-friendly, linear narrative relying on plot at the expense of characterization, psychological depth and formal complexity. Trying to penetrate the characters' silence and building bridges between the novels' different sections has an important pay-off, in that this is the only way for readers ultimately to reach some kind of moral higher ground or achieve significant ethical power -- to echo the books' own titles. As Bernadine Evaristo has suggested in relation to *Three Strong Women*, the potentially dissatisfying narrative strategies, and especially the absence of closure, force

a deeper intellectual engagement. In the absence of answers, we reflect on what we've read, and because we don't know what happens to the characters, they linger in the mind. (Evaristo 2012)

So instead of shouting, like Irina's neighbour in *Higher Ground*, "Stop talking to yourself, you crazy Polish bitch" (Phillips 1989: 177), readers are invited to dialogize with her, to try and understand the abuse that she might have suffered at the hand of her father, her failed relationship with her insensitive husband Reg, or the sense of betrayal she feels when Louis, a West Indian friend she has just met, decides to go back to his native island. Readers are also encouraged to read the novel backwards, so to speak, and that way to become aware that Irina, like its other characters, has been deprived of her free will by the events taking place around her, and that her depression is the result of the trauma she has suffered.

And in NDiaye's novel, too, there is room for that type of dialogue. Confronted with Rudy's ranting in the second section of the novel, readers cannot but want to know more about his wife Fanta, who is hardly heard in the narrative at all, and about her frustrating life. How does she view her husband's attitude? How does she cope with exile in provincial France? How does she perceive the system which keeps her out of a teaching job in France, even though she has a degree in literature? These are all questions that readers are bound to ask themselves. Similarly, when readers read the book's last section about Khady's harrowing, unbearable experience as a would-be refugee to Europe, this retrospectively trivializes the obsessive but futile preoccupations of Rudy's French customers with their fitted kitchens as evoked in the second section. In shocking contrast to Khady's painful attempt to escape her hellish circumstances, the French people's new kitchens ironically correspond to a "secret wish of seeing [their] life transformed, brightened up thanks to the installation of ingenious cupboards and a telescopic hood" (138).

These are just a few examples of possible ways for readers to engage with these two novels dialogically. Teachers and literary critics probably have a crucial mediating role to play in encouraging such readings, and one which is especially important at a time when so many bestsellers offer entertainment that is tailor-made, pre-packaged, reader-friendly, but hardly thought-provoking. That *Three Strong Women* was in 2009 awarded the Goncourt, one of France's most prestigious literary prizes, should perhaps be a source of satisfaction. Yet the award does not seem to have affected the way the novel has been read. A quick look at specialized blogs shows that it receives rather mixed responses from those who read or try to read it. Nor has the fate of *Higher Ground* been so very different. To this day, it remains one of Phillips's less frequently discussed fictional works, except perhaps in the perspective of the black-Jewish relations. Not wishing to conclude on too bleak a note, however, I would point out that, for any reader who does get enthusiastic about these novels, they offer, not a good read, but a rewarding one, which is an altogether more important matter.

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