

The "Aesthetics of Personalism" in Caryl Phillips's Writing: Complexity as a New Brand of Humanism.

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Abstract: This paper attempts to underline the epistemological implications of Phillips's handling of diasporic history through a focus on individual lives in *Cambridge* (1991) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997). His confessional first-person narratives highlight the intricacies inherent in human nature, thereby resisting the globalizing discourse of liberal humanism. Even more importantly, his fictions seem to illustrate a new, more understanding approach to this often hackneyed term, for they give voice to individuals whose multiple differences are, paradoxically, part proof of a common humanity, viewed here as an inclusive rather than exclusive concept.

"*Humanism*" has surely been one of the most central, though sometimes hackneyed, notions in literary and cultural studies over the past century, examined by such authoritative thinkers as T.S. Eliot, Terry Eagleton, and Edward W. Said, to name but a few. There seems to be a general consensus to define it as an anthropocentric tradition of European origin that sustains moral or educational values, like reason and culture, whose aim is the (improvement?) of human life. Nevertheless, beyond this rather vague definition, the term tends to mean different things to different people and has undergone countless redefinitions varying in time and space. In its five-hundred-year-long history, for example, it was given such different and contradictory labels as Rationalist and Messianic, Christian and Liberal. Ideally, it should therefore be used as specifically as possible, even though this paper may well show that it is sometimes difficult to do so.

However interesting it would be to study the developments of "humanism" as a protean notion, this paper will instead use the term as a starting point, mostly in its so-called "liberal" acceptation, because, as such, it seems to have had the deepest impact on twentieth-century Anglophone literature and thought at least until the 1960s. My intention is to focus on the fiction of Caryl Phillips, a contemporary British writer of Caribbean origin. I will attempt to demonstrate that while his writing draws upon the humanistic tradition, it offers

in fact a novel vision of man and the world that can importantly be brought to bear on the construction of a new brand of humanism leading, in turn, to a revised conception of British identity.

If one takes into account that each of Phillips's six novels deals with journeys away from a homeland, undertaken either voluntarily or by force, one could easily call his philosophy "Diasporic" humanism, but, as we will see, such branding is somehow antinomic to the general spirit of his work. In addition, imprisoning Phillips's brand of humanism into a specific category may also contradict his own complex background as a widely-travelled writer born in St. Kitts, raised and educated in Britain, and now resident in New York, thus as an artist resistant to labels which are, by essence, attempts to fix what remains a fluctuating reality. Perhaps it would be more appropriate, though less facile, to define the originality of Phillips's humanism by describing it as promoting complexity and ambivalence over simplification and order. It would be even more important to add that, far from exhibiting an abstract and intellectualized notion of Man, it focuses on concrete individual subjectivities whose multiplicities and imperfections provide a profoundly humane insight into humanity.

This paper will centre on two novels by Phillips: *Cambridge* (1991) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997). Their focus on marginalized individuals counterbalances the potentially dehumanizing agendas of Renaissance Humanism and the Enlightenment, two streaks of humanism which, Phillips shows, underlie colonization, imperialism and discrimination in general, while, paradoxically, promoting principles of justice and emancipation as well. My analysis will concentrate on what could be described as Phillips's "aesthetics of personalism" (Gilroy 69). By this I mean his exploration of public events through the private consciousness of individuals. Through this technique the writer invites us to understand his characters from the inside, by taking them as they are and abstaining from judging them according to preconceived models of what man should be or should do. In this regard, it is surely significant that Phillips rarely gives his reader a clear idea of the physical appearance of his characters as this would give us no clue to whom they really are. That much is suggested by Eva, one of the characters in *The Nature of Blood*, when she is mocked and stoned by German children while wandering outside the concentration camp from which she has just been liberated by English soldiers: "I stand and stare at the children, who laugh and point at me. I know they do not mock me. Eva. They do not know me. They mock what I look like, not who I am" (26).

My main argument is that the personal dimension in Phillips's fiction is,

revisionary since it simultaneously deconstructs and constructs humanism. In other words, the novelist's "aesthetics of personalism" informs his critique of traditional, so-called "universal" humanism, with all its inbuilt prejudices, but also suffuses his alternative vision of it. The conclusion of this paper will try to examine the relevance of Phillips's view of the human condition to defining a new, plural Britishness able to accommodate what he has called, borrowing from Shakespeare, the "extravagant strangers" in its midst (*Extravagant Strangers*).

Paradoxical as it may seem, humanistic doctrines long relied on a process of selection whereby humanity was refused to those who were regarded as inferior and were thought to lack reason by virtue of their gender, race or religion. Interestingly, the major characters in *Cambridge* (1991) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997) are women, blacks and Jews, who are here in charge of their own narratives. By giving voice to these people who were, and still are to some extent, excluded from the centre of mankind, Phillips obviously dignifies them and gives them agency. Yet, this focusing on the margin is, in typical Phillipsian fashion, accompanied by other, complex and unpredictable webs of allegiance that prevent these marginal people from consolidating into a homogeneous body that would in turn exclude the former centre. So, instead of simply widening the existing categories to which humanism was traditionally made to apply, or inverting them, as Afro-centrists would, for example, or even getting rid of them for being meaningless, as some post-modernists would do, Phillips seems to conclude that humanity is made up of irreducibly multiple categories which, as his polyphonic narratives suggest, are all the more un-pin-down-able as they are subjective. This is why his fiction constantly focuses on individual actors whose loyalties can be hard to locate and repeatedly highlights the ironies and eccentricities that mark their lives.

This ontological complexity is perhaps best conveyed in *Cambridge*, in which Emily Cartwright, the white English mistress, and the black slave Cambridge, both viewed as "children of a larger growth" (4), attempt to get full access to the humanity which the spirit of the times refuses to grant them. Unquestioningly adopting the perspective of, respectively, the Enlightenment and Christianity in narrating their own stories, the characters end up defeated partly because their integrative efforts have made them neglect the facets of themselves — that is, their femaleness and blackness — that the prevailing order did not endow with reason. Paradoxically, then, it is their quest for humanity that dehumanizes them because they do not, and cannot, radically call into question the system that oppresses them and its underlying values, whether of racism or of sexism. What they can do is adapt to its demand in the

hope of getting admitted. It is only by reading their stories interactively and becoming aware of their multiple and overlapping identities that humanity fully emerges (Cuder refers to the whole argument?). Incidentally, Christiania, an Obeah-wielding slave on the Cartwright plantation, does not try to play by the so-called humanistic rules, but constantly flies in their face by “[distrusting] words” (160) and refusing to bear children. However, if her uncompromising attitude seems more subversive than that of the other two characters, we are never given access to her mind, as if this absence of textual authority was meant to metaphorize the conflation usually made in the humanistic agenda between discourse and reason (Flax 89).

A close reading of the novel provides numerous instances showing that Emily and Cambridge's quest for humanity, as defined by early nineteenth century society, leads in fact to a process of self-alienation. On leaving England, Emily articulates her attachment to her country by quoting this poem: “*O my country, I have no pride but that I belong to thee, and can write my name in the muster-roll of mankind, an Englishman*” (8), as if in her mind access to mankind was equated with masculinity. As generally assumed, the discourse of the Enlightenment relies on a dichotomized view of society, namely a division between private and public spheres (Flax 75-91). Women are usually confined to the domestic sphere, that of marriage and children but also of “corsets and stays to improve [their] posture” (4). Significantly, Emily presents her Caribbean journey as an escape from an arranged marriage to a “fifty-year-old widower with three children” (3), a union that would have sealed her fate as a second-class human being. However, as a representative of the plantation owner determined to “engage with the affairs of the estate” (45), she enters the Caribbean scene as a public figure, with a status in theory similar to that of the men around her, whether Mr McDonald, the physician, or Mr Rogers, the Churchman. As Paul Sharrad puts it, she is a “surrogate male” (202): Incidentally, Emily's passage from the private to the public, from the female to the male order is, as it were, metaphorized by her voyage, for the sea not only floods her “small *private* world” (12, italics mine), but also deprives her of Isabella, her servant and substitute mother.

Thus, when Emily arrives on her father's plantation, her stance is predominantly masculine, viewing whites as civilizers of a black population that she describes as children or animals, “untempered to the civilized ways of man” (40) and “unfettered by those responsibilities which are the familiar burden of rational humanity” (77). At one point, she even adopts the posture of “the monarch-of-all-I-survey,” that is, she observes and describes the new world from a promontory, in her case the piazza of the Great House that overlooks

the estate (56-57). As Mary Louise Pratt has shown in *Imperial Eyes* this may be viewed as a typically male attitude, common among Victorian explorers, that implies a “relation of *mastery* [. . .] between the seer and the seen” (204). But Emily's intrusion into the male order is not unproblematic. Her feminine side, subdued at first, gradually comes back in times of crisis when she retreats in her “soft and feminine chamber, uncharacteristic of the Great House” (74). Meaningfully, it is through pregnancy, the female experience *par excellence*, that she is finally defeated, but this also grants her access to a more sensitive and tolerant grasp on the reality around her, in short to genuine humanity. She is then no longer obsessed with “rank and order” (72), which, as she first believed, can protect society from anarchy. Nor does she view the world in black and white, but as a colourful frieze wherein black Stella is allowed to replace dead Isabella.

For Cambridge, it is the Christian religion that seems to promise access to humanity, even though general opinion, conveyed in an extract from the press, regards him, like his fellow slaves, as “congenitally unsuited to” “a Christian life of moral and domestic responsibility” (172, 171-72). Aware of the inhuman cruelty of some white men, not only to blacks but also to their own kind, he nonetheless believes that Christianity is a bulwark against barbarity and a “magical opportunity of improvement” (143) which confers on him a “superior *English* mind” (155). Ironically, it is when he decides to talk to Mr Brown, the overseer who victimizes him and his wife Christiana, “as one man to another” (166), thus to reclaim his humanity, that things take a definitely tragic turn and he murders the brutish overseer. For Cambridge, as for Emily, humanity emerges most vividly when he falls: while she finally admits to not being sure of what she is (179), Cambridge comments on his criminal gesture with a recognition of his complex history, embodied in his many names. Also in a last flourish of contradiction, he sees his act as a proof of his “heathen behaviour” (167) and concludes by saying “Praise be the Lord! He who ‘hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth’” (167), a human commonality suggested throughout the novel but sadly denied by his own story and by a holistic conception of History.

The well-named *The Nature of Blood*, at once proclaims this potential universality while showing in a harrowing way that it is hardly ever implemented because men's assertion of their humanity is most often achieved at the expense of the Other. One of the main characters in this novel is Othello, who has a lot in common with Emily and Cambridge. Like them a visitor in a foreign land, he strives to be viewed as an insider in the white male fortress, in which his human status is far from being clearly acknowledged:

My own people, although degraded and without the sophistication and manners of these Venetians, at least regarded me with respect and dignity [. . .]. Among the Venetians, all was confusion as I attempted to distinguish those who beheld my person with scorn and contempt, from those who simply looked upon me with the curiosity that one would associate with a child. (119)

But a strong desire to be accepted makes Othello forget his past as a former slave, and as a father and husband in Africa. It makes him believe that his crucial role in the Venetian army, and above all, his marriage to Desdemona finally place him in “the heart of the society” (145), as if his humanity was then fully recognized. To Phillips, however, Othello’s status in Venice is precarious because he remains what he has called in *The European Tribe* an “alien, socially and culturally” (47), very much like the Jews in their ghetto. And this is the source of his tragedy in Phillips’s version. Unsurprisingly, then, the Moor’s final killing of his wife is left out of the novel, while it could have been viewed by some in Shakespeare’s play as proof of his irrationality and of his devilish nature, thus of his lack of civilized humanity.

Interestingly, *The Nature of Blood* like *Cambridge*, contains a critique of Justice, which has always been, with Democracy and Liberty, one of the major tenets of humanism. In the earlier novel, the proceedings of a slave-court are presented as summary, the absence of “legal representation on either side” (106) being justified by the “dangerous practice of perjury” (106) among slaves. So, even if Cambridge’s conviction, then his being sentenced to hanging may be viewed as a fair punishment for his killing Mr Brown, one is sure that his trial failed to take into account the complexity of his life as conveyed through his narrative. In *The Nature of Blood*, the inhumanity of the legal system is evoked through the case of the Portobuffole Jews who, in the fifteenth century, were accused of killing a young Christian boy to use his blood in the Passover rituals. Phillips underlines the inequity of the proceedings by not giving the narrative over to its protagonists, that is, the Jews themselves, as he does for all the other characters in the novel. Their story is told in an apparently detached, third-person narrative that is actually full of anti-Semitic clichés, but also unwittingly highlights the unfairness ingrained in Venetian Justice, tainted as it is by economic considerations which eventually prevail over the human. Although the Republic of Venice prides itself on “its flawless procedure” (96), it is shown as sanctioning torture and sexism (“in these times nobody would accept the word of a woman unless it had been substantiated by a man” [49]). In addition, it relies in vital cases on the decisions of tired senators. Only when the trial and the burning of the Jews is over does Phillips focus on Servadio,

the main figure of the group, who concludes, posthumously as it were, that “they will capture only the outside of our people, not their souls” (182), a statement intimating that Justice as it is often carried out cannot reach the human in man.

Undoubtedly, it is in its exploration of the Holocaust which, like slavery, belied the notion of progress dear to traditional humanism, that *The Nature of Blood* most directly highlights the dangers of what Aimé Césaire has called “formal humanism” or “pseudo-humanism”. This, he writes, “has diminished the rights of man, [. . .] its concept of those rights has been — and still is — narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist” (15). To the Martinican writer, at the end of such humanism, “there is Hitler.” Eva’s narrative gives a subtle rendering of how the Nazi regime and life in concentration camps gradually dehumanize people, making them “[behave] like animals” (67). Survival itself becomes degrading, for as George Steiner points out in *Language and Silence* “to live was to choose to become less human” (167). So Eva’s suicide in a London hospital after the war, like that of several other characters in the novel, might be seen in this light as a desperate way of reclaiming the humanity that she was denied first by the Nazis, then later by the betrayal of Gerry, an Englishman she met in Bergen Belsen and, through him, of English society as a whole. As the professional, but psychologically incompetent doctor in charge of her case puts it, “there was no *reason* to think that she would do something *irrational*” (187, italics mine), again refusing Eva the full humanity that could have been conferred on her had she displayed so-called rationality. Like most of Phillips’s characters, Eva makes unpredictable decisions that seem to escape so-called common sense, yet shape her life in a radical way.

Now the question to be asked is how Phillips’s representation of these characters, and his sensitive plumbing of their complex souls, which, I argue, inform his own brand of humanism, relate in any way to the construction of a new Britishness. Today’s democratic discourse on identity, in Britain and elsewhere, still rests very much on a set of beliefs inherited from liberal humanism which views the self as unitary, or perhaps dual in the case of immigrants, but which mostly fails to account for the exponential intricacy that marks identities today, especially in a post-imperial society. As Michael Ignatieff points out in an article entitled “Identity Parades”:

We live by “liberal fictions”: that human beings are equal and that in a civic community all difference is minor. In reality, of course, we are all incorrigibly different: skin colour, religion, class and accent are the markers by which we identify ourselves. Yet equality is the

moral story which governs our hypocrisies; it commits us to a distinctive thought experiment on which all political life depends: that we see beneath the surfaces of difference to a common identity beneath. (19)

Phillips's new humanism consists partly in showing how unfair this liberal striving for equality might be because it relies on a mythical and one-sided belief in humanity. As I have tried to show in my analysis of *Cambridge* and *The Nature of Blood*, what Emily calls "a true sense of self" (71), that is, a neatly defined, stable identity, does not exist in Phillips's fictional world. All his characters are both insiders and outsiders who try, more or less successfully, to negotiate a compromise between their different selves. This matches Phillips's definition of a truly multicultural society which, for him, is "composed of multicultural individuals; people who are able to synthesize different worlds in one body and to live comfortably with these different worlds" (*A New World Order* 279). Though this fundamental diversity within each human being is unavoidable, if only for historical reasons, it is never presented by Phillips as the panacea to identity conundrums, but as a potential source of richness which can also cause intense suffering, as Eva's schizoid madness painfully testifies.

However, what the temporal and spatial displacement of Phillips's fiction only obliquely suggests about human nature, and by extension, about Britishness may come out more directly in his non-fiction. While *The European Tribe*, published in 1987, already tackles the "contradiction of feeling British, while being constantly told in many subtle and unsubtle ways that I did not belong," (9) his next work of non-fiction, *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), concludes with the idea that there can be no closure on identity because, as he writes, "it is futile to walk into the face of history" (221) and his latest collection of essays, *A New World Order* (2001), describes a world where "we are all unmoored. Our identities are fluid. Belonging is a contested state. Home is a place riddled with vexing questions" (6). But it is no doubt his anthology entitled *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging* (1997) that most forcefully undermines the myth of British homogeneity, also evoked by Ignatieff above, by showing that British literature has been for more than two hundred years influenced and often written by so-called outsiders, that is, people born outside Britain, whose "difference," be it race, class or ethnicity, and therefore their individuality has hardly been acknowledged.

That Phillips should choose literature, thus culture, to make the point that "Britain has been forged in the crucible of fusion — of hybridity" (*Extravagant Strangers* xiii) is interesting for at least two reasons. First of all, because since Thatcherism "British nationality [. . .] [has been] culturally and

not racially constructed" (*A New World Order* 278). Culture seems indeed to have become a major site of exclusion as made clear in a statement by V.S. Naipaul, a conservative writer of Trinidadian origin and Nobel Prize Winner for Literature in 2001. Commenting on the British government promotion of what he calls "plebeian culture," he contends that such a cultural policy is destroying "the idea of civilisation in this country." Secondly, Phillips's focus on culture brings to mind Matthew Arnold's famous essay "Culture and Anarchy," which may be regarded as one of the most influential texts of liberal humanism. Comparing Arnold's view of culture to Phillips's may provide another way of characterizing the latter's humanism. In their critique of English society, both Arnold and Phillips believe that the function of culture, particularly literature, is to be a source of "awareness" if not "change" for the individual and society. As such both seem to be convinced, as Shrimpton points out about Arnold, that literature "should have things of specific and substantial interest to say about the world" (xvi). Where they disagree, however, is in their definition of culture. Arnold outlines culture, which, as Edward W. Said reminds us, he unproblematically identifies with society (10), as seeking to "make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere" (Arnold 226), in short as partaking in the pursuit for human perfection. This outlook is shaped by a view of the State as expression of "our best self" which, for Arnold, "is not manifold, and vulgar, and unstable, and contentious, and ever varying, but one, and noble, and secure, and peaceful, and the same for all mankind" (294). For all its claim to universalism and its attention to "the sense for the flux of things" (237), then, Arnold's conception of humanity, obsessed as it is with continuity and closure, underlies a view of multicultural society as "composed of many different cultures all living side by side" (*A New World Order* 279). To Phillips, this alternative is not viable because in such a society "there will always be one dominant culture and a hotchpotch of others which are, by definition, lesser" (279). Arnold's view is very different from Phillips's as expressed in his fiction and non-fiction. Indeed, one can assume that Arnold's highly subjective position relies on a selective canon from which someone like Phillips would be excluded by virtue of his origin, very much as the characters in his novels are excluded from a conventional, yet narrow, definition of humanity. Culture, for Phillips, is a more inclusive and shifting notion that, in any case, cannot be taken for granted but is in a constant state of transformation, like society itself, although this fluidity was ignored or obliterated for centuries.

Perhaps the difference between the two thinkers' humanism can best be summed up by contrasting their conception of "A New World Order", a notion that underlies "Culture and Anarchy" but is also the title of Phillips's latest

collection of essays. For Arnold, the "new world order" stands in opposition to the anarchy that one should attempt to keep at bay through culture, and is thus the idealized outcome of a generalizing approach to the world. For Phillips, on the contrary, this "new world order" stands for the current state of mankind which, though far from perfect, provides a glimmer of hope through its inherent, possibly anarchic, complexity and plurality:

A world in which it is impossible to resist the claims of the migrant, the asylum seeker, or the refugee. [. . .] The old static order in which one people speaks down to another, lesser, people is dead. The colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. In its place we have a new world order in which there will soon be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none. (*A New World Order* 5)

Likewise, Phillips's non-linear and fragmented narratives speak of a humanity whose centre no longer holds but whose kaleidoscopic margins, made up of individuals, are brought into the limelight. Clearly, they are also evocative of a British identity whose irresistible openness and fluidity, far from Arnold's unitary and well-established model, contain promises of human enrichment.

Notes

- ¹ Gilroy uses the term in relation to Richard Wright who is said to have identified this aesthetics.
- ² His name is never mentioned but the links with Shakespeare's protagonist are unmistakable

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