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Crossing a “Human River of Shattered Lives”: Caryl Phillips’s Diasporic Fiction /Vision

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Reporting on a conference held in Jamaica in 1992, a commentator remarked , with perceptible irritation, that the immigrant experience had now become “ hot stuff (...) in the Commonwealth diet” (Wijesinha 6), often at the expense of more pressing subjects like racial tension or social change. Exile and its attendant themes may indeed appear somewhat commonplace in the field of post-colonial studies. There is , nevertheless, no sidestepping this ubiquitous concern with displacement since colonial and post -independence societies were all exposed, at some point in their history , to various forms of uprooting and dismemberment, later producing polymorphous cultural, linguistic and psychological alienation but also new cultures. Of all post-colonial populations, the Caribbean peoples have undoubtedly had the most pervasive and intense experience of exile. It is hardly surprising. then, that the equation “ to be a colonial is to be in a state of exile” (Lamming 229) should have been formulated by George Lamming , a Barbadian writer.

No matter how relevant to the condition of both Caliban and Prospero, of the former colonized and colonizers alike, Lamming’s statement should not hide the fact that exile has not only been the fate of humanity since Adam Eve’s loss of Paradise, but has also become one of the most common experiences of the twentieth century. Large -scale warfare , extensive labour migrations and the revolution in transport and communication have indeed multiplied displacements exponentially, transport and communication have indeed multiplied

displacements exponentially, transforming our modern epoch into what the South African writer William Plumber calls the age of “dislocation, disorientation and exile, (the) age of the Displaced Person” (Blamires 220). In addition, with its multiple facets, at once geographical, social., psychological and metaphysical, exile has always been an apt metaphor for the human condition which, from birth to death, from the womb to the grave , is made of endless expulsions and journeys. As such , it underlies world -visions as varied as those expressed in medieval mysticism, Renaissance cosmopolitanism, religious romanticism, or more recently existentialism, all of which posit that human existence is a long wandering in search of an often inaccessible ideal that gives it meaning.

It seems to me that the world -view developed in much Caribbean writing deserves a place alongside these established currents of thought. Like them, it presents exile as inherent to the human condition and can serve as a model to explicate and analyze the physical and mental nomadism of modern metropolitan life. Yet unlike the world - visions just mentioned, it steers clear of the readily romantic notion of rootlessness to concentrate more particularly on the questions of individual and collective self-definition that exile is wont to raise. In other words, it views exile as an essentially dynamic process rather than a state, more as a way of becoming than of being in the world, an ontological approach which transforms the concept of the human condition. In this respect, Caribbean literature makes an original contribution to what has become a major universal issue. One of the premises of this paper is that, owing to their plural intersections and diasporic philosophy, Caribbean writers are likely to contribute to the rejuvenation of Western thought, which is in need of “a mode of thinking that is neither fixed nor stable, [...] one that is open to the prospect

of a continual return to events, to their re-elaboration and revision” (Chambers 3).

Another assumption underlying this essay is the belief that exile is an endless source of artistic inspiration. Though primarily a mutilating and crippling ordeal, exile has been the driving force behind many a creative act attempting to make sense out of the chaos of existence. The Jewish and German literary traditions provide countless illustrations of this stimulating effect. So does twentieth-century English literature. Like Terry Eagleton, one may wonder what this literature would have been without “[its] seven most significant writers [...] a Pole, three Americans, two Irishmen and an Englishman,” i.e. Conrad, James, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce and Lawrence, the latter “an exile from his own culture — in some ways, indeed, the archetypal modern exile” (Eagleton 9). Exile has indeed particular relevance to the literary imagination. As Michael Seidel argues, “narrative is a kind of speaking metaphor, a crossover, and its scene is set by the projection of activity in a mimetic and illusionistic space, a ‘conception of what might be on the other side’” (Seidel 2). The work of major writers like Homer, Ovid, Dante or Joyce testifies to the primacy of the exilic tale not only to explain the genesis of man’s history, but also to project the exilic experience into an aesthetic dimension in touch with the future of humanity.

Starting from these foundational and prospective capacities of exile as actual experience but also as literary theme, my intention here is to demonstrate that the fiction of Caryl Phillips, a contemporary Caribbean novelist based in Britain, uses exile as an artistic stepping-stone to offer an original diasporic vision. My main contention is that his writing has ethical and political implications bearing upon exilic modernity as a whole, for its avowedly cross-cultural viewpoint pro-

vides a new way of looking at our ruptured world, "a framework of thinking that makes the migrant central, not ancillary, to historical processes." Because, as Paul Carter puts it, such a perspective "disarm[s] the genealogical rhetoric of blood, property and frontiers and [...] substitute[s] for it a lateral account of social relations, one that stresses the contingency of all definitions of self and the other"¹ (qtd in Chambers 5), it can lead to a better understanding of the cultural complexity of our rapidly changing societies. Hopefully, it can also contribute to closing the gap between polarized groups (like the North and the South, the colonizer and the colonized) without, however, resorting to a facile, paternalistic reconciliation of the two. To that extent, then, exile can be regarded, in the words of Wilson Harris, as "the beginnings of a new world that may sustain the price that needs to be paid for imaginative truth" (Harris n.p.).

In this paper, I intend to develop the following points. After explaining why Caryl Phillips's fiction can be described as diasporic, I will analyze his diasporic vision, to conclude with a few remarks on how much light this vision sheds on his own post - migratory identity. I would also like to add that "diaspora," as used in this paper, relates to a wide semantic field. It not only refers to the historically documented Jewish and African experiences of dispersion, but is an essentially symbolic concept which, as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have pointed out, also encompasses the inescapable pluralities of people in exile, and the pain and suffering they have had to endure.²

Caryl Phillips is the author of six novels in which displacement crucially determines content as much as form. They

¹ Paul Carter, *Living in a New Country, History, Travelling and Language* (London : Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 7-8.

all basically deal with journeys, either voluntary or enforced, made as a consequence of historical events such as the slave-trade, colonization or the Jewish Holocaust. All of them depict the effects of exilic dislocation of families and on the psychology of individuals. Finally, the geographical displacement of their characters is often compounded by a temporal dispersal, a dramatization of the painful choice between remembering and forgetting that faces the exile and often jeopardizes his / her mental balance.

Unsurprisingly, this spatial and temporal fragmentation is clearly reflected at the formal level, with the possible exception of the first two novels, *The Final Passage* and *A State of Independence*. These have only one set of characters and respect some kind of spatial and temporal unity, even if the circular structure of the first and the use of flashbacks in the second adumbrate the disruption associated with the exilic condition in the later fiction. From *Higher Ground* onwards, however, Phillips's novels are made up of multiple narrative strands which, in spite of being thematically linked and even actually interweaving in some cases, remain structurally separate, thereby efficiently conveying the characters' deep cultural and psychological fragmentation, their sense of being adrift in a world where each individual is an "island unto [himself]" (Phillips 1981:78).

The Nature of Blood, Phillips's latest and most sophis-

² See, among others, Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts : Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London : Serpent's Tail, 1993) and *The Black Atlantic* (London : Verso, 1993) and Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory : A Reader*. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York / London : Harvester, 1994 : 392-403).

ticated novel to date, is a good example of how subject matter and structure combine in his writing to convey the diasporic dimension. Under one cover, it tells of Jewish money-lenders who leave Germany to live in fifteenth-century Venice; of an African general in the Venetian army in the sixteenth century; of Eva, a German Jew who survives Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and ends her life in post-war England; of her uncle, Stephan, who takes part in the founding of the nation-state of Israel; and of Malka, a Jew from Ethiopia who is repatriated to present-day Israel. All these characters leave what they regard as "home" to settle in an often hostile environment. The narrative shifts from one story to another, regardless of any chronological order, and does so at an ever-quickening pace, which may be suggestive of the shattering effect of exile on the individual mind. Moreover, changes in the narrative perspective make the characters alternately "distant, [and] tantalizingly close" (Phillips 1997:3), a mixture of detachment and attachment that is also germane to the diasporic consciousness. Commenting on this intricate structure in an interview, Phillips pointed out: "the form itself uproots the reader all the time." It also faces him/her with a sense of being lost, the "kind of emotional challenge that the characters are facing" (Iellici 147) when they wonder what is going on around them.

Content and structure aside, other, less obtrusive, features of Phillips's writing, like irony, indeterminacy, and intertextuality, also contribute to its diasporic character for they all imply some estrangement from the accepted norm, thus a displacement in meaning. Present to varying degrees in each novel, these characteristics define some novels more than others. *While Cambridge* can easily be associated with irony, and *Crossing the River* with indeterminacy, *Higher Ground*

and *The Nature of Blood* more obviously relate to intertextuality. In each case, however, the writer's aim is to make his readers see things from a new angle, and thereby call into question the official version of history imposed through traditional historiography. Before examining more closely how irony, indeterminacy and intertextuality convey the diasporic, but above all carry an alternative view of the world, one should add that, however much these aesthetic traits may testify to a transposition of the diasporic at the discursive level, the writer never uses these devices, as some post-modern writers do, to promote nihilistic playfulness. Nor does he even lose sight of the actual suffering undergone by the individuals. On the contrary, as can be seen, in the sometimes crude descriptions of life in concentration camps contained in *The Nature of Blood*, he starts from very concrete experiences of pain to express his characters' utter disorientation.

Irony is pervasive in Cambridge. The impressions gathered by the Englishwoman Emily on her father's Caribbean plantation are replete with meaningful contradictions that gradually undermine not only her own racist discourse and her reliability as a narrator, but also, more generally, all the travel narratives upon which Europeans relied to grasp the tropics. The way Emily perceives Mr Brown, the dishonest overseer, is just one example among many of how Phillips handles irony to displace meaning and expose the constructedness, thus subjectivity, of the colonial perspective. Emily is keen on catching sight of attitudes demonstrating the slaves' lack of manners; yet she is blind to Brown's uncouth attitude, although, when she first sees him, he is "his feet upon a chair, engaged in digging out mud from the soles of his boots with, of all implements, a dining fork" (30). Later, she also fails to understand that Brown's "miraculous improvement in [...]

behaviour" (80) is but a ploy on his part to seduce her and so take full control of the plantation. But the most obvious example of ironic slippage in this novel remains its title which is the name given to an educated slave on Emily's father plantation. Peripheral in the Englishwoman's account, he is recentered through the title which nonetheless carries the sign of his own cultural alienation as an educated and Christianized African, in his own eyes "a virtual Englishman" (156).

Like irony in Cambridge, the indeterminacy at work in Phillips's fifth novel, *Crossing the River*, also produces subversion, away from the linear epistemology of the West and its insistence on accurate chronology, exemplified in the log-book of Captain Hamilton, the slave trader who buys the children whose life is told in the novel. Instead of being simply a representation of the characters' wandering through space and time, the chronological disruption and the narrative fragmentation of *Crossing the River* indeed create silences "louder than any noise" (229), i. e. gaps through which "other voices, histories and experiences" emerge that "form chains of identity based on very different rhythms of time and being" (Chambers 68) as in the novel's final chorus. Phillips's factual ambiguity indeed refocuses our concerns on to the human person, the only permanent feature in his ever-changing diasporic universe. Asked by an interviewer why places in his novels are "completely unspecified", as in the third section of *Crossing the River* entitled "Somewhere in England", the writer significantly replied: "I don't bother too much with place, because I want the character in the forefront" (Yelin 80).

Intertextuality is yet another literary technique used by Phillips to convey the idea of belonging and unbelonging. While references to other works bespeak to his own displacement as an heir to several literary traditions, they are also part

of his project of giving voice to the Other. Intertextuality is perhaps more visible in *Higher Ground*, which is literally woven around a web of literary influences (Ladent) but *The Nature of Blood* openly alludes to *Othello* and Anne Frank, two figures of outsiders who though defeated by European racism, are part of Western iconography. By telling their well-known stories again, but also bringing them together, Phillips suggests a world where, in spite of man's propensity to tribalism, "there's great virtue in having roots that come from more than one place. [Where] You can make something new out of diverse pieces" (Kreilkamp 45). Such rewriting also allows Phillips a reversal of the anthropological gaze, whereby the "extravagant strangers," i. e. the way *Othello* is called in Shakespeare's play, but also the title of an anthology edited by Phillips, become the observers of Europe which, in the novelist's version, is described as a cannibal spitting "the chewed bones" (Phillips 1997 : 12) of its Jewish victims in the direction of Cyprus, a place of transit for the Jews after the Second World War.

Some commentators have construed Phillips's novels as pessimistic because they often close with a defeated protagonist on the verge of mental breakdown. Similarly, the fragmented and disjointed structure of his novels might well be viewed as an aesthetic reflection of a world that has lost all bearings and values. So could their thematic interest in slavery, wars and other dislocating experiences. Yet such readings of Phillips's diasporic fiction fail to take into account the transformative capacities of his ventriloquist craft which, by giving voice to the people usually silenced, to the "unremembered" can turn historical absence into presence, objects into subjects and can humanize even the most repulsive characters, like the African slave factor in *Higher Ground* or Captain

Hamilton in *Crossing the River*. Far from merely chronicling the dislocation of our modern societies, then, the maze of Phillips's intersecting stories suggests an unrealized community of being based both on men's common experience of exile and their formidable capacity for survival.

Clearly, then, his fiction does not stop at the level of fracture. To quote Derek Walcott's in "The Muse of History", an essay in which he warns New World writers against the dangers of falling victim to despair and retaliation, Phillips is not content with "[contemplating] [...] the shipwreck" (Walcott 1976 : 116), i. e. the disruption caused by colonization and other man-made catastrophes. What he does instead is point again and again to connections between his characters, whether black or white, Jewish or Christian, slave or master, man or woman, so that one is eventually convinced that, in spite of isolation and cleavages, "everybody is a part of somebody else's game" (Phillips 1997 : 170). Which is not to say that Phillips's view is naively optimistic, for human beings in his novels are linked for better and for worse. If his novels indeed depict a "human river of shattered lives" (Phillips 1997 : 70 and 199), they also help us across towards a vision of man which could be called "elemental," as Walcott puts it, insofar as it deals with "a being inhabited by presences, not a creature chained to his past" (Walcott 1976 : 111). However, while Walcott also calls such a vision "Adamic," I would tentatively call Phillips's "Epic," though I doubt if the word exists. Phillips has indeed often explored the recesses of the diasporic soul through female characters, or at least through characters whose disempowerment was reminiscent of the female condition. It is therefore no coincidence if the main consciousness in *The Nature of Blood* is that of Eva Stern, whose name recalls humanity's common mother, but also the initial expulsion from

the garden of Eden, i. e. the original exile.³

Phillips's diasporic vision does not search for an end to metaphorical or even metaphysical wandering by subscribing to an established mode of thought. Nor does it revel in a weightless rootlessness that would entail an absolute detachment from concrete economic, social and historical realities. Rather, like Walcott in *The Schooner Flight*, it replaces nation with imagination (Walcott 1986 : 350) since his creative rendering of the exilic experience gives birth to an original, idiosyncratic yet "international" ethos, which, if one refers to Martin Heidegger's translation of this Greek word, means "lodging," "the place where one lives," "the open region in which man dwells" (qtd in Chambers 95). If Phillips's writing eventually leads to some kind of homecoming, then, it is paradoxically of a nomadic kind, located in an always changing, never completed dimension which, in keeping with the novelist's own plural attachments, accommodates both his Caribbean roots and a new heterogeneous Britishness, but also stretches over a wider imaginative territory spanning African America, the Jewish Diaspora, and white Europe as a whole.

Far from superseding culture, as a cursory interpretation might suggest, Phillips's fiction may be said to posit an open, heterogeneous culture rooted in exile which, as Derek Walcott writes in *Omeros*, "is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor, / deeper than it seems on the surface ; slowly but sure,/ it will change us with the fluent sculpture of Time" (Walcott 1990 : 296).

3. A reference to Eva's link with Eden is also made in Charles Sarvan, review of *The Nature of Blood*, *World Literature Today* 72.4 (Autumn 1998) : 888.

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