

BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT

'Of, and not of, this Place': Attachment and Detachment in Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*

Interviewed about his novels in 2003, Caryl Phillips declared 'These all seem to be the same book, part of a continuum' (Morrison). Obviously, his seventh work of fiction, *A Distant Shore* (2003), does not disrupt this sense of great cohesion, also acknowledged by his commentators. Although the contemporary setting of *A Distant Shore* is unusual for a novelist who has occasionally been labelled a chronicler of the African Diaspora, this new book constitutes another memorable stage in Phillips' subtle, yet dogged fictional exploration of the tension between attachment and detachment, between belonging and unbelonging that has been part of human life since the beginning of times, especially for the migrant. If this concern sticks to Phillips' novels almost like a second skin, it is addressed more openly in his non-fiction, notably in his recent collection of essays *A New World Order* (2001). There, commenting on his own life, the author writes of the places that have made him — Africa, the Caribbean, Britain and the United States — in these almost incantatory words: 'I recognise the place, I feel at home here, but I don't belong. I am of, and not of, this place' (1, 2, 3 & 4). Because the last section of this statement 'captures the essence of Phillips's work' (Procter), it seems an appropriate guiding light in an analysis of his latest novel. My intention in what follows is therefore to attempt to demonstrate that an ambivalent combination of attachment and detachment similar to that contained in 'of, and not of, this place' suffuses all aspects of *A Distant Shore*, making it a singularly accomplished piece of fiction. Not only does this double, intrinsically contradictory move between closeness and remoteness inform the novel itself — its characterisation, title, themes and narrative technique — but at a further remove, this dialectic also applies to the way in which this book — at once realistic and allegorical, thus both faithful to and distant from the 'real' — positions itself in relation to generic definitions of the novel. By extension, *A Distant Shore* also raises questions about contemporary British fiction and what can be regarded as its enduring inability to mirror a society in flux.

Like many other narratives by Phillips, whether fiction or drama, *A Distant Shore* presents a white woman and a black man and focuses on their intense, yet flawed meeting. Dorothy Jones is a newly retired, divorced music teacher in her mid-fifties who has never left her native England; Solomon Bartholomew is a

30-year-old refugee recently arrived from Africa who lives and works as a 'handyman-cum-night-watchman' (14) in Stoneleigh, a new estate in Northern England where Dorothy has just settled. The novel provides a psychologically complex charting of these two newcomers' unlikely friendship, seen in the perspective of their lives before their encounter. Everything keeps them apart — gender, race, age and lifestyle — yet deep down they are very much alike and feel instinctively at ease with each other. Both are haunted by a painful past, made up of rejection at the hands of men for Dorothy, whose 'story contains the single word, abandonment' (203), and of tribal violence for Solomon, 'a man burdened with hidden history' (300). In other words, they share an experience of loneliness, invisibility and exclusion, which culminates in Dorothy's eventual madness and Solomon's murder at the hands of local skinheads. Though denied by outward appearances, this sense of profound kindred is dramatically expressed by a mad Dorothy when, after Solomon's death, she takes up his routine task of polishing the car and using her own jacket as a cloth. Dorothy's act is one of solidarity with dead Solomon, aware as she is that 'the circular motion of his right hand ... [is] an attempt to erase a past that he no longer wishes to be reminded of' (268). Solomon's demise has finally brought home to her that she is as much a stranger as he is and that, like him, she cannot find refuge in the village community. This realisation causes her to jeopardise the sartorial pride that she wrongly expected to be a guarantee of civility, but also of social respectability and therefore integration.

However, Dorothy and Solomon should not be seen as mere victims of a semi rural society where many people, like Dorothy's late father, are distrustful of 'anything that lay outside the orbit of [their] home-town life' (11), as Dorothy's late father was. Admittedly, Weston is a place where otherness and difference are not welcome, as suggested by the story of Dr. Epstein, a Jewish female physician who tried to settle in the village with her family but did not manage to 'blend in' (9). Yet, with characteristic ambivalence, Phillips also presents his protagonists' isolation as being either of their own making through their inability to communicate successfully or as the result of a particularly cruel fate. Both Dorothy and Solomon are 'lone bird[s]' (14), desperate for companionship. Still, very much as they hesitate to cross the threshold into the other's house, they also seem reluctant to come too close to each other, as if afraid of the intimacy this would entail. Of course, this might be a reaction on their part to their experience of a world plagued by solitude where human interactions are distorted by the law: at one point Dorothy is accused of harassing a male colleague and Solomon is charged with raping a girl who fed him when he landed in England as an illegal immigrant. Both seem to see familiarity as a possible threat to their own and to the other's integrity, which leads to somewhat contradictory behaviour. Thus after Dorothy visits Solomon at his home and he tells her about the hate mail he gets from local people, she decides to leave the village for a few days, because, as she puts it, 'I don't want [him] to become a problem in my life' (45).

At the same time, a mentally deranged Dorothy justifies her departure as a means of attracting Solomon to her, thinking 'I wanted to keep him on his toes until he realised for himself that he really didn't like it if I wasn't around all of the time. Then he would want me' (70). Clearly she is unable to disentangle the knot of attachment and detachment that, much to her irritation, also characterises present day England where, she thinks, 'it's difficult to tell who's from around here and who's not. Who belongs and who's a stranger' (3). *A Distant Shore* does not attempt to unravel this knot — an impossible task — but presents it to us in all its rough complexity.

In addition to the bizarreness of human behaviour, destiny too plays a role in keeping people apart and brands human relationships with a tragic denial of consummation. Solomon's tender friendship with his fellow illegal immigrant, Amma, aborts with her sudden disappearance from a refugee camp in France, while his attachment to Mike, the Irish lorry driver who rescues him and finds him a sanctuary with the Anderson family, ends when the Irishman dies in a car crash. Likewise, Dorothy's reunion with her younger sister Sheila after years of estrangement occurs only when the latter is about to die of cancer, a death that Dorothy rejects by keeping Sheila alive in her mind. In *A Distant Shore*, as in the rest of Phillips's fiction, togetherness is never very far from parting.

This pervasive, never-resolved interplay between attachment and detachment is contained in the title as well. The combination of 'distant' with 'shore' evokes a place — or person — that is far away, possibly out of reach, but can nonetheless represent a possibility of rescue for the individual who has lost all moorings. In other words, the phrase 'distant shore' encapsulates the simultaneous hopeful pull, yet inherent hopelessness, of the longing to belong. In *A Distant Shore* the fulfilment of such a desire is deferred, though not completely annihilated. The main characters' eventual defeat, mental for Dorothy and physical for Solomon, conveys the notion of irretrievable separation, yet this cannot erase the bonds, all the stronger for remaining unspoken, that these two beings have woven in the course of their short-lived relationship. In other words, the death of Solomon which is announced early on in the novel (46), means that his budding friendship with Dorothy will not be allowed to blossom and that his hope of finding a new home in England will never come true. Yet because Solomon has been able to share his story through the novel, he is symbolically rescued from total oblivion and from remaining 'a one-year-old man who walks with heavy steps' (300). So even though the novel does not offer any concrete redemption, there is a sense of serenity which is evoked by Dorothy when she concludes '[m]y heart remains a desert, but I tried. I had a feeling that Solomon understood me' (312). Solomon, too, tried hard to build bridges, and therein lies his, and Dorothy's, ultimate dignity.

Unsurprisingly, proximity and distance also characterise the novel on a formal level, a possible echo of the ebb and flow of the sea that brings people like Solomon to the English shores. The novel's five sections alternate between the

two protagonists, who are in turn focused, absent, or present but only through the other's consciousness. The whole narrative also fluctuates between present and past and, more importantly for this argument, between first and third person narratives, with varying zooming effects, as clearly illustrated in the first two sections. The opening one is a close-up first person narrative told from Dorothy's perspective in an often informal language, but her growing mental confusion, which cannot be detected at first but becomes a certitude as the story unfolds, makes her account so unreliable that the readers cannot help distancing themselves, in the same way as the local population who are taken aback by Dorothy's oddness. The second section is devoted to Solomon. With the exception of his stint as a rebel leader in an unnamed war-torn African country, told in a gripping first-person narrative, his excruciating experiences — the massacre of his whole family in his presence, his danger-ridden journey to Europe, and his detention in England — are all told in an apparently emotionless, occasionally report-like third-person account which may reflect Solomon's wish to 'banish all thoughts of his past existence. There can be no sentiment' (94), but also the detached attitude of English people who '[look] through him as though he did not exist' (172–73). Yet the very horror of the facts evoked and the obsessive repetition of 'Gabriel', Solomon's former name, draw the readers in and make indifference impossible, thereby fully compensating for the dehumanising process in which the character is caught. This technique of oblique inclusion proves all the more efficient because Gabriel's identity is only revealed at the end of this second section, thus the news of Solomon's death in the first part does not have any deflating effect but leaves intact the suspense of the refugee's obstacle course before reaching England.

As mentioned above, the tension between attachment and detachment also marks the novel's relationship to reality. There is an undeniable realistic streak in *A Distant Shore*, much of which is clearly set in contemporary Weston, a village in the north of England, more than twenty years after Mrs Thatcher closed the pits (4). This country, one can imagine, has known the Stephen Lawrence¹ case and experienced media-driven campaigns against asylum seekers. Moreover, there is a fastidiousness in the description of places and of the characters' physical appearance and life stories, (unusual in Phillips's later fiction) which leaves little doubt as to his intention to anatomise today's Britain directly. As he remarked in *The European Tribe* in 1987, there is in modern Britain 'an unwillingness to deal with change in society, and by extension that society's image of itself' (122). Unlike his previous fictions, which always took place in a more or less distant past and whose present relevance could therefore be more easily overlooked, this novel might be regarded as a more straightforward attempt to make this nation look at itself in the mirror.

In other words, the setting and the characters of *A Distant Shore* make its topicality quite obvious, and the novel can indeed be read as a forceful comment

on Britain's current situation, and as a nuanced, humane contribution to the debate on asylum seekers in that country and elsewhere in Europe. Yet, however accurate and well-researched, Phillips's fictional depiction of life in today's Britain, and in particular of the plight of refugees, should not be confused with a sociological or journalistic document. In this regard it is interesting to briefly compare the novel with an article on the Sangatte Red Cross refugee centre that Phillips wrote for *The Guardian* in November 2001. Entitled 'Strangers in a Strange Land', the article is a piece of sensitive investigation into the reasons why people leave their country and attempt to reach England, often at the risk of their own lives. Such elements can be found in the novel too, but there are divergences between the two texts even though both emanate from a profound desire to understand human nature. One of the differences is that the presence of the author is made invisible in the work of fiction while in the *Guardian* piece Phillips comes openly to the fore, especially at the end when he writes: 'Again I look [...] to the stream of hunch-shouldered refugees walking with grim determination in the direction of the mouth of the tunnel. And I silently wish them all good luck'. A sympathy pervades the novel but is never mentioned in an explicit way. More importantly, fiction deals with complex emotions and feelings, very often unconscious, whose surface can only be scratched at even in the best non-fiction. As much is suggested in the novel itself when Solomon is interviewed by his solicitor, Stewart Lewis, on the eve of the his trial for alleged rape. The young lawyer, who starts the interview by 'carefully [writing] down the date and the time' (112),² pays attention only to facts, interested as he is in 'trying to establish dates, not state of mind' (113), which makes the refugee's memory go blank. While the reader has access to Solomon's intimate thoughts, it is not possible to make out exactly what happened between him and the girl, apart from the fact that 'he did not force himself upon [her]. He had done nothing wrong. He was guilty of nothing that would bring shame on his family name' (189). While Phillips's restrained expression conveys the impossibility, the futility even, of a strict attachment to specifics, it also manages to tactfully express the mix of disgust and pity that the girl inspires in Solomon.

In addition to denouncing the shallowness of a purely factual approach to human issues, *A Distant Shore* suggests the limitations of a naturalistic rendering of lives in yet another way: by showing how deceptive appearances can be. Dorothy's seemingly 'ordered existence' (244) hides emotional chaos, very much as her father's peacefulness — as suggested by his well-tended allotment with its 'obedient rows' (27) of vegetables — contrasts with his abusive behaviour towards her sister. So there is some irony in Dorothy's obsession with decorum and good manners, which determines her likes and dislikes, for it is based entirely on semblance. Indeed, one cannot help thinking that Dorothy, whose conservative mentality is clearly that of 'the anti-asylum voter' (Harding 63), would never have been attracted to Solomon if his marginality had not been associated with

some outward sign of decency; for example, if he had become one of the homeless who are, according to Dorothy, 'disgusting, dragging themselves and the country down like this' (65).

As if to dramatise this mistrust of façades, *A Distant Shore* also begs to be read as an allegory; that is, it encourages its readers to look below the surface for some more general and deeper meaning, thus creating distance from mere facts. The topography of Weston is a good example of this. While it roots the village in the real, it also demands to be read figuratively, as if Stoneleigh stood for England as a whole, or even for the world in miniature. The hill on which the new development is built conveys the social superiority (real or imagined) of its new inhabitants, and is thus an image of the class divisions that are still rife today. The canal, 'a murky strip of stagnant water' (6), in which Solomon is found dead, represents the decay and lifelessness of a world that has a static view of itself, and refuses to see the flow of newcomers as a refreshing addition, as would be the case with a river or a sea. This absence of movement is also conveyed by the cul-de-sac in which Dorothy and Solomon live, where a black man still works to provide comfort and safety to a community of white people. With her common-sounding surname, Dorothy Jones, too, can be viewed as an allegory of her country; like England she finds it difficult to come to terms with the ageing and 'decrepitude' (208) that take possession of her body. There are more allegorical overtones in the fact that Solomon and his fellow immigrants are at one point depicted as 'a band of pilgrims' (122), and in Solomon's nameless country, although this namelessness might also allude to the irrelevance of including references to a nation when dealing with extreme human suffering. But the novel's most pervasive allegory may be provided by the numerous cups of tea that the English characters drink at any moment, especially in times of crisis. Not only does tea illustrate further the theme of deceptive appearances: in spite of being a quintessential symbol of Englishness, it originated in regions of the former British Empire. It is, in short, both of, and not of, England. Tea drinking also meaningfully reinforces the attachment and detachment motif. As an eminently trivial part of everyday life, it clearly belongs to the naturalistic realm, but at the same time it can be viewed allegorically as a ritual that allows the characters either to bond or to cope with the vicissitudes of existence — effectively, distance themselves from reality, as Dorothy does when she is confronted with her mother's, then her sister's death (24, 266).

This being said, there is in *A Distant Shore* a clear will to assert the presence of the 'other' in contemporary British society, to root the stranger and the disenfranchised in the national narrative. If this applies to Dorothy as a middle-aged, mentally vulnerable woman, it even more obviously relates to Solomon, who is seen by many as a national and racial outsider. In spite of black people's visibility in a mostly white society, they have rarely been portrayed in so-called realistic, mainstream contemporary fiction, beyond being represented as foils or

as problems. There are only a handful of exceptions to this, for example Jill Dawson's *Maggie* (1998) or Maggie Gee's *The White Family* (2002). Similarly, in spite of their over-representation in the media, asylum seekers and refugees have not really made it into fiction except again in a couple of books written this time by writers from the former empire, such as Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001), a novel about an elderly refugee from Zanzibar, or Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* (2001), a novel for teenagers about a young boy from Ethiopia seeking refuge in England. By placing a refugee at the centre of his work, Caryl Phillips once again devotes fiction to those who have been under-represented in that medium, as he did in earlier novels with slaves, prisoners or mentally ill people. In this sense, therefore, Phillips' new novel may be said to provide what Colin MacInnes called 'A Taste of Reality' when in 1959 he reviewed Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* and concluded, '[it] is the first English play I've seen in which a coloured man, and a queer boy, are presented as natural characters, factually, without a nudge or shudder' (205).³

Trivial as it may seem, this reference to MacInnes is interesting for several reasons. First of all, MacInnes is one of the first writers who, from the end of the fifties, commented on and actually represented in his fiction a changing English society on the way to becoming visibly multicultural. As early as 1956, for example, he wrote: 'A coloured population — and this means a growing half-caste population — is now a stable element in British social life' (MacInnes 20). Next, the allusion to MacInnes relates indirectly to Phillips's source of inspiration for the title of this novel, and provides it with a political subtext all the more powerful for being hidden to the naked eye. Indeed, the piece on Delaney referred to above is included in a collection of MacInnes' pioneering essays entitled *England, Half English*, an obvious reference to attachment and detachment in relation to identity, from which the English singer Billy Bragg borrowed the title for an album released in 2002.⁴ In his turn, Phillips took the title of his novel from a song on that album, 'Distant Shore',⁵ which is spoken in the voice of an asylum seeker who might well be Solomon:

Everyone knows that there's no place like home
But I'm just seeking refuge in a world full of storms
Washed up on a distant shore, can't go home anymore

The natives are hostile whatever I say
The thing they fear most is that I might want to stay
By their side on a distant shore can't go home anymore

I escaped my tormentors by crossing the sea
What I cannot escape is memory
Washed up on a distant shore can't go home anymore

This allusion to Bragg and, by extension to MacInnes, places Phillips in a chain of voices that have provided thoughtful comments on Englishness, and how it relates to race and class. Like him, both MacInnes and Bragg express in their

work 'a malcontented engagement with English identity' (Wood) even though the singer is clearly the most politically committed of the two. In the eighties, for example, Bragg took an active part in the protests following the 'decimation of the mining communities',⁶ an event which visibly affected the village of Weston where *A Distant Shore* is set.

This indirect reference to MacInnes and Bragg makes the political agenda of *A Distant Shore* unquestionable. However, what remains after one has read the novel is not a sense of outcry at today's injustices, but rather a profound sympathy with two wounded individuals who could have remained 'strangers to one another' (163), but are brought together by fiction, yet also separated by it. *A Distant Shore* can therefore be read as a renewed act of faith, on Phillips' part, in a genre that, for him, 'requires a great deal of generosity from the writer and the reader alike' because 'both have to imagine themselves in somebody who is not them';⁷ in short they have to enact a simultaneous process of attachment and detachment. It is apposite that the reading of this novel should involve performing the very process that informs it.

NOTES

- ¹ Stephen Lawrence was born in England of Jamaican parents. He was stabbed to death at a bus stop on 22 April 1993, when he was only 18 years old. The inquiry into his murder triggered a nationwide debate on the institutionalisation of racism in the UK.
- ² This is reminiscent of the attitude of the slave-trader and of the slave auctioneer in Phillips's *Crossing the River* who focus only on 'the date, the place, the time' (76), not on the slave's state of mind.
- ³ Since this paper was first drafted, Caryl Phillips has published an article on the absence of black characters in British fiction and more generally on the politics of literary representation. In that article he refers to Colin MacInnes extensively (Phillips 2004).
- ⁴ 'England, Half English' is also the title of a song on the same album.
- ⁵ Caryl Phillips, correspondence, 14 August 2002.
- ⁶ For more information on Billy Bragg, see 'Billy Bragg: England, Half English', http://cookingvinyl.com/billy_bragg/index.php.
- ⁷ Comments made by Caryl Phillips at a conference on 'Revisiting Slave Narratives', held in Montpellier on 5th April 2003.

WORKS CITED

- Bragg, Billy and the Blokes 2002, *England, Half English*, Cooking Vinyl.
Dawson, Jill 1998, *Maggie*, Hodder and Stoughton, London.
Gee, Maggie 2002, *The White Family*, Saqi Books, London.
Gurnah, Abdulrazak 2001, *By the Sea*, Bloomsbury, London.
Harding, Jeremy 2000, *The Uninvited: Refugees at the Rich Man's Gate*, Profile Books and London Review of Books, London.
MacInnes, Colin [1961] 1993, *England, Half English*, Chatto & Windus, London.
Morrison, Donald 2003, 'A Writer of Wrongs', *Time*, 19 May, p. 62.

- Phillips, Caryl 1987, *The European Tribe*, Faber and Faber, London.
- 1993, *Crossing the River*, Bloomsbury, London.
- 2001, *A New World Order*, Secker & Warburg, London.
- 2001, 'Strangers in a Strange Land', *Guardian*, 17 November.
- 2003, *A Distant Shore*, Secker & Warburg, London.
- Procter, James 2003, 'Caryl Phillips', British Council in association with Booktrust, online, <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/author/caryl-phillips>.
- Wood, Carter 2002, 'There'll Always Be an England?: On Billy Bragg's and MacInnes's *England, Half English*', *The Voice of the Turtle*, www.voiceoftheturtle.org/show_article.php?aid=48.
- Zephaniah, Benjamin 2001, *Refugee Boy*, Bloomsbury, London.