

There is always the other side, always

Britain, the Caribbean and the Ghost of Jean Rhys in Caryl Phillips's Writing

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In 1997, Caryl Phillips published an anthology entitled *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging*, a fascinating collection of texts by writers who were at some point based in Britain. However, because these authors were not born there, they were regarded as outsiders to English literature, a tradition that still now in the twenty-first century tends to be viewed in terms of racial and social continuity. As Caryl Phillips makes it clear in the preface to this volume, one of his intentions in bringing these literary voices together is to radically question the mythology of homogeneity (xiv) that affects the way the nation views itself and its culture, and thereby make us reconsider Britishness and see it as hybrid in nature rather than pure. Phillips's selection of writers and extracts from their work reflects the freight of expectation with regard to Britain (xv) of these so-called outsiders and their high anxieties of belonging to adapt a phrase that Phillips has used in relation to himself as well (The High Anxiety of Belonging). The anthology also suggests that such cultural and existential ambivalence is in the end artistically fecund, as it gives rise in many cases to a formally daring literary production, wary of linearity and sterile order. There are about a dozen writers with Caribbean roots in this collection's impressive line-up, such as George Lamming and Samuel Selvon. There is no doubt that these authors' navigation between Britain and the Caribbean has, in various degrees, been an inspiration for Phillips, whose literary career has been visibly marked by his birth in the Caribbean island of St Kitts, which he left at a very early age. Even if Phillips has expressed himself openly about the influence of Lamming and Selvon on his work (Following On), it is with the only descendant of former colonisers in the list of Caribbean writers anthologised in *Extravagant Strangers* – the only white person, but also the only woman, Jean Rhys – that Caryl Phillips seems to have had the most consistent artistic affinity, a word that I use here as both synonymous with similarity and, importantly, as synonymous with an ability to understand.

The extract that Caryl Phillips chose to illustrate Jean Rhys's relationship with Britain in his anthology comes from Rhys's unfinished autobiography *Smile Please* and shows the young Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams taking her 'First Steps' (this is the extract's title) in Britain after her arrival from Dominica at the age of almost seventeen. The anthologised passage, to quote Phillips's introductory commentary, 'reflects the lifelong unhappiness that she felt trying to adapt to the country that she eventually made her home' (64; italics in original), and it is equally evocative of the permanent feeling of loneliness and disappointment that was to follow her all her life. What 'First Steps' also conveys is the shock that the young girl felt on arriving in England, an irreversible sense of living in two different worlds – the familiar, warm Caribbean of her childhood, on the one hand, and the unknown, cold, colonial Mother Country, on the other. Rhys evokes this rupture even more dramatically in her avowedly autobiographical 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*, where her protagonist Anna Morgan describes her first experience of England:

It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known....The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy.

Sometimes it was as if I were back there [in the Caribbean] and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together. (7-8)

This apparent case of cultural schizophrenia is more complicated than a simple binary approach might suggest since, as a white Creole, Rhys (like many of her heroines) was regarded as an outsider in her native country too, as a so-called 'white cockroach' rejected because of her complexion and the social assumptions that went with it, while not being regarded as fully belonging to white England either, because her foreign origins, notably perceptible in her accent, made of her a so-called 'white nigger'. So even if the West Indies and England remain the defining, opposite poles of Rhys's identity, she can be regarded as an outcast on both sides of the Atlantic, which gives a particularly multidirectional resonance to Antoinette's famous words in Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966): 'There is always the other side, always' (82). This peculiar complexity explains why Rhys's tormented and tragic trajectory should have appealed to someone like Caryl Phillips – regardless of the generational, racial and gender differences between them – since Rhys's identity conundrum seems to be a better match for the predicament of the second generation of Caribbean writers

in England than that of writers who, to take the example of Lamming and Selvon again, could claim a more straightforward sense of belonging to the Caribbean than Rhys. In other words, like Rhys, Phillips and his Caribbean contemporaries in England can be said to be marginalized, but not colonized (xvii), to quote Mary Lou Emery's description of Antoinette and her famous creator. To illustrate this differently, it is useful to recall the doubts that were expressed around whether Jean Rhys, a white woman, should be regarded as a West Indian writer, and which gave rise to an interesting debate between Peter Hulme, Kamau Brathwaite and other critics in the pages of *Wasafiri* in the 1990s. One could also wonder whether such a discussion might apply to artists like Caryl Phillips or David Dabydeen, members of the second generation of Caribbean writers in Britain, who, in spite of their birth in the Caribbean and their obvious black ancestry, are not always regarded as fully West Indian because of their mostly foreign life experience, nor as fully British because of their origins, and have therefore, for some people at least, a contested position in the British canon.

Starting from these points of convergence between Rhys and Phillips, I wish to examine how the intricate interaction between the Caribbean and Britain that presides over Jean Rhys's life, and that of her fictional characters, also pervades Phillips's work to such an extent that it could be said to be haunted by Rhys's literary ghost, in terms of characterisation, themes and also style. I will first concentrate on some of Phillips's early fiction, *The Final Passage* (1985), *Higher Ground* (1989), and *Cambridge* (1991), three novels whose protagonists are strangely, and obliquely, reminiscent of the women that people Rhys's writing (mostly *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Voyage in the Dark*) and who are, in Caryl Phillips's words, 'the same lonely, alienated and unwanted female figure battling against the forces of class and culture' (*Extravagant*, 63). Then I will consider *The Lost Child* (2015), a novel which, as Giovanna Buonnano has established, engages more directly with the work of Jean Rhys, both intertextually and meta-textually, via the Brontëan connection. I will conclude with a brief discussion of Caryl Phillips's most recent novel, *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018), whose biographical approach to Rhys confirms Phillips's fascination with this writer's universe but also displays his unique way of delving into human affairs, with a form of deep respect that nevertheless steers away from Manichean simplification.

The Final Passage, Phillips's first novel, tells the story of a young Caribbean woman, Leila Franks, who migrates to England with her husband Michael and her baby son Calvin in

the 1950s. Far from bettering her condition in the Mother Country, Leila ends up in London, psychologically and physically shattered, stranded on her own with a toddler and pregnant with another child. While her narrative does not directly conjure the confinement experienced by Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there is definitely something in the tone and the themes of the text that binds the two women, if only their fragile mental states further damaged by their migration as well as their victimisation at the hand of an unscrupulous husband. But the resemblance goes further than this. In a 2007 interview, Phillips was told by Jacqueline Bishop that *The Final Passage* reminded her of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 'in the absolute abandonment of that female character at the end and the wish to return to the Caribbean at all costs' (Bishop and McLean). The writer corroborated the connection, adding that 'Jean Rhys was somebody I was reading a lot in the early [19]80s and deliberately so. I went to and stayed at the hotels she stayed in ... in Paris, obviously fascinated by this woman who had been a rootless, slightly dislocated person ... throughout her life, a comment that incidentally highlights the way Jean Rhys and her fictional characters are often conflated. A closer look at *The Final Passage* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* confirms a kinship between Phillips's and Rhys's protagonists, Antoinette and Leila, who could both be described as 'double outsider[s]', a phrase used by Helen Tiffin in relation to Antoinette (328). Regarded as racial misfits in their respective native societies, Antoinette as a white Creole and Leila as a mixed-race girl with light skin, both women travel with their unloving partners to England, where they are regarded as the alien other. One scene in *The Final Passage* has a particularly Rhysian feel: it occurs at the end of the novel when a laughing Leila sets fire to 'the objects and garments that reminded her of her five months in England' (200), in a gesture of revolt that echoes, albeit in a less radical way, Antoinette's dream of setting fire to Thomfield Hall. Quite appropriately, Phillips's first novel closes with Leila catching 'sight of herself in a mirror' (*Final Passage* 204), a crucially Rhysian object. And, significantly, Leila then realises that '[s]he looked like a yellowing snapshot of an old relative, fading with the years' (204-05). Could this relative be Antoinette? Or Rhys, maybe? (See Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* 37-38).

The eponymous third section of Phillips's novel *Higher Ground*, too, contains elements that should be familiar to readers of Rhys. The narrative tells the story of Irina, a Jewish Pole, who has left Poland to escape the Holocaust and is now based in post-war London, where she leads a lonely life. Irina sees her mental state deteriorate after an attempted suicide following her separation from her devious English husband Reg. Again, this

experience aligns her with the protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with whom she shares a marginal status in her native society, only made worse by her migration to England, but also a change of name, since her original Polish name, Irina, is turned into Irene by English people, who are too lazy to bend their mouths or twist their tongues into unfamiliar shapes (*Higher Ground* 183). But it is another Rhys protagonist that Irina from *Higher Ground* most clearly conjures up, namely Anna Morgan from *Voyage in the Dark*. Like the Rhysian heroine, Irina lives in seedy rented rooms, supervised by an often intrusive and overbearing landlady (maybe some kind of Grace Poole equivalent), with no family support to speak of. She is equally resigned to her fate, complaining at some stage, after a ten-year period in a mental home, that “[t]hey had told her nothing about how to deal with men” (201). For Irina, as for Rhys’s Anna, migrant life in England is very much a hellish “voyage in the dark” that entails the loss of a child, caused by an accidental abortion in Irina’s case and a voluntary one in Anna’s, but which for both women signifies a desolate and dislocated life (see Ledent, “Counter-Discursive” 306-07).

In Phillips’s novel *Cambridge* (1991), the female protagonist, Emily Cartwright, presents troubling similarities with both Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Anna in *Voyage in the Dark*. Like the former, Emily is not allowed to make her own decisions regarding her destiny, being a victim of the Victorian “regime which fastened her into backboards, corsets and stays to improve her posture” (4). As the novel opens, she is meant to be married off by her father to a fifty-year-old widower, a transaction that she compares to “[t]he rude mechanics of horse-trading” (4) and which is not very different from Antoinette’s arranged marriage to Rochester. Though not a Creole like Antoinette, Emily is nevertheless trapped between two societies, the Victorian English one, on the one hand, and that of the Caribbean, on the other, and is daunted, like Antoinette, by what she believes to be the power of Obeah, associated in *Cambridge* with the slave Christiania (whose name is incidentally reminiscent of Christophine, Antoinette’s servant). These similarities with *Wide Sargasso Sea* mainly concern the first part of Emily’s narrative, which is written within the confines of travel writing conventions. The epilogue, however, where Emily is now in a state of disgrace, is written in a more modern style, very Rhysian in its deceptive sparseness. *Wide Sargasso Sea* still haunts Emily’s closing account, notably in the scene where Emily stands in front of a mirror, which, for Helen Tiffin, is a crucial object in “Rhys’s depiction of [Antoinette’s] dilemma” (329). But the epilogue of the novel *Cambridge* is also evocative of *Voyage in the*

Dark, especially the passage where Emily delivers a stillborn child, an event which contains echoes of the scene where Anna Morgan needs medical attention after an abortion. The attitude of the physicians in both cases is tainted with a form of paternalism that does not seem to take much account of the two women's painful loss. While the doctor replies 'what utter nonsense!' (*Voyage in the Dark* 159) to Anna when she claims that the haemorrhage she suffers from was caused by a fall (which to some extent is true) and while Emily's doctor tells her to 'stop talking. Stop talking' (*Cambridge* 178), both silenced women are struck by the size of the (male) doctor's hands, which are evocative of the two women's powerlessness and their infantilisation by men (Anna: 'His hands looked enormous in rubber gloves' [*Voyage in the Dark* 158-59]; Emily: 'his hands, his large clumsy hands' [*Cambridge* 178]).

Surprisingly perhaps, little criticism exists on Rhysian echoes in this novel, with the exception of an article written by Vivian Nun Halloran in which the critic considers *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Cambridge* as postmodern narratives 'dramatizing slavery and its legacy in the Anglophone Caribbean islands' (87) and compares the way both texts problematise cultural and national belonging in relation to race, which leads to the establishment of fruitful parallels between Rochester and Emily as both European observers of Caribbean societies, and between Antoinette and Emily as white creolised women. In any case, what such an analysis and the many echoes highlighted above suggest is that there is, between Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Voyage in the Dark* and Phillips's early fiction, an intertextual relationship, which is of the allusive and affiliative type rather than the derivative or counter-discursive one. Clearly, Caryl Phillips shares with Jean Rhys the same concern for dislocated, distressed, female figures, who find themselves alone and adrift in race and class-bound societies and as a consequence often display some form of mental imbalance, which can be variously pathologised as schizophrenia, depression or neurosis.

This particular identitarian profile can be found again in a more recent novel by Caryl Phillips, *The Lost Child* (2015), but here, in addition to having the ghost of Jean Rhys hover over the narrative in the form of plot or character-related clues, which can arguably only be picked up by informed readers, we find a more traceable intertextual connection with the Dominican writer via the link with Emily Brontë and her 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights*, to which Phillips's novel responds in a visible way, notably by providing a prequel to Heathcliff's story. Indeed, for most postcolonial scholars, this association between a writer

with roots in the Caribbean and a British classic by one of the Brontë sisters cannot but bring to mind Jean Rhys's well-known prequel to *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel which has become iconic when one discusses postcolonial rewritings of canonical works.

There are three female characters in *The Lost Child*, who are involved in three different, though thematically related, narrative threads and correspond in one way or another to the Rhysian portrait of the female outcast outlined above. The first one is a nameless woman, nicknamed the 'Crazy Woman' (3), who was a slave in the West Indies and is stranded in late-eighteenth-century Liverpool. She has had a child with Mr Earnshaw, the character from *Wuthering Heights*, who takes the boy back to his own family on the moors upon the child's mother's death. The second is Emily Brontë herself, who is depicted during her final days and is seen to interact with her dysfunctional family. The third outsider is Monica Johnson, a white Englishwoman who has had two sons by a black Caribbean man that she met when studying in Oxford in the late 1950s. The novel depicts Monica spiralling into depression, which begins with her separation from her husband, worsens with the placement of her two mixed-race boys in foster care and the murder of one of them, and leads to her eventual suicide. Like Rhysian heroines, all three women are depicted as living in 'two worlds' (112), which interact in often unpredictable ways. For the ex-slave this complexity involves England as opposed to the Caribbean, to where she was brought from Africa; for Emily Brontë it involves her immediate family versus her fictional universe, and for Monica the tension exists between her harsh reality and her confused mental world. Quite interestingly, the predicament of all three women, but especially Monica's, is conveyed using situations or objects that could very well belong to Rhys's fictional realm. Not only does Monica, like Antoinette, live in an attic room (*The Lost Child*, 16, 214) and is she mentally vulnerable, but she comes to realise, like the prisoner of Thornfield Hall, that the place where she is locked up does not have any mirror, an absence which conveys her profound alienation. Ironically, this realisation simultaneously suggests a form of mirroring between the two characters whose thoughts reflect each other: Antoinette is reported as thinking that 'there is no looking-glass here' (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 117), while Monica becomes aware that 'there's no mirror in this room' (Phillips, *Lost Child* 236) – as if the larger fictional world, by bringing them together, compensated for their degrading loneliness in their respective narrative.¹ That Caryl Phillips's fiction appears to be haunted by the Dominican writer in *The Lost Child* is further confirmed when one pays attention to intertextual links established in the

novel between Monica and the protagonist of Jean Rhys's short story 'Let Them Call It Jazz' Selina Davis. These two women, who both have been lent an empty flat by a male friend, are ostracised by their sanctimonious English neighbours for their apparently unconventional behaviour, which ends up with Selina being imprisoned and Monica sectioned (see Ledent and O'Callaghan; Buonnano).

These troubling echoes might work to enhance the link between the Caribbean and the North of England that the various narrative threads of *The Lost Child* sustain through direct and indirect references to slavery and the African diaspora. In a novel explicitly concerned with genealogy, both familial and literary, however, these intertextual traces might also signal a way, on Phillips's part, of claiming Rhys as a literary ancestor. Yet one should beware of such a pat conclusion and look once more at the other side of the question by paying attention to Phillips's comments on the matter. Asked by Stephen Clingman whether the precedent of Jean Rhys and *Wide Sargasso Sea* was in his mind when he wrote *The Lost Child*, Phillips responded:

No, it's not the precedent. I mean, I know Jean Rhys's work pretty well. I'm a huge fan, actually, but *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the book of hers I like the least. I like the more modernist excursions – certainly in the novels – into the fragility of particularly female psychology. There is definitely a Jean Rhys influence, but it's actually not *Wide Sargasso Sea*, because I'm not a great devotee of that corner of her oeuvre. So there's nothing conscious about it, and I never set out in any way to do that. (Clingman 594)

Thus, in line with the novel itself, which is a story of both connection and loss, of both reunion and separation, the bond with Jean Rhys, if any, cannot but remain elusive or ambivalent in the sense that it does not rely on a blind homage to her and to the novel she is most famous for but more on a fascination for her explorations of fragile displaced souls. This no doubt explains why the points of convergence between Jean Rhys's and Caryl Phillips's writing remain mostly within the psychological realm.

One needs to take this tension on board when examining Caryl Phillips's new novel, *A View of the Empire at Sunset* (2018), which looks at some significant, formative episodes of Jean Rhys's life and recounts the often painful experiences that she had to go through. In that sense the novel can be called biographical. Nevertheless, as suggested above, the book should not be seen as a straightforward tribute to a fellow artist but rather as an imaginary engagement with the vagaries of the Dominican writer's psyche and, by extension, with the

drama of the migrant soul and of the stranger in general. In this respect, it is interesting to consider that the novel does not deal with Rhys's literary career per se: as Caryl Phillips said when taking part in a conference in Liege in 2017, "there is nothing dramatic about the act of writing" Quite significantly in her own, avowedly mostly autobiographical writing too, Rhys did not write the story of the writer either, for "[t]he self she wanted to understand" Carole Angier points out, "was not the writer but the woman" – the woman who longed to be happy, and who was so unhappy (17). In this sense, Caryl Phillips's new literary creation very much respects the spirit of his subject: it is the woman, Gwen Williams, not the writer, Jean Rhys, that matters.

A View of the Empire at Sunset is divided into sixty-five vignettes that provide the readers with clips of selected episodes in Gwen Williams's life, going from her childhood in her native Dominica to her voyage back to the Caribbean with her then English husband in 1936 through her nomadic existence in England and continental Europe. Gwen comes across in these various scenes as a social and cultural misfit, both in the Caribbean and in Europe, as a "mongrel" (156) who is ill at ease everywhere, unable to respect rules or conventions. As already suggested, she is trapped between different worlds, whether these are defined in terms of race, gender or class, which leaves her in a state of utter alienation and isolation leading at some point to a suicide attempt (175). Gwen is also torn between her parents, who, strikingly, were each buried on a different side of the Atlantic, her idealistic Welsh father in the Caribbean and her snobbish Creole mother in England. And as the protagonist of *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna Morgan, puts it, these two worlds are never made to fit together, except perhaps in Gwen's dreams. Even attempting a passage from one of these worlds to the other is perilous and painful, as metaphorised in an incident witnessed by Gwen in Paris and in which pedestrians, with whom she identifies, are shown to be as "stranded" as she is, "unable to cross the road, for there is no break in the motorized traffic" (219).

Gwen's life is made up of a succession of betrayals and disappointments, especially at the hands of the male figures in her life, with the possible exception of her father. In addition to the two adult men who make passes at her when she is still a child in the Caribbean, we see Gwen interact with a gallery of men, some of whom are particularly selfish and patronising. She is first seduced by a young man, Harry Bewes, who attends drama school with her in London and soon proves to be an emotional fraud. Then there is the upper-class yet insecure

Lancey, whose conversation 'didn't truly involve her' (128) and who makes her feel socially inadequate, especially in the presence of his family and friends who '[exude] an effortless sense of belonging' (140) that is absolutely foreign to Gwen. Finally she meets the roguish Jean Lenglet, who takes her to the Continent, marries her and finally abandons her after fathering her two children, a boy who dies when still a baby and a daughter that she will never be able to get close to. As Phillips makes clear, these three men are obviously only interested in themselves, not in Gwen, very much like her Aunt Clarice's secret lover, Harold, who makes sure that 'their conversation remained as uncluttered as possible with the detritus of her [Clarice's] own existence' (88). It is significant in this regard that these self-centred men should not be granted a real chance of focalisation in Phillips's third-person tale, as if the author was almost taking position here and making sure to restore the narrative balance so that the egotistic, male viewpoint does not take over the story. Conversely, it is perhaps significant too that two other men who share Gwen's life at some stage, Leslie, her second husband, one of the few men to really listen to her story (238), and Max, a journalist who displays a relative sensitivity to her existential suffering, should be briefly given the floor, as it were, in the sense that we get temporary access to their perspectives, and can thus understand their perplexity in front of Gwen's wayward behaviour. For if Gwen seems to be unable to defend herself from predators and hypocrites and finds it difficult to respond to the taunting and prejudice that she is victim of both in the Caribbean and in England, she paradoxically does not hesitate to be mean or to take advantage of the kindness of the few men who are ready to genuinely and selflessly protect her. Nothing is either black or white in Gwen's conduct. Clearly, Phillips has not written a hagiographic narrative, but rather an astute study of emotional and social interactions, an honest yet empathetic account of the life of a woman who is nowhere truly at home, not even in her native Dominica.

As ever in Phillips's fiction, the form and the structure of the text are of paramount importance, as they carry much of the ultimate meaning of this story which might come across, when summarised as I have done it here, as a rather straightforward and commonplace chronicle. The sixty-five vignettes of different lengths, each with their own titles, that make up the novel are like so many narrative islands, cut off from each other, in many cases self-contained, yet providing what Louis James has called, in relation to Jean Rhys's writing, 'startling flash[es] of experience' (179), of an unhappy or frustrating kind, in most cases. Written in carefully chosen language, in tune with the vocabulary in vogue at the time of the

narrative, these vignettes are organised in ten narrative chapters, each of which corresponds to more or less clearly defined episodes of Gwenø's life, among which one recognises such misleading yet very Phillipsian headings as 'Going Homeø' and 'Homeø', almost antinomic indicators in view of Gwenø's vagrant existence. The role of the reader in such a configuration is to cross the many narrative gaps, to consider the other side of things, to build myriad bridges between these textual islands, if she wants to access the larger narrative arch, which only emerges from a slow, incremental exposure to Gwen's inner life and her modes of thought, as revealed by the various situations she has to face.

Reading *A View of the Empire at Sunset*, then, should very much be a 'growth to understandingø' a vulnerable woman, as it was for Caryl Phillips who, in a recent interview, told the interviewers that there was no romance involved in the writing of this novel, just a desire to invest in emotional texture in order to understand and get to know a woman who was misunderstood for much of her life (Ledent and Tunca np). There is no redemption in the narrative, no magical reconciliation of the worlds Gwen lived in, just a feeling, both for the writer and his readers, that Jean Rhys is 'no longer [such] a mysteryø' (Ledent and Tunca np). So when she leaves Dominica after her visit there in 1936, when we see her '[turn] back to her island and [look] again at her mountains and rivers and quietly... [break] off a piece of her heart and gently [drop] it into the blue waterø' (324) — the last sentence of the novel — we cannot but be deeply moved and sympathise with her existential predicament, which has generated such compelling literary texts, including, almost forty years after her death, *A View of the Empire at Sunset*.

Note

¹ For more about mirroring and female bonding in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, see Sharfman.

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