

Caryl Phillips's Genealogies

Cross/Cultures

READINGS IN POST/ COLONIAL
LITERATURES AND CULTURES IN ENGLISH

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Delphine Munos, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Mathilde Mergeai



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Foreword: “The Paper Woman”

Caryl Phillips

There is a moment in William Golding’s final novel *The Paper Men* (1984), when the fictional writer, Wilfred Barclay, struggling under the strain of his uneasy relationship with the academic who is trying to write his biography, finally cracks. He shouts at the hapless scribe, “You don’t know who I am! Nobody knows who I am!”¹ I’ve always found some difficulty with this novel, for the tone seems to oscillate between shrill hectoring and unconvincing sermonising. In his collection of essays, *A Moving Target* (1982), Golding prepares us for this frantic work of fiction when he makes the barbed observation that, to his mind, a writer is always in danger of becoming “the raw material of an academic light industry.”² Clearly, Golding is wary of those individuals who choose to examine the work, and delve into the lives, of writers. Such people are to be viewed as unreliable, and possibly imprudent, and Golding suggests that any close involvement with them will inevitably result in conflict.

My first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), was published around the same time that I read Golding’s essays and his novel, *The Paper Men*. As a newly-minted novelist, it didn’t occur to me that I would ever again have any kind of interaction with the academic world, and certainly not as a subject for scrutiny. I had left university six years earlier, delighted to be beyond tutorials, seminars, lectures, faculty libraries, and examinations. However, shortly after the publication of my first novel, I was invited by somebody called Dr Louis James (who I later discovered was an extremely distinguished professor) to give a talk at the University of Kent. I dutifully took the train from Charing Cross to Canterbury, and was met on the platform by an evidently kind man who escorted me to the university and explained that I would be expected to read a little to his students, answer some questions, have dinner with himself and some colleagues, after which he would shepherd me back to the train station. Oh, and I would be paid. Not a king’s ransom, but there would be a cheque and reimbursement for my travel expenses. Suddenly the academic world didn’t seem so bad. By the time I met Bénédicte Ledent, in the early 1990s, I had edged my way back on to the campus. Not only was I included on some syllabuses, I had been lucky enough to be invited to read at many different universities, I had even taught at

1 William Golding, *The Paper Men* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984): 143.

2 William Golding, *A Moving Target* (1982; London: Faber & Faber, 1984): 169.

some, and much to my surprise I found myself on the faculty of a college in the United States. The genial Dr Louis James had introduced me to a world that, only a few years later, I was now familiar with.

Appropriately enough, I first encountered Bénédicte in Brussels, at a literary reception hosted by a British Council representative in Belgium. Earlier in the evening, I had read from my work, together with three other writers, and this reception was the ‘after party.’ I knew that Bénédicte had published essays about my writing, and I was both flattered by her attention and curious to meet her. As it transpired, the person I encountered was thoughtful, quiet, and listened attentively to whatever it was I was gabbling on about. However, at one point she did let me know that we *had* met some years earlier at a British Council Seminar in Cambridge. To my embarrassment, I didn’t remember our meeting. I imagine that the brash young man she encountered in Cambridge was probably in a rush to get to the pub with his friends and escape the formality of the occasion, but Bénédicte appeared unperturbed by my gauche failure of memory. That evening in Brussels, I guessed that the person before me, whom I had hitherto only known as a name, was most likely going to become a friend. And so, it has come to pass. Over the passage of a quarter of a century, as one book has succeeded the next, Bénédicte has become a trusted and cherished fellow traveller.

I look at Bénédicte through several windows. First, as a devoted and inspirational teacher. Her teaching load always appeared to me – as a self-confessed weakling in these matters – to be Herculean. The number of oral exams she conducted each year soared casually into three figures. Furthermore, Bénédicte’s habitual curiosity about new books and authors always seemed to result in her expanding and revising existing courses, and developing new ones. I have often been present in her classroom as she has worked with undergraduates and graduates, and I have witnessed a teacher who is superbly prepared, enthusiastic, and steadfastly determined to pass on her knowledge to the assembled group of students. Some among them have been lucky enough to find a mentor in Bénédicte, who has not only guided scores of students through their theses and dissertations, she has helped them to secure grants, fellowships, post-doctoral positions, and eventually jobs.

In her written work, Bénédicte the scholar has been adventurous in subject-matter, and brilliantly insightful. She has published articles and essays on literally dozens of authors, explored a wide range of topics and themes, and it is globally understood that Bénédicte has made a vital contribution to expanding our understanding of postcolonial literature in the broadest sense. She has been selfless in her devotion to editing volumes, serving on editorial boards, producing special editions of journals, maintaining online bibliographies; in

short, beyond the evidence of the excellence of her own writing, Bénédicte has undertaken much scholarly heavy lifting on behalf of others.

As a colleague, Bénédicte has always done the necessary committee work and attended the meetings that help to shape and establish a healthy and functioning community for faculty, staff, and students. Her friend and mentor, Hena Maes-Jelinek established the Postcolonial Research Centre (CEREP) at the University of Liege in 1968, and Bénédicte has been a leading light in expanding the work of the centre so that many of us now find ourselves immediately thinking of CEREP, and the University, whenever Belgium is mentioned. The fact is, Bénédicte has given so many of her 'foreign' colleagues the gift of a special affinity with her home city of Liege. Whenever I hear mention of Liege, I feel a warm surge of recognition and think of friendships that have been forged there, all made possible by the hospitality of Bénédicte.

Witnessing Bénédicte across the years, in her different roles as teacher, scholar, and colleague, has helped me to better grasp how one should ideally conduct oneself in the academy. She has displayed rigour and devotion, always acted with openness and generosity, and it has been fun to be in her company. To have Bénédicte show such consistent interest in my own work, and for her to invest so much energy in trying to discern the motivation and underlying anxieties that have informed it, has been one of the great gifts of my life as a writer. Getting to know Bénédicte, and her family, has been a privilege.

Late one night in St Lucia, I found myself sitting with Derek Walcott and his partner, Sigrid, on one side of a long table that was crammed full of people. Bénédicte and Evelyn O'Callaghan were seated a little way off on the other side of the table. Everybody was eager for a drink after one of *those* evenings of expansive formal introductions, lengthy presentations, and endless votes of thanks. I listened to Sigrid explaining to her neighbour the 'credentials' of everybody at the table. When she got to Bénédicte, Sigrid pointed at me and said, "Bénédicte is his biographer." I sighed quietly to myself and surreptitiously shook my head. I've often cast my mind back to this moment and wondered what, if anything, I should have said. Actually, I think something as simple as the following might have been an appropriate response: "No Sigrid, Bénédicte is *not* my biographer, she is my dear friend."

Perhaps now, at this stage of my life, I have finally accumulated enough experience of being prodded and probed so I can now make some sense of William Golding's suspicion of academic "paper men," particularly those with a penchant for biography. I have not changed my mind about the clumsy, heavy-handed, satire which informs Golding's novel, but I have been on the sharp end of enough confusion and misinformation to have a little sympathy with Golding's hyper-vigilance in such matters. That said, I do believe that he

crudely overstates the pitfalls of the writer/academic relationship, for the vast majority of academic “paper men” *are* respectful and discreet. Of course, with Bénédicte there has never been the slightest suggestion of any imprudence, and I have certainly never felt the need to question her motives or cry out, “You don’t know who I am!” I am fortunate to have been taught by Bénédicte and gently instructed in what it means to be a teacher, a scholar, and a colleague. The truth is, whatever “raw material” I might have offered up to her, she has given me far more in return.

January 6, 2022

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