

“Look liberty in the face”: Determinism and Free Will in Caryl Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives*

Bénédicte Ledent

One of the major points of contention among scholars working on Caryl Phillips’s writing is the extent to which his world-view should be regarded as optimistic or pessimistic. Some critics seem to focus on the glimmer of hope that for them marks many of his novels, if only tenuously. They find it, for example, in the final chorus that brings together the descendants of the victims of the slave trade in *Crossing the River* or in the ephemeral relation of trust established between Dorothy and Solomon in *A Distant Shore*. Others concentrate on the bleakness of Phillips’s vision, conveyed, in their eyes, by the madness that eventually takes possession of many of his female characters or by the tragic death that strikes several of his male protagonists. This divergence of opinion is particularly marked in relation to a specific aspect of Phillips’s fiction: namely, the determinism that pervades most of his narratives and which implies that history is meant to repeat itself, particularly when it comes to oppression and discrimination. While the proponents of Phillips’s pessimism see a confirmation of their interpretation in the predicaments that his characters from the African and Jewish diasporas seem to inherit from the past, those who conclude that he is optimistic look beyond this almost atavistic suffering to perceive some redemption in his ability to interweave the lives of individuals separated by time, space, race, or gender, but bound by a common sense of otherness and exclusion. These critics also argue that Phillips’s protagonists are not wholly deprived of free will, even if the characters’ bids for freedom often fail in the face of racial and social pressures that they cannot control.

In what follows, I would like to take a closer look at Phillips’s idiosyncratic take on determinism, a contested notion which has been at the heart of many philosophical debates. I shall use it in its most general acceptance here: i.e. as the belief that events and actions are entirely determined by what happened previously, which means that there is no real freedom of choice. By means of introduction, I will first briefly consider Phillips’s fiction in general. Then I will focus on *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, which came out in 2007. A discussion of this book will, I trust, help us to reflect further on the nature of Phillips’s philosophy and

establish whether he is more an optimist than a pessimist, although I suspect that in view of the writer's well-known penchant for ambiguity it will not be easy to come to a clear-cut conclusion.

Phillips's fiction may be said to have been shaped from the start by some form of determinism. Clearly, the circularity of the unnamed Caribbean island at the centre of his first novel *The Final Passage* is synonymous with an existential predictability which his migrant characters try to escape by leaving for the so-called Mother Country, where they get caught up in their colonial past. In his second novel, *A State of Independence*, Phillips suggests that the newly independent island on which the novel takes place cannot achieve real freedom, and he presents its economic and cultural submission to the USA as the almost inevitable consequence of centuries of oppression at the hands of the mostly British colonizers. Although depicting rather bleak situations, both novels are actually open-ended, suggesting that the protagonists might eventually manage to exercise some control – however limited – over their future, or at least find some reprieve, notably through personal relationships (even if the characters are still presented at the end as isolated individuals). Phillips's approach to determinism seems slightly less sombre in much of his later fiction, since this body of work often combines an acknowledgement of the recurrence of human misery with a sense of shared distress, which alleviates, in a way, the inescapability of evil. This is particularly the case in *Higher Ground*, *Crossing the River*, and *The Nature of Blood*, three books which bring together the doomed fate of human beings scattered in time and space. These novels, to borrow the words of Jonathan P.A. Sell, “trace back into the past the genetic and historical bonds from which the present is regarded as unable to shake itself free”¹ while they also “universalize the human condition.”² Sell views this as an “idealist project” which, for him, “loses contact with the here and now and effaces the individuality of [...] fictional characters.”³ Admittedly, Phillips's decision to give these novels a panoramic dimension makes it less easy to lend weight to his characters' failed attempts to exercise their free will, since the focus in these fragmented books is very much on the trans-spatial and trans-temporal: in other words, on the global dimension of human suffering, essentially linked in these narratives to transatlantic slavery and the Holocaust. Still, it seems to me that instead of

¹ Jonathan P.A. Sell, “Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: A Model for Multicultural Identity?” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41.3 (September 2006): 31. Sell's focus in this article is Zadie Smith's work; his discussion of Phillips's position is meant to provide a contrast.

² Sell, “Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*,” 32.

³ Sell, “Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*,” 32. Sell mentions the namelessness of the Othello character in *The Nature of Blood*. Many characters of “Heartland” in *Higher Ground* are equally nameless.

distancing the reader, as Sell seems to suggest in his brief treatment of *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips's narrative method in *Higher Ground*, *Crossing the River*, and *The Nature of Blood* obliges him/her to adopt an empathic attitude towards the characters, which to some extent helps counterbalance the gloom of their common destiny. Phillips's other four novels, *Cambridge*, *A Distant Shore*, *Dancing in the Dark*, and, to some extent, his latest fiction, *In the Falling Snow*, also share the sense of an almost pre-ordained fate, but their determinism might be even less tinged with fatalism. Indeed, as these novels are relatively more linear and focus on a single set of characters, they tend to give more prominence to the protagonists' individual aspirations and their attempts to be autonomous, even if their efforts often prove unsuccessful and, in many cases, their lives are still doomed by circumstances beyond their control. In *Cambridge*, for example, Cambridge and Emily are eventually defeated by the larger order that surrounds them – mainly white and male – but they are shown to make choices, if sometimes the wrong ones, which confers a certain grandeur on their struggle. The same could be said of Dorothy and Solomon in *A Distant Shore* and of Bert in *Dancing in the Dark*. As for Keith, the protagonist of *In the Falling Snow*, he is at the beginning of the novel under the deceptive impression that he is fully in control of his life, until he becomes acquainted with the details of his father Earl's painful experience as a West Indian immigrant in England. He only then realizes that the past is a burden that he, and his own mixed-race son, might find it difficult to escape entirely.

My intention in the rest of this essay is to show how this paradoxical combination of defeat and dignity, this tension between determinism and free will, is also crucially at the heart of Phillips's 2007 book *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, which retraces the tragic lives of three black men who actually lived in England at different periods, yet all saw their liberty to decide curtailed by racial prejudice and paternalism, but also by their own human weaknesses. In *Foreigners*, Phillips's take on determinism seems to combine the two approaches present in his later fiction. On the one hand, its tripartite structure seems to imply, as in *Higher Ground*, for example, that things have not really changed between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, and that slavery, and the racism that it left in its wake, has had a lasting effect on human relationships in English society. On the other hand, like *Dancing in the Dark*, for instance, *Foreigners* focuses very much on the personal struggle of its protagonists, who are all located very precisely (not only in London but in the Midlands, in Wales and in Yorkshire) and whose plight is presented above all as individual, while also having more general ramifications. It might be argued that the determinism at work in

Foreigners is of the softer kind, presented as permanent, but not universal, and regarded as compatible with a limited exercise of free will. I will first attempt to explain how determinism and free will coexist in this book by examining separately the life stories told in each of its three sections. I will further briefly focus on its formal features and will try to explain that its bold mix of fiction and non-fiction – which goes beyond another form of determinism, generic this time – partakes of its overall statement about human freedom, or the lack thereof. *Foreigners*, in other words, might be read as an indirect assertion of the free will of Phillips's characters but also of his own as a writer.

The first section of the book, entitled “Dr Johnson’s Watch,” evokes the life of Francis Barber, who was born in Jamaica, arrived in England as a young boy in 1750, and spent most of his life in the service of Samuel Johnson, the famous man of letters. Barber’s life is told by an anonymous narrator who several years after Johnson’s death decides to publish a profile of the latter’s famous black servant. In his account, the narrator concentrates on the “unique relationship”⁴ that bound Dr Johnson and Francis Barber, who were almost like father and son; he also describes how Barber, who had inherited handsomely from Johnson, ended up a pauper. What is most interesting in the perspective adopted here is to see how the narrator accounts for what he calls Barber’s “fall from grace” (21, 53). For him, this is to be blamed on Barber’s own ineptitude, his drinking and spending habits, and other people’s dishonesty. He also suggests that the Jamaican’s downfall might be linked to his personality, “such as one might reasonably anticipate from a member of his race” (6), as if Barber’s ruin were somehow a fatality caused by his complexion. However, he hardly relates Barber’s predicament to the latter’s situation as a black outsider and as a man who was sold, transported, given as a present to Johnson – in other words, a man who was acted upon rather than acting. The narrator’s presentation of Johnson is not without interest, either: the famous author is shown as someone who not only escaped the “modest circumstances” (4) he was born into, but who also steers clear of implementing racial determinism. Indeed, the famous doctor is opposed to slavery, which, for him, “could never be considered the natural condition of man” (6), and he educates his black servant at a time when black men in England “were prohibited by law from learning a trade” (32). In spite of his perception of Johnson’s progressive nature, it seems, however, that the narrator is unaware of the complexities of the Johnson-Barber relationship and fails to see how the doctor’s well-meaning decisions on behalf of his servant actually impinge on the latter’s freedom to decide for himself. At one stage, for example, Barber

⁴ Caryl Phillips, *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007): 23. Further page references

arranges to go to sea – a resolution clearly associated with his desire for independence – but Johnson manages to have him discharged because he is worried about his protégé's welfare.

It is only when the narrator finally meets Barber on his death-bed, in a miserable infirmary in Lichfield (also Johnson's birthplace), that Barber's own voice is heard and that the reader gets another, more nuanced perspective:

I lack dignity. [He says] Even coming to Lichfield was a fulfilment of my master's wishes. [...] I sincerely wish that he had used me differently. [...] Perhaps it would have been more profitable for me to have established for myself the limits of my abilities rather than having them blurred by kindness, dependence, and my own indolence. (58)

This is the only time that one of the three protagonists is given a chance to actually express himself in the book. And, significantly, Barber's final words are "Look liberty in the face" (58), a sentence, as we will see, that could have been uttered by the other two "foreigners" portrayed by Phillips. Be that as it may, the narrator of the first section interprets this statement as "pitiful" (59), but fails again to understand its irony. Indeed, for all his relative open-mindedness, the narrator is blinded by a rigid sense of race and class, which was by no means unusual for the time. This transpires most visibly in his own choice of words – for example, all the race-related adjectives (such as "sable," "sooty," and "negro," 5-6) that he uses whenever he speaks of Barber, but also in the many remarks which convey his rather inflexible but also naive view of the "natural order" (33) that should preside over society. Of Barber, he concludes for instance that "this negro had most likely been destroyed by the unnatural good fortune of many years of keeping company with those of a superior rank, thus depriving him of any understanding of his own true status in the world" (59). He further declares that "English air is clearly not suitable for negro lungs and soon reduces these creatures to a state of childish helplessness" (59).⁵ In view of this, it is not surprising that his present to Barber's widow should be a watch, an object that used to belong to Dr Johnson but also one which can be associated with determinism. The title of the section has therefore a double meaning: it refers to this clockwork, a mechanism that regulates time, but it can also be understood as Dr Johnson's watchful protection, which was for Barber a blessing of sorts but also a curse, as it got in the way of his autonomy.

are in the main text.

⁵ The narrator seems to support Granville Sharp's project of resettling blacks on the west coast of Africa. This is also the topic of Caryl Phillips's latest play, *Rough Crossings* (2007).

The second section of the book is devoted to Randolph Turpin, an English-born, mixed-race man with roots in Guyana who became Britain's first black world champion boxer in 1951. Two hundred years after Francis Barber, Turpin also experiences a spectacular "fall from grace" (144, 150) and dies destitute in spite of a career that made him at one point one of the most famous black Britons. Like Barber, Turpin is 'protected' by white men, his manager and his trainer, who are presented at once as father figures of sorts and as the creators of the part that the boxer is supposed to play – i.e. "the script" (70) of his professional life.

Turpin's story is first told as a factual account of the boxer's rise and fall, written in a rather dry and journalistic style, including occasional clichés, such as "shot in the arm" (73). It ends on a more personal note, with an 'I' narrator – obviously Caryl Phillips himself – discussing the boxer's life with two of Turpin's now adult daughters, as if the author had wanted to allow his readers the freedom to first make up their minds about Turpin before decoding his life story and approaching it from a more intimate angle.⁶ The conversation with Annette and Charmaine Turpin confirms that their father "felt betrayed" (164) by British society, which temporarily forgot about his race and his working-class background when he was successful, but failed to recognize him otherwise. Their father was, indeed, adulated when he was at the height of his fame in a sport that until 1947 treated "black boxers, even if they were, like Randolph Turpin, born and bred in Britain, [...] as foreigners and excluded [them] from fighting for their own national championship" (78).⁷

From Phillips's account, it is clear that Turpin was a man torn between his private and his public image. Privately, he was a very complex character: sensitive and "emotionally vulnerable" (100), he was also "headstrong and capricious" (92), always making sure that things went "*exactly* the way he wanted" (133), perhaps as a way of coping with his daily experience of humiliation as a member of "the only coloured family in town" (94). His eventual suicide (and an attempted suicide when he was younger) may be viewed as the ultimate expression of this self-will – although this "controlling personality" (115) also leads to less respectable actions such as his domestic violence against his first wife or his failed attempt to kill his own baby daughter, Carmen. Publicly, however, Turpin is expected to play

⁶ Turpin's daughters tell the 'I' narrator that this is the model of behaviour their parents passed down to them: by letting them make up their minds about things, as opposed to a predetermined view of the world (160, 165).

⁷ In a sense, boxing could be interpreted as a metaphor for the black British condition, as black British people have had to constantly retaliate or fight back to assert themselves and keep their dignity. The narrator of Turpin's story evokes the cases of several black boxers in Britain (76-77). Black prize-fighters are also mentioned in Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1984): 227-28, 445-54. I would like to thank Dave Gunning for pointing out this reference to me. See also Caryl Phillips, "Only Connect: An Interview with Caryl Phillips on *Foreigners*," by Bénédicte Ledent, in *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, ed.

a predetermined role as “a coloured bully” (109), a womanizer, or as a sports celebrity who signs autographs and performs for the public. At one point in his career, he is shown as “doing little more than shadow-boxing alongside singing and dancing acts, clowns, and even pet acts” (122), and later, as a black wrestler, he becomes “little more than novelty ring-fodder to be thrown around for the comic entertainment of the masses” (144-45), a degradation that is similar to that of Bert Williams in *Dancing in the Dark*. Turpin’s double personality, at once responsible for his behaviour yet influenced by circumstances over which he has no control, is reflected in the ambivalent title of the chapter, “Made in Wales,” which signals both dignity and humiliation. It first refers to the influence of Wales, his wife’s birthplace, on Turpin’s character. Indeed, it is in Wales that he “could temporarily escape his upbringing, his past” (71), that he “could just be himself” (162), and was not made to feel a foreigner. But Wales is also the place where his celebrity was literally manufactured by Leslie Thomas Salt, an unscrupulous white businessman, making of Turpin a mere product to be marketed and thus commodified as slaves once were.

Other allusions to slavery, and indirectly to its impact on contemporary English society, can be found in the last section, “Northern Lights,” where the protagonist, the Nigerian David Oluwale, is referred to as “Yoruba cargo” (175). Oluwale arrives as a teenager in Leeds, “the heart of England” (175), at the end of the 1940s. His story is told in a totally unpredictable way through a medley of voices with many different tones. Included in Oluwale’s narrative are several witnesses, official documents, and extracts from books, as well as the interventions of a narrator addressing him in the second person. This creates a sense of intimacy that contrasts with Oluwale’s bleak fate as an isolated individual. If there is a sense of unexpectedness in the form, however, the content of Oluwale’s life is quite predictable in its horror, part of a long chain of suffering, following the path of those who, like him, came illegally to the UK from Africa and were crushed by the institutional racism rife in what is supposed to be the land of justice and liberty (210-11). Oluwale’s misfortune also has much in common with the experience of all the immigrants, whether Jewish or Irish, who arrived in Leeds before him and had to face the city’s infamous hostile attitude to “perceived ‘outsiders’” (213). This fact is mentioned in historical snippets that are included in the narrative itself and remind the reader that Leeds’s wealth in the nineteenth century depended “upon the labour of the poor and the young” (210). Nothing much seems to have changed in the twentieth century, the narrator bitterly suggests (218).

Oluwale arrives from his native Nigeria as a stowaway, in circumstances reminiscent of the Middle Passage, with the difference that he thinks he has his “whole life in front of him” (174) and that he believes he is travelling to freedom, with the dream of becoming an engineer. Yet his is a journey to utter loneliness and to confinement, not only in prison but also for several years in a mental asylum, a place where, it is well-known, one “[loses] control of [one’s] life” (202) and where Oluwale was presumably “[sedated] into submission” (194). After this, much of his time is spent as a vagrant on the streets of Leeds, chased by the police, who are all the more determined to harass, beat, arrest or torment him, since “he [isn’t] prepared to be anybody’s victim” (207) and has proudly made up his mind that he has a right to belong. In other words, Oluwale stubbornly refuses to “be invisible” (219), knowing full well what his defiance will earn him at the hands of the police – a strange combination of fatalism and determination. Oluwale is eventually found dead in the river Aire, an end which resembles that of Solomon in *A Distant Shore* and ironically ensures that he is now “forever in Leeds” (260) as he wanted to be. His dignity is preserved, even if the two policemen suspected of his death are convicted only of assault, and not of manslaughter.

Nothing much seems to have changed between Barber and Oluwale. Yet, far from testifying to Phillips’s pessimism, *Foreigners* could be read as evidence of his optimism, qualified as it may be. Clearly, the book makes a convincing case in bringing these three blighted lives together. Put side by side, the three of them show, with both nuance and strength, how preconceived ideas and bigotry can restrict, even annihilate, individual freedom of action and deprive men of responsibility. *Foreigners* thus restores some of these men’s lost self-esteem by providing a rendering – both objective and moving, factual and emotional – of their singular life stories, which had so far largely remained untold.⁸ If they are cast as ‘Foreigners’ by English society, they are nonetheless shown to live very English lives, as the subtitle to the book indicates. They are seen not only as victims of racial and social determinism but preeminently as human beings with aspirations, dreams, and shortcomings, who have been thwarted in their endeavours but nevertheless “refused to compromise their own value system.”⁹ As one of the people who knew David Oluwale says, “To me, David was a fighter for freedom. He was *not* another victim” (226).

⁸ On Francis Barber, see Dave Randle, *A Troublesome Disorder* (New Romney: Bank House, 2002); on David Oluwale, see Jeremy Sandford, *Smiling David: The Story of David Oluwale* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1974), Linton Kwesi Johnson, “The Night of the Head,” in his *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle-L’Overture, 1975): 34-35, and Kester Aspden, *Nationality: Wog: The Hounding of David Oluwale* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

⁹ David Lammy, “It’s Cold Outside,” review of *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, by Caryl Phillips, *The Guardian* (25 August 2007), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/aug/25/society> (accessed 8 January 2010).

The impressive unity that exists on the thematic level is nevertheless absent on the formal one. Each story is, indeed, told in its own peculiar style and uses different narrative strategies, resulting in “portraits as hard to pigeonhole as are its protagonists.”¹⁰ Phillips has explained in an interview that this “[stylistic] choice was intuitive,” but that “as [he] entered further into each section, [he] tried, very deliberately, to develop a formal tone that was different from the other two sections.”¹¹ While this formal diversity might be linked to the type of documentary material that Phillips had at his disposal for each individual character, it also offers an intriguing riposte to the regrettable Western tendency to cast all black people in identical moulds, judging all black people by the colour of their skin as if they were similar and, as a consequence, behaved in the same way. Phillips’s narrative individualization may thus be read as a way of paying respect to the singularity of Francis Barber, Randolph Turpin, and David Oluwale, whose lives, like those of many others, were constrained by preconceived notions hindering their personal emancipation. *Foreigners* also goes against the deterministic grain in another way: by freely combining fact and fiction, and by producing a text which is eventually generically unpindownable, midway between an essay and a novel. A quick look at the reviews published when *Foreigners* appeared confirms that its hybrid quality did not leave critics indifferent, but prompted them to produce widely divergent analyses, the book being a source of satisfaction to some and of irritation to others. By making any labelling difficult, *Foreigners* has contributed to challenging the validity of over-determined categories, whether social, racial, or literary.

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¹⁰ Margaret Busby, “Three Hundred Years of Solitude,” review of *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, by Caryl Phillips, *The Independent on Sunday* (21 September 2007), <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/foreigners-three-english-lives-by-caryl-phillips-464497.html> (accessed 9 January 2010).

¹¹ Phillips, “Only Connect: An Interview with Caryl Phillips on *Foreigners*,” 189.

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