

Caryl Phillips: The Dignity of the Examined Life

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It is notably difficult to place Caryl Phillips as a writer. Should he be regarded as exclusively Caribbean because of his birth in St Kitts, or as British, Black British, diasporic African or even African American by virtue of his cosmopolitan life? To some extent, all these labels could be valid, as Phillips himself suggests in the multi-geographical structure of his collection of essays *A New World Order* (2001) and in the themes developed in his many books, whether drama, fiction or non-fiction. Clearly, his work testifies to a complex, multifaceted identity – which in a sense is typically Caribbean – and addresses a wide variety of subjects. Nevertheless, it also displays a great coherence and might very well be seen as a whole. Phillips himself has said that his books 'all seem to be the same book, part of a continuum' (Morrison 2003: n.p.).

Several successful attempts have been made to try and circumscribe the nature of Phillips's writing. It has, for example, been presented as a wide-ranging chronicle of the often silenced history of the African Diaspora (Walters 2005), as an empathetic study of different types of trauma (Craps 2008), or as a subtle, ongoing reflection on such notions as migration, home and belonging. The form of Phillips's work too has been analyzed (Clingman 2007), particularly its fragmentation; and recently, his writing has been defined as generically akin to the anthology, in so far as 'it articulates at the level of form the problems of order, inclusion and comparison that migration narratives articulate at the level of content' (Walkowitz 2006: 537). This chapter proposes that Phillips's writing is fundamentally shaped by an overarching interest in biography. One of the most striking features of his art is the meticulous and compassionate attention he pays to individual lives. This biographical slant, I would like to argue, is central to Phillips's contribution both as a creative writer and as a critic; it informs his man-centred view of the world, which can be traced back to his Caribbean heritage.

Phillips's concern with biography is, of course, most visible in *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) and *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007a), both of which tell the stories of public figures and raise vital questions about the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of black people in Western traditions. The first book is an imaginative reconstruction of the life and career of Bert Williams, a Broadway performer of Bahamian origin who lived in the USA at

the turn of the twentieth century and became one of the most popular artistes of his generation, best-known for acting in blackface. In spite of his professional success, however, Williams was a private, enigmatic figure, and little has survived about the way he lived. Phillips takes advantage of this relative vacuum to produce a polyphonic narrative that is more interested in the 'emotional texture' (Phillips 2007b: 104) than the factual details of Williams's life. The result is a moving, intimate exploration of the performer's intense loneliness and of the difficulties he met as a man whose artistic freedom was curtailed because of the colour of his skin, a predicament that still affects many artists today. *Foreigners* displays a similar desire on the writer's part to reach a non-judgmental understanding of the trajectories of well-known black men. It tells the tragic lives of three individuals who, at different times, resided in England without being acknowledged as Englishmen: Francis Barber, who was in the eighteenth century Samuel Johnson's servant and protege, Randolph Turpin, Britain's first black boxing champion in 1951, and David Oluwale, a Nigerian immigrant who died at the hands of the Leeds police in 1969. Phillips's inventive portraits, which are written in distinctive styles expressive of the individuality of each of his three protagonists, may be regarded as minority biographies, in so far as they focus on men who were not members of the dominant culture (Parke 2002: xvii). Their lives, Phillips shows us, are nonetheless well worth examining, not only in themselves but also for the light they shed on the state of English society, then and now, and on its attitude towards racial outsiders. It is significant in this regard that one of Phillips's foci in this book should be Barber. Born a slave in Jamaica, he was close to Dr Johnson, whose name is famously associated with biography, both as one of its most eminent practitioners and as the subject of James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). This monumental work is considered by many as 'the first definitive modern biography' (Parke 2002: 17), yet it contains only random references to Barber despite his almost filial relationship with the great man of English letters. In devoting an entire narrative to the black member of Dr Johnson's household, Phillips not only confers dignity on Barber but also redresses the representational imbalance at the heart of the Western biographical project.

The same impulse to reclaim life narratives from oblivion marks Phillips's eight other novels, even if, in this case, his characters – male and female, black and white – are just 'ordinary' individuals who often end up marginalized and lonely, their existences blighted by such historical events as slavery, war and migration. This is the fate, for example, of Leila, the West Indian immigrant in post-war London in *The Final Passage* (1985), of Bertram, the failed migrant who returns to his native Caribbean in *A State of Independence* (1986), of

Cambridge, the educated African who becomes a slave on a Caribbean plantation in *Cambridge* (1991a), of Eva, the Jewish survivor of the Holocaust in *The Nature of Blood* (1997) and of Solomon, the African refugee who settles in contemporary England in *A Distant Shore* (2003). These and the other novels by Phillips could, I would argue, be read as biographies of sorts, focusing as they do on the origin, the background and the experience of his protagonists, some of whom, it is interesting to note, are clearly reminiscent of actual historical figures, be it Anne Frank in *The Nature of Blood* or Olaudah Equiano in *Cambridge*. One of the effects of these intertextual echoes is to blur even further the distinction between history, biography and fiction, a generic confusion on which Phillips's writing seems to thrive (O'Callaghan 1993).

Phillips's novels invite the reader to visit and sympathize with the intricacies of lives which deserve to be explored, even if they are fictional, for they are emblematic of the broken dreams and the suffering that are part and parcel of the human condition all over the world. This ability to allow the readers to inhabit somebody else's world and empathize with their predicament is, of course, typical of the novel in general, a genre that Phillips has significantly described as 'an incredibly democratic medium [where] Everyone has a right to be understood' (Phillips 1991b: 98). What seems to be specific of Phillips's biographical approach to fiction writing, however, is first of all the special feeling of intimacy that he manages to create between his readers and his characters. This is rendered through the use of various, often expert mental formal strategies – for instance, the inclusion of stream-of-consciousness narratives or the insertion of confessional material, such as letters or diaries. These techniques give apparently unmediated access to the workings of the characters' minds and thereby allow their voices to be virtually heard. Another noticeable feature of Phillips's biographical style is that the lives he narrates are hardly ever viewed in isolation; they are rather shown to be inextricably intertwined with those of other characters who are in many cases spatially, temporally, or even culturally distant, but nonetheless share a similar sense of dislocation and solitude. This irresistible human interconnectedness even occurs in a novel like *Higher Ground* (1989), significantly subtitled *A Novel in Three Parts*. The lives of the three different protagonists it portrays are presented as separate on the page, but the three stories eventually overlap in the reader's mind because they all deal with individuals who share the same plight and are 'trying to survive a journey' (Phillips 1989: 218). Understandably, the way Phillips presents human destinies generates a pervasive ambiguity that challenges the notion of pure bloodlines and straightforward lineage, and instead promotes unlikely encounters and connections that cut across class, gender, race and nation,

the categories which are traditionally used to define identity and are fertile ground for all sorts of stereotypes.

An illustration of the traits typical of Phillips's fiction is provided by *Crossing the River* (1993), a novel that follows through time and space Nash, Martha and Travis, the three children of an African father who, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, sold his offspring into slavery. The book, which spans more than two centuries and takes place on three continents, is divided into several sections, each giving a partial yet emotionally authentic account not only of the children's uncommon stories, but also of the captain who took them across the Atlantic and of Travis's white English wife, Joyce. All these memorable characters take part in the 'many-tongued chorus of the common memory' (Phillips 1993: 235) which frames the core of the novel and testifies to the creative vigour of the African Diaspora in the face of dispossession and displacement. Still, this collective dimension does not erase the individuality of each persona whose own narrative is equally worthy of attention.

Phillips's almost obsessive preoccupation with humanity is very much present in his non-fiction as well. Whatever their topics, most of his essays – be they travelogues, memoirs or book reviews – revolve in the first instance around the biographical trajectories of individuals, famous or not. Always intellectually challenging, Phillips's non-fictional texts do not start from dry and abstract ideas: his arguments are anchored in people and more often than not viewed through the prism of actual human experience.

Phillips is the author of a large number of uncollected pieces which came out in prestigious newspapers and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic and he has so far published three book-length collections of essays – *The European Tribe* (1987), *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) and *A New World Order* (2001). These texts have a biographical tenor, which is even more visibly the case as they are also clearly autobiographical. This is particularly true of *The European Tribe* and *The Atlantic Sound*, which respectively recount the young author's early journey around a racist continent, and his later exploration of the major places associated with the infamous Atlantic slave trade. Phillips's tour of Europe gives rise to a sometimes scathing indictment of the continent and of the way it deals with black people, including himself. He buttresses his case by the evocation of other outsiders in Europe, like Othello, Anne Frank or James Baldwin, who all share to some degree his own feeling of unbelonging. Similarly, Phillips's investigative voyage around the Atlantic starts from his own diasporic experience but is also built around historical figures whose remarkable, often displaced lives serve as foils for his own. *A New World Order* too blends biography with autobiography (Yelin 2010): it follows the contours of Phillips's complex identity and is made

up of about two dozen critical essays with a visible biographical streak. Most of them are devoted to the work of outstanding writers or artists – including Marvin Gaye, C.L.R. James, or Ignatius Sancho – and unmistakably contain in the first few paragraphs a mention of the subject's date and place of birth, and biographical elements which emphasize their uniqueness, hence their individual dignity.

Phillips's interest in biography, often combined with history, is surely not unique, particularly not in a region such as the Caribbean where exploitative systems like plantation slavery and indentureship paid scant attention to the value of human life for a long time. The rich potential represented by the inhabitants of the area was as a consequence of this painful history repeatedly ignored or underestimated – for example, in V.S. Naipaul's infamous statement from *The Middle Passage* that 'nothing was created in the West Indies' (Naipaul 1962), a declaration which may sound ironical now that Naipaul himself has become the subject of one of the few bestselling biographies ever written about a Caribbean citizen (French 2008).

Such negation of the human has, in reaction, given rise to a literary tradition eminently concerned with the fate of the common man and the dispossessed. One example of this trend among many is Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros*, which rewrites the classic Homeric poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from the perspective of the people of St Lucia (Walcott 1990). Another would be Walcott's poem 'The Light of the World' (Walcott 1987: 48-51) – which happens to be one of Phillips's favourites (Phillips 2007b). In this text, the now exiled artist conveys his 'inexpressible love' for the population of his native island. He feels guilty about deserting those who have been the victims of a ruthless history and have been repeatedly forgotten to the point that 'abandonment was something they had grown used to'. Much of Caribbean literature, whether homegrown or in the diaspora, could in a sense be considered a celebration of these people's lives. Phillips clearly writes in the wake of this deep-rooted attachment to those who are discriminated against, forsaken, or simply not listened to. So do several of his contemporaries, such as Dionne Brand or Fred D'Aguiar, to mention just a few. What might nevertheless be specific about Phillips's approach is that he extends his remit beyond the Caribbean to embrace the lives of downtrodden people in general, for example that of the Jewish Irina in *Higher Ground* or, in *A Distant Shore*, of the Englishwoman Dorothy whose story too 'contains the single word, abandonment' (Phillips 2003: 203). Like many other white characters in Phillips's work, Irina and Dorothy are social outcasts of sorts whose fate has been wrecked by events beyond their own control and whose marooned state is in that sense comparable to that of the descendants of the African diaspora.

Phillips's almost compulsive fascination with biography should be seen as an integral part of his artistic and intellectual responsibility towards mankind. This is once more forcefully demonstrated in his latest novel, *In the Falling Snow* (2009), which focuses on Keith Gordon, a middle-aged Briton of Caribbean descent, who has done well for himself, even if he is estranged from his wife and has problems with his teenage son. Keith's well-organized routine is suddenly disrupted by his father's deathbed confession, which takes the form of a moving life narrative in which Earl, Keith's father, tells of the many humiliations he suffered as a newcomer to England in 1960. These revelations from the past come as a shock, both to the reader and to Keith, for his father kept his profound disillusion and resentment bottled up during his entire life. This silence resulted in serious mental problems for Earl, who spent several years in a mental hospital, but it also 'meant that his son has never been able to properly explain himself to anybody' (Phillips 2009: 285). Our moral duty as human beings, seems to be Phillips's message, is to listen to other people's narratives, especially when these have not been heard; not only is this the only way of ensuring the dignity that every person is entitled to, but it is also the best means of understanding ourselves better.

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