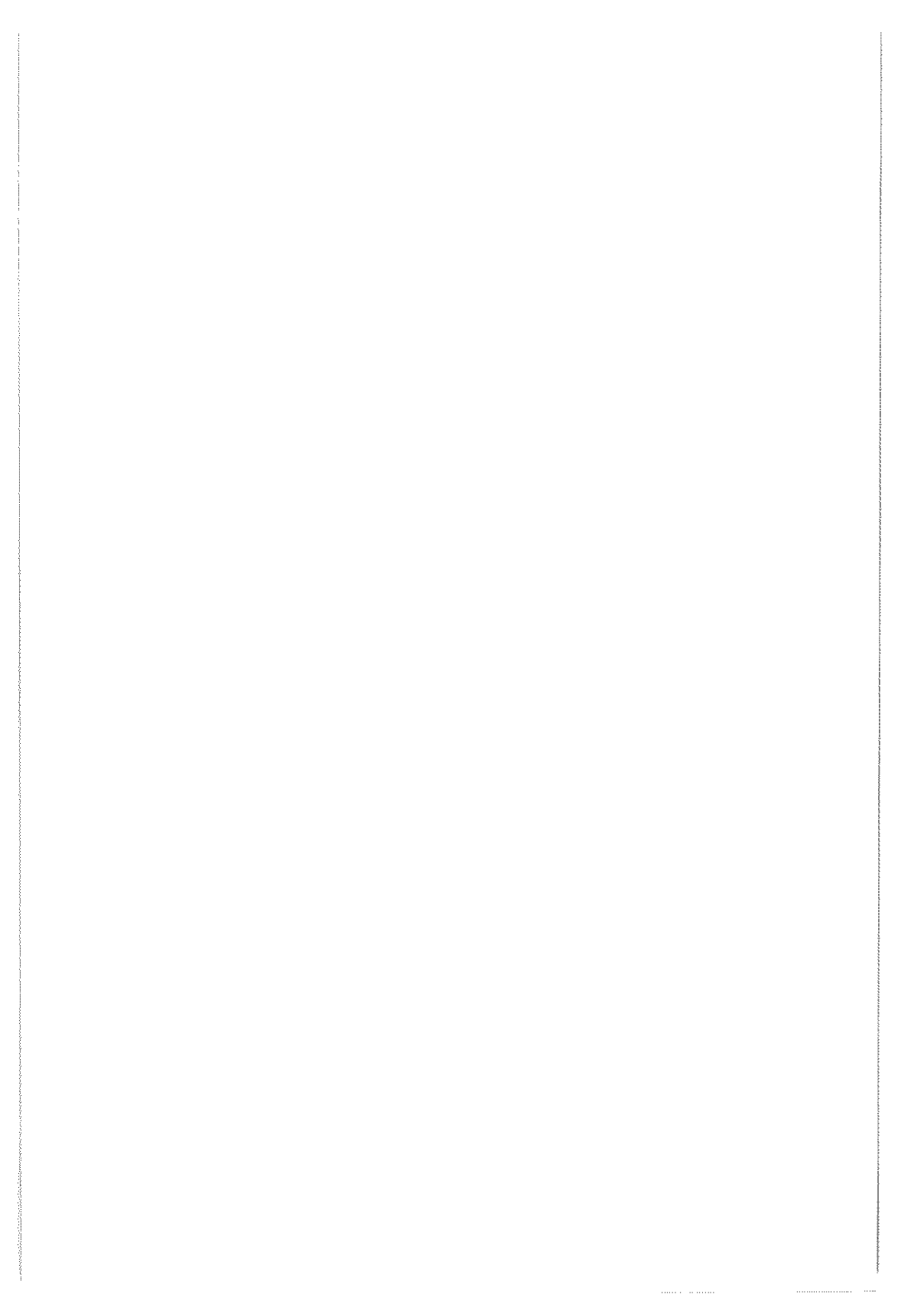


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**CROSSING ISLANDS: THE CARIBBEAN
VS BRITAIN
IN CARYL PHILLIPS'S FICTION**

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Caryl Phillips belongs clearly to that group of «problematic» authors who are difficult to classify as members of one «national» literature. Although he was born in the Caribbean island of St Kitts in 1958, he has been a British resident since he was a baby of a few months of life and, in fact, did not return to his native island until 1980, when he was 22. He was brought up near Leeds and did his university studies at Oxford, where he graduated with an «Honours Degree» in English Literature. Very recently his name has been associated to a new generation of English writers put forward by the magazine *Granta* in its issue 43 («Best of Young British Novelists», Spring 1993), along with already familiar names such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Adam Mars-Jones, Ben Okri, Jeanette Winterson, or rather new and less familiar authors like Esther Freund, Tibor Fischer, Anne Billson, etc. This association or grouping is, to my mind, arbitrary and merely generational, because neither Phillips nor many of those mentioned share enough aesthetic principles or ideological preoccupations to put all of them in a «literary generation» or «literary movement», as these terms are usually understood in literary history.

On the other hand, I think we cannot accept that Phillips is a new writer or simply a writer for the nineties, as the *Granta* campaign pretends, because a great deal of his literary production has developed in the eighties. His first publication goes back to 1981: the play *Strange Fruit*. Since then he has published an impressive amount of both plays and novels; the titles of the former (not only for theatre, but also for radio and television) are *Where There is Darkness* (1982), *The Shelter* (1984) *The Wasted Years* (1985) and *Playing Away* (1987). The novels are *The Final Passage* (1985), *A State of Independence* (1986), *Higher Ground* (1989), *Cambridge* (1991) and his

latest *Crossing the River* (1993). On top of that, he cannot be described either as a «new value», because he obtained an important critical recognition in the past decade: he received, for instance, the «Malcolm X Award» for his first novel, *The Final Passage*; his travel book *The European Tribe* (1987) was awarded the «Martin Luther King Memorial Prize» and his latest novel, *Crossing the River* (1993), was shortlisted for the 1993 «Booker Prize». But we cannot speak only of prizes; the critical reception given to his fourth novel, *Cambridge* (1991), was also a clear indication of the strength of his presence in contemporary writing.

Even though Phillips has recently spoken about his unfailing interest in drama (Bell, 1991: 598-599), with which he started his career as a writer, I think his reputation lies more strongly within the realm of fiction, where his contribution to the «new literary geography» of English studies seems to me very relevant. My purpose in this paper is then to offer a first approach to his fiction. It is basically the fiction of a second-generation black British writer who feels, and reflects in his writing, a sort of double commitment with the colony and the metropolis. In a conversation with C. Rosalind Bell (1991: 593), Phillips has defined clearly his position:

... people always want to find a label for me. They may see me as somebody born in St. Kitts, and they say I live half the time in St. Kitts. Then I open my mouth, and they hear this English accent coming out. So they want to know what my story is. What's my game? What they are trying to do is make me choose. People have tried to make Caribbean writers do that all the time. I think that is what Derek [Walcott] has resisted. I'm sure that Derek and many other writers have had to pay a heavy price for refusing to be pigeon-holed. My own small experience with it is quite straight-forward. I hold a British passport, and I hold a St. Kitts passport. I see no reason why, for the sake of any idle gesture, I should toss one in the fire. I have them both, and I will use them both as I deem fit. I write about both places.

His work, moreover, is an attempt --a fully conscious attempt-- to give the Caribbean novel in English the form lacking now. He has also said (Bell, 1991: 605):

I don't feel that the Caribbean novel, in English, has as deep and as vibrant a tradition as the Caribbean poets who write in English. [...] the forms that have been employed have been very imitative of metropolitan forms. Whereas somehow the Spanish and French, while imitative of the metropolitan forms, have found a way of actually creating their own. I am talking about works by Carpentier or Márquez. They have been

very inventive, not only with subject matter, but with form in a way that English-speaking Caribbean writers haven't been.

His efforts have been addressed towards this aim: the fusion of the Caribbean world and the cultural presence of Britain. This does not mean that the fusion is conflict-free or that the writer pursues a kind of harmonious synthesis or integration. Nothing further, I think, from Phillips's purpose. What I mean is that Phillips has tried to achieve a way of expressing that natural and cultural confrontation existing between Britain and the Caribbean. This he has done through a form that allows him to create that novelistic tradition he feels the Caribbean fiction is lacking, but without forgetting or ignoring the metropolitan tradition. There are, in my opinion, two main paths that Phillips has followed in his construction of this tradition. One is the development of the image of the island, which is an image of isolation and segregation. These issues, as I shall try to explain, are very significant both of his British experience and of his Caribbean surroundings. They will permit the writer to confront two worlds, Europe (not only on the British side, but also at a further continental scale) and America. The second path derives from his attempt at recovering and constructing (that is, at writing) the cultural tradition of his own origins. This is achieved through the research upon the African roots and the slave trade between Africa and America mediated through Europe. The first path is better seen in his first two novels and his travel book, that is, *The Final Passage*, *A State of Independence* and *The European Tribe*, whereas the second is tackled to a greater extent in *Higher Ground*, *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*, although --let me briefly add-- both paths can be pursued in all and any of these works. As I cannot give now a detailed account of each of these novels, I shall restrict myself merely to an over-all view of them as well as of his travel book, *The European Tribe*.

The Final Passage (1985) is a reflection on the necessity to escape from a suffocating atmosphere, which is destroying the personality and the freedom of the female protagonist, the young Leila. This novel, which is told in a predominantly lyrical tone, abundant in descriptions as well as in interruptions of the narrative thread (there are many changes in the temporal perspective, in the narrative voice and in focalization), addresses the theme and the image of the island and of segregation in two worlds: the Caribbean and Britain. The presentation of this issue in his first novel is certainly decisive and constitutes the emergence of his main fictional *leitmotif*, which is to be consolidated in later works.

Leila is a young woman who suffers a humiliating and frustrating life in her little Caribbean island; she is at the border of complete human

degradation, since her husband Michael pays no attention to her, ignoring her existence and living with a previous lover of his, Beverly. For Leila, who feels all the eyes of the island are placed on her with commiseration, Britain represents the hope of a new life, it is her great hope of liberation. That is why she starts her journey to the metropolis with her baby Calvin and her husband. The story is set in the fifties, and begins with the departure from the Caribbean, under the ironic and contradictory title of «The End»; it is truly the end of the life on the island, the end of that dark period in Leila's life, but it is also the beginning, both of the novel itself and of the «final passage» in the title. This title, as Charles P. Sarvan and Hasan Marhama (1991: 35) have noticed, is an obvious echo of V.S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* and is a direct allusion to the last step in the chain of slave trade: the «first passage» from England to Africa in search of slaves, the «middle passage» from Africa to America transporting slaves to the plantations, and the «final passage» back home with the gains of the «enterprise». This final passage will reveal itself as much worse for Leila than her life on the Caribbean island. When she abandons it she has feelings of elation, as if she were superior to those she leaves behind: «This small proud island, overburdened with vegetation and complacency, this had been her home. She looked, feeling sorry for those satisfied enough to stay» (Phillips, 1990a: 20).

The novelist then provides his readers with a vision of this island. It is a long chapter called «Home», which shows the reality that Leila hates, the reasons for her departure. The island that looms up is a place where nothing happens, where seasons come one after another, year after year, along with the noise of the motorcycles or the wind. Everybody knows everybody else, men get drunk easily and cheaply enough, so that inactivity reigns over the whole place. Leila's story is well known, and after she has lost her dignity as a woman despised by her husband, she has no possibility to get it back. Britain is then the only way out of this prison; Britain represents the big island, the rich island, where Michael will get a job and become a different man, where she will rejoin her mother who emigrated there some time ago, and find a new life.

The story the novel tells is obviously the story of a defeated expectancy. When she reaches this new island of Britain all her expectations are disappointed. Even before she gets off the ship, the impression is strongly negative; when the boat comes near the English coast everything around seems bleak, dominated by «a colony of white faces». Some of the passengers believe naively that the differences between white and coloured people are not important because «we all the same flag, the same empire», but the

description of the new atmosphere is gloomy (Phillips, 1990a: 142):

Leila looked at England, but everything seemed bleak. She quickly realized she would have to learn a new word; overcast. There were no green mountains, there were no colourful women with baskets on their heads selling peanuts or bananas or mangoes, there were no trees, no white houses on the hills, no hills, no wooden houses by the shoreline, and the sea was not blue and there was no beach, and there were no clouds, just one big cloud, and they had arrived.

Leila will discover very soon what the «colony of white faces» means: that Britain is *their* island, not hers, and that a «No trespassing» board is hanging everywhere for «the other», the Caribbean, the black, the slave. When she tries to find accommodation the signs are explicit: «No vacancies for coloureds», «No blacks», «No coloureds». The same happens with jobs, and as a consequence, her husband abandons her because a white woman pays him to get his company. Her mother dies in hospital, and she is left alone with her baby, deprived of affection and any means to support herself and Calvin. The few people that give her some help are also commiserative, like the ones at home who felt pity for her because Michael was all the time with Beverly. But now they feel pity because she is black, and all their help is tainted by racism. It is self-evident that she cannot survive in this new island of segregation, so she decides to return. The end of the novel presents the image of Leila reflected on a mirror, still in London, in a December evening (Phillips, 1990a: 199): «She looked like a yellowing snapshot of an old relative, fading with the years. She turned suddenly and saw that somebody had pushed a Christmas card through the front door. She stooped, with Calvin, and picked it up and read it, but it was from nobody».

Isolation and segregation are dominant features in this image of the big island, but for Leila at least there is no way of escaping. Being in Britain is also another way of being segregated and isolated, very much the same as (and even worse than) in the Caribbean.

Phillips's second novel, *A State of Independence* (1986), is a continuation of this theme. Now it is a male character, Bertram Francis, who after twenty years in Britain returns to his Caribbean island on the date of its independence from the British Empire. Yet Bertram is a different character: he has stayed long in Britain, where he came as a young man with a grant to study at the University. But he is also a failed individual. He couldn't finish his career and was not courageous enough to return home with empty hands. After this long period, during which he kept no connection with his family and friends, he goes back with the hope of a new life. He tries to use the

stereotypical anticolonial discourse, that is, that now that his island is independent of the white man he will be able to set up his own business and improve his country. His mother and his friends laugh at him and reject his banal pretensions. He will discover very soon that the liberation is a mirage; in the morning following the night of the independence he goes about the island noticing its decay and the signs of the new times that have just appeared (Phillips, 1988: 157-158):

He tried hard to imagine how he might cope, were he to make peace with his own mediocrity and settle back on the island. And then he glanced upward. He saw a man who, at this time of the morning and considering what was happening in Baytown, appeared unreal. The man was threading wires from telegraph pole to telegraph pole, as though trying to stitch together the island's villages with one huge loop. Then Bertram remembered. That evening the people would receive their first cable television pictures, live and direct from the United States.

His third novel, *Higher Ground* (1989) is a rather atypical work, since it comprises three stories that bear no apparent connection among them. One is the 1st person narration of an African who collaborates with the British in recruiting slaves in the black continent during the 19th century; another consists of a collection of letters addressed to his family by a black American who suffers prison during the sixties for a minor crime; and the third tells the story of a young Jewish girl who escapes from Poland and seeks shelter in Britain during the Nazi regime, World War II and the years following. What puts together all these different stories is the theme of isolation and segregation, as in the first two novels. The characters are all equally prisoners living on an island, either physically or spiritually: the African narrator of the first story, who starts as a collaborator in the slave trade, ends by becoming a slave himself; the African American is in fact imprisoned and is even condemned several times to an isolation cell; and the Jewish girl must suffer internment in a psychiatric hospital after a failed suicide attempt.

After this novel Phillips develops the image of the island and isolation further through the exploration of the slave trade. Probably his best novel to date, *Cambridge* (1991) is an extraordinary *tour de force* in the creation of two characters who reflect the cruelty of the system during the 19th century. One is the slave known as Cambridge, who has been educated in the Christian faith in Britain and has subsequently experienced the evils of being turned into a commodity that is bought and sold. The other is Emily, a 30-year-old Englishwoman who visits her father's plantation in the Caribbean; although she is a liberal in some aspects, she cannot avoid being a prisoner of a deep

racism in her attitude and feelings towards the members of the community of slaves she owns. Both characters, Cambridge and Emily, are evidence of the success of colonization, since both assume their own conditions as 'natural'. Cambridge through the Christian discourse that teaches him to suffer for his previous sins as heathen; and Emily due to her marginal nature as a woman in a society dominated by men. These two characters --who share important features-- cannot communicate, are living one beside the other in complete isolation. The islands that each represent, Britain and the Caribbean, cross each other but do not reach a state of harmony or even of minimal understanding.

Phillips's latest novel, *Crossing the River* (1993), elaborates further the theme of slavery. It uses parts of an 18th-century journal of a real voyage to the African coast in search of slaves, and --following the loose structure of *Higher Ground*-- presents three independent stories about slaves (or former slaves) in 19th-century Liberia, the American Far West, and Britain during World War II. I cannot study them in detail now, but suffice it to say that these stories are all narrations of cruelty and exploitation, reflected in the isolation and separation suffered by their protagonists. Essentially these characters are very much the same as Leila, Bertram, Cambridge, Emily or the other ones. They represent, moreover, many other individuals of the real world who --as the implied author tells us here-- either in Brooklyn or in São Paulo, or in Santo Domingo, are victims of segregation and slavery.

Another important work that cannot be ignored in connection with these five novels is Phillips's travel book *The European Tribe* (1987, 2nd ed. 1992). This can help us understand the development of the metaphors of the island that he pursues in all his fiction. In this book the writer tells about his experience as a black British through many countries in Europe: Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, the former Soviet Union, Norway, the Netherlands, etc. He is normally received everywhere as an African, as «the other», the one who does not belong. As he tells us (Bell, 1991: 599),

My feeling is that anybody who grew up with the sort of background in which I did, and that is not an insignificant percentage of the population of England, will question their identity. In other words, we grew up not quite knowing if this was home. Being told to go back to where we came from. The question of home is a very serious thing because you don't feel at home in this place which is the only thing you know. The other alternative smacks of idealism, because you don't have any notion of it. You probably couldn't even pinpoint it on a map. It just reflects my generation's continuing struggle.

This ambivalent feeling of belonging and not belonging makes him feel attached to another community which has historically suffered isolation in ghettos, that is the Jews. Thus Venice and Othello constitute a powerful metaphor of the island in this book, and the Holocaust is equated to «the bloody excesses of colonialism, to the pillage and rape of modern Africa, the transportation of 11 million black people to the Americas, and their subsequent bondage» (Phillips, 1992: 54). As the latter information was not part of his studies, while the former about the Jewish persecutions occupied a distinct position in his education, Phillips confesses that he «vicariously channelled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience» (Phillips, 1992: 54).

This means that the experience of the new world, the experience of the Caribbean and the construction of his own tradition --so necessary for people of his generation who have been brought up in an alien environment-- is vehicled through his European experience. Europe and Africa, Europe and America, are again crossing islands in a constant movement dominated by these metaphors of isolation and segregation. Othello becomes the prototype of this kind of alienated individual, suffering from what Frantz Fanon (1967, 1968) called the «abandonment neurosis». The image of this man-as-an-island recurs in Leila, in Bertram, in Cambridge, and in other characters who fail in their attempts to escape from their condition.

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