

Caryl Phillips: Writing in the Key of Life

Eds. Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca
441 pages, 2012, \$124.20 USD (hardcover)
Amsterdam, Rodopi

Reviewed by Kathie Birat, Université de Lorraine

Caryl Phillips began writing in the early 1980s and has over a period of more than thirty years become one of the most distinguished voices in contemporary fiction. His literary production, as Bénédicte Ledent and Daria Tunca point out in their introduction to the volume, includes “four stage plays, five works of non-fiction, nine novels, as well as innumerable scripts and articles on a wide variety of topics” (xii). This collection of twenty-four essays, including an original piece by Phillips himself, is the result of a conference held in December 2006 at the University of Liège in Belgium to “celebrate the silver jubilee of Caryl Phillips’s writing career” (xi). It is perhaps both fitting and ironic that this collection of essays should appear in 2012, the year in which the English celebrated Queen Elizabeth II’s Diamond Jubilee. Caryl Phillips has devoted most of his career as a writer to the exploration of what it means to be British when one was born in the Caribbean and the title of his introductory address, “Colour Me English,” testifies to his continuing fascination with the paradoxes of growing up black in Britain.

The essays in this volume make it possible to measure the ways in which Phillips’s writing has accompanied the changes he examines in his own introductory speech. The emphasis has been placed on the work produced in recent years—six of the essays are devoted specifically to his 2003 novel *A Distant Shore* and several of the essays discuss his non-fiction work, which can be seen as an important aspect of his desire to treat the many-faceted questions of racial, national, ethnic and cultural identity. One of the most interesting characteristics of the contributions made by scholars from a wide variety of institutions is their willingness to include Phillips’s own comments on his thematic concerns in their discussions of his work; this is done not in the interest of explanation, but rather as a recognition of the serious and scholarly bent of this man whose “only refuge was reading” when he was a child in Leeds (11).

In a collection of this nature, in which the work of scholars like Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Benedict Anderson is summoned in the construction of a critical framework for the examination of Phillips’s writing, the most memorable contributions are those that create a fruitful dialogue between the critical frame and the specificities of Phillips’s artistic practice. John McLeod’s discussion of the novelist’s relation to V.S. Naipaul, “Vido, Not Sir Vida—Caryl Phillips’s Encounters with V.S. Naipaul,” stands out in this respect. In comparing Phillips’s *A State of Independence* with Naipaul’s work, McLeod shows how the reading of Naipaul helped

Phillips to reach “an ethical location,” a capacity for understanding and compassion which is an important dimension of his “unique literary voice” (124). Stef Craps’s use of trauma studies as a critical frame in “Linking Legacies of Loss—Traumatic Histories and Cross-Cultural Empathy in Caryl Phillips’s *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*” is equally effective in its perspicacious use of what might be an overly generalized concept to point out the specificities of Phillips’s “textual strategies . . . for ‘managing’ empathy” and “open[ing] up a space for cross-cultural encounters in which differences are not eradicated but inhabited” (158, 171). From these essays and others that deal with Phillips’s complex positioning, a portrait emerges of the particular mix of curiosity, empathy, and discretion that characterizes the writer’s vision. Abigail Ward’s study of Phillips’s non-fiction in “‘The cloud of ambivalence’—Exploring Diasporan Identity in Caryl Phillips’s *The Atlantic Sound* and *A New World Order*” is equally successful in proposing a coherent reading of these “fragmentary” works. Ward relies on Homi Bhabha’s distinction between “the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, quoted page 197) to demonstrate how Phillips seeks to overcome the “enforced forgetting” of slavery through acts of “imaginative remembrance” (203). Non-fiction lends itself particularly well to this type of endeavour, allowing Phillips to suggest how diverse trajectories are “inextricably entwined” (207).

Another particularly useful dimension of the essays is their fascination with the intertextual complexities of Phillips’s craft. Phillips’s sense of his relation to other writers is a logical reflection of his plural sense of self, of his fluid perception of identity. It is also the logical correlative of what Bénédicte Ledent in her essay on *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (“‘Look Liberty in the face’—Determinism and Free Will in Caryl Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives*”) calls “a tension between determinism and free will” (77). Phillips’s penchant for approaching history through imaginative representations of the lives of others, as he does in this recreation of the lives of three historical figures—Samuel Johnson’s servant Francis Barber, Randolph Turpin, “Britain’s first black world champion boxer,” and David Oluwale, a Nigerian living in Leeds in the 1950s—is also a sign of his awareness of the way in which our fate is inevitably entwined with the lives of others (80). As Louise Yelin points out in her contribution, “Plural Selves—The Dispersion of the Autobiographical Subject in the Essays of Caryl Phillips,” Phillips “represents himself by writing about others” (59).

Several essays relate Phillips’s fiction to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, thus establishing a shared critical space for the examination of the writer’s relation to one of the most important works underpinning postcolonial fiction (see the essays of Imen Najar, Sandra Courtman, and Cindy Gabrielle). Sandra Courtman sees *A Distant Shore* as offering “a reverse discourse on the association between madness and miscegenation” that can be perceived in “Kurtz’s physical and moral decline” due to his contact with an

African woman and that can be contrasted with “the wholesomeness of Dorothy and Solomon’s developing attraction” which is ultimately “thwarted by racism” (271). Cindy Gabrielle explores the ways in which Phillips avoids using his story to contrast the darkness of Africa with that of contemporary Britain, preferring to consider the ways in which “confronted with war or immigration, Africa and England both reveal the darkest sides of their nature” (317).

This collection of essays is on the whole both thoughtful and thought-provoking and situates Phillips’s practice as a writer of fiction and non-fiction through reference to a broad but carefully selected series of critical references. The editors have noticed one of its potential weaknesses when they point out in the introduction that the authors’ arguments “occasionally overlap” (xx). This is in effect the case, in particular in the section devoted to discussion of *A Distant Shore*. There is also occasionally a lack of precision in the use of key terms. A case in point is Thomas Bonnici’s use of the term “tragic identity” in his essay on *A Distant Shore*. “Tragedy” and “identity” belong to very different spheres of discourse; tragedy is associated with the theatre and is related to destiny, to a trajectory. It can be individual or collective. In the word “identity,” it is the relation between the individual and collective uses of the notion that is important, an aspect of identity to which Phillips is very sensitive. In a similar way, Sandra Courtman confuses “identity” with “character,” in talking about *A Distant Shore*.

For those who are discovering Caryl Phillips as a writer as well as for those who are well-acquainted with his work, this collection of essays will provide occasions to ponder what it means to have a “career” in writing and to understand what deserves to be recognized in Phillips’s fiction and non-fiction. As the writer cogently points out in the “Preamble,” “Fame and recognition are not the same thing” (9).