BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT

Ambiguous Visions of Home: The Paradoxes of Diasporic Belonging in Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*

"What is Home?" is a question that echoes virtually throughout the writing of Caryl

regard it as a frustrating though somehow unavoidable solution to his cultural dispossession to "live on a raft in the middle of the Atlantic at a point equidistant between Africa, the Caribbean and Britain"[3] where he would be left to sink. It is perhaps an index to Phillips's maturation as a writer that, almost twenty years later, he views this point in the middle of the Atlantic as his "imaginary home," as the satisfying reflection of his multiple identity, since, as he reveals in an as yet unpublished essay entitled "The 'High Anxiety' of Belonging," he wants the middle of the ocean to become his "long home," i.e. the place where, ultimately, his ashes will be scattered.

The choice of this watery grave is no doubt the expression of his being forever enmeshed in the complexities triggered off by the Middle Passage and the triangular trade. It also marks a development from a feeling of being homeless and existentially "adrift" to a sense of having finally found an anchorage in the ocean, albeit of an ambiguous kind since the sea implies constant movements and fluctuations. What a critic recently wrote on "Tidalectics," i.e. aquatic metaphors, in Caribbean literature seems to apply to Phillips's arrangements for his posthumous life: "This imaginative return to the abyss," she writes, "indicates an aquatic symbology that 'territorializes' through history rather than through ethnic or national 'roots' and therefore complicates the limitations of nation-based, terrestrial belonging."[4] No doubt, this pelagic mooring is a welcome image at a time when identity construction, and "home," are still geographically confined, and viewed by some in simplistic and static racial or national terms.

My contention is that Phillips's mature, undogmatic, and fluid vision of home has been achieved through his repeated explorations of the diaspora, which is literally

ubiquitous in his novels from *Higher Ground* (1989) onwards, and even more clearly focused in his recent book-length essay, *The Atlantic Sound* (2000). As the following analysis will attempt to demonstrate, Phillips does not regard the diaspora as a notion to be exploited theoretically, but rather as an empirical and historical reality that needs to be probed without prejudices and from multiple and ever-changing angles. A pragmatic artist, Phillips has always examined the very concrete social and

Crossing the River takes on yet another meaning - they also focus on the tension between the desire to forget and the impossibility of forgetting the unforgettable that affects the children of the diaspora, also a major preoccupation in the writing of other diasporic novelists like Fred D'Aguiar. Forgetting and remembering, Phillips shows, are equally tormenting, as the examples of both Cambridge in the eponymous novel and Edward Williams in *Crossing the River* testify. While to Cambridge, "murdering the memory" of the Middle Passage causes distress "at least as great as that suffered whilst enduring the voyage,"[8] to Edward memory is just like "an open wound,"[9] something he bears within himself.

The diaspora is again at the heart of *The Atlantic Sound*,[10] a book of non-fiction, which explores the legacies of the slave trade and seems to have played a significant role in shaping Phillips's "Atlantic Home." Like many of his novels, this book has a ternary topography that follows the lines of the infamous triangle: it takes

him suffer. Unlike the slave, however, Phillips has now achieved freedom of choice and is in charge of his own existence, as indicated by the recurrent, almost obsessive, use of the verb "decide" in the first two chapters of this new book.

Quite predictably, this intercontinental journey is also one of self-discovery for a writer with such a complex background, who has been described as a "citizen of the world."[15] The prologue to *The Atlantic Sound* focuses on his voyage from the Caribbean to England aboard a banana boat, a re-enactment of his own parents' migration from St. Kitts to the Mother Country when he was just an infant. Free from the "nervous anticipation"[16] his parents felt when reaching England, Phillips fleetingly thinks he has found home when he sights the white cliffs of Dover: "For one brief moment I imagine that a chapter in my own personal narrative has closed….I have arrived. I imagine - desire – closure."[17] Yet the ensuing unsentimental exploration of the African diaspora, which ends with a visit to a community of African-Americans who have "come home"[18] to the land of their biblical ancestors in Israel annihilates this short-lived confidence. Phillips is then led to conclude that "There is no closure"[19] and that "It is futile to walk into the face of history."[20] However central to his own identity construction, then, Britain cannot unproblematically become his only home, nor can Africa or America for that matter, for history dictates a different choice, more intricate and less reassuring perhaps, but the only way for the displaced individual of ever achieving some kind of meaningful belonging.

One of the driving forces behind this investigative book may be Phillips's wariness of the diaspora as a blanket concept, and now often hackneyed term, that could magically solve the identity conundrum of the twentieth-century postcolonial.

In this abstract form, the diaspora indeed runs the risk of being exploited either economically or intellectually. Ironically enough, these two forms of abuse were the primal causes of the African diaspora because they initiated the slave trade and colonisation through the lure of gain, later justified by the European 'need' to civilise the savage Other. As Phillips repeatedly points out in this long essay, the diaspora is now too often idealised as a convenient myth of origin and authenticity with sectarian overtones. In this perspective, Mother Africa, erroneously presented as "One Africa,"[21] a single and static entity, very much as in the colonial period,[22] is viewed

Phillips ever to give a satisfying answer to the problematic question, "Where are you from?"[29] But it also promotes an exclusive, as opposed to an inclusive, view of identity which cannot but be sterile, as symbolised by the setting of the book's last pages which are also written in an arid prose characterised by fewer verbs and shorter sentences. The Negev desert where the African-American "Hebrew Israelites" have settled for good indeed stands in stark contrast to the ocean, a space without borders, whose unpinnable fluidity accommodates metamorphoses, even though the deep is not without its own dangers. The desert, on the contrary, crystallises the dry and disciplinarian life of the new community which claims to have succeeded in eradicating crime and violence, but also, more ominously, welfare and homosexuality.[30] Presented by its supporters "as though it were a celestial compound of heaven here on earth,"[31] the black Hebrew community is a place from where it is possible to speak "without doubt. Without anxiety. Without ambiguity,"[32] a utopian society indeed suggestive of a "New World Order,"[33] but a ghetto-like one which, for Phillips, may not be very different from the protracted plantation system the American settlers wanted to escape, and which does not bode well for the future of humanity.

How, then, does Phillips respond to the diasporan excesses just described? Very much as in his fiction, it is mostly through form and characterisation that he energises the diasporic threatened by the theoretical straitjacket. A central narrative in three parts framed by a prologue and an epilogue, the juxtaposition of stories that interweave through similar situations and language, and the wave-like movements of a text that constantly flows forward and backward, like the sea, are just three of the formal techniques reminiscent of his novels and their diasporic quality. Another similarity with his fiction is the focus on several figures who are part of the history of

the diaspora either by virtue of their birth and experience, like the African, John Ocansey, who visits Liverpool on business in the nineteenth century, or by virtue of their achievement, like the American, Judge Waties Waring, a white man who

nineteenth-century Liverpool suggests. Not only is it full of images that evoke clichés now often associated with third-world countries, such as his meeting with insistent beggars and a shoe-shine boy, his visit to an orphanage, and his confrontation with

sorts,"[46] all the more difficult to unravel because they are most often left unsaid. For Phillips, then, there is no single, immovable allegiance, but several of them, such as class, religion, or even sport, which combine and fluctuate over space and time to make each individual a unique being always in becoming. Phillips's only dedication is to what has been called "a state of perpetual wandering,"[47] embodied in the ocean, which, as a repository of history and as a gateway to the unconscious, paradoxically conveys a form of belonging as well.

Appropriately for a volume of non-fiction, the tone and attitude that Phillips adopts to communicate his reflections prove to be the most significant strategy in his attempts to counterbalance the "overstatements" of a simplified diaspora. What strikes first in his approach is his analytical distance, which several reviewers have compared to the by now legendary aloofness of V. S. Naipaul. To me the comparison does not hold, for even if Phillips's humour in this book is sometimes mockingly ironical, even sardonic (as when he comments on African driving habits and faulty timekeeping), it never conveys scorn as his Trinidadian peer's does. Rather, while being very critical, Phillips's rational approach does not prevent him from grasping, as Derek Walcott does, that "the African revival [can be] an escape to another dignity,"[48] as shown by the dance in Charleston of young African women whose "sinewy bodies weave invisible threads that connect them to the imagined old life."[49] Phillips's intellectual undertaking is indeed always associated with a profound sympathy for human nature and its yearning for an elsewhere that can be called home, be it the Western world for the African, or Africa for the Westernized blacks.[50]

As I have tried to show, in spite of his rejection of the soppiness that is sometimes the reverse of the diasporan coin, Phillips is aware of "deep wounds that

need to be healed."[51] For him, however, the healing process, if any, requires a courageous acceptance of the past, not the escapist amnesia that characterises the places he visits in this travelogue. Diaspora as understood by Phillips could thus be a useful tool in such a healing process, because its rich connotative web - combining both dispersal and togetherness, the larger historical upheavals and the individual stories - conveys a tension that invalidates attempts at exclusion, but can still lead to a sense of paradoxical belonging embodied in his "Atlantic home." To quote Walcott again, Phillips knows that "what is needed is not new names for old things, or old names for old things, but the faith of using the old names anew."[52]

[12] *AS*, 221.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] "A Citizen of the World," *Newsweek* (10 May 1999), 63.

[16] *AS*, 16.

[17] Ibid.

[18] *AS*, 216.

[19] *AS*, 220.

[20] *AS*, 221.

[21] *AS*, 175.

[22] *AS*, 81.

[23] *AS*, 172.

[24] *AS*, 137.

[25] *AS*, 178.

[26] *AS*, 138.

[27] Ibid.

[28] *AS*, 148, 171.

[29] *AS*, 98.

[30] *AS*, 169.

[31] *AS*, 170.

[32] *AS*, 216.

[33] Ibid.

[34] "Crossing the River: Caryl Phillips Talks to Maya Jaggi,Ž,Ibar¦0.,1(.).02 90.

[37] *AS*, 141.

[38] *AS*, 116.

[39] *AS*, 117.

[40] *AS*, 220.

[41] Diran Adebayo, "Africa and 'home,'" review of *The Atlantic Sound* (*Times*, London, 11 May 2000), 26.

[42] Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (London: Faber, 1997).

[43] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

[44] Joan Dayan, "Paul Gilroy's Slaves, Ships, and Routes: The Middle Passage as Metaphor," *Research in African Literatures*, 27.4 (Winter 1996, 7-14), 7.

[45] *AS*, 84.

[46] *AS*, 197.

[47] Bronwyn T. Williams, "A State of Perpetual Wandering."

[48] Derek Walcott, 'What the Twilight Says', *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber, 1998), 8.

[49] *AS*, 213.

[50] As Pauline Melville puts it in her collection of stories *Shape-Shifter*, in relation to the Caribbean sense of exile: "We do return and leave and return again, criss-crossing the Atlantic, but whichever side we are on, the dream is always on the other side." Pauline Melville, *Shape-Shifter* ([1990] London: Picador, 1991), 149.

[51] *AS*, 172.

[52] Walcott, "What the Twilight Says," 9.