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‘Saving Bodies’ – Performance in *Crossing the River*

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> This is the patent age of new inventions
> For killing bodies, and for saving souls,
> All propagated with the best intentions.
> (Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, I, 132)

« I couldn’t find him anywhere »

A few years after the publication of *Crossing the River* Caryl Phillips edited an anthology of texts illustrating the tension to be found in all his novels, between outsideness and insideness, integration and exclusion. Its title, *Extravagant Strangers*, was borrowed from the very first scene in *Othello*[1] and the full quote appeared as the epigraph for the volume:

> Your daughter, if you have not given her leave,
> I say again, hath made a gross revolt;
> Tying her duty, beauty, wit and fortunes
> In an extravagant and wheeling stranger
> Of here and everywhere. (*Othello*, I, 1, 131-5)

These lines carve out a space of privileged meaning for the anthology. They express the passage between old and new links, the circulation of love affairs and friendships at the cost of the uprooting of

[1] Othello is also in all probability one of the main voices in a novel published that same year (1997), *The Nature of Blood*, and was mentioned as early as *The European Tribe* (45), although the author noted that « unlike Othello, [he is] culturally of the West » (128). On the figure of Othello see Phillips (1997b) and Galván.

previous connections in a world gone global[2], as well as the sad gaps sometimes opening between individual perspectives or communities. I would also argue that the presence of drama on the threshold of the anthology reveals the overall generic hybridity which characterises the editor's work. Caryl Phillips plays with nonfiction, with historical sources, with confessional writing, with the epistolary novel or the novel of experience; he has written scripts for films and plays for the radio. He also plays with theatrical conventions and remains at heart a playwright and amateur director (while a student at Oxford, he had staged plays by Shakespeare and Ibsen).

Desdemona's « gross revolt » is of particular interest here as it echoes in *Crossing the River* with the « unnatural connection » (145) between Joyce and Travis, one which will cause outrage in the English community and a double expulsion, of father and son. Othello can be seen as a double for Travis, his identity both a performative process, and, in the eyes of the Venetian courtiers, a predetermined destiny of *hubris*. Yet, one distinction stands out between Othello and Travis, two black men whose tragic transgression leads them to take white wives, and be sacrificed and expelled by the European community – Travis disappears from the narrative. This has puzzled critics, and is thus enlightened by Phillips:

> I tried to find a voice for Travis. … I couldn't find him anywhere, but I wasn't prepared to invent a voice. It just wasn't working and if it's not working, I don't care about balance for the sake of balance. (qtd in Ledent, 118)[3]

Critics have abundantly commented the issue of voices in this instance and yet, Phillips declares that he could not find *him*, not *it* – as if retrieving a voice were only part of the process of characterization. I suggest that such disappearance is connected to Travis's being a Black American, therefore not possibly a part of the role-playing which

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[2] One might point out the anachronism of the concept of globalization when dealing with a novel which, apart from the very last pages, ends in 1945, at a date when the phenomenon was only tentatively taking its flight. Nevertheless, it has been argued by historians that globalization has actually been invented with the Black Atlantic slave trade, as early as the 18th century.

[3] Travis's not being found echoes the very first paragraph in the first section, an indirect rendering of the letter received by Edward Williams informing him that his former slave Nash « was nowhere to be found » (7).

proliferates in the novel; this analysis derives from Phillips's own commentary on the singularity of Black Americans, which he sees as excluded from the possibilities for self-reinvention granted by the context of American culture. In an interview given in the wake of the publication of *Dancing in the Dark* he states:

> Now, a hundred years ago, New York City was full of small theatres, Vaudeville theatres, where people performed sometimes twenty-four hours a day. [...] The only people who couldn't play were black people. But then the only people who have never been able to play in American life are black people. Because they are the only people who never wanted to come there in the first place. Everybody else wants to be in America. There is not a single African who said, 'Yeah, OK, I'll be a slave.' Not one. No African got to the auction block in Charleston and said, 'Yeah, OK, call me Kunta Kinte, that's fine.' Because they didn't want to be reinvented. [...] So the act of reinvention for African-Americans has always been problematic; it has always been difficult, and it continues to be difficult to this day. (McLeod 108-9)

This could explain away – as it were – the disappearance of Travis, and of Nash into the bargain, as characters not fit for a novel which imports the conventions of the stage more than has been remarked heretofore. And yet, the author cannot help performing other roles and gives not just a voice but a part to these Black Americans (an ironic one, 'Yeah, OK, I'll be a slave', where one must understand the opposite of what is being said, in true signifying[4] manner). It might also be of some importance that Phillips should have been confronted with the realization of his alienation from Black American consciousness[5] while watching a play, « the Negro Ensemble's production of Douglas Fuller's play *A Soldier's Play*, which featured a very young Denzel Washington » (Phillips 2001: 233). As a Black British author with Caribbean origins, he can only testify to the limits of an association with Black American culture, because theatricality is granted in one case, not the other. While

[4] See Gates.

[5] In spite of important influences, prominently that of James Baldwin, Caryl Phillips has often asserted his conviction that « The African people of the Caribbean face problems of identity which are different from those that trouble their northern cousins in the United States » (Phillips 2001: 221).

it is often associated with *Cambridge*, I would foreground the specificity of *Crossing the River* as it deals with slavery on the American continent, not in the West Indies. In this respect, *Dancing in the Dark* would be closer to either novel than they are close with each other.

Role-playing is not the theme of *Crossing the River* in the same way as it is in *Dancing in the Dark*. Herbert is an actor and some sort of a double for Travis (and Len), but he disappears as well and theatricality manifests itself elsewhere – in more than one place as a metaphor, and, as we shall see further, as an emphasis on physicality, or else as an inscription of the text within the body.

Nash is first and foremost described as an actor: « And now the chief player in his game, the most successful of his Christian blacks, was lost somewhere on the dismal coastline of Africa » (14). The internal focalisation on Edward in this passage makes him a playwright/director fully aware of the artificiality of his activities. Nash's true manumission might be as one performer who changes roles and costumes, since he writes half-way through his very last letter that he has « cast off the garb of ignorance » (61-2). This marks an evolution in his mental voyage as he had previously mentioned dismissively the « robes of ignorance which drape the shoulders of my fellow blacks » (21). The same Nash, whose new role as ex-slave places him in the position of a playwright in turn, finds wives able to « act out the role of dear and gentle mother » (60), and he watches with an amused irritation how « emigrants [have] styled themselves as lay ministers of the Gospel » (33) in a chaotically carnivalesque upturning of previous roles, where the former slave becomes colonial settler. Likewise, in a reversal of racist prejudice around 'savages' and their fantasized face painting, Edward attempts to « paint his face » to « disguise his true feelings of disgust » amidst 'natives' (69) – announcing in a way Joyce's detachment from Sandra, as she stares at her « with a stupid grin painted on [her] face » (154).

If the recent formation of the state of Liberia offers a historical moment to the novelist of drastic role-shifting, the intimate sphere is also rife with moments of theatricality. Joyce's mother is wearing a « mask » (139) on her face as her daughter gets married to Len and after her death, Joyce decides to « play daughter » (187) and visit her at the cemetery; an odd warlike theatricality develops in her pages, with people wearing gas masks (144, 150) or preparing to go naked in the events of a gas explosion (147). Crucially for issues of transmediation, the disappearance from the stage of Travis is represented in generic terms by a substitution of theatre with the cinema (where the image of the body has replaced its

presence); when Travis has been sent to Italy, Joyce notes that she'd « go to the cinema in the hope of seeing him ». (223) Even then, the Blacks would not play their part: « But they showed the Tommies. Never the Yanks. And if they did, never the Coloureds » (223).

These are a few examples of a novelistic characterisation fraught with moments of theatricality, presenting protagonists whose abodes, professions, families, positions, are extremely unstable. Far from being gratuitous, such narratorial choices make it concretely felt how slavery had reduced human beings to their sheer physicality and forced them into a new role – the same one that Bert Williams had been accused of playing, still. If some characters are receding in terms of role-playing, the text allows their physical presence to resist erasure. This 'effacement' or 'fadeout' is not that of the voice, as Spivak exposes in « Can the Subaltern Speak? » (21) but that of the body. In criticism around the novel it seems that an extreme emphasis on the theme of the voice has suppressed its intense inscription within the body. The polyphony announced in the prologue must not cover up the intense feeling of physicality, and of spectatorship, it prefigures: « I *soiled my hands* with cold goods in exchange for *their warm flesh*. A shameful *intercourse*. I could *feel their eyes upon me* » (1, my emphases). This sense of a performance is only confirmed by the closing pendant of the framework, an epilogue where music, TV programmes, speeches, songs, culminate.

The Evidence of the Body, The Presence of the Spectator

Crossing the River's last section leaves the reader with Joyce's invitation to sit down (232); it is as if Joyce's frustrated maternal instinct gushed forth to focus on the physical comfort of her son. The body in all its states is of foremost importance for Caryl Phillips, who had actually wished to study neurophysiology before choosing to graduate in English Language and Literature (Ledent 2-3). The novel foregrounds physical needs and sensations, the careful description of a body's position in space, as much as its location within the geography of the Black Atlantic.[6] The author, in so doing, multiplies the various possibilities of the unreliable narrator/focalizer, as characters get sick, starve, are sleep deprived, but he also foregrounds the site of the wrong done to slaves – their legal and institutionalized reduction to bodies. Nash and Edward catch malaria and « stomach complaint » (22), Nash has long had a

[6] I am leaving aside the rife possibilities of a Marxist reading of the body as a commodity, « warm flesh » exchanged for « cold goods » (1).

painful hip (26 – perhaps a consequence of his passion for « rehearsing » biblical scenes and an allusion to Adam?), Captain Hamilton suffers from fatigue and the excessive heat; his eyesight is weakening (124). Martha is arthritic (74), exhausted and unbearably cold; her shivering actually triggers memory on page 78 and opens doors into her past. Similarly, Captain Hamilton has to conclude his letters « abruptly » (109) because of illness, while the « flux » devastates both slave cargo and crew (114, 116, 121, 122). Joyce records how the war translates into more and more food restrictions, and a lack of dentists and doctors (152). There are bouts of fever, episodes of smallpox, epidemies of consumption, and a « black lung » (132) which qualifies Len as a husband. A long list of characters die an untimely death because of contagion and the novel sometimes turns into a *danse macabre* where death is made tangible in a succession of performing skeletons; the mighty Neville Chamberlain – who had, incidentally, tried to make a fortune on a Bahamian plantation in his youth – dies as surely (176) as no. 59 on board the Duke of York (122). This contributes to the reader's empathy; if the experience of the Middle Passage could limit empathic readership to descendants of slaves, any reader would know what it is to be sick, hungry or cold, and faced with their own mortality. Focusing on such universal physical distress, linking (if not comparing) slavery and wars for example, allows the novel to render the event of the Middle Passage without excluding from the field of affect readers not descending from former slaves.

I would further argue that the concept of the objective correlative imagined by T.S. Eliot travels from objects to gestures in a novel where running one's hand in the hair of a daughter signifies the unbearable pain of having to leave her at an auction block (76), or hands laced around knees express the full force of humiliation and terror as one rides back to the military camp after having been found on the street, late at night, with a woman the wrong colour (203). One's dignity thus paradoxically starts with what one owes one's body: « Lucas was not a man to let his body fetch up in flinty, lonely ground » (78). This reverie comes shortly after we encountered a shivering Martha huddling in a doorway:

> Curling herself into a tight fist against the cold, Martha huddled in the doorway and wondered if tonight she might see snow. Beautiful. Lifting her eyes without lifting up her head, she

> stared at the wide black sky that would once more be her companion. (73)[7]

The reduction of the character to her physical suffering and loneliness is made visible by her position in space, while her liminal situation (in the doorway) is metafictional – Martha's body becoming the very narrative opening in front of us with those few lines. The huddling recalls that noticed by Hamilton on board the slave ship, one which launches a moment of performance (« They huddle together, and sing their melancholy lamentations », 124).

In *Crossing the River* moments of physicality are often tied in with sight, as is the case here (« Lifting her eyes »). In *A Distant Shore* Dorothy famously pronounces, « But I see everybody all the time » (13), and is later shown, on a bus, seated at a place that allows her to steal the driver's perspective exactly (58). Phillips pays great attention to what the characters see, to the singularity of their standpoint, in true post-structuralist fashion. Like Edward Williams they are all, in various ways, « investigat[ing] matters with [their] own eyes » (13), as well as watching people watching them, as Joyce does on her honeymoon (141). This is confirmed in the last section, where Joyce happens to « glance up » (231) to catch sight of her son, who had himself « come looking » (231) – despite Joyce's previous insistence that, like Len (130), she was « not much to look at » (191).

Characters are not merely threatened by stereotypes (the slave or the settler, the submissive wife and mother, the good daughter), they become prey to spectators. One might thus read the request expressed by Nash as a pun in the following quote: « Father, will you please send me a pair of spectacles for my own use, and a further pair for my wife,

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[7] With its erotic connotations, this passage might be read as a postmodern reenactment of the Greek myth of origins, the union of Uranos and Gaia, Sky and Earth. This could be confirmed by the fact that the child which Gaia begets is no one else than Chronos, God of Time – an obviously major consideration in *Crossing the River*. The connection between sight and time is to be heard in English by an accidental drift in the word 'watch'. It is also suggested in Martha's insistence, in the first two pages of her section, upon 'prospecting' – according to the etymology, she is 'looking before' her, 'looking forward'. And it is suggested as early as the quite programmatic prologue, when the father says of himself and his children, in a strange, if correct, syntactical erasure of the preposition 'for', « We watched a while ». Time becomes the main 'show' in the novel.

Sally? » (22), testifying to his ambiguous position in the narrative, both oppressor and oppressed, protagonist and voyeur. Indeed, the various expressions of bodies, in *Crossing the River*, are systematically scrutinized by others. In the previously quoted opening of Martha's section, her gaze skywards is met by that of an anonymous spectator: « A tall man in a long overcoat, and with a freshly trimmed beard, chin tucked into his chest, looked down at her as he walked by » (73); the phrasal verb 'look down' is to be understood both in its literal and figurative meanings. In *The Final Passage*, the arrival at Victoria Station of the West Indian immigrants was similarly observed by inquisitive eyes: « Behind the fencing were rows of spectators » (145) – it seems that the stranger, a common fate of all protagonists in Phillips's novels, sees her or his outsideness reflected in the gaze of the others first and foremost.

Further along, Martha appears in a crucial scene to understand what role the body plays in the novel, as the interface between the inside and the outside, between one's emotions and the rest of the world. At the end of the section she dreams: « Martha, feeling old and tired, sat down and wept openly, and in front of her grandchildren. She would not be going any place » (94); crying in front of her mother (196) or not crying in front of Len (171) is also at issue with Joyce. Space looks like a stage, a self-enclosed/inexistent place (« She would not be going any place ») where the body is trapped and offered to the gaze of spectators. Martha's tears express her subjection to the eye of the other. This device does not, I think, feed any existentialist vein but instead, gives value to Martha's existence, turning it into a piece of evidence (etymologically, something 'to see out of', a Phillipsian combination indeed of sight and outsideness) of the dereliction suffered by slaves, even after they had been officially freed.

One important dimension of sight in the novel, is that of the proof, the idea that language lies but eyes can see for themselves. This is something that Joyce knows, as she is not fooled by the war propaganda lavished upon her Yorkshire village: « I was getting good at learning the difference between the official stories and the evidence before my eyes » (165); shortly before (in narrating time), she had already and drily closed one of her entries on an opposition between what « they say » and what « we'll see » (151). Like many others in the last section, this statement rings true retrospectively and could apply to Martha's section for example. Both women share a status as witnesses of historical events. Like Eva, in *Higher Ground*, they are privileged eye witnesses: « They

cannot know what I know. They can never know what I know » (*Higher Ground* 46). The evidence is both that of the body offered as a spectacle (« the evidence of her malaise », *eg.* 86), and the performative act of enunciation that is allowed by such a position. The body becomes the vehicle of truth, rid of the various costumes it has had to don. In *Rough Crossings*, during one of the trial scenes for which Granville Sharp was notorious, an exasperated Sergeant Davy exclaims, « Young lady, perhaps you would like Mr. Somerset to remove his shirt and display marks of flagellation? This is an English court of law, and I insist that we argue this case without recourse to the theatrics of Drury Lane. The negro shall remain silent » (54). The silence of the slave is replaced by the body beneath the shirt, and the implicit suggestion is that the « theatrics of Drury Lane » would allow for a more convincing piece of evidence than discourse. Testimony is transferred to the body and spectatorship becomes judiciary.

This paradoxically public dimension of the body, which allows justice to be rendered and theatre to create a form of communality, is expressed justly, I think, by Judith Butler:

> The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where "doing" and "being done to" become equivocal. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon. (26)

The movement of individuation announced in the prologue and performed throughout the four sections in the novel *Crossing the River* is thus key to the formation of agency, but also of a community. It is one where the character does not always want to 'do to', as when Martha does not acknowledge Lucy's proposition (« I stare back at her, but say nothing » 85), or when Joyce does not wish to react when Sandra announces her pregnancy (« I looked at her but said nothing » 156). By retrieving the names of those three slaves, the author does not turn his back upon the three-century long system of a slave trade which made twelve million victims by the narrowest count, but it renders it collectively through trying to understand how it felt at a very individual level. The novel constructs an 'equivocal agency' indeed, balanced

between the self and the others. This enterprise curtails the cold knowledge of 'the facts' taught in schools, as Faith Jackson, the protagonist of Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*, recounts: « We had to write essays telling the facts – how the slaves were captured then transported from Africa to the New World » and « draw diagrams of how the triangular trade in slaves worked, like we drew diagrams of sheep farming in Australia » (4). *Crossing the River* isolates human existence through sheer physicality, and around those bodies, spectators can see for themselves what slavery has done, then and now.

Interventions

In view of the previously outlined emphasis on physicality it might come as a surprise that all four sections should indicate a place, without any reference to protagonists. Yet, the construction of space is not disconnected from the theme of sight and the very end of the third section (« We have lost sight of Africa » 124), literally combines sight and loss. If Gail Low has turned to Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* to draw attention to « the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally in the interarticulation with racialized being » (Gilroy 198, qtd. in Low 131), I would contend that such 'interarticulation' is central to the phenomenon of performance in the novel. If the novel does not follow any pattern, spatially or otherwise, I would like in my last section to look at the connections between space and performance. The body, I argue, is represented by the novelist as a site for performances which 'take place' (literally speaking) in odd ways. This can be seen in a curiously anti-climactic moment at the very end of Edward's first day in Monrovia, spent trying to 'locate' lodgings (48), then Madison (49) and his house (50). Overcome by guilt at realizing how he had sent former slaves « to engage with a past and a history that are truly not their own » (52), Edward goes down to the harbour, and the culmination of such a momentous journey unfolding over more than seven pages is the following:

> Once there, he gazed upon the tranquil sea, the moonlight sparkling on the water so that it looked like a liquid case of jewels. And then his attention was seized by the echoing of heels upon flaggings, and the loud protestations of a woman who declaimed lunatic phrases as though speaking some foolish part she had written for herself. Judging her an Irish whore by dint of her accent, Edward stared at her as she trembled in her

> cloud of wounded indignation, the thick powder on her face channelled with tears, her mouth set in a twist, and he felt pity and despair in equal part. (53)

With an emphasis on a comic artificiality (« declaimed lunatic phrases », « some foolish part », « the thick powder on her face ») and its distortion of the Aristotelian tragic couple of pity and terror – become, here, an a-cathartic despair –, this passage reads as a confirmation that Edward's enterprise has been, indeed, a farce, already suggested a few lines earlier by the smiling « buffoon » of the tavern. Meaning unravels as connotations thrive in various directions, with intimations of violence (« seized », « wounded ») of weakness (« flaggings »), or of judgement (« case », « de*claim*ed », « judging »), but maybe also of relief (« heels », homophonous of 'heals'). Sight is foregrounded (« gazed upon », « looking like », « stared at ») but rivalled by sound, while temporality is anomalous with « protestations » coming without what provoked them, and the « echoing » of heels before the appearance of its source. And yet this woman, a sad clown, a displaced colonized subject oppressed as a woman, as a prostitute (at least in the eye of male prejudice), as an Irish[8] and as an exile, is given pride of place in this crucial moment for Edward. She is also replacing the landscape, which had announced her (« jewels »), and which she embodies (« cloud »). Her 'mouth', and the tears 'channelling' her face, could even be seen as a displacement of the mouth of the Saint Paul River which, as he is watching the harbour, Edward could not not be seeing – her performance heralds the quest undertaken by her spectator, and might actually be provoking it. With this moment of farcical performance, what had remained intellectualised (« It occurred to him » 52) in his feeling of guilt finally becomes an affect.

Sketched out in the novel is the re-inscription of a body in space beyond language, as is visible in the absence of re-transcription of the Irishwoman's phrases. Her accent and performance allow her to occupy the place in a way not allowed by discourse. This form of theatricality resists the oppression of power, one which has struck in the heart-breaking scene where children reach Joyce's village with « an

[8] For the racist association between Blacks and the Irish, or the working-class prostitute, in the colonial propaganda, see McClintock in the section entitled « "White Negroes" and "Celtic Calibans", Antinomies of Race » (McClintock 52-6).

identification tag around their necks » (144) – where one, nevertheless, also hears the phrase 'to play tag', *i.e.*, to exchange roles, not to mention the fact that a tag is also a grammatical notion aimed at addressing someone at the end of a sentence. Language actually fails, as in any postmodern text, to pin any protagonist. In the second entry of the fourth and last section, dated June 1939, a young Joyce appears as an immodest figure of writer and reader both. Employed as a clerk, « charged with keeping the books right » – not to mention the fact that she shares her name with possibly the most important English-language author of the first twentieth century –, she boasts that she is able to « read [Len] like a book » (130). By the last line in the entry and with hindsight, she admits to her failure as a reader: « I should have known then[9] » (131).

Such is often the reader's experience in *Crossing the River*. Clues proliferate and allow one to piece them together and carry on some sort of investigation; nonetheless, the loose ends amount to more than the solutions by the time one reaches the end. There is a ceaseless tension between dissolution and construction of meaning, between the appearance and disappearance of scriptures. The act of reading is often jeopardized. Amelia Williams hides the letters written by her husband and his lover. On pages 10 and 11, we are given only and arbitrarily a 'portion' of a letter which was actually never sent, or received. At the end, a piece of paper (carrying an address, as it were, and one at which he « kept glancing ») disappears into Greer's pocket (231). What is vanishing from sight with this slip of paper is also the authorial presence, in truly postcolonial fashion. One could not insist enough on the instabilities and uncertainties, uncommon even by postmodern standards, around enunciation in the novel. The reader has access to the two women's, Martha and Joyce's, voices, in texts that could be described as largely confessional, but where focalization is imperilled. Plays with perspective are visible of course with « Crossing the River », which all of a sudden gives us the viewpoint of the slave buyer, and which was only announced in the prologue by the italics, not by the names of the lost children. The first section is focalized on Edward, or narrated by a third person, or consists in letters written by Nash and whose addressee can shift from one line to the next. This formal choice might have been picked up in Joseph Conrad's pages; in *Extravagant Strangers* Phillips

[9] This is one of the few clues speaking against Joyce's section reading like a diary; narrated and narrating time are obviously not congruent, in yet another diffraction of perspective.

writes the following about the author of *Heart of Darkness*, « Conrad was to transform the English novel in both style and content. He abandoned the stability given by the single narrator in favour of the shifting perspective brought by several » (24). In a similar ambiguity, the whole of « The Pagan Coast » reads like a colonial piece of writing where in a carnivalesque movement of reversal the Black man is cast in the role of the colonizer, and the African is once more oppressed into exploitation and silence. Nash finds himself trying to improve the condition of the 'natives' by teaching during the week, and preaching on Sundays, in the very same building, like a born-and-bred missionary intent on 'killing bodies' but 'saving souls', as Byron would have it. The oddities in the narrative device contribute to revealing the anti-essentialism of characterization; in turn, the latter feeds the prevalence of masks and variety of roles. As in a play, the author disappears behind his various creatures; both his body and his authority remain fully invisible. Like the Irish prostitute, everyone appears free to write their own cues.

The father's initial 'common memory' crosses the limits of historical boundaries and allows experiences to be re-enacted constantly. The 'beyond' made explicit in the prologue could be linked to Homi Bhabha's reflections on moments of reconnection with the present:

> To dwell 'in the beyond' is [...] to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; to touch the future on its hither side. In that sense, then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now. (Bhabha 7)

This beyondness echoes the general transgression of borders in the novel while the notion of reinscription introduced by Bhabha suggests a performativity of history which is the opposite of memorialization, of legacy, of testamentary impulses. First approached through the idea of sight (« revisionary »), the movement of performance « in the here and now » is envisaged as novelistic (« redescribe »), then as dramatic (« reinscribe our [...] commonality »). Such hybridity in form is to be found in *Crossing the River*; it aims at bodily 'intervention', an inbetweenness which is also an intrusion on stage.

While Nash is being « *dis*patched » (9, 12) as an « *ex*periment » (11) or an « *ex*pedition » (9, my emphases) in a movement of exclusion and fragmentation, while Martha tells of her « exodus » (87), there are

series of inclusion in the novel which do not mark belonging, but an irruption. One might mention the « incidents » (206) of babies, the « invasion » (134) of 'Yankee' soldiers or that of German ones (160). Captain Hamilton dreads first and foremost an « insurrection » (103, 114) of slaves. These map out what Phillips has called, in an interview, « the relationship of Britain and the outside world for two-and-a-half centuries »[10] and it is important to acknowledge how the first and last sections are much about the relationship between Britain and America – the issue of slavery, then of Blacks, is 'only' a catalyst thereof. In this quote, the 250 years reckoned by the fatherly voice in the prologue and epilogue become the sum of the devastation wreaked by the British Empire, and the racism that still ensues. This reveals not only that *Crossing the River* is to be understood as a trajectory back to the very origins of evil, but that these origins are re-enacted « today ». Joyce asserts open-endedness (« not the whole story », 191), as opposed to Nash's alienated belief in teleology (« your work is complete », 63). The movement of endlessly renewed inscription becomes a strange metafictional catachresis in some passages, such as when Captain Hamilton writes to his wife: « I have written myself into tears » (110; in Newton, Liverpool, May 27th). Characters are the physical medium through which language intervenes, as when Joyce declares, « Language goes right through me » (138) or « I'm all ears » (145). The stress on physicality deprives characters of a voice but returns a body to them, thus retrieving a sense of humanity resisting exploitation.

I hope to have shown how *Crossing the River* goes beyond matters of slavery, the Black Atlantic and the horrors of History, by drawing attention to the theatrical dimension of human existence. *Crossing the River* is a novel about the impossibility to know oneself or the others beyond watching what the body reveals, or does not; beyond masks and rehearsed cues. Subjectivity emerges as a necessary failure but in the process, the worth inhumanly attributed by slavery to bodies has turned into the value of meaning, an ambivalent one. Agency has been retrieved, if not redeemed. The novel outgrows considerations about slavery and touches upon the human condition in general while in return, an emphasis on physical pain allows the reader to reach out to the condition of slaves. The novelist reminds each one of us, whatever our

[10] « [Y]ou can't expect something to characterise the relationship of Britain and the outside world for two-and-a-half centuries and for it not to have deep reverberations still today » (Jaggi 26).

origins, race and gender, how we suffer from bodily dereliction, how this mysterious conjunction of heavenly soul and beastly body called Man has produced immense texts the whole world through. In this respect Caryl Phillips places himself in a lineage that would include, perhaps, Fyodor Dostoyevski and Henry James, Hölderlin and Hendrik Ibsen – the latter a major influence for Phillips. This scope of influences might be visible in his candidly remarking how no one had sneered when Hardy wrote *Tess* or Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (Clingman 113), when (white) male novelists staged (white) female characters. Even as he deals with the past, Phillips engages with the fate of our contemporaries, in the sort of « warm detachment » (73) he might share with Stephan, the protagonist in *The Nature of Blood*, his following novel.

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