

No Direction Home

The novel as betrayal

Matthew Cheney

Foreigners

By Caryl Phillips

Knopf, 2007

Ours is a hybrid age, an age of mixing cultures and histories, an age of migrations and transmigrations. Such an age deserves hybrid forms to explore the life it breeds and to delve down into the sources of its textures. The hope is that those forms will express more than can be expressed otherwise and will point toward truths invisible to less eclectic lenses. One of the strengths of Caryl Phillips's oeuvre is that it is difficult to box up with convenient labels and ship off as widgets and comfort food. It sings and talks and hectors and hums. It walks and chews gum at the same time.

Phillips habitually melds political, cultural, and aesthetic concerns, mixing and matching tales and voices, revisiting favorite obsessions and bugbears in different contexts as he searches for the concrete implications of abstract terms: race, identity, home. His first two novels, *The Final Passage* and *A State of Independence*, told tales of people between places—in the former, of people leaving the Caribbean; in the latter, the reverse. With *Higher Ground*, he introduced a technique that he would offer variations on in many of his later books: stories of people at different points in history, linked by theme (in this case, an assistant to slave traders in the 19th century, an African-American prisoner in the 1960s, and a woman who as a child escaped the Holocaust). Phillips's next three novels, *Cambridge*, *Crossing the Water*, and *The Nature of Blood*, continued to use multiple voices to tell thematically-related stories, and the books' power came from their polyphony, as readers were forced to fill in gaps and make connections between times and spaces in a mosaic of individual lives. *A Distant Shore* and *Dancing in the Dark* continued to build novels from various points of view and narrative modes, but the fragments were linked not only by theme, but by characters, maintaining some elements of Phillips's collage structure while creating more traditionally unified novels. With his latest book, *Foreigners*, though, Phillips has returned to the structure he

introduced in *Higher Ground* and used to particularly strong effect in *Crossing the Water* and *The Nature of Blood*: multiple stories, separated by time, linked by implication. It is not as effective a book as the earlier ones, not as varied and not as resonant, but it offers a few moments of great beauty and insight.

In “The Pioneers: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain” (from his 2001 collection of essays, *A New World Order*), Phillips writes: “Race and ethnicity are the bricks and mortar with which the British have traditionally built a wall around the perimeter of their island nation and created fixity. On the inside reside patriotic Britons, who are British by virtue of their race (white) and their culturally determined ethnicity. On the outside of the wall are the foreigners with their swarthy complexions, or their Judaism, or their smelly food, or their mosques, or their impenetrable accents, or their unacceptable clothes, or their tongue-twisting names, or their allegiance to Rome.”

Foreigners gives life to these ideas by presenting the reader with three stories. The first, “Dr. Johnson’s Watch,” investigates the life and death of Samuel Johnson’s “faithful negro servant,” Francis Barber, who to the horror of many of Johnson’s friends was named the principal beneficiary in the great writer’s will. Despite this, Barber died in poverty. How he came to such an end is the subject of the story, told from the point of view of a journalist who goes in search of Barber sixteen years after Johnson’s death.

The second section of the book, “Made in Wales,” tells the story of Randolph Turpin, who in 1951 defeated Sugar Ray Robinson and became Britain’s first black world-champion boxer and, for a moment, one of the most famous men in the world, and one of the most beloved in Britain. His fame didn’t last, however, and his later years were filled with misery and debt, ending in suicide.

The third section, “Northern Lights,” tells of another bad end: that of David Oluwale, a Nigerian immigrant whose difficult life in Leeds concluded with his being beaten by police officers who had routinely harrassed him; his body was found in the River Aire.

Each section has a distinct tone, voice, and point of view. “Dr. Johnson’s Watch” is a first-person account, and the diction is similar to that of eighteenth-century writings (though Phillips does not go as far in imitating that age’s syntax as, for instance, Thomas Pynchon did in *Mason & Dixon*), allowing it a certain distance and irony. From faux journalism we move to more straightforward journalism: “Made in Wales” is similar in structure and tone to Phillips’s book of reportage and meditation, *The Atlantic Sound*, and it would not feel out of place as an article in a magazine like *The New Yorker* or *Harper’s*. The events of “Northern Lights” are close in time to those of “Made in Wales,” but their presentation is different: Here Phillips lets us get to know David Oluwale through the voices of people who encountered him during his life, and through documents that present different facts, opinions, and moments from that life.

Foreigners is a less satisfying book than many of Phillips’s others: less complex, less engaging, less than the sum of its parts. Where the narratively unconnected pieces of *Higher Ground*, *Crossing the Water*, and *The Nature of Blood* (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, nearly all of Phillips’s previous fictions) worked together in ways that produced multiple resonances within the books, in *Foreigners* the occasional resonances are murky, and the second and third sections contain many passages that are exceedingly dull. Phillips’s work has often suffered sluggish pacing from his inability to distinguish vivid detail from mucilaginous detail, but in *Foreigners* this weakness overwhelms everything else the book has to offer, because in the absence of more ideas and connections to carry us through, the details become numbing.

“Dr. Johnson’s Watch” is the liveliest of the book’s sections (it is also about half the length of the other two), partly because in sustaining a single and distinctive narrative voice, the story implies various levels of meaning, and many questions are left unanswered and unanswerable. The matter-of-fact narration of “Made in Wales” only comes alive when Phillips inserts himself into the story at the end, and the potential for insight of “Northern Lights” goes

unrealized, because the different voices and perspectives are not different enough to justify the technique, and every added item comes to feel more like padding than like provocation to thought.

Thought, presumably, is what Phillips wanted these portraits to cause, but *Foreigners* is too schematic in its juxtapositions, too purposeless in its hybrid forms, to present a coherent vision. Or perhaps the problem is more that the vision is too coherent—three black men whose lives ended wretchedly in England. That Turpin and Oluwale could die as wretchedly in the twentieth century as Barber in the eighteenth is a sad fact, but hardly a surprising one. The various juxtapositions within *Foreigners* seldom produce any emotional connection to the situations, and, without more material for intellectual stimulation, the book often becomes tedious.

The elements of the stories that attracted Phillips to them remain compelling, but the book ultimately offers us less to think about than many of Phillips's more straightforward essays, and it offers us less to care about than his more vivid fictions. The strength of, particularly, *Crossing the Water* and *The Nature of Blood* emanates from the breadth of their concerns—a breadth that encouraged readers to make radical connections. Those connections are far less radical and far more obvious in *Foreigners* than in almost any of Phillips's previous books.