The Human(ist) Dimension of Caryl Phillips's Fiction through the Example of *Higher Ground* (1989)

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Abstract: The paper presents a critical rereading of Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground* (1989), which tells the (hi)stories of a West African man, an African-American teenager and a Polish war refugee who set themselves against hostile socio-political systems. Originally published in 1989, but reprinted in 2006, the novel is an exemplary piece of Phillips's fiction that embodies all the characteristic elements of his writing: fragmentary narration, deep intertextuality and, most importantly, a purely humanist message that enables one to place the novel beyond the Black Atlantic or Afro-Caribbean canon, as Caryl Phillips is customarily read. The paper revolves around the issues of cultural identity, intercultural migrations, political radicalism and social exclusion, showing that Phillips's fiction constitutes a timeless and valuable source of knowledge about the socio-cultural condition of the contemporary West and thus deserves wider recognition on the European literary scene.

Keywords: Caryl Phillips, humanism, multiculturalism, migrants, migrations

Caryl Phillips is known for his complex, fragmentary novels, which confront readers with the anxieties of migrations, intolerance, cultural misunderstandings and racial discrimination. As Phillips once said, 'I believe passionately in the moral capacity of fiction to wrench us out of our ideological burrows' and, by forcing us into contact with *the other*, to open our eyes to the complexity of the world we live in, 'for literature *is* plurality in action' (Phillips 2011, 16; italics in the original). Thus Phillips sees literature as a space of cultural confrontation and he claims that the role of a writer is to facilitate intercultural dialogues and shape intercultural sensitivity. Needless to say, his message is especially significant today as our public discourse is becoming dominated by a nostalgic rhetoric, a possible return to the idealised past from before globalisation, where clear national and ethic boundaries define one's place

within the community (Bauman 2017, 3). It seems, however, that Phillips is still relatively little read beyond the Black Atlantic canon where, in turn, he is famous for such novels as *Cambridge* (1991), *Crossing the River* (1993) or *The Nature of Blood* (1997). Here, Phillips is usually tied to Paul Gilroy's vision of the African diasporic experience and classified as an African diasporic writer.[6] Nevertheless, Phillips's dedication to reclaiming the African voices from the abyss of history is only one aspect of his writing worth appreciating nowadays. Throughout his career, Phillips has been consistently focusing on the marginalised from all the possible ethnic groups, building parallels between African, Polish or Jewish pasts for example. '[D]isplacement, home/homelessness, race and identity, Eurocentrism, victimisation and complicity' (Schatteman 2009, xiv) are commonplace themes in his fiction and he does not shun from tackling difficult, or even openly political issues. He constructs protagonists who 'are highly ambiguous and deeply flawed' (Schatteman 2009, xiv) and whose moral choices puzzle readers. Consistently refusing to pass any moral judgement on his characters, Phillips provokes his readers into sympathising with his protagonists and thus rethinking their own socio-political positioning. His texts, then, 'resist the easy reduction of history and contemporary events to sloganeering' (Schatteman 2009, 53), so typical of today's political and media language.

Therefore, the 'human(ist)' dimension of Phillips's fiction suggested in the title points out the fact that, despite experimenting with narrative forms and voices, Phillips has always leaned towards conveying a broadly relatable vision of human experience that exceeds ethnic and national borders. This Phillipsian 'human-centrism' has nothing to do with endorsing an anthropocentric vision of the world, as the phrase is commonly defined today, and therefore Phillips's writings elude classifications into postcolonial, African diasporic or posthumanist veins.[7] This simple observation, though by no means

[6] Paul Gilroy advocated a transnational character of the African diasporic experience, which he presented in this book *The Black Atlantic* (1993); within its realms, he placed the Atlantic, understood as both the ocean and the symbolic space of transgression, at the heart of African migrations and argued for the existence of a common transnational identity of African diasporas across the world, which stems from their common experience of dislocation and slavery. Nowadays, his theory is approached with caution as the idea of a universal African experience is being contested within the African diaspora itself.

[7] Posthumanism as a trend in the humanities is usually associated with the works of the French sociologist Bruno Latour. It challenges humanism as an essentially anthropocentric worldview that

revolutionary, gains weight if placed within the context of a gradual departure from the postmodern contestation of *truth* that we observe today; more precisely, critics have started noticing a renewed longing for realism in fiction, understood here as a pursuit of 'meaning, truth, representational accuracy' in literature – the aesthetics which postmodern criticism regarded as compromised (Toth 2010, 1–23).[8] However, one needs to be adamant in stating that they do not mean a direct return to the nineteenth-century paradigm, but a return to epistemological seriousness in literature as a reaction against the postmodern distrust of *facts* that led to the rebirth of 'political and media populism' (Ferraris 2014, 3). In other words, as Arkadiusz Żychliński (2017, 187–198) puts it, people are once again hungry for truth in fiction, which marks a new chapter for confessional and testimonial narratives. Even though we do not yet know where this path may lead us, one may argue that it makes such writers as Caryl Phillips, with his unwavering focus on testimonial narrative traditions, well worth (re)reading and bringing forward to a wider readership.[9]

The present paper illustrates all the aforementioned aspects of Phillip's writing through *Higher Ground: A Novel in Three Parts* (1989), first published in 1989 and then reprinted in 2006, as it constitutes a good example of the hallmarks of Phillips's fiction. Firstly, the tripartite structure of the piece combines three distinct narrative voices into a single allegorical tale of non-belonging; as the author himself says, '[e]ach segment of the novel demanded a different point of attack' and gave him the opportunity to break away from 'the straitjacket of the third person [narration]' (Phillips 2009, 15). Secondly,

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discriminates against non-human entities. For more, see Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993).

[8] Realism as a movement based on the assumption that literary narratives convey truth about human experience (Watt 1957, 11), and a type of a narrative mode employed in the nineteenth-century historiography (White 2009, 23), was both 'a rhetoric and an ideology' (Duncan 1992, 6). Therefore, postmodern criticism departed from realism in favour of emphasising the ironic nature of narrative representations. Though postcolonial writers also contested realism in the said understanding, they nonetheless have always approached the postmodern deconstruction of truth and history with caution (Young 2004, 51). Rooted in an alternative set of historical and political experiences, they turned towards reclaiming their own *truth* and *history* reconceptualising realism as marvellous or allegorical. For more, see Hamish Dalley's *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts* (2014).

[9] Regrettably, so far only one of his novels has been translated into Polish – *A Distant Shore* published by Muza under the Polish title *Odległy brzeg*.

as Benedicte Lédént observes, *Higher Ground* is a perfect example of the deep referentiality characteristic of Phillips's fiction. It may be read through associations with slave narratives, African-American rap music, modernist literature, or the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Joseph Conrad, Wilson Harris, and Franz Fanon. Though Lédént (1996, 300–308) fully appreciates Phillips's intertextual potential, she nonetheless warns against seeing him as a predominantly counter-discursive writer, as such a view may overshadow the fact that his main artistic aim is to (re)tell Western history through an array of individual lives and voices. Therefore, *Higher Ground* may be seen an embodiment of Phillips's ambition to achieve 'his novelistic "higher ground"', which Susheila Nasta understands as 'artistic transcendence of the particularities of exile and dispossession so as to create a more general "literature of belonging"' (Nasta 2000, 64); he 'does not want to confine his alternative history to peoples of African descent as it would then become a form of cultural nationalism' (Nasta 2000, 64). Putting it differently, Caryl Phillips sees writing literature not so much as creating art but as creating a dialogue between himself and his readers that may open our eyes to different aspects of our own identity. The following analysis emphasises those aspects of Phillips's fiction, namely his ambition to create a widely relatable literature of belonging and to force his readers to critically assess Western history and our contemporary socio-political reality. As such, Phillips proves to be one of those writers whose vision of story-telling as a human(ist) mission may be of great value today; not only does it sensitise us to the experience of non-belonging but it also openly challenges a dehumanising vision of *the other* as the one that threatens the wellbeing of the West.

Broadly speaking, *Higher Ground* is a collection of three portrayals of individuals struggling to carve a niche for themselves within a hostile society. Within its realms, Phillips pays particular attention to how the protagonists redefine their identity, choosing either to adapt or to withdraw from the mainstream part of that society. The first part of the novel, entitled 'Heartland', takes the readers to the shores of West Africa and paints a crude image of the African life under colonial rule in the times of the slave trade. It may be read as an extended commentary on *becoming* the other within one's own homeland, poignantly shown through the example of the narrator – an unnamed West African man – who serves as a translator and intermediary between the natives and the Europeans. The action of 'Heartland' is symbolically stretched between two spaces, the trading post, known as the Fort,

and a nearby native African village, from which the slaves are procured for commerce, and which happens to be the narrator's birth place. The reader observes the everyday workings of the Fort and immediately notes that the system of colonial power has infiltrated both private and public spheres, and pushed the narrator into a morally ambiguous sphere in-between cultural adaptation and resistance (cf. Bhabha 2000, 101). Initially, it seems that the narrator has grown accustomed to his life and he seems able to appreciate certain aspects of it: '[w]ithin the confines of the Fort my position is secure, if low and often unbearable. I now find it difficult to conceive of a life either before or after this place. I need to feel safe' (Phillips 1989, 19). This illusory sense of safety, however, is unexpectedly shattered when one day his superior, Price, takes him on a journey to his very own village where he is to assist in procuring a girl that would satisfy Price's peculiar sexual appetites. When surrounded by his former African brothers, the man recognises the ambiguity of his positioning as belonging neither to the colonizers nor to the colonized. He sees himself '[m]arooned between them, knowing that neither fully trusts [him], that neither wants to be close to [him], neither recognises [his] smell or [his] posture' (Phillips 1989, 22). He knows that '[he is] easily identifiable as one who dwells with the enemy' (Phillips 1989, 24), and thus 'feel[s] uncomfortable conversing in our native tongue' (Phillips 1989, 33). At this very moment, then, 'the magnitude of [his] fall strikes [him]' (Phillips 1989, 22), but the reasons behind his choices are by no means easy to judge. 'I merely survive, and if survival is a crime then I am guilty' (Phillips 1989, 24), he says, but makes no excuses for his previous actions: '[y]ou see I have no excuses for my present circumstances, they were thrust upon me and I accepted them (…) I subsequently acquired some status in their [European] eyes and began to assist them in their trading' (Phillips 1989, 44).

Such reflections of the narrator echo the state of 'the unhomeliness', once famously described by Homi Bhabha, which is 'the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations' (Bhabha 2000, 13) and part of the migrant and refugee experience, although by no means limited to these groups. In fact, it does not seem unjustified to argue that 'unhomeliness' is a humanly universal experience, capturing the moment when one ceases to feel 'at home', or rather cannot attain the feeling of *being at home*, even if one is not homeless. As Bhabha says, this displacement is a direct result of cultural relocation, which may be physical or symbolic, and as such it happens to Phillips's narrator, who can no longer call Africa his home. In fact, such a displacement

is experienced by all the protagonists contextualised in *Higher Ground* which, in turn, makes them relatable to many a cross-cultural migrant. What seems most intriguing in 'Heartland', however, is not so much the very position of the narrator within the colonial world, but the strategy he employs to survive within its realms. More precisely, the Europeans running the Fort remain oblivious to the complexity of their translator's identity and they see him as an example of a successful cultural adaptation. 'I can fully appreciate the distance – the somewhat remarkable distance that you have travelled along the path of civilization' (Phillips 1989, 52), says the Governor.

The protagonist resorts to mimicry and he adopts, or rather imitates, the manners of the colonizer, which ultimately proves a subversive strategy allowing him to carve a niche within the body of a hostile system and to draw some benefits from its mechanisms (Bhabha 2004, 122–123). Mimicry, then, may prove successful as a strategy of survival, but the question truly asked by the narrator touches upon the morality of such a choice. In truth, such debates are not unfamiliar to postcolonial scholars and V. S. Naipaul, for example, is known to have been very harsh towards his West-Indian brothers, whom he saw as merely poor imitations of the West, failing to recognise the sociological and psychological complexity of mimicry and its subversive potential (Cudjoe 1988, 139). Phillips, however, seems to lean toward Bhabha's interpretation and, instead of being harsh towards his narrator, he suggests that in colonialism, much as in any other oppressive system, nobody is innocent of partial collaboration and therefore it is all too easy to pass moral judgements from the temporal and spatial distance. Significantly enough, and somewhat surprisingly, the already mentioned Governor discerns such a dubious quality of progress brought by the Europeans to Africa:

> [I]t is possible you [African people] may never recover from this [European] intrusion. I am led to believe that certain chiefs have been known to raid their own villages and seize people of custom, language and manners near to their own, then subject them to the whims of factors in exchange for brandy (Phillips 1989, 51).

The Governor intuitively acknowledges the fact that the Europeans have 'intruded' onto the African way of life, which, in turn, has brought about negative consequences. Nonetheless, he justifies the susceptibility

of the Africans to the corrupting effect of Europe by repeating clichés about their inborn barbarity. 'Imagine being able to pay a king or a chief in alcohol to round up his own people and reduce them to little more than horses', he observes, 'is it any wonder that there is some debate on whether you have in you the capacity for reason?' (Phillips 1989, 51). This unnerving remark strikes one even stronger if one sets his words against those of the chief of a native tribe. More precisely, when our narrator visits his village, the chief tries to extract from him a bunch of information about the slave trade, hoping for a negative answer: 'I am led to believe that they take our people to their country to work for them in the fields; to harvest their crops in servitude' (Phillips 1989, 41). In return, however, the narrator offers only silence: 'I can say nothing truthful that will alleviate their worry so I remain mute' (Phillips 1989, 42).

Using Slavoy Žižek's metaphor, Phillips presents his protagonists and the colonial world at the moment of denial, when all parties participate in the system, but are not yet ready to pierce the veil of ideological illusion that surrounds them (Žižek 2008, 15), which is well captured in the following words uttered by the narrator: 'regardless of the more obvious differences of our origins, we are all trapped by similar circumstances" (Phillips 1989, 20). To complicate this image even further, Phillips brings to light yet another element, namely the patriarchal structure of native Africa, drawing a parallel between two systems – colonial and tribal – on yet another level. In so doing, he allows his otherwise complacent protagonist to utilise his privileged position earned through mimicry to rescue the African girl he first helped to procure from the village. Once Price has abused her and irreversibly scarred her body, he asks the narrator to take her back to the village. The man, however, soon finds out that the Africans would not claim her back, as for them she is tainted. The Head Man of the village decides even that the narrator should take the girl back, and do with her as he pleases: 'You must take her and never return or you shall both lose your lives' (Phillips 1989, 42). Although the narrator initially refuses, he quickly realises that, should he leave her behind, she will surely die; thus he brings the girl back to the Fort, hides her in his quarters and cares for her, being well aware that he is risking his own head in the process. Surprisingly enough, the girl does not despise the man for the fact that he helped Price and she is fully aware of her own conditioning: 'My father had to disown me. (…) [i]n our tradition [the father] is able to give up a daughter more readily than he would his pride or his position

in the village" (Phillips 1989, 45). As one may nonetheless predict, the section ends sadly – the girl is discovered and the narrator locked up in the docks. There he awaits transportation to the colonies and his story goes full circle: now he is the lowest of the low and his place as a translator is taken by a young man, in whom he recognises ambitions akin to his own. As one reads, 'Price stands with the new "linguist", a young man who barks orders at us in our own language and then turns and converses with them in theirs" (Phillips 1989, 59). At this point in the narrative, the system proves more powerful than the individual.

The narrator of 'Heartland' chose the path of partial adaptation which, although ultimately unsuccessful, nonetheless allowed him to survive and to take an active stance against the system. The second section of the novel, entitled 'The Cargo Rap', shows a contrary image of a young man who refuses to accept any moral compromise in his struggles with the world, but who experiences his own 'unhomeliness' just as strongly as the narrator. 'The Cargo Rap' is written in the form of letters, dated from January 1967 to August 1968, authored by an African-American man, Rudi Williams, and sent from prison to his friends and family. Rudi, as he himself claims, is imprisoned for merely attempting to steal forty dollars, and unfairly kept in a high security facility. The image of the boy that emanates from his letters, however, shows an angry young man from an impoverished background who is accused of participation in an armed robbery and who continues to challenge the guards and fellow prisoners, which, in turn, results in solitary confinement. The primary feeling emanating from Rudi's letters is that of hatred towards America, white people, and everything they stand for. His dismissal of America and American culture takes at times caricature forms; for example, he accuses his own mother of a slave mentality whenever she warns him against getting into trouble (Phillips 1989, 64) and he claims that '[t]he sooner our professional slaves die', a category into which he includes all Afro-Americans participating in the system, 'the better for us [the Africans] all' (Phillips 1989, 73). On top of this, he admires Malcolm X's uncompromising struggles, and especially his decision to adopt Islam: 'the only religion for the black man is an African religion, preferably Islam. (…) [T]he one religion to be avoided is that of Christianity' (Phillips 1989, 75). At the same time, Rudi idealises the communist regimes and supports the development of communism in Africa, justifying the use of violence in reshaping the world. 'I try now to marry my political reading with the African-American experience' (Phillips 1989, 79), he says,

and the ideology Rudi propels may be called a radical version of pan-Africanism married with communism.

Although beyond doubt very emotional, Rudi's letters nonetheless convey an image of the American society that strikes one as uncomfortably contemporary. 'Men are not naturally brutal', he says in the context of the crime rate in the Afro-American community, '[i]t is their environment that makes them so' (Phillips 1989, 71). This environment for Rudi was a life on the streets, among guns and crime, where he got his girlfriend pregnant very early and, immediately after, he went to jail, never actually meeting his daughter. His America, therefore, is a very denial of the American dream, where everything is possible; an especially powerful moment of contrast between the ideology of success and reality comes when Rudi places himself alongside the famous people of colour, such as Toussaint for example, claiming that they prove that one should '[n]ever let anybody tell you that the odds are too long. Anything can be achieved given the right mental attitude' (Phillips 1989, 118). His own case painfully contradicts this rule as he very acutely remembers a teacher who recognised in him the potential for greater things: 'it was he who told me that I had some talent; that I might one day become a clerk. He did not mention doctor, lawyer, judge, professor, or nuclear physicist' (Phillips 1989, 76). Being a clerk, then, is a synonym of success for a talented African-American boy and Rudi himself has little hope for affirm-ative action – a political programme aimed to guarantee African-American youth equal education – to change the status quo. As he writes:

> Do they seriously believe that by having ten black and then white students they are advancing the cause of racial harmony in America? (…) When you speak to most African-American men the failure of integration as a viable social experiment becomes startlingly clear. Most of us don't want a damn thing to do with them (…) We do not want to be integrated into their lives any more than they want to integrate with us (Phillips 1989, 115).

According to Rudi, the gap between the two communities is impossible to bridge and his words strike a surprising tone with the present day situation in America where African-Americans still voice their concerns about systemic

discrimination, and especially police abuse, and therefore they remain reluctant to trust the system and the privileged groups.[10]

Rudi's observations on racial tensions in America go even further than the animosities between white and black communities. More precisely, when Rudi comments on a common dislike of a movie, *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner,*[11] watched by the prisoners from all possible American racial groups, he notes that, although they all agreed as to the poor quality of the movie, '[they] did not like the fact that [they] all agreed' (Phillips 1989, 154). This seemingly innocent remark echoes Bauman's well-known concerns about the failure of multiculturalism as a programme of social reform. Although supported by the state both in America and Europe, it did not facilitate integration; instead, under the disguise of respecting cultural differences, it solidified the ghetto-like mentality of minority and majority groups, contributing to the problems with social integration noticeable even among the second and third generation immigrants (Bauman 2011, 46). Moreover, in his anger at the system, Rudi resembles not only a representative of a cultural minority, but also an average frustrated young man of today's West. Seeing no chance to better their fate, such angry young men vent their frustration though voting for radical political parties or, most dangerously, resort to violence. As Terry Eagleton writes in *Holy Terror* (2005), the ideology of endless progress 'for which nothing is impossible once you put your mind to it has exhausted its potential for social change, but even so it still remains part and parcel of the American and capitalist dream. One cannot, however, remain impervious to the fact that it discriminates against those who simply cannot make it, and this group is growing alarmingly strong in the West. 'Failure, for this crassly hubristic doctrine, is simply lack of will-power' and it 'dehumanizes the very humanity it acclaims', argues Eagleton. 'There are citizens of the United States for whom the word "can't" is as pernicious as the word "communist"' (Eagleton 2005, 104). Thus, the communist bug with which Phillips infected Rudy gains a deeper dimension. Although no longer read in its original political context of a struggle between Soviet and Western blocks,

[10] Those interested may place Rudi's letters in the context of the ongoing, and still unresolved, debate on crime rates within the African-American community and the US police force's likability to kill an African-American offender rather than a white one (Stolberg and Williams 2017, A9).

[11] The film was made in 1967. It contextualises the issue of a mixed-race marriage, reflecting the debates of the American public of the time.

it remains a powerful symbol of an ideological exhaustion of the West and late capitalism to which, as of yet, we have no answer. One thing we know for sure, however, is that the West fails to face up to the problems of people like Rudi, and the result may be political violence, because the 'anger of the excluded and abandoned is a uniquely rich ore from which constant supplies of profuse political capital can be extracted' (Bauman 2017, 69).

Undoubtedly, 'The Cargo Rap' is the most emotional part of the novel, and the next section, 'Higher Ground', significantly lowers the tension evoked by Rudi, confronting us with a calmer yet equally profound image of a social outcast who refuses to adapt to the mainstream society but, at the same time, does not find strength within herself to rebel against the dominant order. The main protagonist of the section is Irina, a Polish-Jewish woman, who arrives in England as a war refugee and carries within herself deep traumas connected with anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Her narrative imitates that of the stream of consciousness, providing us with a deeply personal image of a grand historical moment that the readers are invited to witness from a very personal and intimate perspective of an individual victim. Not organised linearly, the story travels with Irina's memories and takes us back to Poland, where Irina's family, as many Polish-Jewish families at that time, runs a small trading establishment. There, they live their quiet middle-class life until the growing wave of anti-Semitism starts ruining their world. As Phillips rightly suggests, the racial tension grew successively stronger in Poland even before the invasion of Nazi Germany, but the family refused to discuss the problem for fear that voicing their concerns would make them even more real. The silence, however, is broken when Irina's sister, Rachel, gets badly beaten, and probably abused, which triggers in her the onset of a severe depression. As Irina admits 'the attack was not unexpected' and 'Rachel (…) had once suggested that they should discuss the "problem" with Mama'. Irina 'said no for she had noticed that Mama was showing signs of tired resignation, and had formed a habit of speaking to strangers with her eyes lowered' (…) (Phillips 1989, 191). In truth, the mother herself 'wanted to leave and go away to England or America, for what happened to Rachel frightened her, but papa was against it' (Phillips 1989, 191). As such, their combined family inertia leads up to the moment when Poland is invaded by the Nazis, and Rachel is too ill to travel, so only Irina, carefully equipped by her parents, has her chance to escape. Thus, she lands all alone in a foreign country where, as "Irina

was not to know (…) the Irene-Irina-Irene-Irina-Irene-Irina-Irene problem would begin' (Phillips 1989, 183).

Irina's emigration means not only a physical journey between two radically different countries, but also a transition between identities, namely, between Irena – as her name would truly sound in Polish – and Irene, its English counterpart. The woman is never allowed to forget that she is an immigrant form a poor, faraway country, 'a Polish bitch', as she remembers being called, and she never calls England her home. Moreover, due to her prolonged trauma, Irina herself sabotages any attempts at integration into society and displays a paradoxical attitude to her past; on the one hand, she cherishes some of the things that remind her of her former life, such as the pictures of her family (Phillips 1989, 183), but on the other, she despises books, which filled her pre-war house and which have, in a way, failed her. In her new, sparsely furnished room, '[t]here were no books, despite the fact that a book can neither expel nor despise you' (Phillips 1989, 175), as '[s]he had ensured that there could be no comfort in [literature]' (Phillips 1989, 176). Thus, Irina symbolically loses faith in the power of literature, and especially in the promise of the meaningful connections between people that it represents. It is all the more symbolic therefore that when she decides to commit suicide, she crafts it after Anna Karenina, as if openly manifesting to the world that she has lost her trust in human kindness. As the narrator recalls: '[i]t was over ten years since Irene had travelled down to London and tried to throw herself under the train (like Anna Karenina)' and then '[she has] been taken to hospital (but not for her bruises)' (Phillips 1989, 200). In the hospital, in turn, she has 'learn[ed] to hate friendships proffered and attempted attachments and imagined love' (Phillips 1989, 200), battling the symptoms of depression and trauma.

It may seem surprising that Irina's story finds an allegorical conclusion in her last relationship on which she embarks after her release from the hospital. Entering into her post-hospital life, Irina once again tries to open herself up to feelings and she meets Louis, an immigrant from the West-Indies, with whom she is ready to make '[o]ne last effort. Just to hold on to him' (Phillips 1989, 201). What binds them is the fact that Louis is well familiar with racial discrimination and racial violence, and well used to hearing words like: '[y]ou're quite good-looking for a coloured' (Phillips 1989, 194). He is also an immigrant who, much as Irina, does not see England as his home. Irina has every right to think that '[t]he light on her face [is] a lesson, a book that

she hoped he would want to read' (Phillips 1989, 216), and her hope for a relationship is based on the poignancy of experiences which she intuitively recognises. Louis, however, although initially fascinated by this eerily different woman, ultimately 'look[s] away from her' (Phillips 1989, 216), claiming to be leaving England and its racialist atmosphere where he sees no place for himself and his ambitions. Symbolically, then, he refuses to read Irina's story, declaring that '[he's] going back to where [he] come[s] from' (Phillips 1989, 214), which brings the loneliness of Irina's immigrant life even more sharply to light. The last recounted scene of the novel shows Irina looking through the window, 'more fearful of the morning, for ever lost without the sustaining love' (Phillips 1989, 218) and humming a line 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Phillips 1989, 217) as if looking for comfort beyond the human world, which has failed her. It is not fortuitous, then, that the title of the section echoes the title of the novel, which, in turn, is a line from a religious hymn, 'Lord plant my feet on higher ground'; as such, it alludes to Irina's hope for a salvation that she retains despite her experiences, ending the story in nostalgic but hopeful tones.

'Higher Ground' is a multilayered story of trauma and depression, which may be read on at least two more levels. Firstly, it seems notable that Irina and Louis meet in Britain, the heart of the multinational empire, where they both, although coming from two ends of the world, occupy a similar space demarcated for the foreigners. The foreigner, as Derrida (2000, 11–14) writes, is not necessarily different from the host in skin colour, culture or language. After all, Irina is white, they both speak English and Louis, although of African origin, comes from the West Indies, where he must have been raised 'the English way' (cf. Phillips and Phillips 1999).[12] However, Irina and Louis do not *feel* at home in England, but their displacement is as much a result of their personal decision as it is a consequence of their social status as guests in England. The hospitality extended to them by the state is by no means absolute and they are continuously reminded of their otherness. This, in turn, reflects the very fact that no Western state accepts foreigners unconditionally (Derrida 2000, 25). Not only does it demand to know the foreigner's identity, but also it retains the very right to arbitrarily choose whom to allow into

[12] *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (1999) remains a powerful record of the West-Indian migrant experience and its complex relationship with England, which the West-Indians regarded as their homeland, but which has not reciprocated their feelings (1999, 12).

its body, and whom to expel, which derives from the wish to retain sovereignty, as Derrida said, or to protect the borders, as the media call it today. Thus, there exists 'the necessity (…) of choosing, electing, filtering, selecting their [the state's] invitees, visitors, or guests, those to whom they decide to grant asylum, the right of visiting, or hospitality' (Derrida 2000, 54) and hospitality no longer functions without this power. Hence, 'a certain injustice (…) begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality" (Derrida 2000, 54) and Phillips seems to have aptly captured its complexity, constructing a parallel not only between Poles, Jews, West-Indians, but all migrants who are seen as temporary additions to the society, even if the length of their stay, just as in Irina's case, extends well beyond ten years.[13] Displacement, then, is a state of instability, which may be said to extend the original context of Bhabha's 'unhomeliness' as a subjective feeling toward the social status of a foreigner as a guest. As such, it makes Irina's experience highly relatable both to those who have experienced various forms of forced and wilful migrations as well as those who turn to fiction to understand the migrant positioning in today's world.

Secondly, as we live in a world where 'the truth' about the past is waged like a weapon in identity wars (Bauman 2017, 66), Irina reminds us that history is not an abstract, nameless force, but a story of people like her, whose ordinary, relatable lives are rarely part of official historiography. In other words, depending on the historical moment, we all may relive Irina's experience of displacement and non-belonging, just like many of today's nameless migrants who continue to confront themselves with unwelcoming institutions of the West. Although we have been taught this lesson many a time, it seems that today, when the triumph of liberal democracy has by no means marked the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama famously hoped, but transformed into a new wave of populism, we need it to be reminded of it once more. In other words, people like Caryl Phillips, who have lived their lives with an acute sense of racial inequality still persisting in the West, have never lost sight of the fact that history, including all its inglorious chapters, forever remains part of the present. Already in his first collection of essays published in 1987, *The European Tribe*, in which Phillips looks at European history through the prism of his own journeys, Phillips

[13] Phillips uses a similar comparison in his other works, for example in *The Nature of Blood* (1997), where he evokes to the same purpose the figure of Othello.

warns his readers that one of Europe's gravest sins is its continuous tolerance of racism masked under the pretence of multiculturalism. Europe, he notes, 'still look[s] askance at "strangers"', and allows 'right-wing extremism' to live on in its political life and public discourse. Through the example of Britain, he notes that one of the vehicles of political popularity is the promise of '"expulsion" of all "New Commonwealth" immigrants' (Phillips 2000 [1987], 127–128). Needless to say, Phillips's observations sound like a premonition of the Brexit referendum debate (Phillips 1987, 127) and point towards the problems that Phillips will then continuously confront himself with in his fiction, including *Higher Ground* – a dehumanisation of *the other,* who is seen as an enemy and not as a fellow human being.

However, it would be unfair to say that Phillips's vision of Europe as a socio-political organism is entirely negative. In the very same essay, he expresses his idealistic hope that, in the future, Europe may embrace its complex history and become a moral centre of the contemporary world, teaching others about the effects of radicalism (Phillips 1987, 127). In yet another of his essay collections, *Colour Me English* (2011), Phillips too voices his belief that story-telling is a powerful tool that may trigger 'compassion born of familiarity towards our fellow human beings, be they Christian, Jew, Muslim, black, brown, white'. The (re)birth of this compassion, he says, 'truly is my hope for Europe' and 'the writer has a crucial part to play in this' (Phillips 2011, 17; italics in the original). Hence, novels such as *Higher Ground*, whose protagonists struggle with unhomeliness, political violence and social rejection, are the means helping Phillips to communicate his human(ist) worldview. In other words, Phillips purposefully places human beings at the heart of his fiction and, in so doing, he somehow reclaims the very word *humanism,* which in today's literary debates oftentimes comes across as dated, or even suspicious, due to its connotations with anthropocentrism. Phillips's texts are *humanist* insofar as they make us rediscover our own experience of *being human* as a universal value that goes beyond race, ethnicity or time. As Maria Janion once said, literature and literary criticism are there to make sure that history is not solidified into a homogenous narrative (Janion 2017 [1996], 17) – the battle which Caryl Phillips has been fighting for years and which he beautifully captured through the metaphor of Irina's face being a book that waits to be read. Therefore, it does not seem unreasonable to hope that, as people start turning towards literature for realism of representation, fiction may fight its way back into the mainstream

discourse, spreading empathy and undermining the hate speech that permeates the media, and especially the Internet. Hence, although Irina ultimately loses her faith in literature, Phillips himself does not, and he continues to show the humanity of his flawed protagonists under all the socio-political circumstances that it is possible to imagine. One may even risk a statement that today's Europe needs both writers like Phillips and those who, to paraphrase Shelley, would help scatter his words among mankind.

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