

## "Not afraid of ambiguity"

### CARYL PHILLIPS in Interview with AXEL STÄHLER, Bonn/Münster



Caryl Phillips, born in St. Kitts in 1958, grew up in Leeds and now lives in New York. Phillips is the author of eight novels, most recently of *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), a novel about the African-American entertainer Bert Williams, for which the author received the PEN/Beyond Margins Award in 2006. This was preceded by *A Distant Shore* (2003), Phillips's only novel so far with a contemporary setting, which was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book in 2004. His debut novel was *The Final Passage* (1985; Malcolm X Prize for Literature), followed by *A State of Independence* (1986), *Higher Ground* (1989), *Cambridge* (1992; Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award), *Crossing the River* (1993; James Tait Black Memorial Prize, 1994), and *The Nature of Blood* (1997). Phillips has also published three collections of non-fiction, *The European Tribe* (1987; Martin Luther King Memorial Prize), *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), and *A New World Order* (2001), as well as anthologies, stage plays, screenplays, and radio plays.

Much of Caryl Phillips's writing, both fictional and non-fictional, has focused on how narratives of slavery affect contemporary migrant experience. In his writing, an obvious medium for individual and collective self-exploration, the issues of displacement and, related to it, of identity and memory are prominent. While probing cultural conflicts arising from the diasporic condition, Phillips also scrutinizes its cross-cultural potential. In fact, much of his work is informed by the tensions of numerous opposites – among them home and exile or strangeness and familiarity – which imbue it with a certain ambiguity. Himself of mixed ancestry (African, European, Indian, and Jewish), his writing making ample use of postmodern narrative techniques, resorting to an impressive range of intertextuality, and often designated postcolonial or Caribbean, Black British, British and, more recently, also African-American, Phillips is an author who cannot be labelled (Sarvan and Marhama 1991, 40) – nor does he want to be.

Michael Dash's description of 'the' Caribbean writer as "a natural deconstructionist who praises latency, formlessness and plurality" (1989, 26) certainly seems to apply to Phillips. And while he may not be too happy with the implied essentialism, Phillips's own praise of

latency, formlessness and plurality makes him and his writing the opposite of what 'fundamentalists' aspire to.

The current ubiquity of the term fundamentalism (in the aftermath of 11 September 2001), an inflation of sorts, has contributed to devoiding it of meaning, and the facile identification of fundamentalists and fundamentalism is another labelling whose general validity Phillips contests in the following interview. Yet, as Karen Armstrong points out, there seems to be a "family resemblance" (2000, 11) of fundamentalisms in that they are commonly characterized by a pronounced anti-modernism and an interlacing of the religious and the political. In fundamentalist belief systems, political action is usually being legitimized by, and dictated through, a transcendent authority which manifests itself in some written form. They aim at a speedy and comprehensive reconstruction and homogenization of society – to the detriment, very often, of socially marginalized groups.

Considering the function of literature as a medium for cultural self-reflexion, it will be no surprise that fundamentalisms 'made it' into literature. Not only are fundamentalisms themselves based on texts which are perceived as testimony to the religious (or sometimes perhaps also ideological) fundamentals to be adhered to. In addition, particularly in the Anglophone fiction of the last two decades, the topic of fundamentalism has been variously addressed by a number of writers, among them, to name but a few, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith, Jeanette Winterson, Tova Reich, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, and John Updike – yet not, at least not explicitly, by Caryl Phillips.

In the following interview Phillips explains his stance on the interrelation of fundamentalism and literature. The interview was conducted at the fringe of an international conference on "Fundamentalism and Literature" at the University of Münster in November 2006 (organizer: Klaus Stierstorfer, co-convenor: Axel Stähler), to which Caryl Phillips had been invited as a keynote speaker.

**Axel Stähler (AS):** *Let me put my first question quite bluntly: What made you follow our invitation to this conference?*

**Caryl Phillips (CP):** Well, because there's so many issues at the moment in Europe that are to do with the relationship between the arts, not just literature, but the arts and identity. I'll put it that way. Particularly, I'm interested in what's happening in Holland, the relationship of the Islamic community to larger Dutch society, and the veil and the banning of Muslim dress. Now, I thought some of these issues seemed to me to suggest that this was, well, for want of a better phrase, a hot topic at the moment in Europe, so it was an opportunity to pull my thoughts together about this area. I didn't know what I was going to write, but I thought: You know what, this is an important area in Europe at the moment, so, good timing.

**AS:** *So you see it actually as a topic particularly important in Europe now, and not so much in the States?*

**CP:** Well, obviously, when I started to sit down and write, I realized that I was going to write something specifically for the conference and part of me thought I would be writing about Europe, however, about Europe, when I sat down to write I realized that actually in America the issue is just as much of a hot topic and it occurred to me that perhaps nobody would be putting the point of view, here in Europe, from America, so I ended up writing something about America. So I think it is an important subject in America.

**AS:** *In which ways do you see the threat of fundamentalism, whatever this means, because the threat is a vague one and may be imagined to some degree, or exaggerated – in which ways*

*do you see the threat of fundamentalism as pertinent to your work and to literature in general?*

**CP:** I don't really see it as being necessarily that pertinent to my work because the way in which we think about it in the modern world it is usually connected to religion or to some form of a religious belief that is slightly more rigid or dogmatic than maybe other practices. For instance, Islam: I don't see Islam as a fundamentalist religion. I see there are versions of Islam which are more fundamentalist, and the same with Catholicism and all religions. But I'm not really a person who deals with religion so much as identity, and in that sense I don't regard religiously inspired fundamentalism as directly in opposition to, or in conflict with, my own work. But where religiously inspired fundamentalism or a governmental response to it, as in the case of Holland, happens and then encroaches upon questions of identity, then it obviously does affect what I do and it is in conversation, if you like, with my work. So, these issues of how do you belong to a society, how do you fit in to the society, how do you partake in a society, which are the root of a lot of what I've written about, are these days being affected by some fundamentalist issues and in that rather oblique sense, it does maybe have an effect on my work. But not directly. You know, it's not as though I'm writing out of a particular religious position. It has an affect, but it has a tangential effect.

**AS:** *With regard to fundamentalism, how do you interpret the obvious ambivalence of literature in that it provides, on the one hand, the basis for much fundamentalist thought and action and is, on the other hand, as a means of cultural self-reflexion a means also of negotiating fundamentalisms?*

**CP:** Literature has to be ambivalent because it can't, it doesn't make judgements. I mean, the thing about literature is that you explore and you usually end up in a position of some ambiguity. You don't necessarily close the door and declare, or declaim, at the end of a work of fiction. In that sense you're in total opposition to a fundamentalist way of thought because fundamentalism in its many guises, religious or otherwise, is predicated on the idea that somebody knows something. Most writers begin their literature, begin their literary journey towards producing their work of literature, because they don't know, they're exploring, they're trying to find out, they're not afraid of ambiguity. And in this sense the title of the conference is really interesting because the two things are in opposition to each other. Literature should not serve anybody's position. It can be co-opted by governments or by individuals or by priests or imams to try to support their position, but that's not the reason for producing that literature, so the ambiguity and the ambivalence, to use your word, which surrounds literature, is always going to be in conflict with fundamentalism.

**AS:** *In your talk on "American Stories, American Silence"<sup>1</sup>, you said writers go where they can see, for, to quote you, "to be an artist, one has to be able to see [...] to the heart of society". You also argued that in America writers are silenced in a very unobtrusive way by not being listened to. Why, then, do you think has America become an "asylum", as you call it, for so many writers, yourself, not least, included? And what is there, in America, to see for writers?*

**CP:** That's a very good question, a very big question. The best answer I can give you is personal. I left Britain in 1990 to go and live in America for one year because I was fed up and dispirited about the fact that every time a member of the black community in Britain threw a brick or a bottle at the police the BBC would call me to ask me to comment on it.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will be published in the conference proceedings volume due to appear later this year.

There was a sense that I wasn't free to be able to develop as a writer because there was an onus upon me to be a social commentator as well. I think the wonderful thing that I discovered when I went to America for one year was the fact that my phone didn't ring. You know, when something happened in Britain, or actually in Europe, I didn't have journalists trying to make me comment on it. And that silence, that ability to get on with your life and to get on with your work was a great benefit, and I think that that's what so many writers appreciate about America. That there's a sort of indifference, in America, towards the creative person, towards the artist, which has enabled many, many people, including German artists. German film-makers, in particular, have gone there over the course of the twentieth century. They've been able to get on with their work because they're no longer tied in to a national programme or they're no longer tied to, if you like, the old essential notion of who they are and what they are supposed to think. There's a freedom in America that enables one to produce. So, yes, in a sense I think that that's what has enabled people to go and to work. Of course, the problem with that is that if nobody is interested, and nobody is listening, and nobody is looking, then, when the country is in trouble, and when the country has a problem, then nobody looks to the writers, because the whole thing has been predicated on the basis that these people can come here and can work in peace because we don't really care what they think. So, it's a double-edged sword, you know. It's convenient, but it's also a dangerous thing. I don't feel that in Germany, in France, in Britain, in most European countries, the writer *is* irrelevant. I think the furor that you had here recently over Günter Grass's memoirs<sup>2</sup> suggests to me that the writer *is* looked upon as a crucial and vital and important person in society. In America? No. It's very different.

**AS:** *In your talk, you also elaborated, in reference to Chinua Achebe, on the image of the 'emperor'<sup>3</sup> as a figure of power who stands outside the more harmonious and non-violent relationship between 'storyteller' and 'tribe' and who, if he should deem it necessary, clamps down on the irritating writer to silence him or her, because there's nothing that can be done about the story itself, once it's set loose, but the writer can be held accountable. This seems to be a very bleak outlook. Do you see any way the emperor may be distracted or, more particularly, do you see any way the "appalling apathy of American writers", as you also called it, may be overcome?*

**CP:** As for distracting the emperor, I don't think so. I think people who have power do all sorts of awful things to keep power. They act in very immoral and amoral ways. I don't really think you can distract them. I think you have to wait until somebody pushes a buzzer and it's the turn for the next one. I don't really think they'll – loose focus, shall we say? The writer has a choice. The writer can get involved in politics. We've seen this in many parts of the world: Mario Vargas Llosa running for president in Peru, we've seen Gabriel García Márquez very involved in Cuban politics, we've seen in the Czech Republic the playwright [Václav] Havel become president. We have seen examples of writers actually becoming very frustrated and annoyed with the state of progress and trying to step in, and in some cases they have very successfully entered politics. But in the main, I think that the role of the writer, and the role of the politician, or the poet and the emperor, to use Achebe's terms, are oppositional. They both

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<sup>2</sup> In his *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*, Nobel Laureate Grass admitted to having been a member of the Waffen-SS during the last days of the Second World War. When the book appeared in August 2006, this revelation provoked a sustained and heated debate about the writer's moral integrity.

<sup>3</sup> Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe repeatedly refers to the "emperor", a figure of authority, in his works and in various interviews. Talking to Bradford Morrow, for instance, Achebe explained: "I think [artists] have been conned into apoliticism by those who have a vested interest in keeping us out. The emperor would prefer the poet to keep away from politics, the emperor's domain, so that he can manage things the way he likes. When the poet is pleased to do that, the emperor is happy and will pay him money to stay within his aesthetic domain. But you and I don't have to agree with the emperor. We have to say no." (Morrow 1991, n.p.)

want the same thing. They both want to change society. They both want society to be different. But their methodology is entirely worlds apart. I think they're doomed to be in opposition.

**AS:** *In your 2001 collection of non-fiction, A New World Order, you say that, to quote again, "[t]he colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. In its place we have a new world order in which there will soon be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none. In this new world order nobody will feel fully at home." (5) Do you think that fundamentalism is perhaps the attempt to counteract this particular aspect of the new world order and may be understood as the violent claim to a home. Is it related at all to the diasporic condition?*

**CP:** Yes. My answer is yes. You know, that's exactly the problem with fundamentalism and that's why I find the rise of a kind of fundamentalist thought both frightening and ahistorical. It's flying in the face of the reality of the world that we know at the moment. The world that we know at the moment is becoming one in which those old essential notions of identity, which are principally tied to nationality, if truth be told, those old essential identities, are falling apart. They're falling away, because we are becoming an increasingly multi-cultural, multi-racial, intermarried, multi-ethnic confused world, confused in the best sense of the word. To re-establish old essential identities, be they fundamentalist, or religious identities, or fundamentalist national identities, is the opposite of what I was saying five years ago. You see, it's an ahistorical movement. But we still have people speaking to the orthodoxy and the desirability of these old fundamentalisms. Occasionally, you get people, whom you can call terrorists, and you can try to vilify them, by calling them 'these people'. But how you accommodate people of different cultures and different traditions into the mainstream has always been a problem in Britain. To speak about it as if it's a new thing is just offensive. It's an old issue. But you know what? That process of assimilation and that process of accommodating different cultures and different identities is the modern world. That's the world we live in. What we have to guard against is anybody who tells us that you have to have one identity. And that's what fundamentalists on the right are telling us, and that's what fundamentalists on the left have been telling people in Eastern Europe for the longest while. We have to guard against that, because the evidence, the physical evidence of our world, aside from anything else, the physical evidence of the world we live in, just looking around the streets, looking at our national sports teams, looking at who our children will marry, tells us that that's just not the case. It's just not the case.

**AS:** *Can you imagine writing a novel in which the subject of fundamentalism occupies centre stage?*

**CP:** Well, I spoke a little bit yesterday about John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) which I admire. I can't imagine writing that novel, because someone's done it. But I admire it. I think anybody who's trying to tell us – you, Axel, or me – who we are, and who we should be, is somebody that I'd be interested to write about, to be honest, because that person, as far as I am concerned, is a fundamentalist. That person has the temerity, the sheer cheek, to be able to define you and to tell you who you should be, and that's a person I *have* written about in the past and I will write about in the future, I am sure, because I consider that to be the most dangerous person of all. The person who tries to tell you that you should make your identity simple and able to be packaged and be put in a box, is a dangerous person. And I don't care whether they're dressed like an Islamic imam or whether they're dressed like the Chancellor of Germany or whether they're dressed like the Prime Minister of Britain. I don't care what costume they have on or what platform they speak from, they should never make people

ashamed of the essential complexity of their identity. Unfortunately, any sort of fundamentalism seeks to reduce the complexity of people's identities, the very essential components. So, I can imagine writing about it. I think it is a tremendous idea, actually, to look at a very quiet Islamic boy, growing up in New Jersey who suddenly finds himself co-opted into the world of violence [as in Updike's novel; AS]. Maybe there'll be a similar situation either in Britain or in America, that I'll read something in the newspapers or see something on the television which will spark a novel, I don't know, but it's certainly not something I'll rule out.

**AS:** *To conclude, I'd like to return once more to this, and indeed other conferences. Do you see any value in academic conferences of this sort, apart from some academics filling in another decorative detail of their ivory tower?*

**CP:** Now that's a very good question. I think it's good to have interchange. I think it's very good for people to have the opportunity to hear that people are working in similar fields, or parallel fields, and hear what they have to say, see where their research is at, exchange papers with them, perhaps. All that kind of interchange is productive in itself. The actual conference dynamic is one thing for an academic and another thing for a writer. I mean, that's just the truth, that's just how it is. Writers are working at the other end of the telescope, you know. Academics work on the business of taking things apart, they are fundamentally deconstructive, and trying to figure out how things work, trying to figure out how they were put together. Which is a thoroughly legitimate and an important component, because no art form that doesn't have serious criticism will survive as an art form. That's what's wrong with television. Television will never be an art form, because there's no serious criticism in television. You know, you get some little note in the newspapers: hey watch out for this programme. But film is an art form, because we have serious film criticism. And so, in literature, we have to be very careful sometimes, as writers, not to be too disparaging or to be too snooty around academics. Academics, first of all, keep your work in print, because they're putting it on their syllabuses. And two, they respond to it, creatively. So, I'm all in favour of academics meeting and discussing and kicking ideas around. Is it important for the writer? Yes, but it is slightly less important, to be honest, for the writer, because the writer is in the business of putting things together, is in the business of constructing. And that's a very private act, that's not an act which is communal, that's not an act which is dependent on critical feedback, that's something to do by yourself. And a conference is just an opportunity – I can't speak for all writers, I'm just speaking for myself – a conference is an opportunity to make new friends and to meet old friends. That's what it's there for. You meet some people that you've not met before, and you get on with them, and you chat and you exchange numbers or whatever. And then you see some old friends whom you haven't seen for a while, and you meet the people who have had the dignity and the dedication to keep your work alive, and that's important, it's important for the people who are teaching you, and it's also important for you too to meet them and to be aware of that.

**AS:** Thank you very much, Caryl, for this interview.

**CP:** Thank you, Axel.

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