Fausto Ciompi

On Name Symbolism in Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River*

Abstract: *Crossing the River*, Caryl Phillips' 1993 acclaimed novel, tells three intertwined stories of slavery and de-humanization in which black men and white girls are mishandled, traded like goods, and exploited as unpaid labourers or objects of sexual pleasure by their white masters or husbands. An eloquent sign of human debasement is that, on Captain James Hamilton's ship, black slaves are nameless and identified only by numbers, but other rigid designators bear strong symbolical implications. This essay discusses the function of name symbolism in the text by taking into consideration people's and ship's denominations, as well as the name of some places.

Keywords: Caryl Phillips. *Crossing the River*. Name Symbolism. African Diaspora.

1. *An Unfiltered Semiosphere: Mythical Kinship and Historical Suffering*

I shall start by recalling Caryl Phillips' sensitiveness to the relevance of names. In a revealing statement about uncertain and failing identities, he once declared: "I remember back in 1979, during my final year as a student at Oxford, contemplating whether to take the low road toward a career as a writer, or stay on the academic high road and attempt to put some more initials after my name".[1]

Names are of the utmost importance also in *Crossing the River*, Caryl Phillips' 1993 novel on African diaspora, which circuitously tells the story of three characters – Nash, Martha and Travis – sold into slavery by their old mythical father because crops failed. The novel is narrated with continuous time-shifts that create a-chronological loops: time is circular and mythic, rather than linear and historical, and the four chapters of the novel are encircled by a Prologue and an Epilogue 'in heaven'. Chapter 3, "Crossing the River", presents the three characters together, while the other three chapters have one protagonist at a time. This responds to a fictional logic for which a mythical ancestor lives 250 years to see his three children act in either the eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth century. In the eighteenth-century portion of the story, however, the three brothers become contemporary, and all of them are sold to Captain Hamilton.

Travis, the most eloquent of these speaking names, comes from the French 'traverser', which means 'to cross', an action to which the book title immediately draws our attention. In Chapter 4, Travis is an African-American GI who crosses the Atlantic and comes to Europe to fight in World War II. In Yorkshire he meets Joyce, a married white woman with whom he has a tender love affair. Not only does Travis cross the ocean, but he also moves across cultural and racial barriers. A black man, he approaches Joyce, a white woman, in

[1] C. Phillips, "Stuart Hall", *Bomb*, 58, Winter 1997, p. 38.

her shop, invites her to a ball and woos her in a very courteous manner. Just like his brother Nash and his sister Martha, Travis is in fact a "limit-surpassing" character,[2] and this is a recurring feature in *Crossing the River*, a text in which, starting with the book title, mobility, whether physical or cultural, is a pivotal notion.

But before discussing mobility, let us define it in semiotic and cultural terms. According to Russian semiotician Jury Lotman, a narrative event is determined by the crossing of a boundary while the semiosphere is the result and the condition for the development of culture produced by the interaction of its "different substructures".[3] It is through the exchange of information (epistemic mobility) and through personal, social and ethnic interchange (anthropological mobility) that cultural systems (the semiosphere) define their homeostasis and develop. If we apply Lotman's perspective to *Crossing the River* we realise that, on the macro-cultural scale, it is because the likes of Travis *traverse* (that is, *cross*) the Atlantic that the semiosphere of democracy is spared the ultimate disastrous effects produced in Europe by the entropy of totalitarianism. But Phillips' text does not focus on the grand narratives of European history and geo-politics. Rather, the English section of *Crossing the River* is concerned with small-scale events. What the reader learns is that it is because Travis crosses the threshold of Joyce's shop in a neglected English town that the woman's name, which means 'joy' or 'happiness', does not sound entirely ironic at the end of the day.[4] It is in fact because of her affair with Travis that Joyce liberates herself from her mother's and her husband's different forms of tyranny and does experience some kind of happiness. Nor does happiness come across as the result of acts based on rigidly ethicised assumptions. Joyce's liberation from her mother is not just the consequence of her choice of what is good, but of her subconscious pursuit of what is desirable in terms of eroticised psychology. Joyce's love for Travis is boosted by obscure psychological drives. This emerges in the episode in which, first, Joyce puts flowers on her mother's tomb, and then goes to the movies with Travis in a theatre conveniently called 'Elektra Palace'. By choosing Travis as her partner – a soldier and an evident avatar of her father, who died fighting in the Great War – Joyce in fact punishes her mother, her psychosexual competitor, and resuscitates the ghost of her father, who returns from the otherworld as an Oedipal hero and the auratic bearer of masculine codes.

When Travis dies in Italy, Joyce entrusts their son, Greer, to the social services because she is too poor to support him. This duplicates the three children's sale into slavery on the part of their mythical father, but this time parent and child are eventually re-united. The

[2] I borrow the notion of a limit-surpassing character from G. Bottiroli, "Frankenstein Rather Than Faust? The Decline of Limit-Surpassing Forces", *Enthymema*, 19, 2017, pp. 260-66.

[3] J. Lotman, "On the Semiosphere", *Sign Systems Studies*, 33 (1), 2005, pp. 205-29.

[4] The name 'Joyce' may also recall James Joyce, the prototype of the modernist diasporic author. Phillips' character is, incidentally, a strong reader and in the novel she acts as a link between the Western written tradition and the African oral heritage. See, on this point, A. Di Maio, "Diasporan Voices in Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River*", in H. Wylie and B. Lindfors (eds), *Multiculturalism and Hybridity in African Literatures*, Trenton, NJ, and Asmara, Africa World Press, 2000, p. 371. Phillips himself has emphasised the transcontinental turn of recent African literature: "As we move into the twenty-first century it's extremely exciting to see the growing numbers of African writers who are commenting with insight and authority on not only their own continent, but on Europe, and the Americas—in fact, on the world. I don't detect contemporary African writers extending much sympathy, or time, in the direction of diasporan individuals who are worried about what Africa means to them. And given the evidence of this diasporan musing, who can blame them" (C. Phillips, "What Is Africa to Me Now?", *Research in African Literatures*, 46 [4], Winter 2015, p. 14).

fourth section of the novel, "Somewhere in England", ends with 18-year-old Greer paying his first visit to his unknown mother. The vicious circle of filial loss and separation is thus ultimately broken. The apparently endless travelling in space and time of uprooted personages comes to a halt. The words finally spoken by Joyce, actually the last words in her story and in the whole metadiegetic portion of the novel, are framed by the rhetorical figure of anadiplosis (the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning and at the end of a sentence), which reinforces the idea of the closing of a circle: "Sit down, please, sit down".[5] Eventually there is some peace and some rest in the existence of the wretched of the earth: a category that includes anyone, black or white, who has been abused by history or destiny. And it may be worth noticing that the living symbol of Joyce's liberation from male and matriarchal oppression is called Greer, possibly after Germaine Greer. A feminist icon and heroine of the women's liberation movement, Greer maintained that the West hates children and children revenge themselves by making them wards of the state when they grow too old:[6] a relationship that is ironically reversed in *Crossing the River*, where a deconstructed version of *Homo occidentalis* is presented in the shape of Martha's indulgent son. As argued by Bellamy, this is a core issue of *Crossing the River*:

> What the reader initially carries away from *Crossing* is the dissonance between the father's affirmation of love for his children and the dire consequences of his abandonment of them as well as the multiplicity of responses to their plight. Phillips carefully constructs the text to offset the optimism of the epilogue by using the trauma of the core narratives. Rather than rendering triumph where there is none, he intentionally leaves the African father's descendants (as well as the reader) in an unresolved middle space between the tragedy of their initial abandonment and the triumph of a hoped-for but unrealized reconciliation. Shelly Rambo's theory of remaining suggests the possibility of inhabiting this middle space as a place of survival and witness. She defines remaining as living on "as a form of witness to the persistence of death in life" (Rambo 937).[7]

Let us now consider Nash Williams, the emancipated slave who is sent to Liberia by his master, Edward Williams, and by the American Colonization Society in order to convert the natives and contribute to their material and spiritual improvement. My contention is that the character is called Nash because the name means 'atten ash', that is, 'at the ash tree'[8] and contains the noun 'ash', two facts that forebode the nature of his end. As Madison, another liberated slave, puts it, Nash dies of fever and "is burned according to local custom" (p. 58). Ashes to ashes, as the biblical saying goes.

Biblical undertones also resonate in Martha's name. In Luke's Gospel, Martha is Mary

[5] C. PHILLIPS, *Crossing the River*, London, Vintage, 2006, p. 232. Further references from this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[6] This thesis is developed in G. GREER, *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility*, New York, Harper and Row, 1984.

[7] M. RICE BELLAMY, "Haunting the African Diaspora: Responsibility and Remaining in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*", *African American Review*, 47 (1), Spring 2014, p. 130. The novel's ending thus suggests a radically different outcome from the typical black family narrative, in which the absence of fathers may lead to social maladaptation and family destruction. See, on this point, P. SMETHURST, "Postmodern Blackness and Unbelonging in the Works of Caryl Phillips", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 37 (5), 2002, p. 10. For Phillips, the idea of absent fathers is a consequence of the effect on the psyche of a man of African origin, who under slavery, had his children taken away from him by the master, acting as head of the family. This, suggests Phillips, "induces an irresponsibility" which may lead to the disruption of the black family.

[8] C. HOUGH and D. IZDEBSKA (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*, Oxford, OUP, 2016, p. 243.

and Lazarus' sister. When Jesus visits their house and resuscitates Lazarus, Martha prepares food and makes all the required practical preparations, while her sister listens to Jesus' teachings and enjoys the pleasures of spiritual illumination. Mary has chosen the one needful thing and "that good part, which shall not be taken away from her".[9] Like her evangelical archetype, Martha Randolph is a hard worker and wins her bread in Dodge City, Kansas, by cooking and doing laundry work for poor labourers. She also buys her journey to California by offering her services as a cook to black pioneers, who eventually abandon her in Colorado when toil and fatigue have nearly killed her. In her silent speculations, when she is fleeing from slave traders in Virginia, Martha wishes she possessed her husband's passion: "Lord, give me Lucas' voice" (p. 80), with words that may sound as a request for Luke the Evangelist's eloquence in order to adequately express her intolerable pain. However, Martha's destiny is to die unknown to everybody in Colorado (incidentally, a suitable name for the burial site of a coloured slave). Here, Martha suffers the ultimate outrage of being buried unnamed, which is a sad return to her original condition of slave, because the first step in the depersonalisation of slaves was the taking away of their name and its substitution with an assigned denomination chosen by the slavemaster.

Just like the correspondent character in Luke's Gospel, Phillips' Martha is actually complemented by one Mary: her daughter Eliza Mae. Mae is, in fact, a diminutive of Mary. At least in Martha's imagination, Eliza Mae has taken 'the good part' just like the evangelical Mary. In her delirious daydreaming Martha is satisfied that her daughter lives in California, the earthly paradise Martha also aspires to reach but which she will never see. In Martha's visions, California is a land of plenty where Eliza leads a wealthy and respected existence. Like the Eliza made famous by George Bernard Shaw, Eliza Mae has met a Pygmalion who taught her the manners of an educated middle-class woman. She is married to a schoolteacher and has generated three children. But to Martha's distress, she is now called Cleo, that is, Cleopatra, the name of a pagan queen which sounds too voluble and undignified to the old woman, who evidently believes Eliza's new identity is not respectful of her Christian lineage.[10]

2. *Four Villains: Full-blooded and Otherwise*

The villain in the story is obviously vicious captain James Hamilton, the slavedriver. If in his surname we look for what Jean Starobinski calls 'words under words', we realise that the captain's family name contains the phrase: AM IL(L) TON, which might be re-shuffled

[9] LUKE, 10: 2, *King James Version Online*, https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Luke-Chapter-10/#38 (last accessed on 10 July 2020).

[10] A different interpretation of Martha, seen as a sign of Phillips' critique of Christian axiology, is provided in T. ASHFORD CARTER, "Signifying (Non)Linguistic and Subliminal Spirituality: Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River*", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 45 (1-2), January-April 2014, pp. 250-51: "Phillips further complicates black female subjectivity by using the duality of Western signification versus African American signifying to create particular fragmentations of cultural and religious identity. *Crossing the River* is reminiscent of the Du Boisian notion of double consciousness, which asserts a dichotomised awareness for black Americans, and Homi K. Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness, which refers to the multiple and yet nonexistent citizenships of the postcolonial subject and connotes a particular dislocating aspect of that identity: Phillips demonstrates how dominant Western Judeo-Christian ideology may hamper the black female subject's ultimate search for psychological/emotional wholeness".

as "I am ill", and even "ill in enormous amount", a *ton* being "a unit of internal capacity for ships equal to 100 cubic feet".[11] The truly disquieting side of Hamilton's character is that he represents evil in an upgraded form. While his father was a brutal slavedriver who earned himself a devilish reputation through the unspeakable deeds he committed, James embodies slavedriving with a human face. Although he ruthlessly exploits the natives, he struggles to make himself acceptable to well-thinking Christians and respectable families. A fierce tyrant on his ship, James Hamilton exercises his autocratic power on both sailors and slaves with inflexible cruelty, but in the intervals of his cold administration of authority he writes sentimental letters to his wife in which he yearns for the pleasures of sweet marital love and the middle-class heaven of family life. He is the living demonstration that slavedriving is part of the well-mannered, well-meaning, self-indulgent capitalism, which has easily solved the problem of reconciling slavery with theology, genocide with peace of mind, entrepreneurial efficiency with sanctimonious ethics.[12] In the eighteenth century, pro-slavery Western culture had since long metabolised the contradiction caused by the clash of religious morals with slavery by reading selectively Christian tradition, and, in particular, St Paul's epistles. For instance, in the epistle to Titus, Paul admonishes his addressee as follows: "Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things; not answering again".[13] And that Paul's doctrine, with all its ambiguity, is at the basis of Nash's Christian mission in Africa is recollected by the fact that in Liberia he settles up Saint Paul's river.

Another villain, if we may grant her this elevated status, is Amelia, Edward Williams' wife. Just like James Hamilton and Edward himself, Amelia is part of that power which eternally wills good and eternally works evil. The trouble is that, in actuality, the good which all of these characters will consists of the arbitrary universalisation of the received values established by the ruling white classes. Amelia is much concerned with respectability and marital fidelity, two perfectly decent notions in the society of her time. She is jealous of her husband and steals the letters which Nash the African missionary sends Edward, his former master and lover in America. By doing so, deceptive Amelia causes the failure of Nash's enterprise in Liberia because he does not receive the moral and material support he requests from Edward and which was badly needed in order to survive in a hostile context. It is no fluke, then, that the name of Amelia the wily pretender is the perfect anagram of "Am a lie". Amelia is shocked by Edward's homosexuality, infidelity, and interracial sexual relationships, but her prudish respectability persuades her to tolerate it and keep lying in the face of the world. When Nash is sent to Africa, she is satisfied that all the filth and indecency have gone with him and everything may be dumped into oblivion and unconsciousness. But the repressed returns in the form of Nash's letters, which she hides for several

[11] "It is [also] interesting to note that Phillips chose for his fictional slave ship captain the name of the third mate in Newton's journal, a name whose last syllable (-ton) echoes Newton's name" (V. GUIGNERY, "Pastiche, Collage, and Bricolage: Caryl Phillips' Hybrid Journal and Letters of a Slave Trader in *Crossing the River*", *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 49 [2-3], April-July 2018, p. 145). Guignery also co-edited, with C. GUTLEBEN, "*Traversée d'une œuvre:* Crossing the River *de Caryl Phillips*", *Cycnos*, 32 (1), 2016.

[12] For an alternative interpretation, see A. WARD, "Caryl Phillips: The Absent Voices of History", in EAD., *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen, and Fred D'Aguiar: Representations of Slavery*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 2011, p. 53, in which Captain Hamilton's "loneliness and capacity to love" are seen as means of "complicating his characterization".

[13] TITUS, 2: 9, *King James Version,* https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Titus-2-9/ (last accessed on 10 September 2020).

years. And when she finds out that Edward's passion for young slaves is far from spent, she is eventually overcome and takes her own life: her own way to destroy permanently the dirt and shame she has vainly tried to sweep under the carpet.

The third villain in the story is Len, Joyce's husband in "Somewhere in England". Len is short for Leonard. It is an ironic name because it comes from an Old German word meaning 'lion' ('Lewenhart') and from the Latin 'Leo', although Len is anything but brave or lion-hearted. He does not join the army because he is disabled. He is just a member of the Local Defence Volunteers, or 'Look Duck Vanish', as local people call them. He cowardly beats Joyce in order to work "off the embarrassment of not having a uniform" and because he can thus play "at being a man" (p. 159).

The next character to be considered is Edward Williams. Actually not a full-blooded villain, Edward is a morally ambiguous character. His psychological and moral duplicity is visually expressed in a telling description of his face, shown as split in two parts, while he is seeking some rest in a wooden hut in Africa: "Half of Edward's face lay shrouded in thick shadow, the other one changed hue and shape according to the nature of the dancing flame" (p. 68).

The name 'Edward' is of Anglo-Saxon origin and means 'guardian of wealth'. Edward's wealth comes from the exploitation of slavery in his tobacco plantation, but, as an illuminated exponent of progressive thinking, he frees slaves and encourages them to get a Christian education and become missionaries in Africa. A fact that, as the narrator clarifies, is conveniently instrumental in boosting his business. In the surname 'Williams', on the other hand, we detect two overlapping and contradictory phrases: WILL I AM and ILL I AM, which confirm the duplicity of the character. In fact, to his slaves Edward is a Father, someone invested with a sort of Divine authority ("good will" and "Godwill" are expressions which occur several times in the text, and Edward is obviously a king's name). But, at the same time, he is 'someone profoundly ill', and not only in terms of physical health as when he gets sick while journeying to Africa. Edward personifies what Vladimir Jankélévitch called "bad conscience".[14] His sickness represents the bad conscience of the Western world torn between the duty of Christian charity on the one hand and the brutal praxis of Colonialism on the other. His conscience is tormented by "a profound guilt" (p. 529) and he vainly hopes to cleanse it by bringing his abstract idealism close to the actual life of people in the flesh. But when he gets to Nash's place in Africa, he finds out that his abstract idealism and detachment from reality have reduced his former lover into ashes. Edward thought he could send freed slaves to colonise Africa, "encouraging men to engage with a past and a history that are truly not their own" (p. 529). But he simply succeeds in transforming the colonised into a coloniser, and then, as in a typical atavistic reversion, the coloniser into a native. Edward's separation from the actuality of history is evident at the end of his story, when he sings a Christian Hymn in memory of Nash and thus proves to be no more than "a strange old white man" (p. 70), an alien presence in Africa, unrecognised both by natives and by Madison, his former slave.

[14] V. JANKÉLÉVITCH, *The Bad Conscience*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

3. *Ship Names: Embarking the West's Grand Narrative of Power*

James Hamilton's ship is called the *Duke of York*, an obviously colonialist denomination and a link to Yorkshire, the setting of "Somewhere in England". Another evidently imperialist name is that of the ship which in 1820 carries Nash to Africa: it is called the *Elizabeth*. But this vessel's denomination also conveys some religious nuances because 'Elizabeth' means "My God is an oath" or "My God is abundance". In fact, Nash leaves for Africa under the aegis of Edward's God-like Will and with a promise of wealth to be gained: "under the protection of a wise God, who promises to be a God of all nations" (p. 26). But, as we have seen, no promise is kept by Nash's white father, Edward Williams, nor does Nash succeed in the colonisation of the desolate portion of Africa he elects as home.

An ironic inversion of meaning is interestingly suggested by the names of another two ships: the *Mercury* and the *Mathilda*. Edward Williams, the militant Christian, journeys to Africa on board the *Mercury*, a ship called after the winged messenger of pagan gods in Greek mythology. This ironically suggests that, despite his Christian faith, Edward lives like a pagan, surrounded by slaves and male favourites. But, more evidently, it stresses that he is a messenger of Western civilization: an unfit one, who in fact falls ill as soon he gets in touch with the harsh reality of Africa's climate.

On the contrary, one of Nash's letters from pagan Africa travels on the ship *Mathilda*, whose denomination recalls the heroine with the same name who appears in Dante's Eden. In his letter, Nash complains because he cannot get in touch with Edward, just like Dante in Canto XXVIII of the Purgatory complains because he cannot cross the river that separates him from Mathilda, the lovely woman who represents primeval beauty: a kind of beauty that was only possible before the Fall of man. As suggested by Nash himself, the ship *Mathilda* departs from a sort of Eden, a "Liberian paradise" (p. 62), a land to which he was expelled by his Father after Edward used him for his purposes. In Dante's Purgatory, Mathilda is an allegory of forgetfulness and of the memory of good deeds, which are dispensed by two rivers: respectively the Lethe and Eunoe. In this perspective, the ship's name evokes both Edward's forgetfulness of his former lover and *protégé* and his failure in the strengthening of Nash's good deeds and intentions.

4. *Trans-historical Voices: Recurrent Names, Recurring Phrases*

A final consideration on names may concern their return in different spaces and times. For instance, in the nineteenth-century story titled "The Pagan Coast", Nash Williams marries Sally Travis, a woman from Georgia, whose family name becomes the Christian name of a GI in the twentieth-century tale told in "Somewhere in England". Symmetrically, in this same story Joyce meets one "old Williams", who shares his surname with Edward and a plethora of slaves liberated by him, including Nash and Madison, all of them from "The Pagan Coast". This suggests the interchangeability of people and events, and reinforces a sense of trans-historical brotherhood, an 'eternal return of the same', whose circularity is also expressed by the narrative structure of the novel.

As has been noted, in fact, events in *Crossing the River* are arranged in non-chronological, non-linear succession. This is because the past, as reconstructed by memory, is always incomplete, fractured and untotalised. At the same time, the past is not meaningless. The

history of human sufferings is not vain. Furthermore, the novel's epilogue breaks this circularity. In the novel's ending, circularity is first suggested through the repetition of sentences from the prologue's *incipit*: "A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children" (p. 1). Then, it is denied by Captain Hamilton's notes on slave trade: "A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. *Bought 2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl.* But they arrived on the bank of the river, loved" (p. 237; emphasis added). In the final "many-tongued chorus of common memory", even James Hamilton's entry into his journal may find place. His is the voice of history, which is added to that of myth: the painful memory of slavery is juxtaposed with the cold, historical record of merciless slavedriving. Carefully avoiding the 'rhetoric of blame', the text's ending subscribes to a polyphony of experiences and values. The last sentence ("But they arrived on the bank of the river, loved") is inclusive and conciliatory. As Derek Walcott would put it, Phillips exhorts to look ahead, but he also seems to suggest we ought do so only when the past is adequately understood and kept alive to the present through the deconstruction of power dichotomies[15] and a meticulous elaboration of memory.

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[15] In Ledent's words, by "re-entering European history from the point of view of those who have usually been eclipsed from it, Phillips makes a clear political gesture which challenges cultural essentialism, ethnic purity and political correctness" (B. LEDENT, "'Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories': Cross-Culturality in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 30 [1], 1995, p. 61).

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