The Poetics of (In)visibility:

A Stylistic Analysis of Caryl Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives*

“The problem with every story is not the story, it’s how to tell the story.”

Caryl Phillips (“‘Who are you calling a foreigner?’” 288)

“But what *is* it?” Thus Evelyn O’Callaghan reports the words of the historian that she consulted while doing research on Caryl Phillips’s novel *Cambridge* (1991), a narrative which the critic herself describes as “a hybrid, syncretic fabrication” (40) that largely relies on a “pastiche” of historical travel journals (36). Predictably, similarly puzzled reactions have greeted the publication of Phillips’s *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), a book said to be “generically unpindownable, midway between an essay and a novel” (Ledent, “Determinism” 84), and which imaginatively retraces the lives of three black men who lived in England between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries: Samuel Johnson’s Jamaican servant Francis Barber, the mixed-race boxer Randolph Turpin, and the Nigerian immigrant David Oluwale.

For the seasoned reader of Phillips’s work, however, any sense of bewilderment over the generic ambiguity of *Foreigners* is likely to be associated with a paradoxical feeling of recognition, as a blurring of boundaries between the realms of fiction and non-fiction and a combination of different genres under the same cover are some of the writer’s most conspicuous trademarks. The early example of *Cambridge* was mentioned above; a later instance worthy of note is *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), a novel which presents a fictional reconstruction of the life of vaudeville artiste Bert Williams, alternating between imagined recreations of the protagonist’s introspective moments and “real” archival material, including song lyrics and newspaper reports. Interestingly, even those of Phillips’s novels that are often regarded as purely fictional often bear traces of non-fictional works – think, for example, of the allusions to Anne Frank’s diary woven into *Higher Ground* (1989) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), or of the excerpts adapted from Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* scattered across *A Distant Shore* (2003).[[1]](#endnote-1)

The variety of sources used by Phillips in his novels is but one element that testifies to his books’ reliance on polyphony, a concept investigated by Mikhail Bakhtin, who defined it as “*[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses*” co-existing within a single text (Bakhtin, *Poetics* 6, italics in original). “*The polyphonic novel*,” the Russian critic continued, “*is dialogic through and through*. Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally” (*Poetics* 40, italics in original). Considering how accurate Bakhtin’s words are to describe Phillips’s writing technique, it comes as no surprise that the Russian scholar’s theory has repeatedly inspired critics of the British-Caribbean author’s work over the years. As early as 1992, Bénédicte Ledent identified the “dialogic multi-voicedness” of *Cambridge* (“Voyages” 54), a point that she also developed in relation to *Crossing the River* on two separate occasions in the following years (“Remembering Slavery,” “Vocal Kaleidoscopes”). In both of these cases, Ledent’s emphasis was firmly placed on the dialogic potential of Phillips’s polyphonic constructions, that is, on how the “diverging voices” found in his texts “interact . . . with one another to produce meaning(s)” (“Vocal Kaleidoscopes” 285). Ledent distinguished between a form of “‘outer’ dialogism,” created by the inclusion of voices from other texts in Phillips’s own, and a type of “inner dialogism” (“Vocal Kaleidoscopes” 288) resulting from the juxtaposition, within single novels, of “narrative viewpoints which complete and contradict each other in a crisscrossing dialogue” (“Remembering Slavery” 277). As Ledent’s analyses suggest, the clashes and contradictions contained in Phillips’s texts reveal that his works exploit Bakhtinian polyphony in its full complexity, for the writer does not simply feature seemingly diverse voices only to subordinate them to a single, easily circumscribable, authorial viewpoint; rather, the multiple characters and focalizers found in his books open up nuanced, sometimes conflicting, interpretations of historical “facts.” That Phillips makes an elaborate use of polyphony is also suggested by Lars Eckstein, who, in his analysis of *Cambridge*, observes that the speech of the white English narrator Emily “dialogically confronts, on equals terms, the ideologies of the older texts it writes back to” (82), and that Emily’s narrative is, moreover, “juxtaposed dialogically” with that of the slave Cambridge (85). Ledent’s and Eckstein’s studies are undoubtedly among the most incisive investigations into the dialogic aspects of Phillips’s fiction. Assertions similar to theirs are found, with various degrees of detail and different emphases, across the existing research on the writer’s oeuvre; in fact, the dialogic aspects of Phillips’s texts have been analyzed in such depth that, nowadays, the highly polyphonic nature of his works can be regarded as a premise rather than a hypothesis.

Remarkably, within the “many-tongued chorus” of voices (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 1, 237) that infuses Phillips’s writing, a notable absent has often been said to be the author’s own. The artist himself has repeatedly commented on this perceived self-effacement in interviews, stating, for example: “*I*’m not present. The characters are totally in the fore. I’m invisible... I hide behind the characters” (Phillips, “Interview” 51, italics in original). In what follows, I would like to argue that Phillips does not so much hide behind his characters as *within* his own texts, a suggestion that I wish to develop with reference to *Foreigners*. Admittedly, as indicated by Phillips’s use of the word “character” in the excerpt from the interview, his comments about invisibility in fact relate specifically to his fiction, whereas in non-fiction, he says, “I always feel that I have be more present as an agent of narrative purpose” (“‘Only Connect’” 190). This statement certainly applies to the travelogues *The European Tribe* (1987) and *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), and to the collections of essays *A New World Order* (2001) and *Colour Me English* (2011). However, the question of (in)visibility is far less easy to settle in the case of the generically liminal *Foreigners*, in which “a voice which is most probably [Phillips’s] emerges in the second and third sections” of the book, but is said to be absent from the first (Ledent in Phillips, “‘Only Connect’” 190). While it is important, for the sake of methodological accuracy, to be aware of the general correlation between fiction and authorial invisibility on the one hand, and non-fiction and authorial visibility on the other, these differences will matter little to my own argument. My suggestion that Phillips hides within his works is not so much linked to the presence or absence of a speaking “I” that bears resemblance to the real-life writer, as to the ways in which “Phillips,” as the implied author (that is, as the “governing consciousness of the work”: Rimmon-Kenan 87) discreetly, but nonetheless perceptibly, shapes the sometimes slippery and elusive meanings of his texts by setting up polyphonic resonances within them.

Interestingly, despite Phillips’s claim to absence and invisibility in his fiction, much of the existing criticism has treated the writer as a hovering presence in his own works, be they fictional or not. On several occasions, this authorial role has been captured using the idea of “orchestration,” an image that echoes Bakhtin’s own musical metaphor of polyphony. For example, in relation to *Crossing the River*, Bénédicte Ledent has observed that the writer “orchestrate[s] all the individual voices . . . that his novel contains” (“Vocal Kaleidoscopes” 287). In her discussion of *Foreigners*, Louise Yelin further suggests that the author “collects and orchestrates (or invents in some cases)” the material that constitutes the section on David Oluwale (“Plural Selves” 69). Similar ideas implicitly run through many studies of Phillips’s work, particularly those that, like Ledent’s, concentrate on how the implied author covertly critiques racist or sexist ideologies, for instance by lending his characters statements replete with euphemisms and ironies that betray the hypocrisy or contradictions of colonial modes of thought. More often than not, conventional hermeneutic techniques have enabled Phillipsian scholars to uncover the dialogic subtlety of the writer’s texts, yet the absence of a linguistic focus in many of the analyses performed to date has caused occasional slips to occur. For example, in an otherwise compelling article, Louise Yelin highlights “the unselfconscious parroting of racist clichés that drive his [the first-person narrator’s] identification of Barber as ‘Blacky,’ ‘Dr. Johnson’s negro,’ a ‘pathetic negro,’” in the opening section of *Foreigners*, entitled “Dr Johnson’s Watch” (“Migrant Subjects”). Obviously, the terms “blacky” and “negro” are highly offensive racial designations nowadays, but both were in current use at the time of narration, the turn of the nineteenth century, as a quick dip into the *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms.[[2]](#endnote-2) There is no doubt that Yelin knows this – the critic’s competence is certainly not in question. What might be disputed, however, is her particular strategic choice: she opts for an analytical shortcut that conflates two temporal dimensions, probably with the aim of lending maximum force to her ultimate point, which is that Phillips’s text denounces the pervasiveness of racist ideologies across centuries. Nevertheless, the casting of “Dr Johnson’s Watch” in this particular light seems to rob the narrative of some of its artistic subtlety. More precisely, because Yelin’s primary focus does not lie on form, the textual elements that make the opening section of *Foreigners* a masterpiece of dialogism are entirely left aside.

The exact reasons as to why this matters will become apparent only as this essay progresses, but the rationale underlying the above observation can already be explained. Clearly, it would be both sterile and naive to dismiss Yelin’s remark altogether and claim that simple historical accuracy is at stake in Phillips’s compulsive assigning of the term “negro” to his well-meaning white narrator (the other term discussed by Yelin, “blacky,” is used only once, *Foreigners* 56). That the narrator is racially prejudiced by contemporary standards, as Yelin points out, is beyond dispute. Yet the full resonance of his use of “negro” cannot emerge unless one considers the term’s “socially charged life” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 293). Indeed, it is only by heeding the word’s long history that one can determine how subtle the articulation is between “the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” more than two centuries later (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 324). Put differently, the connotations assigned to the word “negro” in the first section of *Foreigners* only surface when one juxtaposes the term’s socially condoned use in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with its racially offensive use at the time when Phillips put pen to paper – all the while taking into account the writer’s awareness of this historical discrepancy. From this idea derives the decisive observation that, when analyzing fiction such as Phillips’s, one must not “hasten to narrow [the] provenance [of words] to the single speaker we call ‘voice’” (Bal 45), but rather view linguistic items as loci of ideological negotiations that have taken place across time (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 293-94). Thus, Mirja Kuurola’s observation about Phillips’s novel *Cambridge* that “the ventriloquistic recreations of period attitudes, prejudices, and conflicts” partake of “a process of criticism” (132) by the contemporary author can be applied to the linguistic choices made in *Foreigners* too. In sum, Phillips, in positioning his works at the crossroads where significations – historical and contemporary – may meet and intertwine, is very much the discursive “orchestrator” described by Ledent and Yelin. However, the writer’s use of language also subtly refracts his own sensibilities and involvement in the history of words. In this sense, the author’s subjectivity is inevitably inscribed *inside* the text itself, not on its periphery – hence the suggestion that Phillips hides within his works.

While this formulation represents a slight shift from the traditional “orchestrator” metaphor, one cannot in all good faith argue that Phillipsian critics have not suggested this idea before. In fact, many scholars seem to have been guided by a very similar notion of authorial involvement in the text when developing their own analyses of the writer’s books. The contribution of the above discussion, therefore, is not so much epistemological as *methodological*, in that it makes a case for increased explicitness in analytical procedures. Such systematic transparency is one of the cornerstones of stylistics, a discipline defined by its practitioners as “an approach to the analysis of (literary) texts using *linguistic* description” (Short 1, italics in original). A stylistic examination of Phillips’s writing is bound to offer terminological precision and methodological reflexivity but, importantly, these benefits are not ultimate aims in themselves; rather, they are aids designed to enhance our understanding of the text and its linguistic mechanisms. I hope to demonstrate this in two different ways in what follows. First of all, I would like to briefly show how paying attention to a precise textual feature – namely the use of attributive adjectives in “Dr Johnson’s Watch” – can help to readjust and develop existing interpretations of the narrative. Secondly, in a quantitatively more substantial section, I wish to explore the ways in which a stylistic model built around the connections between modality and point of view can help to shed further light on the narrative strategies developed in the first and second sections of *Foreigners*. I will show how these strategies, which seem radically different at first sight, in fact jointly inform the ways in which Phillips uses the genre of “creative biography” (“‘Only Connect’” 188) to offer larger reflections on historiography. My primary focus, in other words, will not so much be on why the author chose to tell the stories of Barber and Turpin, but on why he chose to tell them the way that he did.

Phillips has been widely praised for the elegance of his prose, yet stylistic analyses of his work are few and far between. This scarcity of scholarly material not only accounts for a series of critical blind spots, but also for sheer incomprehension, on the part of some commentators, of the importance of the linguistic makeup of Phillips’s texts. For example, in a review of Renée T. Schatteman’s *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, Jeremy Taylor castigates those interviewers who dare to ask the author about the technical aspects of his craft, accusing them of “want[ing] to simplify and codify the writing process.” Among the targets of Taylor’s scathing criticism is a passage from Bénédicte Ledent’s interview with the writer:

BL: “Dr. Johnson’s Watch” contains a lot of adjectives. What this a deliberate choice? Why?

CP: I try to be very precise with adjectives. (“‘Only Connect’” 190)

Admittedly, Phillips’s answer is not as helpful as one might have hoped but, as it turns out, Ledent question was particularly astute. “Dr Johnson’s Watch” not only contains a dizzying number of adjectives, but these also provide an important key to unraveling the section’s narrative strategy, as I will argue below. If anything, this interview question shows that sharp critical acuity may occasionally need to be complemented by more systematic linguistic procedures, no matter how painstaking or tedious these may appear to be at first. This can perhaps best be illustrated by continuing the discussion on the presence of adjectives in “Dr Johnson’s Watch” where Ledent left it off. In her analysis of *Foreigners*, she observed that

for all his relative open-mindedness, the narrator is blinded by a rigid sense of race and class, which was by no means unusual for the time. This transpires most visibly in his own choice of words – for example, all the race-related adjectives (such as “sable,” “sooty,” and “negro,” 5-6) that he uses whenever he speaks of Barber. (“Determinism” 79-80)

A similar comment is made by Eva Ulrike Pirker when she writes that “the narrator uses an excess of descriptions and attributes pertaining to Barber’s blackness” (213). Both critics are right. Like Louise Yelin, whose reaction to the term “negro” was discussed above, Ledent and Pirker respond to an element that is particularly striking to the reader of Phillips’s mock-historical account – even more so, one might argue, to the scholar attuned to the author’s interest in race. Ledent’s and Pirker’s observations in fact rely on the perception of a precise stylistic technique: in “Dr Johnson’s Watch,” blackness is “overlexicalized”; that is, the “text makes extensive and repetitive use of sets of terms” to refer to Barber’s complexion so that the concept of race, and “the ideas [it] symbolize[s], become foregrounded” (Fowler 218-19).

However, this is only part of the story. Let us for a moment switch methodologies and, rather than merely reading Phillips’s text and letting our literary radar pick up on foregrounded elements, let us pay more systematic attention to the narrator’s use of adjectives throughout his account, even when these items appear unremarkable at first sight. A slightly different picture emerges. For instance, in a passage where the narrator discusses Francis Barber’s time in the navy (28-30), the noun phrases containing attributive adjectives (or adjective-like modifiers) that are used to identify Dr. Johnson’s servant include: “sixteen-year-old Francis Barber” (28) “the young negro” (29), “the black boy” (29), “young Francis” (used three times, 29), and “the eighteen-year-old young man” (30). In other words, Barber’s *youth* is overlexicalized through the use of adjectives and nouns in the same manner as his complexion, presumably because his age and inexperience emphasize his vulnerability in the eyes of the anxious Dr. Johnson, and perhaps also of the narrator himself.

Even more arresting is another instance in which heavy use is made of attributive adjectives. When the unnamed narrator, who is preparing a biographical sketch on Barber for a magazine, goes to the Jamaican’s house sixteen years after Johnson’s death, he is accompanied by an anonymous carriage driver, who only makes a couple of brief appearances in the story and remains a minor figure throughout. This man is successively referred to as “the ancient driver” (15, 16), “the wizened man” (16), “the aged driver” (16), “the ancient man” (16), “the decrepit fellow” (17), “the same ancient man as before” (34) and “the impudent elder of Lichfield” (35). In other words, *all* the noun phrases that include attributive adjectives contain a reference to the man’s advanced age, and this despite the fact that this quality does not appear to have any obvious relevance to the events in the story – the man’s elderliness does not, for example, visibly affect his driving abilities. In short, if, as Ledent and Pirker suggest, the narrator is fixated on Barber’s blackness, then he is equally obsessed with the driver’s old age. This is all the more noticeable as the attributive adjectives used in relation to the latter character are non-restrictive modifiers – that is, they express a property of the referent but are not used to differentiate, for instance, between the old driver and another younger colleague of his.

This concern with different forms of human categorization is hardly surprising coming from a man who has a “rather inflexible . . . view of the ‘natural order’ (33) that should preside over society” (Ledent, “Determinism” 80) – a society in which individuals of “superior rank” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 59), among whom the narrator includes himself, are firmly situated above those of lower racial and social status. But what his insistent use of non-restrictive adjectives more specifically reveals is the attendant corollary to this mode of thought, which is the inherent *separateness* of categories within an immutable order dictated by an elusive, higher (perhaps divine) power. In relation to gender, the narrator at one point speaks of the “*distinct* roles that the sexes were intended to occupy,” and “the *different* natures and capacities of men and women” (33, my italics).[[3]](#endnote-3) Such essentialist notions of segregation also characterize his attitude towards race. While the condescending narrator is by no means as hostile to people of African descent as some of his contemporaries (hence the “relative open-mindedness” pointed out by Ledent, “Determinism” 79), his racial intolerance most acutely manifests itself in his disapproval of miscegenation. Whereas the narrator merely “describes blacks through the language and attitudes of the time and place he inhabits” (Birat 61), his characterization of Barber’s “irregular,” “strangely coloured” mixed-race children invites a more disquieting reading (Phillips, *Foreigners* 43, 17). On two occasions, Barber and his white wife Betsy’s young daughter is referred to as a “mongrel” (37, 54), a chiefly depreciative term designating a person of mixed descent but which, importantly, also applies to dogs of undefinable breed. Here Phillips clearly lurks within his narrator’s discourse, for the writer sets up a polyphonic resonance that simply cannot be ignored, as other examples confirm. Elsewhere, the child is indeed called a “cub” (36), a term typically applied to animals; in yet another passage, the daughter is shown to be “curled across her [mother’s] lap *like a slumbering animal*” (43, my italics). Moreover, the young girl is in the majority of cases assigned the pronoun “it,” even after the narrator has “determined [the child] to be female” (17). Thus, the “zoological terms” so often used by colonizers to “dehumaniz[e] the native” (Fanon 33, 32) are here employed to express disapproval of the “aberrant union” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 40) between Francis and his wife. No wonder, then, that the narrator has “begun to contemplate some involvement in . . . Mr Granville Sharp’s scheme for resettling blacks on the west coast of Africa” (14) – a supposedly “philanthropic” (14) project which, conveniently, happens to put black people at a safe geographical distance from white English society.

The narrator’s obsession with different forms of compartmentalization, I would argue, betrays a larger urge for control that mirrors the totalizing impulse at the heart of colonial historiography. This, I would further suggest, makes “Dr Johnson’s Watch” as much about the recounting of black history – and the reception of these accounts – as about the figure of Barber himself.[[4]](#endnote-4) I will develop this assertion by, once again, following the trail left by the narrator’s use of adjectives. However, my comments on this linguistic feature will only acquire significance when viewed within a larger theoretical framework articulated around the notions of modality and point of view in narrative fiction, which I will now introduce. This stylistic theory, devised by Paul Simpson, will also allow me to compare the techniques used in “Dr Johnson’s Watch” with those displayed in the second section of *Foreigners*, “Made in Wales.”

In a nutshell, Simpson’s theory (46-85) rests on the basic assumption that “[m]uch of the ‘feel’ of [a] text is attributable to the type of point of view it exhibits” (46). Central to his model is the concept of “modality,” a term that refers to the grammatical means – including modal auxiliaries and evaluative adjectives – that indicate “a speaker’s attitude towards, or opinion about, the truth of a proposition” and, more generally, his or her “attitude towards the situation or event described by a sentence” (47). Building on this key role assigned to modality, Simpson proposes a distinction between what he calls “category A” and “category B” narratives, which are accounts respectively told in the first and third person (55).[[5]](#endnote-5)

“Category A” narratives, Simpson continues, “can be subdivided further on the basis of three broad patterns of modality, referred to as *positive*, *negative* and *neutral*” (55, italics in original). “A positive” narratives (A+ve narratives for short) are thus called because of the “positive shading” attached to them: they are “co-operatively oriented towards the reader” (56). Typically, they abound in “generic sentences which possess universal or timeless reference” (57), verbs of feelings, evaluative adjectives and adverbs, so-called “deontic” modal elements (that is, elements foregrounding duties and obligations, such as the auxiliaries “must” and “may”), and “boulomaic” modal elements (that is, words expressive of desire, such as the verbs “hope” or “wish”). Conversely, other features expressive of modality tend to be rare in A+ve narratives. These include “epistemic” elements (which are words concerned with the speaker’s (lack of) confidence in the proposition expressed, including adverbs such as “perhaps” or “possibly,” and the auxiliaries “may” and “must” when used to express probability), and elements of “perception” modality (that is, structures similar to “It is clear/evident that…,” or perception adverbs such as “clearly” and “evidently”).[[6]](#endnote-6)

At the other end of the modal spectrum are “A negative” (A–ve) narratives. These are expressive of “bewilderment and estrangement” (58), and exhibit precisely those features of modality that are suppressed in A+ve narratives – for instance, epistemic modal auxiliaries, lexical verbs such as “suppose” or “assume” (58), and perception adverbs are common. A–ve narratives also tend to exhibit a certain amount of “comparative structures which have some basis in human perception” – for example, “it looked as if,” “it seemed,” “it appeared to be” (58). The last type of “category A” narrative, “A neutral,” is so named because it does not exhibit narratorial modality: the narrator withholds judgments on events and characters, and tells the story only through categorical assertions (60). This absence of modality gives “A neutral” texts a “flat, almost ‘journalistic’ feel” (61).

“Category B,” or third-person, narratives can similarly be subdivided according to their positive, negative or neutral shading, but with the added difficulty that these texts may either be “related from a position outside the consciousness of any of the characters,” or “mediated through the consciousness of a particular character” (62). On the basis of this distinction, Simpson proposes an additional division between two types of B narratives: those “in Narratorial mode” – B(N) for short – and those “in Reflector mode” – which he abbreviates to B(R).[[7]](#endnote-7)

These are the theoretical foundations of a model whose general spirit may be summarized as follows: narrators and/or focalizers of fictional accounts may be assertive, moralizing, and judgmental (positive shading), unsure and bewildered (negative shading), or impersonal and seemingly objective (neutral shading). Of course, as Dan McIntyre points out, “no text is likely to exhibit one type of narration alone” (29), but this need not be seen as a weakness of Simpson’s model. On the contrary, the theoretical basis provided by his categories offers guidelines that may allow one to “look at the effects generated by *changes* in narration, and to look particularly at *how* specific points of view effects are created” (McIntyre 29, italics in original).

Some of the avenues of research pointed out by McIntyre have already been followed by critics of *Foreigners*. Analyzing point of view in “Dr Johnson’s Watch,” Kathie Birat has observed that “[the narrator’s] discourse is marked by a liberal use of modals, the conditional tense and verbs implying hesitation” (61) but that “[t]he marks of hesitation in his discourse disappear as the narrator gradually evokes the reactions of the young Barber” (62) when the latter’s life story is recounted. This remark echoes Eva Ulrike Pirker’s statement that the narrator first “overtly reports and comments” on the figure of Francis Barber (for instance, by using introductory clauses such as “As far as I could ascertain”) before “assum[ing] a covert position” and rendering “impressions of the experiences of Barber, Johnson and diverse other figures . . . via internal focalisation” (211). Using Simpson’s terminology, one might say that the opening section of *Foreigners* starts in A–ve mode when conveying the narrator’s initial impressions of Francis Barber, and then moves into B(R) territory when focusing on Barber and Johnson’s relationship.

Crucially, the recourse to Simpson’s theoretical model allows for more than simple paraphrasing of Birat’s and Pirker’s remarks. While the opening pages of “Dr Johnson’s Watch” indeed exhibit the markers of hesitation noted by these two critics (to which one might add features of perception modality, also typical of A–venarratives), several other linguistic elements run counter to Simpson’s predictions for A–ve accounts, indicating that the narrator is perhaps not as hesitant as one might initially suppose. Chief among these elements is probably the heavy use of evaluative adjectives. To cite a few examples among many, the narrator speaks of “the *modest* confines of Dr Johnson’s house” (3, my italics), of Barber’s “*virtuous* affection” for his master (6, my italics), or of the “*elegant* monument to William Shakespeare” in Westminster Abbey (9, my italics). Even a large number of those adjectives that may semantically be classified as “descriptive” smack of evaluation when considered from a pragmatic perspective. This was already the case of the terms referring to Barber’s blackness, whose old-fashioned associations and accumulation account for their ideological connotations. Another striking example is the narrator’s reflection that he (that is, the narrator himself) “should be putting [his] *educated* mind to better use” (9, my italics) – a statement that, undoubtedly, does more than merely point to the objective fact that the man has received a formal type of education.

The clash between, on the one hand, the many modal markers of hesitation in the narrator’s discourse and, on the other, his more assertive use of evaluative adjectives (particularly when used in attributive position), leads to a more significant finding, which can again be introduced through a specific textual example. Observing Barber sitting alone at Johnson’s funeral, the narrator first states, in typical A–ve style, that the servant “*appeared* to be genuinely consumed with grief” (10, my italics). In other words, the narrator relies on his visual perceptions to posit that Barber is in a state of emotional distress and sincere bereavement. Any sense of tentativeness, however, disappears when later in the paragraph Barber is simply called “the sad negro” (10) and “this poor man” (10-11). In such structures, the black man’s sadness or misfortune is no longer asserted (and therefore accessible to debate), but assumed– or, in more precise linguistic terms, presupposed. Hence, the narrator’s initial, tentative and openly subjective impression of Barber’s state of mind becomes ideologically encoded into the narrative through the use of emotive adjectives placed in attributive position. Such textual manipulations are all the more easily overlooked as they co-exist with typically A–ve elements that persist throughout the narrator’s account of Johnson’s funeral. For instance, in the next paragraph, Barber’s attitude is again tentatively interpreted when he is described as “*seemingly* reluctant to rise to his feet” (11, my italics).

While shifts from assertion to assumption may be discreet, woven together as they are with a plethora of more hesitant statements, they are not as trivial as they might appear. Even before discovering the full story behind Barber’s misfortunes, which lead the Jamaican to spend his final days in an overcrowded infirmary, the narrator speaks of the “*careless* Barber” who “managed to fully deplete the capital” bequeathed to him by Dr. Johnson (21, my italics). In other words, Barber’s responsibility in his own demise is presupposed. Later in the narrative, a far more nuanced account emerges from the story told by Barber’s wife Betsy, who explains that weaknesses in her husband’s personality, racial prejudice in England, and some individuals’ ill-intentioned behavior all contributed to his ruin (53-54). This intricate picture is later completed by Barber himself when he states that, during the course of his life with the generous Dr. Johnson, “the limits of his abilities” were continually “blurred by kindness, dependence, and [his] own indolence” (58). Disregarding these complexities, the narrator subsequently mentions that Barber is a “pathetic negro” (61). This is yet another strategically placed attributive adjective that presupposes, and therefore presents as evident, the former servant’s “pitiful” state (59). The attentive critic will of course have noticed that the narrator “fails . . . to understand [the] irony” behind Barber’s words (Ledent, “Determinism” 79), but, as the Jamaican’s helplessness is ideologically encoded into the narrative account, the reader is at greater risk of internalizing this view of the black man as historically accurate. Revealingly, Eva Ulrike Pirker includes among the “known *facts*” of Barber’s life (196, my italics) the idea that, after Johnson’s death, “Barber is unable to stand on his own feet” (196). In other words, the scholar seems to unwittingly lean towards an infantilization of the servant very much akin to the narrator’s own.

Such examples support my earlier suggestion that viewpoint and modality, here embodied in the use of evaluative adjectives, contribute to the construction and transmission of the narrator’s skewed view of history, compartmentalized along the lines of black vs. white, upper class vs. lower class and, as has now become clear, dignified vs. pitiable. These examples betray the narrator’s worldview, but they also epitomize how subjective renderings of history are constructed, transmitted, and sometimes made to appear commonplace. In the early stages of the story, the narrator’s ideological rigidity is limply camouflaged by an overabundance of linguistic expressions marking tentativeness, and by affectedly modest statements about the quality and authority of his account (see, especially, 3). Eventually, however, his conversation with Barber leads him to draw a more authoritative conclusion:

the black should have left our country and journeyed back to Jamaica or to Africa with Mr Sharp’s expedition. In fact, all ebony personages should do so for I was now convinced that English air is clearly not suitable for negro lungs. (59)

This short passage displays several features typical of A+ve narratives: the assertion that Barber “should” have left England is an expression of deontic modality, while the fact that “all ebony personages” should do so is a generic assertion. The epistemic and perception modalities that have characterized the narrator’s speech thus far are still present; nevertheless, both occurrences in this passage (“convinced” and “clearly”) are indicative of confidence rather than self-doubt. It is rather striking that this self-assured pronouncement should occur after the narrator has been presented with the supposed “evidence” of Barber’s demise – the narrator’s entire account, one might say, takes the form of a dubious scientific demonstration that only reinforces his initial prejudices.

Importantly, as already hinted at above, the narrator remains entirely unaware of the thwarted logic of his reasoning. At the end of his story, he concludes that “[a] biographical sketch [of Barber] in the *Gentlemen’s Magazine* would most likely be met with the same combination of fascination and disdain that had blighted” the servant’s life (61). In light of the observations made in the previous paragraphs, the irony is unmistakable, since the mixture of “fascination and disdain” seemingly deplored by the narrator also characterizes his own attitude towards the Jamaican. One may even argue that this ironic statement also acts as a cautionary remark to the contemporary reader. Once again, such an interpretation is made possible by the recognition that this narrative statement is double-voiced: this is a clear case in which the “implied author communicates with the reader ‘over the head’, as it were, of the narrator,” who is himself “unaware of the ironies generated by his discourse” (Black 116). Thus, here too, Phillips hides within the text to undermine the supposedly “generous” (*Foreigners* 6) nature of his narrator’s tale and, perhaps, to alert readers to their own well-meaning but potentially problematic negotiation of Barber’s story as it is presented in the book. This reading is supported on the plot level by the narrator’s final act, which consists in the allegedly altruistic gifting to Barber’s wife of the watch that Dr. Johnson once left to his servant – a gesture that, very much like the narrator’s account itself, perpetuates the muddled confusion between benevolence and paternalism that still characterizes white hegemonic discourses today.

A factor left aside in the above analysis is the narrator’s use of internal focalization when expounding on the relationship between Johnson and Barber. On the surface, this technique merely seems to confirm that the storyteller shamelessly appropriates – or, indeed, colonizes – the inner lives of his biographical subjects by adopting perspectives that can in fact only be based on imagined reconstructions of the two men’s inaccessible intimate thoughts. Alternatively, one might argue that such polyphonic passages reveal a genuinely empathetic tendency on the narrator’s part to identify not only with white Dr. Johnson, but also with black Francis Barber, whose feelings are given expression in this section of the text. This fact no doubt contributes to cementing the narrator’s ambiguity, and it more generally evidences how the text’s polyphonic strategy makes it all but impossible to form a clear-cut judgment about its central figures.

At first sight, such a complex use of voice and point of view appears to neatly contrast with the seemingly distant approach adopted in “Made in Wales,” the second section of *Foreigners* that retraces the rise and fall of boxer Randolph Turpin in the mid-twentieth century. This story, supposedly “told from the outside” (Ledent in Phillips, “Only Connect” 188), has been described as “a factual account” (Ledent, “Determinism” 80) and a “straightforward non-fictional text” (Birat 59). Another commentator, using less generous but particularly revealing terms, has stated that the Turpin section “reads like an extended Wikipedia entry” (Goodheart). To a large extent, these impressions of being confronted with a neutral, external point of view can be attributed to the “rather dry and journalistic style” (Ledent, “Determinism” 80) adopted by Phillips in this narrative. As the writer himself has confirmed, he consciously attempted to “fashion something akin to sports reportage” in recounting Turpin’s life (“‘Only Connect’” 189). Based on these comments, as well as on my own initial impressions, I started out my stylistic analysis of “Made in Wales” with the hypothesis that the text would largely conform to what Simpson identifies as a category B(N) neutral narrative – that is, a third-person account adopting an external perspective and containing few expressions of modality. These theoretical presumptions were rapidly disproved. Had the Turpin section really been a Wikipedia entry, it would have been flagged for seriously breaching the website’s policy of both neutrality and verifiability.

Indeed, even if “Made in Wales” mentions a large number of names, dates, addresses, and figures – all of which reinforce the impression that facts are reported in a neutral and descriptive way – the narrative is in fact far from straightforward in its use of modality and focalization. On the modal plane, the first part of the section in particular contains general statements typical not of B neutral, but of assertive B+ve narratives, such as “The British have always held their prize fighters in high esteem” (Phillips, *Foreigners* 76), or “Everybody in Britain knew that Turpin carried a potential knockout punch in both hands” (127). The latter statement, especially, is obviously not to be understood literally, but as a sweeping declaration that reinforces Turpin’s immense popularity in Britain at the height of his sporting career. While it might be argued that such generalizations are inherent to even the most “objective” attempt at historiography, other features in the narrative are more revealingly indicative of a “subjective” B+ve stance. Most notably, the narrator repeatedly uses the boulomaic adverb “unfortunately” (106, 123, 164) to deplore the course taken by Turpin’s life, also employing the adverb “sadly” (90, 148) in reference to the man’s difficult family situation. Such expressions of modality testify to the narrator’s allegiance to the boxer – a stance, one might say, very much akin to that of a sports commentator championing a local hero against the opposition.[[8]](#endnote-8) More generally, these details indicate that, contrary to widely-held critical beliefs, *something* is being done with point of view in “Made in Wales”; suffice it now to establish precisely what and why. I will attempt to do so by isolating two precise features in this unusual reportage, namely the narrator’s temporal position, and his use of focalization.

First of all, an examination of point of view in the story promptly yields the observation that the narrator regularly shifts his temporal position in relation to his subject. Indeed, the narrative opens with an account of Turpin’s arrival in London “[o]n the morning of 9 July, 1951” (63), and then states that “*today* there was something auspicious” about the boxer (63, my italics). Here, the narrative privileges a sense of immediacy that renders the sense of anticipation presumably felt by the participants in, and observers of, the events being reported. Later in the same paragraph, Turpin’s promoter Jack Solomons is described as a man “who, *in the parlance of the times*, liked to talk fast and plenty” (64, my italics). This expression clearly signals a sense of temporal distance from the events recounted. However, similar “parlance of the times” is adopted by the narrator himself throughout the story, as he constantly describes the mixed-race Turpin as “coloured,” a term now considered dated, or indeed offensive, in the British context. To a large extent, these racial references are – just like the use of the adverb “today” mentioned above – suggestive of polyphony. To give but one example, the narrator’s assertion that manager “George Middleton . . . foolishly overmatched the promising coloured fighter” (69), i.e. young Randolph Turpin, with Sugar Ray Robinson, clearly ventriloquizes the opinions of skeptical observers *before* the mixed-race boxer’s victory over the American champion. As in “Dr Johnson’s Watch,” the dated racially-related vocabulary used in “Made in Wales” serves to discreetly encode prejudice into the narrative, and hence indirectly hint at the racist ideologies that shaped the life of its protagonist. However, polyphonic strategies do not operate in the same way in the two stories. In the opening section of *Foreigners*, the technique works covertly, since narrative authority is assigned to an imaginary contemporary of Francis Barber, and the reader must retrieve instances of overlexicalization and irony through pragmatic interpretation. In the second section, on the other hand, double-voicedness is far more easily perceptible, as in the following passage:

Many believed that being from the only coloured family in the town obviously informed the boy’s [i.e. young Turpin’s] delinquency. It did not occur to them that being the only coloured family in town meant that the Turpins, Randy included, had to be able to take care of themselves, and sometimes get their retaliation in first. In the thirties, most British people were unfamiliar with the novelty of living among people of another race, but given the evidence of the Turpin family, the novelty of living with coloured people was something that a number of the narrow-minded townsfolk of Leamington Spa had concluded they could do without. (94)

The excerpt starts by reporting the opinions of “many” inhabitants of Leamington Spa, whose voices can be discerned in the presence of the adjective “coloured” and, even more visibly, of the perception adverb “obviously.” The narrator then more firmly takes hold of the textual reins by detailing what “did not occur to” the people of the town, offering an alternative interpretation of the reasons behind Turpin’s “delinquency.” This analysis of the situation turns out to be retrospective, as the adverbial of time “[i]n the thirties” seals the narrator’s sense of temporal distance from the events; at the end of the passage, the adjective “narrow-minded” unambiguously reveals his precise stance on the matter. All the while, white Leamingtonian voices continue to resurface in the text – for example, the supposed “evidence” of black delinquency provided by the Turpin family appears to reflect these people’s opinions, in addition to expressing the narrator’s doubtful attitude towards the alleged proof. In sum, the narrative works by alternatively borrowing the voices of those involved in the events and distancing itself from them, an oscillation that is also reproduced in temporal terms. Importantly, these techniques offer a first glimpse into the ways in which the account approaches historiography – as a *seemingly* coherent narrative that in fact emerges from the constant confrontation between voices and temporal planes. Whereas the neat cohesion of the text may indeed give the impression that one is confronted with “a paratactic structure – and then, and then, and then” (Yelin, “Migrant Subjects”), “Made in Wales” in fact bears far more traces of the type of polyphony usually found in Phillips’s texts than may initially appear to be the case.

This observation finds confirmation when one examines in more detail the second feature mentioned above, namely the use of focalization. The narrative is by no means “told from the outside” at all times (Ledent in Phillips, “Only Connect” 188); rather, the narrator’s temporal oscillation identified in the preceding paragraphs finds a parallel in his repeated incursion into the bodies and minds of his protagonists, in a manner that is even more striking than in the polyphonic borrowing of voices discussed above. This internal focalization is evidenced by the recurrent recourse to verbs and expressions denotative of cognitive and emotional states: Turpin’s mother “gathered her wits about her,” “sensed,” “worried,” “knew” (85); George Middleton “was alarmed,” “was unconvinced” (123), “had little faith” (125); Turpin himself “knew” (83), “was aware” (92), “felt at ease” (102), “realized” (123), and so on.[[9]](#endnote-9) Interestingly, even as the narrator assigns his protagonists specific states of mind and verbs of feelings, thereby venturing into what Simpson has called B(R)+ve mode (that is, a third-person narrative in focalizer mode in which the feelings of the focalizer are reported on), he also moves back to the estranged, external perspective of the B(N)–ve mode on a regular basis. This is particularly noticeable in the passage recounting the legendary fight between Randolph Turpin and Sugar Ray Robinson, in which the American’s behavior is, initially, mostly interpreted from the outside using the conjunction “as though,” a term that the Russian scholar Boris Uspensky has identified as one “of estrangement” (85). Thus, Robinson “bob[s] and weave[s] *as though* eager to let everybody know he was ready for business,” and “bang[s] his gloves together *as though* eager to get the proceedings over and done with” (81, my italics). However, the focalization then becomes internal: the American “*wonder[s]* if the Limey was yellow” (81, my italics). Similarly, Turpin initially “[sits] slumped on his stool *as though* awaiting his fate,” but then gets up, “*knowing* that there was now no turning back” (81, my italics).

Such frequent changes in point of view, I would argue, account for more than localized stylistic effects in climactic scenes – they are part and parcel of the multifaceted narrative strategy of “Made in Wales.” Indeed, the narrator at times confidently recounts the story of Turpin by assigning the protagonist specific states of mind, but at other times struggles to impose an interpretation on the events. Most notably, when Turpin, after his victory over Robinson, is invited to a reception in his honor at Leamington Spa Town Hall, the narrator first reports, in B(R)+ve mode, that the “overwhelming adulation” of the cheering fans “brought a lump to Turpin’s throat” (86-87). Only a few sentences later, a radically different B(N)–ve mode prevails when, describing the pictures of Turpin taken on the occasion, the narrator states that the young man “*appears* a little confused. In almost every photograph he *seems* to be avoiding full eye contact with the camera *as though* hiding from somebody, or from himself” (87, my italics). More than simply including a few token markers of hesitation, this excerpt casts the spotlight on the very act of interpretation involved in the reconstruction of a narrative based on archival material. One might well posit that such passages, which contrast with those that unambiguously identify Turpin’s feelings and sensations, purposefully problematize the process of historiographical encoding made to appear so self-evident by the narrator of “Dr Johnson’s Watch.”

Significantly, as “Made in Wales” progresses, this tension between factual exposition and tentative interpretation becomes all the more palpable, as the authority of the B(R)+ve mode and the hesitancy of the B(N)–ve mode are increasingly made to clash. For instance, at a late stage in the story, the narrator reports that Turpin, forced to earn a living after his boxing career, persists in taking part in wrestling matches “despite his own reservations and his evident discomfort” (145). While the mention of the former champion’s “reservations” suggests unmediated access to (or at least unwavering labelling of) his state of mind, his “*evident* discomfort” (my italics) includes a marker of perception modality signaling that an interpretation is being made from an external vantage point. In another passage, the narrator states that Turpin’s “anxiety over his debts was compounded by the frustration of knowing that . . . *to some extent*, the present situation was *entirely* one of his own making” (149, my italics). Here, a modal collision occurs between the epistemic expression “to some extent” (which hedges the claim being made) and the amplifier “entirely” (which conversely, intensifies the message of the clause). Extending the musical metaphor of polyphony, one might say that such clashes cause the narrative to become increasingly dissonant. It is in this way, I would argue, that Phillips, who had been hiding within the text, slowly comes into visibility in *Foreigners*, even before “an ‘I’ narrator – obviously Caryl Phillips himself” makes an appearance at the end of “Made in Wales,” “decoding [Turpin’s] life story and approaching it from a more intimate angle” (Ledent, “Determinism” 80).

Interestingly, Phillips’s eventual appearance as a homodiegetic narrator (that is, one who is a character in his own tale) marks an attempt to reconcile the two discursive modes present within the Turpin narrative – on the one hand, the factual, non-fictional discourse of journalism and, on the other, the fictional genre characterized by conjectural liberties. After listening to the testimonies of two of Turpin’s daughters, Phillips concludes:

Turpin’s inner turmoil towards the end cannot have been simply fuelled by anxieties over lack of money, and anger and frustration at having allowed himself to be used by people. There must have been a deeper, and in the end far more destructive, hurt. . . . He lived with this hurt for many years . . . and the great mystery is how he survived for so long. (164)

The beginning of this passage features the epistemic modals “cannot” and “must,” both of which mark strong commitment to the factuality of the propositions expressed, but do not indicate an omniscient point of view. These markers of modality, however, disappear in the following sentence, when it is plainly stated that Turpin “lived with this hurt for many years.” Yet this extrapolation is then immediately followed by the mention of a “great mystery” that remains unresolved. Phillips, in other words, once more adopts a point of view outside Turpin’s consciousness, and ultimately leaves his narrative at the crossroads of imagination and fact, fiction and non-fiction.

If the different sections of *Foreigners* are indeed “written in distinctive styles expressive of the individuality of each . . . of [Phillips’s] protagonists” (Ledent, “Dignity” 73), then it may also be claimed that these styles individualize the narratives’ considerations on historiography. Rather strikingly, the propensity to increasingly foreground the tension between historical facts and narratorial interpretation in “Made in Wales” (either by introducing dissonances within the text or by having the narrator step into the story to ponder on these discrepancies) contrasts with the growing tendency towards authoritativeness and generalization displayed at the end of “Dr Johnson’s Watch,” at least where matters of race are concerned – recall the statement that “all ebony personages” “should . . . [journey] back to Jamaica or to Africa” (59). In this sense, one might well argue that the first two sections of *Foreigners*, despite their protagonists’ common downfall, can be regarded as mirror images of each other. On the one hand, the Francis Barber narrative is largely left in the hands of a well-meaning but ultimately patronizing narrator, which works to reinforce the idea that the former servant, as he admits himself, “lack[s] dignity” (58). On the other, the Turpin section, without glossing over its protagonist’s tragic fate, reconstructs the boxer’s life in all its complexity, and eventually leaves the reader with the idea, articulated by Turpin’s daughter Charmaine, that this particular Englishman “always had dignity” (163). In typical Phillipsian fashion, it befalls the reader to decode the workings of the sections’ polyphonic strategies. In each of these cases, this can be done by seeking out the author’s hiding places within the text. In “Dr Johnson’s Watch,” Barber’s dignity *can* be restored, but only through a critical reading of the narrative – one must, in other words, become fully aware of the biased ideologies that dominate the narrator’s account to expose the attitudes that they conceal. The second section demands a similarly sustained engagement but, conversely, the text openly, and increasingly, foregrounds the difficulty of imposing interpretations on so-called historical “facts.”

If “Dr Johnson’s Watch” and “Made in Wales” can be regarded as mirrors of each other, then the third section of *Foreigners*, “Northern Lights,” might be considered a shattered version of these looking-glasses. Undoubtedly the most fragmented section of the three, the story of David Oluwale “is told in a totally unpredictable way through a medley of voices with many different tones” (Ledent, “Determinism” 82). This sophisticated polyphonic assemblage demands a far more elaborate treatment than could be given here. The extent to which the absence of this analysis will be perceived as a shortcoming of the present essay may, paradoxically, be a measure of the critical potential of its methodology: if the reader is left wanting to know more, then perhaps the stylistic approach adopted in these pages *does* have something to contribute to the critical evaluation of Phillips’s texts. If the opposite impression prevails, then I would invite readers to reflect on the limits of the methodological exercise proposed here. This suggestion is not as self-defeating as it may appear, for, as mentioned above, one of the aims of stylistics is precisely to foster reflexivity on readerly procedures – all the while keeping in mind how one might elucidate the artistic messages that Caryl Phillips’s work so convincingly, and at times so elusively, manages to convey.

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1. Notes

   On the intertextual link between Anne Frank and Phillips’s *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*, see Ledent (*Caryl Phillips*, esp. 68 and 155-59) and Craps (169-71); on the relationship between Olaudah Equiano and *A Distant Shore*, see Ledent (“Family and Identity” 71). Gillet (323-24) also discusses the latter link in more detail and establishes parallels between *A Distant Shore* and *Cambridge* based on their common use of Equiano’s narrative. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This reference work goes so far as describing the word “negro” as the “standard designation” for black people until the middle of the twentieth century – and indeed, the term was used without racist undertones by a long line of twentieth-century black writers, from Langston Hughes to James Baldwin. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. That this compartmentalization betrays an obsession with order is also suggested by the narrator’s comment that one must “rul[e] these trifling creatures [i.e. women] with benevolent determination” lest “things . . . fall out of their natural order” (33). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This assertion somewhat echoes Kathie Birat’s statement that the “invented voice” that tells Barber’s story, “like all first-person narrators, reveals as much about himself in his telling of Francis Barber’s life as he does about Barber” (61). However, my claim differs from Birat’s in its perception of the narrator’s account not as a biography composed by a man who holds prejudices typical of his times, but as a text used by Phillips to comment on historiography itself. Put differently, I will be arguing that the encoding of ideologies into the narrative illuminates the ways in which historical “facts” are textually constructed. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. These categories broadly correspond to what Genette (1983) has famously called “homodiegetic” and “heterodiegetic” accounts – on the one hand, narratives where the narrator is a character in the situations and events recounted; on the other, those where he or she is not. For clear and concise definitions of narratological terms, see Prince. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Perception modality may be considered a sub-category of epistemic modality, since it reflects how “the degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition is predicated on some reference to human perception” (Simpson 50). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The “reflector” is the “holder of point of view,” a narrative agent more commonly called the “focalizer” (Prince 82). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Notice that the narrator of “Dr Johnson’s Watch” too uses boulomaic adverbs, showing a marked preference for “sadly” (27, 37, 46, 49, 51) over “unfortunately” (1), but with the adjectives “sad” and “unfortunate” recurring in equal measure. Along with the evaluative adjectives that I discussed above, these adverbs suggest that the “negative” modal shading of the opening section is but a front hiding a more assertive subjectivity. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The extent to which these references to the protagonists’ states of mind are derived from historical documents (such as interviews or other journalistic reports) does not bear any direct relevance to the argument, since in all cases conjecture is at work – whether it takes the form of assigning authority to a historical source, or attributing motivations to the people involved based on actions that they performed during their lifetime. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)