

# *A Fictional and Cultural Labyrinth: Caryl Phillips's "The Nature of Blood"*

BÉNÉDICTE LEDENT

The voyage between two worlds is fraught with this grandeur and this anonymity. Who blazes a trail is overtaken by a labyrinth leading to many conclusions.

WILSON HARRIS, "Behring Straits" (13)

THE FRAGMENTED NATURE of Caryl Phillips's fiction has occasionally led to puzzled statements on the part of commentators unable to rid themselves of rational frames of mind. This was especially the case with *The Nature of Blood* (1997), a disjointed novel which brings together the Jewish and African diasporas, and focuses on the twentieth-century Jewish Holocaust, life in Renaissance Venice and present-day Israel. Although this novel garnered a lot of praise, it also elicited complaints about "a loose web of flashback, shockingly fragmented memories, random facts and loosely-interconnected individual stories" (Battersby). Another reviewer concluded that "the difficulty with a novel as ambitious as this is how to tie all of the various threads together finally" (Mahjoub 62). These baffled comments may seem surprising because Phillips has in a way tried "to prepare readers for the challenges of this book with his earlier work" (Kreilkamp 45), especially *Higher Ground* (1989) and *Crossing the River* (1993).

My purpose here, however, is not to contend that *The Nature of Blood* is an easy novel, nor is it to provide an "open sesame" to crack, as if by magic, its intricate structure and narrative, for it seems to me that the novel's very disjointedness is part and parcel of its meaning, that its opacity is inherent to the message it wants to convey, and, ultimately, a measure of its Caribbeanness. What I will attempt to do, then, is to tentatively analyze one of the novel's organizing principles, and thereby hopefully show how the different

strands “tie together,” while at the same time never losing sight of the book’s enigmatic complexity.

Like Phillips’s other fictions, *The Nature of Blood* could of course be read through the lens of exile, viewing its characters as individuals desperately trying “to survive a journey” (*Higher Ground* 218) with varying degrees of success, and regarding its broken structure as the reflection of their individual dislocations. Without repudiating such a reading and the insights it can yield into human nature as described by Phillips, I would nonetheless like to try and plumb the intricacies of this novel by resorting to a more visual, though germane, archetype, that of the labyrinth, which *Brewer’s Dictionary* defines appropriately as “a structure with complicated passages through which it is baffling to find one’s way” (642).

As the following textual analysis will attempt to highlight, the labyrinth constitutes an interesting symbolic nexus in *The Nature of Blood*, the paradoxical point of convergence of its otherwise diffracting fictional and cultural ramifications. Not only does this pattern incorporate the notion of wandering and evoke the sense of being lost experienced by the novel’s characters and readers alike, it also fits in with its criss-crossing structure, its organic and architectural imagery, and, perhaps even more importantly, with its non-linear and fluid epistemology. The labyrinth has, in addition, a chronotopic quality that relates to this novel’s conception of history as cyclical, i.e. as both spatially and temporally “distant yet so tantalizingly close” (3).

Finally, while the labyrinth can help us to apprehend the relevance of Phillips’s novel to today’s societies and their unpredictable networks of identities, at the same time it buttresses the book’s demystification of the notion of newness in human relationships. As a theoretical paradigm, the labyrinth provides an apt evocation of the historical complexity and the cultural “impurity” that, for Phillips, have long characterized his native Caribbean: “It’s impossible to sum up the repeating fluidity and hybridity and dynamism of Caribbean culture in a sentence. It’s a European conceit to try to define yourself by exclusion, by defining the Other. What’s dynamic and energizing about the Caribbean is that they reject that form of definition. ‘Impurity’ is the norm here” (Jaggi). The labyrinth, as an ancestral symbol connoting multiplicity, ambiguity and

meandering, therefore alerts us to the age-long existence of cultural interweaving as part of a universal history of ideas, even if today's "mongrelization" in the Western world has reached unprecedented levels. As Jacques Attali points out in his book *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society*, the labyrinth is one of the "most ancient emblems of human thought" (xxii) everywhere in the world. Overshadowed by linear and rational thought from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution onwards, it has been gaining ground again and dominates our modern world through the Internet and new forms of nomadism, at once virtual and real. However, in his preface to *Extravagant Strangers*, a collection of texts by writers born outside Britain yet part of its literary tradition, Phillips already refuted the idea of a newly discovered heterogeneity. Taking his cue from Daniel Defoe's poem "The True Born Englishman," he pointed out that "British society has always been a melting pot of diverse cultural influences, and her heterogeneous condition runs very deep" (xiv). It is thus a cultural labyrinth of sorts, even though this cosmopolitanism remained unacknowledged for a long time.

The tortuous narrative of *The Nature of Blood*, and its rejection of the unities of place, time, and action, may be the most obvious expression of labyrinthine thought in this novel, though by far not the only one. Once the reader has entered the text, (s)he is constantly obliged to veer into new, though interlocking stories, then turn back to former ones. This winding pattern accelerates as the novel unfolds, as if the reader had got lost in the narrative maze and was panicking at the idea of not finding a way out of this increasingly nightmarish world, full of what is perceived at first as narrative dead ends. Such are, for example, the description of the gassing process in the concentration camps or the matter-of-fact entries on Venice, the ghetto, Othello and suicide that interrupt the narrative flow in the second part of the novel. Behind promises of comprehensiveness or at least a claim to authoritativeness, also to be found in the colonial versions of Caribbean history, these short, factual texts in fact offer reductive versions of what has been presented, through individual testimonies, as a Daedalian reality. Yet, in spite of these apparent blind alleys, there is eventually a way out; the frantic voyage through the horrors meted out to Europe's strangers ends with the words: "Don't worry, I say. Everything will

be fine. Please. Don't worry" (199). This ironically deceptive statement is uttered by Eva, the tormented survivor of the Holocaust, to her schizophrenic double, and announces her way out of the labyrinth, that is, her suicide. For the reader, however, these soothing words herald another exit: the last, more straightforward section devoted to the failed yet peaceful encounter between Stephan, Eva's uncle, and Malka, an Ethiopian Jew now living in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, their meeting first takes the form of a dance which Attali equates to "[moving] along the lines of a labyrinth" (89), adding that "all myths teach that the labyrinth is the origin of the dance" (89). While being a physical reenactment of the twists and turns of their diasporic lives, this dance causes Stephan and Malka's relationship to be both "respectable and intimate" (202), making them feel, in Attalis's words, "like two neighbouring points in a labyrinth, so close, yet far from each other" (99).

If the structure of the novel is labyrinthine, so are the lives of its main characters. Each of them is trapped in a kind of existential maze and involved in a quest for its center. Eva, the young Jewish victim of the Holocaust, is desperately looking for her lost family and, then, for Gerry, her "knight in shining armour" (29), the Englishman who liberated her from Bergen Belsen. For Othello, the sixteenth-century black general lost in the maze of Venetian customs, the goal is assimilation into this society through his marriage to Desdemona, "the most beautiful treasure of Venice" (129). As to Stephan, "one of the leaders of the Palestine underground army" (80), the search is for "the promised land" (5), as in the symbolic stone labyrinths in Christian churches whose centre often symbolizes Jerusalem (xxiii).

In each case, however, a kind of Minotaur thwarts the character's progression towards his/her target. Pure evil, represented by Nazism, annihilates Eva's chances of ever finding her sister and parents, while destroying most of the other people around her. Othello's "predicament" is triggered off by the pragmatism of the Republic of Venice and the covert racism of its inhabitants, but also by his own inability to perceive the precariousness of his own position. And Stephan's ideal of togetherness, of a country he can share with other "displaced and dispossessed" people (5), is spoilt by the cultural and racial consolidation of the new Jewish state which fails to integrate people like Malka and her family.

Readers familiar with the Phillipsian universe know that it has hardly ever any redemptive dimension. Unsurprisingly, therefore, his three protagonists cannot escape the recesses in which they are trapped, or if they do, their escape is strangely flawed. Eva, for example, finally commits suicide, a dubious escape indeed. Before that she tries to get away from the horrors of the camp through dreams or flights of fantasy. An interesting comparison crops up in her "swirling" thoughts (28) when she compares herself first to a bird (35), then to a butterfly (194, 197), for these two images bring Icarus to mind. Indeed, very much like him, Eva flies away from her prison but eventually collapses. To some extent, Othello becomes his own Minotaur as he himself gives up his actual and metaphorical wanderings and their attendant perplexity when he believes he has reached "the heart of the society" (145), oblivious of his own irretrievably marginal status. Instead of liberating him, this sense of "finality" (147) proves a prison that excludes his African wife and child but also any form of hope or desire. Of the three consciousnesses explored in the novel, Stephan's is the one who most successfully manages the labyrinth of his own existence. Like his quasi namesake, Stephen Dedalus, in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he may be said to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race" (253), but instead of resorting only to "silence, exile, and cunning" (247), like Joyce's character, Stephan uses memory as his Ariadne. His only companion, memory, enables him to "[reach] across the years" (213). Even if this process of remembering is painful, and potentially dangerous, as Eva's mental problems seem to show, it allows him some sense of belonging by bridging the past and the future. Unlike the other two characters, he seems to have understood that there is no "new beginning," but simply life, which involves a past that "can never [be] put down to rest" (11).

So, in a sense, there is no escaping the labyrinth, that is, the entanglements of life, because, Phillips seems to suggest, it is everywhere, above all in human beings themselves, whatever mask they may wear. For example, the circulatory system, ubiquitous in the novel through the many images of blood and sectioned arteries, is a labyrinth of sorts. So are the bowels which take control of the existence of the concentration camp inmates. So too are the

convolutions of the brain and the dark recesses of memory which, like a labyrinth, combines both time and space as in Stephan's definition of it as "that untidy room with unpredictable visiting hours" (11). This inner complexity of Man may explain why human beings are ultimately "secret and inaccessible" (73) to each other, as several unexpected turns in the novel seem to show. The letter forged by Eva, and containing Gerry's fake marriage proposal, may be one example of the unpredictability of human behaviour which implies constant choices whereby "time forks perpetually towards innumerable futures" (Borges 53). In contradiction to what the doctor, an expert in "emotional anaesthesia" (*The Nature of Blood* 174), believes, human actions cannot be rationalized nor made to fit scientifically predicted patterns, but always remain beyond understanding.

Despite its omnipresence, its being part of the nature of blood, that is, of human nature,<sup>2</sup> the labyrinth and the complexity it entails are very often negated or suppressed by systems of thought promoting what Borges has called "symmetry with a semblance of order" (42). Nazism is, of course, a prime example. It is striking to note, for instance, how the linear (as opposed to the circular or tortuous) has taken over the camp where Eva is an inmate. Yet it never takes over her body or her mind which keeps "swirling about in a haze of dreams" (28). Significantly, one of her dreams pictures her in a mazelike forest, chased by dogs and soldiers, like runaway slaves in the Americas, "furiously weaving her way through the trees, diving beneath branches and stumbling over exposed roots" (184).<sup>3</sup> It should be added, however, that the linear gradually acquires a seductive protectiveness in the eyes of Eva, so that by the end of her stay in the camp she feels "comfortable being confined" (22), the fence giving her some certainty as to where she is.

While outside the camp people are represented as "huddling" (91) or as forming "a flood" (70), in the camp they are mostly seen standing in "factory" lines (19), being "processed" (19) for death but also for life when the camp is liberated and the prisoners are sent to Displaced Persons centres. The paradox of this industrial simile (which, incidentally, recalls the commodification of slaves) also applies to the London hospital where Eva lands after becoming aware of Gerry's betrayal. The staff's obsession with order and

the doctor's "makeshift office" (196), with its cold decoration ["a desk with a solitary chair in front and one behind, a single bed, and a metal filing cabinet", "on his desk there is a single flower in a thin vase" (196)], unsurprisingly remind Eva of "the barracks at the end" (188). Yet, in an ironical twist quite common in Phillips's fiction, the so-called "orderly" (193) in the hospital (who is, to judge by his English, a man of Afro-Caribbean descent) is the only person who seems to provide genuine attention and warmth to the young woman.

Other forces, apparently less harmful than Nazism, have a similar effect in repressing Man's natural proneness to circularity or plurality. The war logic which guides the Venetian doges and presents their war as a straightforward confrontation between the Turks, "the infidel usurper," on the one hand, and "Christian civilization" (137) on the other also partakes of a simplifying mode of thought, glaringly contradicted by the presence in their ranks of Othello, a dark-skinned Christian. Similarly, the legal reasoning that presides over the Jews' trial in fifteenth-century Portobuffole tends to imprint a rational line onto the testimonies collected about the alleged killing of a Christian boy although, as Attali remarks, "there is nothing more labyrinthine than rumor and word-of-mouth" (62). Finally, the State of Israel too, by becoming a "land of clocks" (209), has banned the convoluted temporality symbolized by Malka's father who, as a genuine nomad, has a different relationship to time, one marked by wandering and hesitation, not by urgency as in the host country (Attali 83-84).

The way Renaissance Venice and postwar London are described perhaps best illustrates how the labyrinthine and the linear clash and coexist in this novel. The two cities are depicted in strangely similar terms: these two imperial centres have clearly mazelike topographies, with streets flowing "carelessly, one into the other" (190).<sup>4</sup> While this tortuous quality may reflect the soul of cities with cosmopolitan populations, it also conveys their undecipherability for the visitor, equally embodied by Desdemona's handwriting which remains a mystery for Othello. Venice, in particular, with its "network of back streets and . . . complex labyrinths of alleyways" (121), its canals, its Jewish ghetto, a labyrinth within a labyrinth, seems to bear the marks of the multiple and the opaque,

and thereby to be able to “undermine the presumed purity of thought” (Chambers 95). However, as the very idea of a ghetto suggests, the city hides a different reality: Venetians are not only obsessed with keeping “the bloodlines pure” (112), but seem “sternly unconcerned with anything beyond the narrow orbit of their own lives” (122). Quite interestingly, the ambiguous figure of the Minotaur could be made to stand for Venice’s and London’s (and by implication Europe’s)<sup>5</sup> unacknowledged impurity: as a half-breed monster, he indeed represents the hybridity that has to be fearfully hidden. At the same time, however, he also embodies Europe’s cannibalistic propensity which is suggested in *The Nature of Blood* when a Jewish character in post-war Cyprus ponders: “In Cyprus, I have watched as Europe spits the chewed bones in our direction. (The flesh she has already swallowed)” (12).

Clearly, then, Venetians are unable to live up to their city’s latent cross-culturality which is expressed, paradoxically, through their well-known interest in the carnivalesque, yet another oblique parallel with the Caribbean. Londoners are equally incapable of coming to terms with their own heterogeneity. Therefore, Malka’s conclusion about Israel that “This Holy Land did not deceive us. The people did” (209) could very well take a more universal meaning. Interestingly, this quotation is reminiscent of what the Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon once said about his experience as an immigrant in England. Speaking of the beauty and peace of the English countryside, he concluded: “the land did not deceive me, as the people did” (35). This intertextual connection seems to give access to two further labyrinths.

First, it opens onto a literary labyrinth which, unfortunately, cannot be crossed within the scope of this paper. Suffice it to write here that *The Nature of Blood* is a real Babel of voices. It includes echoes of writers like James Joyce, Shakespeare, Anne Frank, André Schwarz-Bart and Primo Levi, to mention but a few names, and as such testifies to Phillips’s complex cultural background.

Next, this allusion to Selvon reminds us, even more clearly than the few subterranean elements mentioned in the above analysis, that *The Nature of Blood* also displays the Caribbean dimension pervasive in the rest of Phillips’s writing, in spite of being apparently mostly preoccupied with Europe. The labyrinthine metaphor at its centre may indeed be said to crystallize the commonality of

Caribbean cultures beyond the linguistic barriers, and can be readily associated with the concepts of creolization, chaos and cross-culturality used by Edouard Glissant, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, and Wilson Harris to theorize the Caribbean racial and cultural kaleidoscope. Like the labyrinth, this complexity is threatened by the straight line of so-called modernity, symbolized as much by racism as by the economic rationale of slavery and neo-colonialism. Significantly, then, the concentration camp in *The Nature of Blood* has a lot in common with the New World plantation which, in Michael Dash's words, is a "domesticated space [whose] defining enclosure . . . was built on notions of difference, hierarchy and power" ("Excentric Spaces" 68). In this regard, it is surely no coincidence if Cyprus was an early site for sugar cane plantations and enslaved labour (Walvin 13). The camp, like the plantation, has "no regard for affiliation" (*The Nature of Blood* 163). Moreover, it generates "a unifying world view" ("Excentric Spaces" 68) whereby people "all look the same" (*The Nature of Blood* 165), whether man or woman.

The novel's insular topography and its Mediterranean anchorage, that is, its setting in Venice, Cyprus and Israel, but also its allusion to the Cretan myth, also point to the novel's Caribbean subtext. As the works of Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris, and Derek Walcott amply testify, the parallel between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean is not new for, like the Caribbean, the Mediterranean was for a long time a zone of transit, thus a potentially "intercultural matrix" (Dash *The Other America* 98). But instead of centering on the Caribbean as a New World Mediterranean, as Walcott does, for example, Phillips rather focuses here on the failure of the Mediterranean, and by extension of Europe as a whole, to take advantage of its labyrinthine multiplicity in the way the Caribbean did. As Phillips himself put it, "[this] novel is about Europe's obsession with homogeneity, and her inability to deal with the heterogeneity that is — in fact — her natural condition" ("On 'The Nature of Blood'" 6). In this perspective, the Caribbean as "the busiest crossroads of the modern world," thus a labyrinth, "offers the quintessentially postmodern, multiracial, multicultural model that Europe . . . is now grappling to come to terms with" ("More to the Caribbean than Beaches"), being thereby more an

experimental guide to be followed than a mindless mimic of the Old World. In other words, the New World's original societal condition could well become a theoretical paradigm for a post-modern creolized humanity in search of meaning, with the corollary paradox that, like the labyrinth, with its diffracted and unpredictable structure, it seems to be resistant to any kind of abstract and fixed systematization. As Benítez-Rojo puts it about the Caribbean archipelago, it keeps repeating itself endlessly "unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs" (3).

Travelling through a labyrinth is commonly represented as an initiatory passage. Although there is neither esoteric nor didactic dimension to *The Nature of Blood*, its reader can nonetheless gain some kind of wisdom from it provided (s)he yields to the disorientation caused by this literally *amazing* prose. Hard to put into words, this acquired knowledge is more emotional than factual, and, I would argue, ultimately involves a new vision of the world, one which presupposes an unusual form of curiosity leading to a wandering in untrodden cultural paths far away from man-made signposts.<sup>6</sup> "To enjoy being lost," Attali points out, "also presumes the special quality of curiosity. It is what enables us to learn from losing our way, to make discoveries in the unknown, to find something through our ignorance. It means being interested in others . . . being alert for all kinds of differences, and putting oneself in a stranger's place in order to understand his or her uniqueness" (79-80). Losing oneself to find the other is what Phillips's fictions, not just *The Nature of Blood*, engage the reader to do and, aptly, in this novel there is no end to that quest, just an ongoing search reaching not only "all the seas and lands of the earth" but also "across the years" (213).

## NOTES

- 1 Malka's origins may be yet another allusion to Caribbean culture, in particular to Rastafarianism which regards Ethiopia as the black man's heaven.
- 2 Incidentally, *La Nature humaine* is the title given to the French translation of this novel.
- 3 The subterranean resistance to Nazism adopts techniques reminiscent of the labyrinth as "people were building tunnels under hallways, widening cellars, creating hiding places inside furniture; in woodsheds, in fact anywhere" (92).

- 4 This quotation applies to London, but Venice is described in almost similar words: "her streets led carelessly one into the other" (132).
- 5 In Greek mythology, Europe, as the mother of Minos, was the ancestor of the labyrinth. I would like to thank Dr Maria Cristina Fumagalli for pointing out the complex implications of the Minotaur figure to me.
- 6 Appropriately, Phillips's evocation of a Black Atlantic identity in *Crossing the River* ends with a similar idea: "There are no paths in water. No signposts" (237). Here the ocean, not the labyrinth, symbolizes this disorientation full of promises.

## WORKS CITED

- Attali, Jacques. *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom*. Trans. Joseph Rowe. 1996. Berkeley: North Atlantic, 1999.
- Battersby, Eileen. "Walking In and Out of Time Zones." *The Irish Times*, 26 Feb. 1997.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Trans. James E. Maraniss. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1992.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths*. 1964. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.
- Brewer, Ebenezer Cobham. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. 1870. Rev. ed. London: Cassell, 1981.
- Chambers, Iain. *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Dash, J. Michael. "Excentric Spaces: Marronage and Métissage. . . ." *Bim* 19.74 (1992): 67-74.
- . *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998.
- Harris, Wilson. "Behring Straits." *Eternity to Season*. 1954. London: New Beacon, 1978. 13-14.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. 1916. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.
- Jaggi, Maya. "Beyond Carnival and Cricket." *Guardian Weekly*, 17 May 1998, 32.
- Kreilkamp, Ivan. "Caryl Phillips: The Trauma of 'Broken History.'" *Publishers Weekly*, 28 Apr. 1997, 44-45.
- Mahjoub, Jamal. Review of *The Nature of Blood*. *Wasafiri* 28 (Autumn 1998): 61-62.
- Phillips, Caryl. *Higher Ground*. London: Viking, 1989.
- . *Crossing the River*. London: Bloomsbury, 1993.
- . *The Nature of Blood*. London: Faber, 1997.
- . ed. *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging*. London: Faber, 1997.
- . "More to the Caribbean than Beaches." Review of *Travellers' Literary Companion to the Caribbean*, by James Ferguson. *Financial Times* 19/20 July 1997.
- . "On 'The Nature of Blood' and the Ghost of Anne Frank." *Common Quest* 3.2 (1998): 4-7.
- Selvon, Sam. "Finding West Indian Identity in London." *Kunapipi* 9.3 (1987): 34-38.
- Walvin, James. *Slaves and Slavery: The British Colonial Experience*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992.