**Pastiche, Collage and Bricolage: Caryl Phillips’s Hybrid**

**Journal and Letters of a Slave Trader in *Crossing the River***

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Caryl Phillips’s fifth novel *Crossing the River* (1993) has often been studied alongside neo-slave narratives but recent criticism has emphasized the diasporic scope of the novel in which slavery is a major but not the main topic (Wallart 261). Slavery is nevertheless at the heart of the third section of the novel, entitled “Crossing the River” and consisting of the logbook of a fictional slave trader, James Hamilton, during his expedition to the west coast of Africa in 1752-53 and of two letters to his wife. From the sixteen months of extensive research Phillips conducted before he started writing the book (Jaggi 26), the author singled out one specific document mentioned in the acknowledgements: *Journal of a Slave Trader (1750-54)* by John Newton (1725-1807). Through this paratext, the novel, like its predecessor *Cambridge*, “deliberately calls attention to its intertextuality” (O’Callaghan 34) and thus does not “smuggle” its major hypotext since this is the type of transtextuality which is at work here (Genette 13). Hypertextuality involves a process of grafting and can include transformation or parody, and imitation or pastiche, and this corresponds to what is taking place in “Crossing the River” which both transforms the hypotext and offers a case of pastiche, through the imitation of the style of Newton’s authentic logbook and letters to his wife (an unacknowledged source in the paratext). This third section is also characterised by a process of montage or collage through the inclusion of slightly modified extracts from Newton’s original documents without quotation marks.[[1]](#endnote-1) The aim of this paper is to examine Phillips’s achievement in his ventriloquism of an eighteenth-century English slave captain and to reflect on the ways in which a contemporary novel may bear witness to the trauma of slavery.

*Crossing the River* weaves together four narratives of forced displacement, throwing light on the journey back from America to Africa of emancipated slaves in the nineteenth century (“The Pagan Coast”), the ordeal of a former slave turned frontierswoman and defeated pioneer in the American Wild West (“West”), the slave trade in Africa in the eighteenth century (“Crossing the River”) and the alienation of an Englishwoman and a black GI in England during the Second Word War (“Somewhere in England”). Spanning three centuries and criss-crossing three continents, *Crossing the River* raises crucial questions relating to identity, belonging, uprootedness, responsibility and loss. It is an interesting coincidence that Phillips’s novel was published in the same year as Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* as both novelist and theoretician draw from the memory of slavery to write about hybrid experiences of diaspora which transcend the essentialist binaries of race, and favour the dynamism of routes over the stasis of roots.

The section entitled “Crossing the River”, whose modes of ventriloquism and hypertextual circulation will be examined in this paper, is not the only case of extensive borrowings from historical documents in Phillips’s work as he also developed a complex network of unmarked quotations from various authentic sources in *Cambridge* and in *The Nature of Blood*.[[2]](#endnote-2) The critics who have analysed “Crossing the River” (but also more frequently *Cambridge*) have dismissed any charge of plagiarism since the hypotext is ostentatiously identified from the start. However, they have disagreed about the proportion of appropriation and creation in both texts, with some of them[[3]](#endnote-3) insisting on the creative transformation and transposition of the historical documents, thus situating Phillips within a postcolonial and postmodernist tradition of reworking of past authoritative texts, while others – more specifically Marcus Wood in his detailed and incisive comparison of the original and invented journal and letters – have argued that Phillips relies excessively on the original text while simultaneously reducing its complexities. Another bone of contention concerns the choice of a unique white male voice and perspective on the slave trade in a section which keeps the slaves in the cargo hold resolutely silenced.

After providing elements of historical contextualisation, this analysis will focus on the contradictions which emerge from the coexistence of the logbook and the letters in “Crossing the River” and complicate the reader’s response. A comparison between the hypotext and the hypertext will then allow us to draw attention to major similarities and differences in the writings of the authentic and fictional slave ship captains – both in the logbooks and in the letters – and therefore to evaluate the proportion of creation in the novel. The paper will conclude by suggesting possible interpretations for this controversial case of *bricolage*.

**The slave ship captain’s mighty contradictions**

Caryl Phillips is known to conduct substantive research as preparation for his novels and often relies on historical sources. He is particularly fond of first-person historical documents which he draws from to “digest what they’re saying, and somehow rework them” (Sharpe 32). This reworking usually entails paying close attention to their form since “all too often there’s a self-serving nature behind these narratives” (Sharpe 31). Referring to diaries and journals written by slave ship captains, Phillips notes: “there is always an agenda, which is obviously part and parcel of the economic and political purpose behind that journey” (Iyer 43). In “Crossing the River”, Phillips is therefore interested in uncovering the agenda behind John Newton’s *Journal of a Slave Trader*, a day-to-day record of three different voyages made by a slave ship captained by Newton from Liverpool to the Windward Coast of Africa, then Antigua and back to Liverpool. His first journal relates his voyage on the *Duke of Argyle* (1750-51), at a time when the slave trade was deemed “respectable” and necessary to England’s economy. Newton therefore had no scruple upon engaging in a trade he called “a genteel employment” (Wood 43). It was only when writing *An Authentic Narrative* (1764) that he started having doubts about the morality of the enterprise and thirty-two years later, in *Thoughts upon the African Trade* (1788),[[4]](#endnote-4) he considered it “unlawful and wrong” and admitted to being haunted in his old age by memories of a “business at which my heart now shudders” (Newton, *Journal* 99, 98).[[5]](#endnote-5) However, before this evolution towards being a dedicated abolitionist and during the first voyage which forms the main source of inspiration for “Crossing the River”, Newton had no such qualms about what he would later call “that unhappy and disgraceful branch of commerce” (Newton, *Journal* 98).

What struck Phillips in Newton’s situation and which he reproduced in the creation of his fictional Captain James Hamilton was the paradoxical situation of a man who was simultaneously “wreaking havoc on other people’s families” and “dreaming of beginning a family of his own” (Sharpe 32). Indeed, while writing his logbook which records in a dispassionate tone the relentless buying of slaves and breaking up of family ties, their illnesses and deaths and the impact of these losses on his own profit, Newton was also writing long affectionate letters to his wife in England, Mary (née Catlett). As noted by Phillips, Newton “can’t recognize his own contradictions, but hopefully we can” (Sharpe 32). By juxtaposing the impersonal chilling tone of the journal and the effusive style of the letters, the novelist meant to unveil these contradictions. While twenty-six-year-old Hamilton ruthlessly destroys families through the slave trade – a severance of family ties which is recurrently displayed throughout the novel and presented as a constitutive trauma of slavery – he is indeed simultaneously longing for the love of wife and mourning the death of his father two years before in West Africa, “a mighty severe” blow and the first one he felt keenly, having been “too young to fully grieve” for the death of his mother (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 118 and 120). Bereft of father and mother like other characters in the novel (especially slaves), the young Hamilton “revels in the imagined joys” of his “projected children” (*Crossing the River* 120) but fails to notice his own rupturing of family lines. As noted by Phillips:

As black people’s lives were being subjected to all these forces – the dispersal, the brutality, the historical hurt – white people were still dreaming of having families, of bringing up their kids, and of what schools they were going to send them to. They couldn’t actually see the people before them as human beings, as fathers, brothers, mothers, daughters, sons. (Sharpe 32)

The paradox emerges at large in one of Newton’s authentic letters to his wife in January 1753 when he argues that “these poor creatures” do not understand love: “To tell them of the inexpressible, and peculia [*sic*] attraction, between kindred minds; the pains of absence, the pleasures of a re-meeting (if I may make a word,) and all the other endearments, (were it lawful, or possible to name them,) which I owe to you, would be labour lost” (Newton, *Letters* 157, 160). Newton’s assumption of the lack of understanding of “the pains of absence” sounds bitterly ironic when compared to authentic documents by former slaves,[[6]](#endnote-6) as well as, centuries later, the fictional narrative of the former slave Martha in *Crossing the River*, haunted by the painful remembrance of her lost daughter.[[7]](#endnote-7) In the letter to his wife, Newton suggests that he discussed the topic of love with the slaves: he has “tried to explain this delighted word” to them, has “spoken of its effects” and the slaves have responded to his arguments (Newton, *Letters* 159, 160). Such a claim sounds doubtful considering the type of relationships the captain would have had with the slaves and the way they were usually deprived of a voice (as evidenced in the third section of Phillips’s novel). Newton’s self-delusion therefore seems blatant, not only at the time of writing these letters, but also forty years later in 1793, when, in a footnote to his letter, he starts “with horror at [his] own employment, as an agent in promoting” “this vile traffic”, and yet writes: “I only thought myself bound to treat the slaves under my care with gentleness, and to *consult their* *ease and convenience*, as far as was consistent with the safety of *the whole family, of whites and blacks*, on board my ship” (158, my emphasis). The ironical notion of a “family, of whites and blacks” on the slave ship – all of them seemingly treated equally and with great care – suggests that Newton’s blindness persisted even during his efforts towards the abolition of slavery and points to the complexity of the man.

In Phillips’s novel, the coexistence of two literary genres (the clinical log and the sentimental letters) which reflect the two sides of Hamilton’s personality, is emblematic of the captain’s schizophrenic resolution to “separate the two aspects of his life – the domestic and the vocational” (Bellamy 132).[[8]](#endnote-8) Hamilton’s capacity to write himself “into tears” out of love and longing for his wife (*Crossing the River* 110) and soon after coldly and tearlessly record in his journal the numbers of the slaves who died and were thrown overboard, may be compared to George Steiner’s comment that “a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, […] can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning” (ix). This comparison between slavery and the Holocaust is not fortuitous as in *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips weaves connections between the experiences of loss suffered by Jews and by Blacks at the hands of Janus-like persecutors. Hamilton’s situation could therefore be related to Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil” in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), in which the philosopher argues that Adolf Eichmann was an average man and “not a ‘monster’” (55), someone who, like the fictional captain, unthinkingly supervised “the routine organization of dehumanization” (Lanone 67). Eichmann’s inability “to think from the standpoint of someone else” (Arendt 49) and his taking refuge in stock phrases and clichés during his trial find an echo in Hamilton’s failure to acknowledge the sufferings and odious treatment of the slaves and his mechanical transcription of purchases, illnesses and deaths.

The reader would judge it difficult to find any redeeming trait in Hamilton’s personality as even the letters to his wife ring hollow in their gushy sentimentalism and most critics have emphasized the cold-bloodedness and brutality of the slave captain. However, Fatim Boutros offers what he calls “a more nuanced understanding” of the captain’s social position by arguing that in the logbook and in front of his crew – who keep questioning his authority and mocking him –, Hamilton has “to live up to what is expected of a captain, which conflicts with his private character” (184) as well as his Christian beliefs.[[9]](#endnote-9) His letters to his wife reveal indeed the “mental strain” induced by what is expected of those involved in the slave business, which breaks men both physically and spiritually.[[10]](#endnote-10) According to Boutros, Hamilton’s schizophrenic dimension therefore “complicate[s] stereotypical views of victims and perpetrators” (184), as also noted by Phillips:

I can feel […] compassion for and interest in a slave ship captain because not only do I have the evidence that some slave ship captains deeply repented and in the end wrote narratives against the slave trade, I could also imagine the slave ship captain finding himself in this position through no fault of his own. I could also imagine that even somebody cruel could find themselves justifying what they were doing because of economic necessity or economic greed. (Schatteman 62)

This would justify why Phillips chose to give a voice to the slave trader and not only to the victims of slavery such as Nash in Part I and Martha in Part II, a decision for which the writer was taken to task by several critics because it offers Hamilton the possibility of eliciting sympathy and maybe experiencing moral growth (Goyal 16, 20) while simultaneously silencing the slaves’ narratives and thus reproducing the privilege given to white master discourses in official historiography. In addition, the inclusion of the letters which present a more humane and vulnerable view of Hamilton raises ethical questions as they not only point to the young man’s contradictions but may also encourage the reader to consider the slave ship captain with a form of benevolence.

Phillips’s decision to give a dominant voice to Hamilton in this section but also to borrow so much from Newton’s original journal and letters, and only minimally invent, necessarily elicits ethical interrogations. While Part I, in the former slave’s letters, limits itself to pastiche through Nash’s imitation and appropriation of Western Christian colonial discourse, Part III combines stylistic imitation with unamended quotations so that Newton’s and Hamilton’s journals are sometimes almost word for word. As mentioned by Abigail Ward, such a faithful reliance on narratives of slave captains or plantation owners by some postcolonial authors can be troubling “because of the possibility of transforming these documents into monuments” and “bestowing upon them a new kind of authority in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries” (“Postcolonial” 247, 248). The risk of an excessive loyalty to the archive is indeed to let these voices dictate the way the memory of the slave trade is recorded and thereby perpetuate the silencing of the victims. A comparison between Newton’s authentic journal and Hamilton’s fictional one reveals the extent to which Phillips relied on the hypotext and the implications of this faithfulness.

**The silences of the logbooks**

As noted by the editors of Newton’s journal, authentic logbooks had to record the winds and currents met by the ship and include an account of the boats and lands sighted, and of the general condition of the crew and ship (Newton, *Journal* xvi). They were also “an exercise in bookkeeping, saying who was bought when and where, how much was paid”, and therefore served as “economic testimony” (Wood 57). These logs (which were not meant to be published) were to be handed over to the owners of the ship at the end of the voyage, which explains why the captain would want to highlight his business skills, justify his losses or reassure his readers as to his wise decisions. Phillips’s fictional logbook offers a very faithful pastiche of such official documents, with a few but sometimes meaningful transformations. Hamilton’s voyage starts on 24 August 1752, thus overlapping with Newton’s second voyage of 1752-53, but Phillips’s entries borrow from the logbooks of the three voyages undertaken by Newton between 1750 and 1754 – mainly the first and second –, sometimes blending several entries.

In the authentic and fictional journals, the presentation is similar on the title page as well as on the list of the crew, which comprises their names, quality and the dates of death or discharge. It appears that Phillips borrowed eleven names from Newton’s Journal for the first voyage – though he modified the first names –,[[11]](#endnote-11) thus making his borrowings relatively open.[[12]](#endnote-12) The journal entries themselves are similar as most of them include the day of the week, date and month in italics, followed by indications of the weather. Newton and Hamilton both refer to repairs on the ship, meeting other ships, arriving in West Africa, meeting slave traders, buying slaves and refusing others. The entries are composed in the same staccato style, written in a dispassionate and impersonal tone. Beyond presentation and content, entries often contain the same words, phrases and structures, thus ensuring that Phillips has adequately pastiched eighteenth-century British language as used by a captain, but also maybe suggesting that what is at stake is an acknowledgment of past literature and of the memory of the slave trade.

Similarities relate to everyday innocuous activities on a ship:

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Newton’s Journal** | **Hamilton’s Journal** |
| ***1.*** | *4th October [1750]*: “Carpenter employed in fitting up the stateroom to serve as a shop on the Coast.” (10) | *6th October [1752]*: “Carpenter fitted up state room to serve as a shop on the Coast.” (102) |
| ***2.*** | *5th October*: “removed most of the India cloth […] got the ship’s arms chest aft. Were all hand so engaged […]” (10) | *6th October*: “Removed most of India cloth from hold into cabin. Got ship’s arms chest aft. […] All hands engaged […]” (102) |
| ***3.*** | *10th October*: “Caught a small dolphin” (10) | *11th October*: “Caught a small shark” (103) |
| ***4.*** | *12th October*: “a great deal of lightning and thunder. Very strong riplings” (10) | *11th October*: “By 2 p.m. a great deal of lightning and thunder. Very strong riplings…” (103) |
| ***5.*** | *16th October*: “At 2 p.m. got soundings again about 30 fathoms, white sand and black stones” (11) | *11th October*: “Got soundings at about 35 fathoms, white sand and black stones” (103) |

Apart from a few alterations of dates and the substitution of a harmless “dolphin” for a more threatening “shark”, the entries look very similar and are written in the same characteristic brisk style, Phillips thereby remaining loyal to the original text. However, not all entries are so benign as several draw attention to tensions on board, even before the arrival of slaves. For instance, in both journals, the Boatswain behaves badly and is clapped in irons, an anticipation of what would happen to the slaves:

*24th October [1750]* […] the offisers [*sic*] and all the ship’s company to a man complained that the Boatswain has behaved very turbulently, and used them ill, to the hindrance of the ship’s business. Having passed by several of the like offences before, I thought it most proper to put him in irons, *in terrorem*, being apprehensive he might occasion disturbance, when we get slaves on board. (Newton, *Journal* 12)

*14th October* *[1752]* […] Upon my return the ship’s company, to a man, complained that in my absence the Boatswain, Mr Davy, had used them ill. I thought it proper to put him in chains lest he might occasion disturbance when we get slaves on board. (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 103)

Despite the recurrence of the same vocabulary, Phillips’s version is much terser and denser, so that the information that the boatswain has been put in chains may come as a shock for the reader after the unique and vague indication of “had used them ill”, whereas Newton proposes four consecutive reasons for putting him into irons,[[13]](#endnote-13) thus making sure his ship-owning readers would approve of his decision. The fictional captain may therefore appear more implacable in his decision, which constitutes a slight deviation from the original. In addition to being put in irons for bad behavior, members of the crew become sick and die, as bluntly noted in both logbooks:

*11th January [1751]* […] At 2 a.m. departed this life Andrew Corrigal, our carpenter, having been 10 days ill of a nervous fever; buried him at daylight […] (Newton, *Journal* 30)

*23rd April [1753]* […]At 7 p.m. departed this life Edward White, Carpenter’s Mate, 7 days ill of a nervous fever. Buried him at once. (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 116)

Both entries are marked by an informal tone and a lack of emotions or affects.[[14]](#endnote-14) However, Phillips’s version is once again brisker: the Carpenter’s Mate dies more quickly (after 7 days of illness against 10 for Newton’s) and is buried more quickly (“at once” rather than “at daylight”). This sense of urgency may be linked to the very form of the novel which has to incorporate so many different voices that Hamilton’s logbook has to be dense and efficient, but it has once again an impact on the characterization of Hamilton as it makes him potentially more ruthless or uncaring towards the crew than his authentic predecessor.[[15]](#endnote-15) The minimal (but crucial) change of names, statuses, times and dates can be interpreted as the sign of the shift from the historical to the fictional.

One of the specificities of Hamilton’s journal compared to Newton’s is that he makes more references to problems with the crew, while these are rarely mentioned by Newton, maybe for reasons of propriety because he wanted to convince his future readers of the good conduct of his employees (even if several have been discharged as indicated in his list of crew – Newton, *Journal* 2). The cases of misbehavior on the part of the crew can be explained by the fact that it was more and more difficult to recruit sailors for such voyages so that the crew often comprised “refuse from prisons or drinking houses” (Phillips, *The Atlantic* 42). As noted by Newton in an unpublished letter of 1752, “We are for the most part supplied with the refuse and dregs of the nation. The prisons and glass houses furnish us with large quotas and boys impatient of their parents and masters, or already ruined by some untimely vice and for the most part devoid of all good principles” (Newton, *Journal* xiv). Few volunteered to take part in such journeys as they were exposed to many diseases during the months of trading by the coast of West Africa, and were often submitted to punishments when on board (as shown in Phillips’s novel). When Newton gave evidence to a Committee of the House of Commons in 1790, he declared: “I suppose there is no trade in which seamen are treated with so little humanity” (Newton, *Journal* xiv). The fact that Phillips devotes more entries to the crew (compared to the relative silence of the original logbook on that subject) suggests that he is interested in the fate of the voiceless sailors as much as in that of the slaves, as he said in an interview:

The experience of the sailor on deck is as important as the experience of the slave below deck. That experience of the young boy press-ganged at eleven onto a ship, suddenly finding himself sailing the Atlantic backwards and forwards and dead at seventeen from malaria on the coast somewhere three thousand miles from home and his family is as valid an experience as what happened to the slave below deck. (Schatteman 65)

The helpless sailors may be part of the subaltern but they are still relatively free, to the point that some of them escape (as is the case of Cropper and Creed in the novel, 106), which is impossible for the chained slaves in the hold. As noted by Abigail Ward, it is therefore “problematic to compare too closely enslaved Africans with free, if harshly treated white crew members” (*Caryl Phillips* 55). In addition, although the sailors are not given a voice in the logbooks, they are at least named, which is not the case of the slaves who remain both nameless and voiceless. The novelist’s adoption of the genres of the journal and the letters implies indeed limiting the viewpoint and voice to the captain, thereby perpetuating the silence and silencing of the slaves.[[16]](#endnote-16) Contrary to the other three narratives of the novel, in “Crossing the River”, the slave is unidentified by name, remains mute and is a mere object of sale, a piece of cargo, a commodity, only considered as a numbered item in a group. In the following entry of Hamilton’s journal: “32 slaves viz. 19 men, 3 man-boys, 4 women, and 6 girls” (122), the numerical detailing and the categorization according to gender and age deprive the slaves of their individuality and humanity. Such silencing and objectifying of slaves is typical of master discourses of official history, which postcolonial writing has interrogated and subverted, offering instead the versions of the forgotten voices of history, as is the case in the previous narrative of *Crossing the River*, “West”, in which a former slave woman is allowed to tell her story. In both Newton’s and Hamilton’s journals on the other hand, slaves die anonymously because the voice of the steadfast and efficient captain prevails and reduces the narrative of their deaths to be a few cursory remarks, as shown by the following quite similar quotations:

*9th January [1751]* […] This day buried a fine woman slave, No. 11, having been ailing for some time, but never thought her in danger till within these 2 days; she was taken with a lethargick disorder, which they seldom recover from. Scraped the rooms, then smoked the ship with tar, tobacco and brimstone for 2 hours, afterwards washed with vinegar.” (Newton, *Journal* 29)

*20th April [1753]…*This day buried 2 fine men slaves, Nos 27 and 43, having been ailing for some time, but not thought in danger. Taken suddenly with a lethargic disorder from which they generally recover. Scraped the men’s rooms, then smoked the ship thoroughly with tar and tobacco for 3 hours, afterwards washed clean with vinegar…(Phillips, *Crossing the River* 116)

The death of the slaves, meticulously recorded because of the economic loss it entails, is quickly followed by pragmatic measures (the smoking and cleaning of the ship) – a symbolic wiping out of the slaves from the historical archive – or, in other entries, by neutral references to the weather.[[17]](#endnote-17) Both authentic and fictional entries are marked by the recurrence of identical words and the same detached, objective and cold tone but the date, gender and quantity of slaves as well as their identifying numbers have been changed, together with the duration of the smoking of the ship and the information that slaves “generally” recover from the lethargic disorder (rather than “seldom”). Hamilton’s version is therefore more deadly and tragic (slaves usually recover from that disorder but not these two) and the erasure of all traces of death from the historical archive requires more effort. For Marcus Wood, the slight changes to the original journal (in particular, substituting “a number that once did exist as a person into a number which now does not”) have “almost limitless implications for the memory of slavery” (56) for they eradicate the trace of someone who existed and suffered to replace it with a fiction which does not even stop the slaves being numbered. According to Wood, by destroying “that one small vestige of historical identity” slaves possessed – their numbers –, Phillips removes them from their place in the historical archive (58). One could argue contrarily that the novelist preserves the real victims’ integrity by changing their numbers for the slaves and their names for the members of the crew when transferring them to a fictional creation. In both cases, the reader is struck by the predominance of numbers (to refer to quantities, identities and durations) and the stark efficiency of verbs unaccompanied by personal pronouns (“Taken”, “Scraped”, “smoked”, “washed”), which erase all signs of humanity and of responsibility.

The comparison of the logbooks has revealed Phillips’s great loyalty to the authentic archive despite a few adjustments and the efficiency of his pastiche which confirms the silencing of the victims in official historical documents. The fictional letters are marked by a more intricate case of *bricolage* which combines pastiche and creation.

**Letters to a wife: a technique of montage and collage**

In the acknowledgements, Phillips only refers to Newton’s journal, edited by Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell in 1962, in which some entries are interrupted to make way for extracts from letters by Newton, either to a friend or to his wife, included between square brackets. In “Crossing the River”, two of Hamilton’s letters are included between brackets but they appear in full rather than as fragments. In addition, Phillips does not mention in his paratext *Letters to a Wife*, a selection of the correspondence between Newton and his wife during his three voyages between 1750 and 1754, which he published during his lifetime in 1794. *Letters to a Wife* is remarkable for the way Newton constantly declares his love for his wife in an expansive and sometimes mawkish tone, thus contrasting with the rigidity of the journal. Phillips borrowed many passages from these letters, which he cut and pasted, without respecting the chronology as the two letters written by Hamilton are dated 10th January 1753 when he is at sea and 25th April 1753 when he is in West Africa, whereas the extracts borrowed from Newton’s letters were written before his departure from Liverpool, after his arrival in Antigua and when he was at sea towards Liverpool. The result is a montage and collage of passages from more than a dozen letters by Newton, whose sentences have been slightly altered and reorganized, as marked by the following example:

*8th January [1751]* […] No one, who has not experienced it like me, can conceive the contrast between my present situation, distracted with the noise of slaves and traders, suffocated with heat, and almost chop-fallen with perpetual talking; and the sweet agreeable evenings I have passed in your company. (Newton, *Letters* 48)

25th April [1753] […] Those, myself aside, who have experienced pleasant and agreeable evenings in your company, could never imagine the contrast between such sweet times, and the present miserable situation. I am continually assaulted by the combined noises of slaves and traders; suffocated by heat; and subjected to perpetual talking, the greater part of it to no serious purpose. (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 118)

While Newton starts with the negative (his present situation, the noise, the heat) and ends with his pleasant memories of home, Hamilton phrases it the other way round, first focusing on his sweet memories of home and only then insisting on the present conditions. This might point to the specificity of Hamilton’s fictional account as longing much more for the comfort of home. Another letter includes a passage which is eerily similar to that in *Crossing the River*:

*29th March [1751]* […] I give and take a good deal of raillery among the sea-captains I meet with here. They *think* I have not a right notion of life, and I *am* *sure* they have not. They say I am melancholy; I tell them they are mad. They say, I am a slave to one woman, which I deny; but can prove that some of them are mere slaves to a hundred. They wonder at my humour; I pity theirs. They can form no idea of my happiness; I answer I think the better of it on that account; for I should be ashamed of it, if it was suited to the level of those who can be pleased with a drunken debauch, or the smile of a prostitute. We shall hardly come to an agreement on these points; for they pretend to appeal to experience against me. (Newton, *Letters* 57-58)

10th January [1753] […] I take a good deal of raillery among the sea-captains, for they *know* I have not a secure knowledge of life, and I *know* they have not. They claim I am melancholy; I tell them they have lost their wits. They say I am a slave to a single woman; I claim they are a slave to hundreds, of all qualities. They wonder at my *lack* of humour, I pity theirs. They declare they can form no idea of my happiness, I counter with knowledge that being pleased with a drunken debauch, or the smile of a prostitute, can never give one such as I pleasure. They pretend, all the while, to appeal to experience against me, but I stand firm. (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 109)

Phillips copies the binary rhetorical construction from the original, relentlessly marking the stark opposition between other sea-captains and Hamilton (“They claim”/“I tell them”; “They say”/“I claim”; “They wonder”/“I pity”; “They declare”/“I counter”; “They pretend”/“I stand”), while at the same time appropriating the metaphorical use of the word “slave” which contrarily points to a blurring of categories and a “mutability of identities” (Ledent 58). One may argue that by transforming a revolting historical reality into a romantic cliché, Newton and Hamilton both trivialise the trauma of slavery,[[18]](#endnote-18) but Phillips’s appropriation of the metaphor exposes the trivialisation.

In the previous examples, the close borrowings guarantee the accuracy of the eighteenth-century language and testify to a faithfulness to the historical truth. However, Phillips is not only a *bricoleur* but also a creator as beyond the many echoes, the letters include additions to the original, in the form of allusions to Hamilton’s sense of inadequacy and references to his father (118-119). While Newton’s father died in England and Newton learned of his death when he arrived in Antigua, Hamilton’s father died two years before his first voyage and was buried in West Africa. In Phillips’s account, Hamilton appears more insecure than Newton although both are twenty-six years old when they make their first voyage. While Mr Ellis refuses to take Hamilton to his father’s resting place and his own officers dismiss him as a “*gentleman passenger*” (109, 120), Newton writes to his wife in September 1751: “I am as absolute in my small dominions (life and death excepted) as any potentate in Europe. If I say to one, Come, he comes; if to another, Go, he flies” (Newton, *Letters* 110). The tone is much more assured and self-confident than that of Hamilton.

In addition to these palpable – though limited – differences between Hamilton and Newton, other more substantial elements diverge, pointing to the specific agenda of Phillips’s twentieth-century novel, which is quite understandably unlike that of an eighteenth-century non-fiction writer. These differences pertain to meaningful ellipses which not only make the contemporary version creative but also reveal Phillips’s purpose and resonate with the other parts of the novel.

**Creative ellipses**

Newton’s first journal for 1750-51 (131 pages in manuscript) is complete with a day-to-day entry until September 3rd when the editors announce that when entries “are only weather or navigational details they are here omitted” (Newton, *Journal* 8); the second and third journals are “much abbreviated, including only entries which differ in kind or degree from the first voyage” (Newton, *Journal* xvii). These elisions are marked by asterisks separating entries, which can encourage the reader to interpret the asterisks between some entries in Hamilton’s journal as the typographical sign of suppressions of entries. This indicates that we are presented with an edited and fragmented journal which is the result of the intervention of an unidentified external hand. Hamilton’s log is more partial than Newton’s as there are twenty-four entries until elisions start in Newton’s daily log against sixteen entries for the same length of time in Hamilton’s (with asterisks indicating missing days). The rhythm is therefore quicker in the fictional journal whose entries are also shorter, creating a more urgent impression as events seem to happen in quick succession so that, for instance, the first reference to slaves appears sooner, thus probably increasing the sense of shock in the reader. This is also due to the fact that Phillips made Hamilton’s voyage from Liverpool to Sierra Leone quicker than Newton’s, with one month and twenty days for the fictional journey against two months and eight days for the authentic one. In addition to the suppression of entries, the dots at the beginning or at the end of entries are also the typographical mark of ellipses.

The holes in the logbook seem to point at a greater hole related to all that is written out of the history of slavery, cast away and therefore not remembered. As suggested by Abigail Ward, in the gaps, “we can perhaps sense the unspoken or missing parts of this past, such as the voices, or stories, of the slaves (and of other, poorer, crew members), of whom we hear nothing” (*Caryl Phillips* 53). Hamilton refers to insurrections (111, 114) and a “conspiracy” (124), which are evidence of dissent, to indistinct “noises” (118) – another dehumanizing word – “talking” (118), “clamour” (121) and “melancholy lamentations” (124), which echo the “moaning” of the Louisiana blacks on board the ship sailing for Africa in Part I (14), but nothing is revealed of the actual words and narratives of the slaves and sailors. Newton, in a footnote to a letter of 26 January 1753, notes that the slave trade is “abounding with enormities which I have not mentioned” (Newton, *Letters* 158), and in a letter of 1 March 1754, he writes to his wife: “There are other reasons for my concern, which I need not mention to you” (Newton, *Letters* 250). These blanks hide violent and traumatic experiences which had better remain unknown by the captain’s wife, but they also entail the erasure of a whole dimension of history.

The greatest gap in Hamilton’s journal lies in the final ellipsis. While Newton’s logbook follows the full route of the triangular slave trade with the journey from Liverpool to Africa, to Antigua and back to Liverpool, the journal in *Crossing the River* stops as the ship is leaving Africa. The narrative appears “suspended” just as the captain is suspended between Africa and America or the West Indies (Ward, *Caryl Phillips* 55) and the reader is thus only offered one part of the triangular voyage. This abrupt stop could be interpreted as the sign that the first part of the journey has ended and that the narrative has therefore completed a stage and the last suspension points emblematize the silence to which the trauma of deterritorialization condemns the victims. Interestingly, the last sentence of the section “We have lost sight of Africa…” (124) which ends (or rather opens) with suspension points is followed by the title of the next part, “Somewhere in England”, thus pointing to the ellipsis of the second part of the triangular trade and moving directly to the third journey and return to England. In addition, the fourth narrative starts with the words “JUNE 1942 / They arrived today” (129), which could answer “We have lost sight of Africa” with an arrival responding to a departure, and a change of perspective from “We” to “They” – the latter pronoun being deliberately vague so as to let the reader imagine that “they” could be the slaves of the *Duke of York* emigrating to England (although “they” are the GIs during World War II). This connection between the two narratives points to the continuity between the legacy of slavery and contemporary racism as suffered by Blacks in Britain and the United States (emblematized by the situation of Travis in the last narrative).

One may also interpret the brusque halt as a case of poetic justice with “the ill-humoured slaves” (124) having led a successful insurrection (unlike the failed one they had been preparing the day before) and the captain having been overthrown and killed, – or the “hard wind” and “lofty sea” (124) mentioned in the last entry having led to the capsize of the ship, – or his “small fever” (124) having had the better of him. The open ending thus leaves room for the reader’s interpretation as is often the case in a postcolonial or postmodernist fictional text, unlike Newton’s journal which is completed and then followed by two more journeys and journals.[[19]](#endnote-19)

**Interpreting the hybrid result**

Bearing in mind some of the similarities and differences that have been pointed out between hypotext and hypertext, one may now attempt to evaluate Phillips’s achievement in a section that is replete with echoes and borrowings but also creative deviations. While pastiche and unmarked quotations grant a historical authenticity to the fictional journal, there probably exist other reasons to justify this process of psittacism or extensive appropriation. First of all, Phillips’s creation could be considered as a contemporary and diasporic version of Pierre Menard’s contemporary version of *Don Quixote* as fictionally reviewed in Jorge Luis Borges’s famous 1939 essay “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*”. Menard rewrites letter for letter chapters from the first part of Cervantes’s book but the fictional reviewer argues that although the signs are the same, the signifieds are altered because the context of reading has changed and therefore the references and allusions are understood differently, just as the style and themes are received differently by the contemporary reader.[[20]](#endnote-20) This might be the case that in Phillips’s narrative, Newton’s original text is also “transformed by retroactive influence” (Wood 54). However, Phillips’s creation differs from that of Menard’s as it contains deviations from the original and it is therefore this hybrid result which needs to be assessed.

As mentioned earlier, Phillips had already borrowed extensively from original sources for *Cambridge* in which he quoted entire paragraphs with the aim of capturing an authentic voice but also of revealing the inadequacy of relying upon a single source or standard account. His friend Paul Edwards, an expert in eighteenth-century literature, read a first draft of the novel and sent his reaction to Phillips on 10 August 1990:

The Cambridge section uses so much material from Equiano and other sources in a wholly undisguised way that I doubt the value of the narrative. It is not as you thought, simply a problem of plagiarizing your sources, I think rather that the narrative degenerates into easily recognizable pastiche, a kind of impersonal patchwork with little contemporary value, since the original sources have said it all already. I think that the narrative of Cambridge must derive much more from your own imagination, but as it stands, what you do is repeat material from the past. That’s not what a modern novelist must do with material like this […], which is to make a new thing. (Eckstein 70-71)

Edwards’s severe reproaches may also be partly addressed to *Crossing the River* in the way it excessively relies on the historical original and limits imaginary creations to minor alterations or additions in the log and letters. The risk of such loyalty to published work might be to grant further authority to an archive which already lets the voice of the white masters dominate and leaves the slaves chained and silenced in the hull. Phillips countered however that, in *Cambridge*, he was rewriting “material which is largely (though by no means totally) inaccessible to the general reading public” and hoping that the memory of his character might linger in the minds of the readers so it might “send them back to the original sources to find out more”. His purpose was therefore to awaken readers to some aspects of history that might have been insufficiently known. The main difference between *Cambridge* and “Crossing the River” is that the former novel is marked by an intertwining of many different sources and is therefore “a hybrid, a syncretic fabrication” (O’Callaghan 40), while the later narrative mainly draws from a single source, which makes it less polyphonic, despite the duophony of the matter-of-fact journal and the heartfelt letters on the one hand, and the bidirectional temporal dimension on the other hand, as the eighteenth-century English voice is relayed by that of a twentieth-century Caribbean-English writer.

Phillips’s insistence on the fact that he draws from material “largely inaccessible to the general public” raises the question of reception: most readers will probably not notice the borrowed quotations as they will not be familiar with Newton’s journal and will not compare the two documents. They will acknowledge the pastiche as the narrative imitates the style of logbooks but will approach the narrative as a fictional text, crafted by the novelist. Only the expert reader (who is not Phillips’s ideal reader), specialists of eighteenth-century slavery historical documents or Phillips scholars might be tempted to compare the hypotext and the hypertext, and therefore discover the extent of the echoes. The effect of the borrowings therefore greatly differs according to the status of the person who reads the novel.

One of Phillips’s expert readers and his fiercest detractor, Marcus Wood, strongly contests the contemporary author’s appropriation of Newton’s text, arguing that Phillips fails to transform the authentic journal into a new creation and that his pastiche “reduce[s] the complexities and complicities of the original” (59). Comparing the two versions through precise examples, Wood asserts that Phillips’s version “damage[s] Newton’s original” through the minor alterations of numbers, dates and names and the “process of reduction” (62) due to the various ellipses of words, segments or whole sentences which, in the original, made Newton’s “terrifying mentality” more blatant (59), and whose deletion in the fictional version ends up eroding “the bizarre contradictions which inflect Newton’s own voice” (63). The novelist thus introduced more silences and gaps than there originally were in the authentic logbook so that the reworking of the archive led to the production of a less arresting and shocking text than the original. According to Wood, Phillips cannot “invent anything more powerful than the words Newton has already made/written/invented/recorded”, because the eighteenth-century slave captain’s words “have an authority which a late twentieth-century consciousness desperate to reclaim the past cannot mimic” (54). It is interesting to note that what the critic finds fault with in Phillips’s text is not the extensive borrowings from Newton’s journal and letters with too little invention (which was Paul Edwards’s main criticism), but the fact that Phillips, as a fiction writer, distorted (even so slightly) the historical documents.

It might be that Wood severely dismisses the novelist because he posits himself as “a custodian of the historical archive” (Joannou 208) which needs to be preserved in its sheer abomination and exactitude, whereas Phillips exercises his rights as a novelist to (barely) deviate from the hypotext and maybe thus point to its instability. It is probably *because of* the minor alterations to the original and *because* the section is inserted within a novel that Phillips is able to throw “into doubt the very process of recording the history of slavery” (Wood 53). The change of dates in the fictional logbook (with several of Newton’s entries from 1750 or 1751 being moved forward to 1752 or 1753 in Hamilton’s log) and the blending of entries from several of Newton’s voyages not only testify to the process of fictionalization but also unsettle the supposed solidity of dates in the historical archive. The near repetition of Newton’s entries by a fictional Hamilton some two years after they were first written may also point to the recurrence of the horror and trauma of slavery year after year, with each new voyage taking place in similar atrocious circumstances and erasing the specificity of each individual death and tragedy. The haunting and nightmarish repetition of history is best emblematized by the pastiche of Newton’s entry for 11th December 1752 – “Put the boys in irons and slightly in the thumbscrews to urge them to a full confession” (Newton, *Journal* 71) – in Hamilton’s entry for 2nd April 1753 – “Put two in irons and delicately in the thumbscrews to encourage them to a full confession” (Phillips, *Crossing the River* 114) – which is repeated in the epilogue in italics some two hundred and fifty years later (235), thus suggesting that the horrors of slavery are not forgotten. Phillips’s deliberate change of dates and shift from “the boys” to “two” and “slightly” to “delicately” – this adverb applied to a ghastly act of torture ringing like an unbearable provocation – may be interpreted as the sign that Hamilton is here recording yet another instance of torture, eerily similar to the one performed by his predecessor, thus pointing to the nauseating recurrence of violence over the years.

For Evelyn O’Callaghan who analyses *Cambridge*, Phillips’s extensive word-by-word quotations prove that the writer “has gone to great pains to establish the historical ‘authenticity’ of his fiction” but the aim is also to focus “attention on the connection between the fictional and historical narratives” (39). As has been shown by theoreticians of historiography like Hayden White, historical documents include a part of subjectivity, impartiality, narrativity, and therefore bear similarities with fiction. By inserting unaltered parts of a historical document within a novel, Phillips is therefore performing two apparently incompatible moves. On the one hand, his faithfulness to the brutal words and indifferent tone of Newton’s original directly exposes the common reader (who might not be as familiar with such documents as experts would be) to the stark cruelty of slavery as implemented by the British who, for a long time, failed to confront these dark hours of their history. On the other hand, the undifferentiated mixture of authentic quotes and invented fragments, and the close proximity of this hybrid narrative to openly fictional parts, leads to a blurring of the frontiers between fiction and history, which encourages the reader to pay attention to the constructed and manipulative nature of historical texts.

Finally, Hamilton’s journal should be considered in relation to the other narratives in the novel, as its impersonality and casualness contrast with the emotional tone of Martha’s introspective story that came just before and gave “access to the affective dimension of slavery” (Boutros 187). The dehumanized log which offers the unique perspective of a white slave captain obsessed with computing figures comes indeed “as a shock after the human pathos and tragedy of Martha’s story” (Low 137), which alternated between the first- and third-person narratives of a slave woman. This abrupt shift in tone and focalisation makes Hamilton’s pastiche all the more chilling and disturbing. In addition, the generic traits of the journal differ from the way Edward Williams in Part I, thanks to the third-person omniscient narration, is given the opportunity to justify his involvement in the slave business, and from Nash’s letters which offer a former slave’s own version of the vile traffic – views which are deafeningly ignored in the third section. Thus the various narratives and perspectives complement each other in the way they “expose the complicity of narrative in silencing or repressing something that resists being said” (Kowaleski-Wallace 99). As a consequence, Phillips’s creation not only invites the reader to reflect about the relationship between fiction and history, between narrative and the “ghastly authenticity” (Wood 64) of Newton’s historical journal: by re-inscribing Newton’s logbook within a contemporary and fictional framework, Phillips offers a way to preserve the past, even its most shameful events, from the forces of amnesia. Like fellow Caribbean writers David Dabydeen and Fred D’Aguiar, Phillips “resist[s] the temptation to leave the reader with the sense that the story has been told, consigned to the past; that it has been taken care of and can therefore now be forgotten” (Craps 6). On the contrary, Phillips demonstrates that history needs to be questioned anew and fiction – in its great variety of forms, including pastiche, collage and *bricolage* – proves to be a resourceful medium to perform this task.

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1. Ilona and Thomas argue that Phillips probably drew inspiration from other authentic sources apart from Newton’s logbook and letters: they refer to journals by voyagers and travellers such as Sir Francis Drake, Sir Richard Hawkins, Richard Haklyut (Ilona 3 and Thomas 42). Phillips confirmed that he read many logbooks in a 2016 interview (Guignery 327). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In an interview with Renée Schatteman, Phillips revealed he had read over two hundred books before composing *The Nature of Blood* (61). He remarked: “as the novel became increasingly fragmented, it felt okay to have parts of it that were influenced by this book or by that text, some of which I do acknowledge and some of which I don’t acknowledge” (Schatteman 57). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In particular Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, Lars Eckstein, Evelyn O’Callaghan, Maroula Joannou and Catherine Lanone. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Phillips refers to Newton’s treatise against slavery in *The Atlantic Sound* (45). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In a *Note Bene* to the last letter of 18 August 1754 in *Letters to a Wife*, John Newton notes that his illness led physicians to advise him to resign the command of the ship he was about to sail so that he “was thus, unexpectedly freed, from the disagreeable, and (as I now see it) the abominable employment, and traffic, in which I had been engaged” (304). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass shares his outrage at “expressions of surprise that black people could feel familial love as passionately as did white” (Meer 95). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This narrative resonates with echoes of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* in which a former slave woman is haunted by the ghost of the daughter she herself murdered to prevent her from being recaptured after they fled to a free state. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. These two aspects are nevertheless interrelated as, according to Günter Lenz, the “eighteenth-century sentimentalism and celebration of the bonds of the middle-class family” are exposed as “the reverse side of the spirit of capitalism, of the economic rationalism of the time” (247). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hamilton’s model John Newton converted to evangelical Christianity in 1748. After he renounced working in the slave trade in 1755, he became a tide surveyor of the Port of Liverpool until he was ordained as a priest in 1764. He wrote the famous hymn “Amazing Grace”. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Claude Julien argues for his part that Hamilton is “a lost child: the misguided heir of a tradition, who follows his father’s trade to fulfil his dream of material success, happiness, and a family at home” (88). Yogita Goyal notes that Hamilton “emerges not as a figure of authority but as a lonely twenty-six-year-old son trying to succeed in his father’s footsteps” (20). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Hamilton, Gallagher, Brown, Morgan, Pitts, Cropper, Creed, Fellows, Thompson and Arthur appear in both journals. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. It is 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. Although Hamilton is a fairly common name, it may recall that of Alexander Hamilton (1755-1804), one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, who was born out of wedlock on the island of Nevis in the West Indies (Phillips himself was born in St Kitts which forms a federation with Nevis) to James Hamilton (the exact same first name and name as the fictional slave captain) and a married woman. Alexander Hamilton’s mother died when he was a child (like fictional Hamilton’s), a few years after Alexander’s father had abandoned them. In 1785, the historical Hamilton was a co-founder of the main anti-slavery organization in New York. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. “has behaved very turbulently, / and used them ill, / to the hindrance of the ship’s business. / Having passed by several of the like offences before”. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Just before this episode, Phillips’s captain had referred to the weather in a similar tone: “At sunrise, a snow and a sloop, both French, anchored at Leeward. Close dirty weather, and a great sea tumbling in” (116). Kathie Birat has rightly noted however that Hamilton sometimes “comments upon natural phenomena in a highly impressionistic, almost poetic style”, which contrasts with the brutality of his remarks “about the way he treats disobedient sailors and slaves” (98). The log is therefore hybrid in its mixture of cold-bloodedness and poetry, thus complicating the response of the reader, “potentially creating a certain fascination with the mind of the captain in spite of the moral opprobrium generated by the context of slavery” (Birat 98). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Marcus Wood argues contrarily that when it comes to the slaves, in the fictional journal, “the account of extreme physical abuse is altered, and lessened” so that Hamilton emerges as “a softer figure” (60). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Yogita Goyal regrets Phillips’s decision not to grant a voice to the slaves while he “meticulously reconstructs the voices of the masters with a great deal of fidelity to existing historical models” (20). Borrowing Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “epistemic violence” (76) in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Goyal admits that it is “possible to read this refusal to give voice to historically silenced figures as a reluctance to commit epistemic violence on the subject under representation” but adds that “the difficulties that necessarily attend Phillips’ project of historical and linguistic reconstruction surely need not be completely disabling” (20). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Jackie Kay also imitates the style of Newton’s journal in her radio play *The Lamplighter* by unemotionally juxtaposing references to the weather and to the deaths of slaves (also identified by numbers) aboard the ship:

    New Low, moving rapidly North-east and deepening.

    Occasionally moderate or poor.

    Buryed two slaves –

    A man (no. 140) and a boy (no. 170)

    Of the gravel and stoppage of urine.

    A boy, no. 158, then a girl no. 172. (18) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Yogita Goyal remarks that Hamilton “hijack[s] the category of ‘slave’ for himself” (19). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. While atsea on 18 April 1754, Newton informs his wife of his bad health and of the risk that he may die: “I have been ill three days, of a fever, which, though it is, at present, attended with no symptoms particularly dangerous, it behoves me to consider, may terminate in death” (*Letters* 253-54); on 30 April 1754, he writes: “The fever has left me, and I feel my strength returning” (*Letters* 257). He indeed recovers from this illness. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For example, what, in the seventeenth century, appears as “a mere rhetorical praise of history” as being “the *mother* of truth”, is considered an “astounding” idea in the twentieth century (Borges 51). The fictional reviewer concludes: “Cervantes’ text and Menard’s are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer” (Borges 51). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)